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Shelley's Delusive Flames: Self and Poetry in The Major Works

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Shelley's Delusive Flames: Self and Poetry in The Major Works

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DEDICATION

For my mother Janet Robida and for my father Steven Robida. Not only is this dissertation *for* you, Mom and Dad, but it is also *by* you. I never could have spent so much time educating myself without first having received from you the only lesson worth learning—Love. Thank you.

And for Grandma.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores Percy Shelley's ethical commitments in several of his major works. Its primary claim is that Shelley's poetry is involved in the regulation and education of desire. As a fundamentally antinomian poet, Shelley grapples time and again with how moral progress will be guided absent the regulatory influences of law and religion. My dissertation offers an answer to this central impasse affecting scholarship on the ethical world Shelley imagines and attempts to realize through poetry. It argues for a dialectical movement observable in Shelley's work of the programmatic breakdown, rather than fulfillment, of hope. This study reconsiders the process of how Shelley's notion of the liberated self, best represented in *Prometheus Unbound*, overcomes what he calls in "Mont Blanc," "Large codes of fraud and woe." I claim that Shelley's poetry tends toward the enlargement of human agency by addressing the constraints of volition and passion. Consumed with self-interest and human passion, what Shelley names in *Laon and Cythna* the "dark idolatry of self" runs athwart the aesthetic and political telos of his poetry—the collectivization and inclusiveness of the self.

Yet I argue that such a self-conversion from exclusionary self-interest to inclusive self-liberation becomes possible only through failure and limitation, humility and forgiveness. My aim is to show how Shelley speaks in his poetry from the end of history in order to translate the political and social abstractions of utopian discourse into a "vital alchemy" of living poetry. The immanent moment when selfishness converts to altruism marks some of the most powerful events in Shelley's work as well as some of the most bleak. In this study I reveal the dialectical process behind them. The retreat to the self, a frequent narrative trope of the Romantic period, becomes in Shelley a re-treatment of the self's relation to desire and society.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION Apart from the Law: The Structure of Freedom in Shelley's Poetry……..1

CHAPTER ONE From "Silent Eloquence" to a "Swoon of Joy": History and Futurity in *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*…….26

Laon and Cythna and the Wake of Broken Progress…….60

CHAPTER TWO Lyrical Morality……...87

"Ode to the West Wind" and the Moral Limits of the Poem……...109

CHAPTER THREE Self and Love in *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*……135

Prometheus Unbound and the Necessity of Love's Wreck…….164

CHAPTER FOUR As Yet to Come: Beginning Again at *The Triumph of Life*……..183

CONCLUSION The Future of Shelley……...217

WORKS CITED…….224

VITA……..234

INTRODUCTION
Apart from the Law: The Structure of Freedom in Shelley's Poetry

He tramples upon all received opinions, on all the cherished luxuries and superstitions of mankind. He bids them cast aside the chains of custom and blind faith by which they have been encompassed from the very cradle of their being, and become the imitators and ministers of the Universal God.

—Shelley, *Essay on Christianity*

The following study examines several central notions in the work of the English Romantic poet, Percy Shelley. Chief among these are notions of history, the future, ethics, love, poetry and the self. This study began when I started to explore the different ways that Shelley uses temporality in his poetry. As I attended to how time worked in his major poems, it became clear that his sense of history and the future, while always exerting significant formal and thematic pressures, was often inconsistent and at odds with his system of ethics and theory of the self. It was as if in his prose writings on politics, love, and the self he was saying one thing that in his poetry could never become audible, at least not for very long. How was this possible? I realized my struggle to answer this question was indicative of a decision that all scholars of Shelley must make regarding the privileging either of his poetry or prose. While each chapter of this dissertation addresses major Shelley poems, I derive from his letters, biographical accounts of his life, and the intellectual and moral system he outlines in his prose, valuable evidence and contributions to my argument.

Whether Shelley's poetry or prose offers us a better centerpiece for his thinking, I choose not to distinguish. Each in my view illuminates the other. Yet the contradictions in how Shelley tries to understand historical and individual progress are less an effect of the genre through which he explores these challenging issues than they are a more troubling sign of the impossibility of progress itself in his poetry and this period.

Furthermore, a trajectory can be traced from his early to later works in which his vision of future good for individuals and communities undergoes significant changes. Convictions of gradualist social improvement eventually give way to dreams of apocalyptic change.

What ultimately constituted the most difficult challenge of this dissertation was trying to get to the core of Shelley's thought in spite of its persistent avoidance of any stable core. Ironically, it was this desire to pluck out the heart of Shelley's mystery that led me to formulate the thesis of this study. For Shelley the aim of progress is freedom, the idea of humanity liberated from all past and present, moral and political, impasses, what he calls "Large codes of fraud and woe." The problem with this goal is that a paradox ensues, because what Shelley names "codes of fraud and woe" are the very laws and values binding together the culture he critiques and the morals he derides. If the fraud and woe disappear, then the culture, along with its historical justifications and future promises, dissolves. As some scholars have argued, Shelley's desire for freedom and equality was essentially utopian.[1] In order to make history and ethics meaningful, he was hoping for the annihilation of both—apocalyptic, indeed. However, the process of discovery to which Shelley directed his reform efforts involved the creation of a social order where law was inspired by loved.

[1] See Michael Scrivener's *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton UP, 1982). He argues that Shelley is ultimately an ethical idealist who grounds his notion of a perfect society in socioeconomic equality. According to Scrivener, Shelley is a utopian "in the sense that it [what is socially possible] is thoroughly beyond the confines of the established order" (xii). See also Steven Goldsmith's *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Cornell UP, 1984) for a discussion of *Prometheus Unbound's* linguistic utopianism and its effects on democratic politics. pp. 209-61. For treatment of Utopianism in the context of 'the body and the natural world,' Timothy Morton's *Shelley and the Revolution of Taste* (Cambridge UP, 1994) discusses Shelley's vegetarianism and proto-ecopolitics. In "The Transgressive Double Standard: Shelleyan Utopianism and Feminist Social History" (Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), Annette Cafarelli explores how the radical political agendas of Shelley's time were influenced by gender, taking particular note of the women in Shelley's immediate circle. pp. 88-104.

Yet an important critical need that I address in this dissertation is taking poets like Shelley, and their often transcendent claims that softly echo in our contemporary world of critical immanence, at their word. He means something of profound trans-historical moment when he says that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," so rather than writing off the paradox as a utopian wish, I want to answer the following question: In the absence of coercive and fraudulent sources to shape human progress, what drives this rejuvenated vision of the future and offers hope to the present?

The main objective of this dissertation is to show how Shelley's dialectical understanding of human freedom through love emerges from his earlier and more teleological convictions; and, secondly, to show how there is a mutual entailment in Shelley's poetry between social and individual revolution. In the following chapters I explore these issues from different angles, through different figures and concepts in Shelley's poetry; such as metaphor, the circumference of self, Love, history, or even "Poetry" as an abstraction. Rather than give a definitive answer, I will claim that the absence of a master-framework that would stabilize Shelley's future-oriented politics and aesthetics is itself a deliverance from such codifying structures. Love is the master-trope of Shelley's poetry and faith, affording the possibility of the Promethean individual, the world that has not yet arrived but which Promethean change might bring about; Promethean becoming marks the birth pangs of Love and Shelley's many representations of vernal restoration.[2]

[2] The readings of *Prometheus Unbound* run the gamut from seeing in the poem a complete renewal and integration of the human and material world to a drama that enacts the impossibility of this restoration. See C. S. Lewis's essay on Shelley in *Rehabilitation and other Essays* (Folcroft P, 1939), pp. 1-35. See also Carol Jacob's deconstructionist reading of *Prometheus Unbound* in *Uncontainable Romanticism* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1989), pp. 19-61. Combining these two antithetical ways of reading Shelley's most famous long poem, Stuart Curran understands *Prometheus Unbound* as enacting the perfection of love and desire

The answer, therefore, to the question of what will guide the newly transformed self when all oppressive social institutions and ideologies have been removed from the path to enlightenment, is dialectical. To paraphrase Shelley at the end of *Lines written among the Euganean Hills* (1818), the world will never really grow young again. We always already live in a fallen world, yet we might begin to grow young in it. The solution is a form and methodology rather than a specific content. The rhythm and harmony of the spell is given, but not the words to be chanted.[3] "To hope, till Hope creates/ From its own wreck the thing it contemplates," Demogorgon exhorts at the end of *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelleyan Love mediates the moral spell to be cast. Hope is both the form and content through which the future is visible, generating itself out of what it cannot look away from, the fallen present. Because Shelley writes toward futurity, he wants his poetry to be able to resist the vagaries of historical chance. In a sense the moral content of his message becomes the form, allowing for the possibility of a poetry that can pass through the ages until the "graves from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day."[4]

Shelley's dialectical vision of reform is closely connected to his antinomianism. Greatly agitated by the possibility of genuine progress becoming codified into either static dogma or tyrannical oppression, Shelley tries to balance the appeals of enlightenment reason and apocalyptic enchantment. The two primary antitheses in his poetry, reason and imagination, self-esteem and self-contempt, the songs of Apollo and the songs of Pan, law and freedom, do not always merge into a fully reconciled synthesis;

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for "apocalyptic renewal" (297). See his essay "Lyrical Drama: *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas*" in *Oxford Handbook of Shelley* (Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 289-97.

[3] Significantly, the Latin word for poetry, *carmen*, means charm, enchantment, song or prophecy.

[4] "England in 1819." Lines 13-14.

sometimes they hang in abeyance beside each other, while at other times they are indistinguishable from one another, as is the case when Prometheus curses Jupiter.[5] Yet taken collectively, Shelley's poetry seeks just such a synthesis, and however paradoxical its outcome appears, the motive remains constant: to ensure the freedom and autonomy for an individual caught between self-dissolution on one hand and self-isolation on the other. Each outcome is insufficient for the kind of social and spiritual reform Shelley wants to bring about.

At the heart of Shelley's dialectical understanding of self-creation and becoming is his conception of love—its forms, motives, and effects. Freedom for Shelley consists not in self-sovereignty or self-determination as a condition or cause in its own right, but as a force directed toward the twin aims of breaking down or beyond the present meaning of things (whether these forms are the result of laws, customs, culture or language), as well as restoring human relations to a morality based on love and equality. As Shelley attempts to demonstrate in *Laon and Cythna* (1817), the mere explosion of revolutionary impulses will, without the guiding principles of liberal reform and virtuous action, succumb to violence and chaos.[6] In the preface to that poem Shelley makes a case for the

[5] "Song of Apollo" and "Song of Pan," each composed in 1820, embody contrary impulses of the human mind and Shelley's poetry. Thomas Frosch argues that the opposition in Shelley's poetry between reason and imagination, embodied in the figures of Apollo and Pan, constitutes a dialectic of defense against self-dissolution into either one. He claims that "Shelley creates a rich and flexible dialectic of defense, in which he is able to express, if not fully to satisfy, four conflicting motives: to defeat Apollo, to sustain him as an ideal, to keep both gods safe from contamination by each other, and still to bring them together" (117). See "Psychological Dialectic in Shelley's 'Song of Apollo' and 'Song of Pan.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*. 45(1996): 102-17. Frosch suggests that Shelley's failure to fully satisfy the ideals of the opposing figures allows for both individual desire and social responsibility. I agree with Frosch's analysis of these representative figures in Shelley's thinking, yet I question just how rich and flexible this dialectic of defense is, since Shelley always seems to privilege Pan over Apollo.

[6] In his recent study of Romanticism and Orientalist political rhetoric and aesthetics, Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud makes the point that *Laon and Cythna* (though he prefers *The Revolt of Islam* because "Unlike a revolution that completely upends political structures, "revolt" suggests a circumscribed reaction to disputed policies rather than an attempt to install a wholly new order") is everywhere intent on containing, guiding and grounding insurrectionary excesses in the principles of liberal reform (80). The effort to

reasons behind the democratic failures of the French Revolution and its aftermath; in the poem's narrative Shelley offers a corrective to that historical event through the actions and words of his two rebel heroes. There is an identifiable analogy in the work between the ecstasies of French liberatory truth evolving back into tyranny and self-autonomy evolving into self idolatry, the principle of poetry turning into the principle of self.[7] I cite *Laon and Cythna* as an exemplary representation of this process, but the threat of self-isolation or even self-dissolution disguised or desired as freedom occurs throughout Shelley's poems. Shelley's notion of love unmasks the difference between the individual who is deluded in an egocentric self-awareness and the one who understands that being free means the continual cultivation of an identity sympathetic to and aware of the realities and sufferings of others.[8] Achieving such a rarified mode of autonomy, which is at once a union with the greater whole of people and things, means relinquishing one form of freedom for another. By examining the relationship of Shelleyan love to each, Shelley's distinction of a divisive versus a self-affirming and social-oriented identity emerges, making clearer the ways in which Shelley's political and aesthetic rhetoric oscillates between reform and revolt.

"kindle" the right kind of truth and freedom is evidenced, Cohen-Vrignaud argues, even by the Spenserian stanza Shelley employs: "By adhering to the poetic customary, Shelley refuses the consolations of an autonomous self – what Keats famously termed Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" – disengaged from dialogue with the community" (84). *Radical Orientalism: Rights, Reform, and Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015. The "consolations of an autonomous self," as Cohen-Vrignaud phrases it, are for Shelley no consolations at all; they represent the siren call of a disastrous solipsism that corrodes human sympathy and love.

[7] Cythna laments, "It is the dark idolatry of self, / Which, when our thoughts and actions once are gone, / Demands that man should weep, and bleed, and groan" (VIII.192-94). In *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley distinguishes "Poetry, and the principle of Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world" (*Norton*, 531).

[8] In *Alastor* (1815), Shelley presents just such a contrast of perspectives. The Poet sees the world as a reflection of his own visionary desires. His commitment to an idealistic reality cuts him off from the larger human community. The preface of the poem, however, cautions that "Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt" (Behrendt 5).

In *On Love*, the short prose fragment from 1818 in which Shelley attests to the mysterious power of attraction animating each person's yearning after their own likeness, on view is a split between love's presence and absence. What is noteworthy about Shelley's remarks has to do with their insufficiency to account for the ideas and images he wants to describe. Perhaps it would be commonplace to suggest that in *On Love* Shelley is searching after himself or that in *On Love* love is his object (and subject) of desire, but a frequent theme for his works is the overcoming of the mind's fevered projection of its own reality. For example, the epigraph to *Alastor* from St. Augustine's *Confessions* translates to "Not yet did I love, yet I was in love with loving;…I sought what I might love, loving to love."[9] Furthermore, Shelley's famous note to the manuscript copy of *On Love*, "These words are inefficient and metaphorical—Most words so—No help—," which immediately refer to the piece's most awkward and vague description, "Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particulars of which our nature is composed," speak to the inexhaustible void Shelley tries to fill with his helpless words.[10] Even the first definition of love that Shelley offers is syntactically ambiguous, repulsing the attraction that informs it.

> It is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are a community with what we experience within ourselves.[11]

Though what Shelley means here is by no means self-evident and transparent, I read the final, most semantically challenging clause as "and seek to awaken in all things that *are* a

[9] *Norton*, p. 74, note 2.
[10] *Norton*, p. 504, note 3.
[11] Ibid., p. 503.

community with what we experience within ourselves." Reading "are" as a full stop aligns with the thematic progression of the sentence from union to separation to union. The object love, "it," unites with the subject love, "ourselves." According to Shelley's definition, love is only possible after a temporal turn toward the negative, "when we find…the chasm of an insufficient void." At its bottom, so to speak, the powerful and repeated image in Shelley's work stands for unobtainable desire. It is this impossible desire that both causes a divisive self and gives birth to a self-affirming one.

The desire to reach the "invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends" involves a poetics more complicated than discovering an "antitype" for the "ideal prototype" that exists within the self-aware individual "in" love (*Norton*, 504). Figures in Shelley's poetry accomplish this frequently through perverse idealizations and dream hallucinations. But the poetry that describes the false wisdom of a world-unto-the-self always betrays it as such. As Shelley's manuscript note attests, words themselves might inevitably fail, yet the revolutionary power of metaphor, poetry (and for Shelley poetry is by definition the language of love), or as Cythna remarks, "A subtler language within language," succeeds in reflecting and realizing the law of desire (VII.xxxii.4). "We are born into the world and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its *likeness*," broods Shelley (*Norton*, 504; my emphasis).[12] But notice how the "something" is not us, but exists within us "deprived of all that we

[12] The line recalls how in *Mont Blanc* "Power in likeness of the Arve" (16) affected the speaker's observation. Further, the principle of love Shelley describes as that which "thirsts after its likeness," a primal lack, recalls Plato's *Symposium*, specifically Socrates's exchange with Diotima of Mantineia. Diotima tells Socrates that Love is a daemon, who "interprets between gods and men, conveying and taking across to the gods the prayers and sacrifices of men, and to men the commands and replies of the gods; he is the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them, and therefore in him all is bound together, and through him the arts of the prophet and the priest, their sacrifices and mysteries and charms, and all prophecy and incantation, find their way" (Trans. Benjamin Jowett). "When we find within our own thoughts a chasm of an insufficient void," as Shelley says, there is love. Love modulates, mediates and interprets the essential relationship of self to world. Love suffices the "insufficient void."

condemn or despise" and composed of "everything excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man" (*Norton*, 504). I argue that in the context of "likeness," it speaks to the dream of a master language or body of enchanted words that when spoken do not merely refer to the world but create and sustain it, signs or symbols that the poet looks through in order to see that which, without them, never could have existed otherwise.[13]

We see evidence of speaking a language that enlarges rather than circumscribes human sympathy in *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley's lyrical epic withstands against and dispels the curse that begins it. At the beginning of the narrative, Prometheus is a symbolic figure for divisive self-idolatry, bound to his hate and literally chained to a mountain. Shelley makes clear, however, that Jupiter is not responsible for Prometheus's suffering. The hate that sustains Prometheus's curse on Jupiter becomes implicated in the language derived from the principle of the self. Based on a morality of materiality, the cost-benefit nexus "of which money is the visible incarnation," Prometheus's vengeance affords him a kind of freedom from the world, which now stands in ruins. Three-thousand years tied to a rock also affords him ample opportunity for "self-anatomy," Shelley's way of describing the process by which we hate and torture ourselves by worshiping the resentments of the past. When Prometheus revokes his curse, the "chasm of an insufficient void" appears in the form of the Phantasm of Jupiter and he begins to create a new world and identity. Prometheus, in other words, unbinds himself and his language;

[13] Allen Dunn, remarking on Shelley's description of the ideal perfection that inhabits each soul, argues that "Such self-contemplation courts disappointment in the form of narcissistic collapse," which suggests whether love is not the idolatrous self mistaken for the creative energies of poetry. "Out of the Veil of Ignorance: Agency and the Mirror of Disillusionment." *Southern Humanities Review* 25.1 (1991): 1-21. A deep struggle resonates in Shelley's poetry between productive and pernicious modes of "self-contemplation," as Dunn writes. I would argue that it is more rewarding to emphasize the moments when this struggle erupts instead of the moments when these two modes seem distinct.

what follows is a vision of society where "None talked that common, false, cold, hollow talk / Which makes the heart deny the *yes* it breaths / Yet question that unmeant hypocrisy / With such a self-mistrust as has no name" (3.4.149-52). This kind of language is disengaged from and disastrous for social harmony. Described as "hollow," no adequation obtains between word and thing, self and world; it is neither poetic nor moral.

Shelley ends *On Love* with a similar image: "So soon as this want or power [the desire to discover reflected without the image of perfection within] is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was.—" (*Norton*, 504.) The "husk of what once he was" is nicely juxtaposed against the heart that breathes *yes* not only by the shadow and substance dichotomy but also the discord of a "husky" voice over and against the eloquence of a heartfelt "yes." Driving the image home, again in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley writes in the preface that "until the mind can love…reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness" (*Norton*, 209). This is impassioned rhetoric from Shelley, who never lightly invokes "reasoned principles of moral conduct." That these principles are metaphorized by Shelley into the biblical husks of barren seeds suggests that the force of their law is helpless against "unconscious" self-idolatry. Until we are capable of love, the passage suggests, there is no hope for the future. Through poetry, love, not only can we discover the "chasm of the insufficient void" but we can also overleap it into the future, moving beyond the oppressive reproach of the past. "The great secret of morals is love," Shelley says in the *Defence*, and the contradictions that inhere

within a moral system not grounded in love are exactly those that inhere in a utilitarian culture that worships the "calculating faculty" (*Norton*, 517 and 529). As Shelley conceives them, those very inconsistencies by which "man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave," arise from a self-autonomy that denies an affirmative projection of the larger and intersubjective community from which it draws its breath.

Every contradiction that emerges in Shelley's poetry is not a dialectical push toward a future state of harmony. There are moments when Shelley wants simply to account for and describe those moral evils that prevent progress or the building of a mutually beneficial community. A great part of *Queen Mab* is dedicated to this aim of representing the inadequacies of custom to liberate human potential from past errors. Set against this litany of historical falsehoods are the later scenes of the poem that depict a future guided by reason, self-esteem, and brotherly love.[14] But by depicting both the past and present errors of society as well as its future utopian restoration in the powerful lyrical utterance of the dream vision, Shelley unites, as Ianthe's soul returns to her body, natural and moral law into a cohesive design. A similar conflict between the limits of rational discourse and the potential of imaginative freedom occurs in *A Defence of Poetry*. When first discussing how poets were once identified as "world legislators," Shelley next insists how poets "behold the future in the present."[15] Thus, as Shelley articulates the most inclusive conception of poets and poetry, legislators of the world, built into this declaration is an explicit formulation of law. As legislators, poets enact

[14] This is not to say that *Queen Mab* does not move dialectically toward its moment of spiritual restoration because I think that it does; yet the terms of its progression have more to do with how the past and future are represented in poetic language than with what is described.
[15] *Norton*. p. 513.

laws, yet their "thoughts are the germs of the flower and fruit of latest time."[16] In other words, they enact the very laws that in the future will be broken by other poets.

By creating the political, moral and aesthetic conditions that demand their presence both to fulfill and change them, poets create the future. Poets order the temporal appointments that can only be met by other future poets. In this sense poets are the "mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present" (535).[17] Poets, according to Shelley, do not predict the future so much as they embody the future, just as the "first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially" (528).[18] The dialectic progression of Shelley's conception of moral agency, therefore, consists in the paradox of legislating freedom.[19] Absolute freedom for Shelley leads only so far; it leads to a particularly height and not further, "Pinnacled dim in the intense inane," the conclusion of the third act of *Prometheus Unbound*. A sheer transparent vacancy of neither desire nor satiety, the inanity Shelley describes requires direction, because it cannot form the basis of a society, politics, or model of self-representation.[20] In *Prometheus Unbound* the fourth act of the drama emerges from and satisfies this inadequacy, but in the greater context of Shelley's

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Monika Lee identifies a similar paradox in *Queen Mab*, claiming that it can be traced to Romanticism's duel preoccupation with the Promethean myth as well as the role of the poet. Citing Shelley's self-projection onto Rousseau in *Queen Mab* and his brief reference to Prometheus in the same work, she extends her argument: "Both Rousseau and Shelley present Prometheus as the bringer and breaker of laws. Like themselves, Prometheus is seen as complicit in the conspiracy of *langue*, which they must challenge with an utterance or *parole* in order to free themselves and humanity from the self-created restrictions of language as code." See "Nature's Silent Eloquence": Disembodied Organic Language in Shelley's *Queen Mab*. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 48.2(Sept 1993): 169-93. p. 177. Lee's reading of Queen Mab functions also as a plea for its comparable sophistication to Shelley's later works, revealing that not only is Shelley's message similar at such an early stage in his career but also his poetic deployment of it.
[20] I give in Chapter Three a fuller account of the relationship of the final act of *Prometheus Unbound* to its whole.

moral vision the collectivization and inclusiveness of the self is impossible without legislative action.[21]

The self-transformation of egotism into altruism occurs by an imaginative act of love that unites the mutually exclusive yet conflicted ways of thinking between divine Apollonian seclusion and sublunary Pantheistic brotherhood. As a "going out of our own nature," Shelley's conception of love concedes to the mutual, communal, and whole, the interests of the individual (517).[22] In this way the individual achieves a freedom that is greater than freedom from law or those forces, natural or social, he cannot control; namely, freedom from self-idolatry by paradoxically perceiving "within [his] own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void" (503).[23] The self's greatest need is a desire for something and someone not itself, and the hope is that this fulfillment of desire will meet with a real rather than idealized object, a law enacted poetically from within rather than imposed from without.

What connects Shelley's dialectical understanding of human freedom to the individual is his figure of the circumference surrounding each self. The Romantic ideal was an individual fully integrated into the world through the imagination.[24] Self and

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[21] Donna Richardson convincingly demonstrates Shelley's dialectic of self-becoming in her reading of *Revolt of Islam*. Her general contention, with which I agree, is that Laon and Cythna, rather than representing ideals of absolute good, offer a method of practical moral instruction for social progress. She contends, "because of the way humans ethically polarize self and whole, the moral dimension of the dialectic becomes the struggle between the human tendency toward a dark idolatry of self and the attempt to understand how much of individual desire is intertwined with the natural universe, historical processes, and the needs of others." See "'The Dark Idolatry of Self"': The Dialectic of Imagination in Shelley's 'Revolt of Islam."' *Keats-Shelley Journal*. 40(1991): 73-98. I owe to the dynamic Richardson posits of individual desires to mutual ones in Shelley's longest poem my understanding of how Shelley's idea of love bridges the distance between them.

[22] *Norton*, *Defence*.

[23] *Norton*, *On Love*.

[24] A coherent and coincident integration between mind and world is the starting point for many critical interpretations of the Romantic project. Representing both the formal unity that Romantic authors seek to achieve in their work as well as the formal breach from which many Romantics begin their explorations of consciousness, the relationship between mental and physical realities constitutes the core subject of

world would constitute not only authentic reflections of each other but also, during fleeting states of consciousness, become the same, undifferentiated yet greater than the sum of their discreteness. The power of lyrical poetry, its use of metaphor, self-projection, and prosopopoeia, is a defense against the threat of self-dissolution or self-isolation. This was the dream of many Romantic poets, regardless of whether the world in question was nature itself, cities and monuments, or other individuals. Shelley's idea of integration is an idea of self-transformation in which the narrow self becomes an inclusive self. A more comprehensive circumference around the self allows for wisdom and virtue, which, by extension, allows for more pleasure and for more interactions with other people. The virtuous self becomes a community of selves, literally and figuratively, and love grows stronger. This is the dream and ideal, yet it is also a necessary step in the journey of self-liberation that culminates in the dissolution of all laws, conventions, and customs that keep a narrow circumference around the self, which keeps people enmeshed in what Shelley calls the "dark idolatry of self."

My critical methodology took its initial point of departure from deconstructionist readings of Romanticism and Shelley. Shelley's agitated relationship with the limits of poetry to make meaning and access truth has made him an ideal poet for deconstruction. Scholars such as Paul de Man, Stuart Curran, Carol Jacobs, Hugh Roberts and Orrin Wang have analyzed Shelley's use of language in diverse and revealing contexts. What

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Romantic literature. See Northrop Frye's study of William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry* (Beacon P, 1962), in addition to his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton UP, 1957). See also Harold Bloom's *Shelley's Mythmaking* (Yale UP, 1959) in which he applies Martin Buber's *I-It* and *I-Thou* philosophy to Shelley's mythopoetic perception of suffering, experience and relation. M. H. Abram's *Natural Supernaturalism* (Norton, 1971) seeks to explore the major Romantic poets concerns with the connections between nature and mind. Abrams conceives of Romanticism as a radical form of Western humanism the values and forms of which derive from and often parallel those of Christianity. For an examination of Shelley's adoption of Christian scripture see Bryan Shelley's *Shelley and Scripture* (Oxford UP, 1994).

has emerged is greater knowledge of how Shelley is relentlessly preoccupied with, as Paul de Man puts it, the "madness of words."[25] As Shelley says in a late prose piece, "we are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down that dark abyss—of how little we know."[26] De Man's conception of Romanticism, and Shelley's poetry specifically, as an allegorical struggle between the poet's quest for meaning and the positional power of the event of language, still holds true. But this is by no means the whole story, and I use de Man's reading practices as a beginning and not as an end. Geoffrey Hartman, a critic sympathetic, if not devoted, to deconstructionist principles, concluded that for de Man "*Language* rather than politics is fate; politics is part of a counterfeit Great Tradition that arrogates to itself the impositional strength of performative language."[27] I agree with Hartman's assessment and also with his view that de Man's project is "too absolute." The ultimate aim of Shelley's ethical convictions, human freedom in the fullest sense, cannot be derived from the indeterminacy of language. Similarly, neither does the indeterminacy of language consign humanity to a prison-house of rhetorical speech acts. Both the style and effect of Shelley's poetics are inextricably bound to his ethical idealisms.

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[25] "Shelley Disfigured." 1979. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. Columbia UP, 1984. p. 122. Other noteworthy deconstructive analyses of Shelley's work include William Keach's *Shelley's Style* (Methuan, 1984), Jerrold Hogle's *Shelley's Process* (Oxford UP, 1988) and Forrest Pyle's *Art's Undoing* (Fordham UP, 2014). Keach argues that Shelley's preoccupation with the "indeterminacy of all writing" and the "relation of words to thoughts" contributed to a poetic style that both champions and severely questions poetry's ability to access truth. Hogle's work center's on his notion of transference and how Shelley's poetry is representative of a "primordial, preconscious shift, intimated in the movement of perception, feeling, and language, always already becoming a different enactment of itself at another time and in conjunction with other elements" (15). Pyle closely reads *The Triumph of Life* in an effort to understand the relationship of poetry and history in Shelley's work. He argues that in Shelley's final poem history turns into Benjaminian catastrophe, that Shelley's "radical aestheticism" "burns up" the minds of those who confront it (64). I am also indebted to New Formalists such as Susan Wolfson, whose chapter on Shelley in *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford UP, 1997) impressively articulates the unresolvable political outcomes of Shelley's poetic forms. pp. 193-206.

[26] *On Life*. 1819. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. 2nd ed. Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002. p. 508.

[27] *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980. p. 108.

Deconstructive readings of Shelley's skeptical relationship with language were built on scholarly attention paid to Shelley's interest in philosophical skepticism and idealism. These two broad narratives that drive Shelley's poetry toward imagining moral and political freedom can be traced to C. E. Pulos and Earl Wasserman.[28] Their work on how the skeptical and idealist strains in Shelley's poetry ground his epistemological and ontological claims about Christianity, materialism, Platonism and the poet's relation to poetry, has been immensely influential to contemporary debates on the author. For a long time Shelley was, rather offhandedly, described as a skeptical idealist because of Pulos and Wasserman's reevaluations of Shelley's work and his philosophical source material. Pulos examines the majority of Shelley's prose pieces that outline his intellectual philosophy, as well influential thinkers like Sir William Drummond and David Hume, who greatly influenced Shelley's skepticism.[29] Wasserman's impressive examination of Shelley's conception of the One Mind entails close readings of all his major works and many of his relevant letters and prose treatises. It is the two conceptual methods of debate, skepticism and idealism, from which emerge my own examination of Shelley's dueling narratives of reformism and revolutionism, prediction and prophecy. I see Shelley's thinking and writing as both skeptical and idealist. He frequently sets his idealist notions of the mind, universe, and human destiny beyond a veil of human tears, awful silence, and unredeemable suffering.

Jerome McGann's New Historicist project can be understood as an outgrowth of the kinds of skepticism that engaged both deconstructionists and earlier scholars

[28] Pulos, C. E. *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Skepticism*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1954. Wasserman, Earl R. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971.
[29] Terence Allan Hoagwood's *Skepticism and Ideology* (Iowa P, 1988) picks up where Pulos and Wasserman leave off, and provides an invaluable resource for understanding how Shelley's skepticism is more a method for suspending judgement and upending dogma than arriving at conclusive claims either for poetry or politics.

committed to revealing Shelley's source material. Instead of the indeterminacies of either Shelley's poetic figures or philosophical influences, McGann is highly suspicious of scholars' ideologies. I examine in the first chapter his groundbreaking socio-political reading of Romanticism *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), which is both the manifesto of New Historicism and a revisionist attack on what he claims constitutes a pervasive romantic ideology blinding many Romantic scholars. He offers his project as a "critical meditation on the recent history of Romantic scholarship insofar as that history may provide an example, or perhaps a case study, of how literary criticism, is involved with ideology, and how it might find the means for achieving a critical distance, however provisional, from its own ideological investments."[30]

I find nothing controversial or incorrect with McGann's intentions; after all, achieving critical distance is essential to all effective hermeneutics, particularly in fields such as religion and literature, where the object of study has often greatly influenced the perspective and consciousness of the studying scholar. I disagree with McGann about his claims for poetry generally, and for Shelley's poetry, specifically. Examining past artistic productions through a socio-historical framework in an effort to isolate and emphasize their historical difference from the ideas and attitudes of our own present moment reveals McGann to be a brilliant and farsighted reader of Romanticism. But to do so because the very ideas and attitudes of these past artistic productions express "idealized localities," indifferent to everyday human suffering, and on the basis that old ideas are reactionary,

[30] McGann, Jerome J. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983. p. x. McGann's suspicions of the trans-historical privilege afforded poetry and other forms of literature has opened up new ways of critiquing Romantic critiques. For instance, in Maureen McLane's *Romanticism and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge UP, 2010), McLane writes against McGann's conception of poetry's trans-historical privilege as a "supreme illusion," countering that "it does not suffice to call, I think, to call such a privilege a 'supreme illusion,' as McGann does: as opposed to what 'reality,' we might ask? His own book enacts a certain kind of trans-historical dialogue, testifying to the privilege of poetry even as it critiques it" (227).

reveals McGann's own ideologies. My purpose is to insist that the moral and intellectual value of some ideas transcend socio-historical frameworks, that some values, and the realities they support, are trans-historical. We should first evaluate the worth of an idea by whether it serves the good, not by whether it serves our own ideological commitments or whether it can be easily integrating into a historical context. My own purpose here is undoubtedly subject to a historical critique as well, which testifies to the influence of McGann's thesis.

McGann's book set in motion a generation of historicist Romantic scholarship. James Chandler is one critic who inherited this legacy and whose reading practices and ideas about Shelley's historical consciousness inform this dissertation. *England in 1819* (Chandler adopts his title from a Shelley Sonnet) attempts to "show how our undertheorized concept of the 'historical situation' can be situated in a history of Romanticism" (xiv).[31] Much of Chandler's book examines Shelley's unique role during the special year 1819 within the special period Romanticism to bring about a new understanding of how we understand history and ourselves as historical subjects. My argument for how Shelley tries to recuperate from seeming impossible social conditions a truly moral individual subject capable of negotiating the regulatory impositions of the law, was influenced by Chandler's concept of how terrible conditions, political and social, become the "source from which the illumination will spring" (30). I also share Chandler's commitment to understanding figures such as history and psyche to be both material and immaterial in Shelley's poetry, thus allowing the poet to actually impose change on the world his poem's respond to and intervene in. In addition, Chandler's

[31] Chandler, James. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.

reading of Shelley and my own each offer ways in which the potential historical effect of the poetry on the present is distinctly antinomian.

Although Chandler is a New Historicist, he applies many deconstructionist principles to his close readings of Shelley's work, particularly in the shorter lyrics. It is not surprising then that Orrin Wang, who along with Chandler looms large in this study, reaches many of the same conclusions, in particular about Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind."[32] As I sought to isolate a distinct and consistent notion of historical consciousness in each of Shelley's major works, Wang's insistence on the close relationship between ideology and history, prophetic utterance and present anxieties, brought me nearer to the claim I make in Chapter Two that Shelley's historical consciousness is always seeking to awaken innumerable and as yet to be known historical contexts; or as Wang concludes, a history without context. Wang says in his chapter on Shelley's "Ode" that ultimately the poem teaches that history is a wager, which is the same lesson I argue *Prometheus Unbound* teaches. History as chance, not randomness but possibility, the opening up of the future because it is, like history, everywhere and nowhere.

Finally, my reading practice and methodological framework owes a great deal of inspiration both to James Rieger and Hugh Roberts, each Shelleyans who wrote uniquely brilliant and comprehensive studies on Shelley's thinking and poetry.[33] As it resists comfortable pigeonholing in most critical movements, Rieger's meandering and digressive book takes seriously Shelley's obscurantism, replete with allusions to various early Gnostic sects and the creation myths of Christian heresies. Rieger argues that

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[32] Wang, Orrin N. C. *Romantic Sobriety: Sensation, Revolution, Commodification, History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2011.

[33] Rieger, James. *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. New York: George Braziller, 1967.

Roberts, Hugh. *Shelley and the Chaos of History*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1997.

Shelley's antinomian devotion to love and poetry is always threatened by his equally skeptical view of metaphor. What I took to be Rieger's most compelling and valuable conclusion was the centrality of the Wandering Jew both to Shelley's psychology as a poet who knew he possessed posthumous fame and Shelley's unresolved anxiety about whether desire is a life-giving or death-dealing force of the human heart. The figure negatively inhabits many of the same characteristics as Prometheus, as one who was unjustly rejected, subjected to inexorable suffering, yet who rebels against all authority as history unfolds.

Hugh Robert's *Shelley and the Chaos of History* (1997) offers a new politics of poetry through examining Shelley's works as staging a contest between two modes of self-representation, what he calls the "representative" and "evolutionary" ideal. These opposing characters are best dramatized in Shelley's "Song of Apollo" and "Song of Pan" (1820). Apollo's song dramatizes the self-consumed subject, searching after totality and rational certainty in a world of flux. Pan's song, in contrast, sings in a voice of inclusiveness and accepts life's uncertainties as well as death's inevitability. Roberts, through an impressive and detailed account both of Shelley's poetry and present and past debates in philosophy, history, and science, finally arrives at his thesis: Shelley's poetry and the politics it makes possible is the "power of privation-within-memory, the creative power of the perception of vacancy" (485). I align Robert's conclusion with my own, that Shelley's revolutionary politics and theory of the self maintains a self-generating cycle of emergent possibilities for freedom. I suggest that the poetry's teleological orientation toward the as yet to come future conforms to a teleological process without being one

itself. The historical and individual program being realized is the very possibility of possibility, a future.

Having addressed the major sources of my methodological approach and some of the central issues of Shelley's poetry that have preoccupied certain critics with whom I both align and diverge, I now want to discuss the ways in which this dissertation distinguishes itself from similar studies of Shelley. First and foremost, my claims for Shelley's sense of history are inextricably aligned to my claims for his sense of the self. The selfish self and the self that seeks fullness in human sympathy and collective destiny generate tension because they cannot be completely distinguished. History and psyche are two sides of the same critical coin. If we allegorize one in order to reveal the actual material conditions of the other, then all we have done is reinforce their interdependence. This is what happens in *Prometheus Unbound*. The poem stages an allegory of the human mind integrated into perfect relation with all other minds. My explicit claim regarding this is that there are only individuals when we try to answer how Shelley tries to imagine human freedom; societies, on the other hand, are many individuals working out their shared and opposing interests. The model of self-becoming that Prometheus sets in motion is conditioned by the moral takeaway of how far from Promethean humanity remains; yet while freedom begins with one, it should end with all. Too often in books on Shelley the individual subject is only discussed as a way to make broader claims for this or that radical political outcome. If the reverse were true, then we would have a clearer picture both of Shelley's unique politics and unique poetry.

This brings me to my second point. Because this study is committed neither to deconstructionist nor historicist interpretations of Shelley's poetry, and neither announces

itself as a formal nor a material examination of his aesthetics and politics, my absorption, as McGann would say, of different critical movements and their ideological self-representations is both absent and present. It is absent because I have no ideological axe to grind, whether Marxist, Freudian, feminist, formalist, or deconstructionist; it is present because I cannot avoid absorbing, in the process of writing a single author study on a poet for whom I have a great deal of admiration, many of Shelley's own self-representations. Though my predominant interest is Shelley's ethics, all modes and forms of discourse partake in evaluative claims, or they should. I feel announcing this anxiety of critical distance at the beginning of the dissertation better serves my readers, which I think addresses a sore need in scholarly publications as a whole.

A third way in which my study distinguishes itself is its emphasis on how the relationship of past to present functions in Shelley's work, in addition to our critical reception and assessment of this relationship. It is not new to say that Shelley is a future-oriented poet or that his work is deeply invested in representing a philosophy of historical change. I try to call attention to the ways in which Shelley's poetry is literally speaking to us, the ways in which, even as scholars, we fail the objects of our critical gaze when we do not chant aloud "Ode to the West Wind" or do not more urgently ask ourselves what happens to such inspired poetry when we repeatedly reify it in academic discourse. Though clearly this is a question for a much larger cultural debate on the purpose of poetry in life, questions of how better to participate in and realize the struggle of the work.

Lastly, most studies of Shelley's revolutionary and utopian politics end with an explanation and simple assumption of what might come next when Prometheus is

unbound into the world or Rousseau partakes in the manic dance of *The Triumph of Life*. I attempt to offer a practical solution to the individual who is freed from the constraints of the law with its large codes of fraud and woe, the individual who is as free as the west wind. How to give shape to the wind? I address this question in my concluding remarks.

In the first chapter, "From 'Silent Eloquence' to a 'Swoon of Joy'": History and Futurity in *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*," I briefly survey the influence of William Godwin on Shelley's thinking, examining the ways in which Godwin offered Shelley a first glimpse of a society free from the limitations of tradition, custom, and convention. Godwin provided Shelley a picture of human life guided by reason and justice. I discuss how the radical Enlightenment influenced the design and ideas of *Queen Mab*, and how this first major poem of Shelley's is guided by a necessitarian view of natural and moral law. Human freedom in this poem requires less effort on the part of the individual than in Shelley's next major effort, *Laon and Cythna*. I argue that *Laon and Cythna's* self-reflexive aesthetics make it more attuned to the idolatrous self than *Queen Mab's* referential historicity and representation of successful self-realization. Further, the relationship of the individual to the collective destiny of humanity is conceived in terms that comprehend the necessity of a continuously deployed revolutionary politics.

The second chapter, "Lyrical Morality," makes the case for Shelley's moral imperative, that the narrow self must become the inclusive self if the human mind is to be used for anything more than self-projected phantasies. "Mont Blanc," I suggest, teaches a moral lesson in spite of its final uncertain lines. The power made manifest in the mountain becomes the unacknowledged legislator of the world through Shelley's

apostrophic lyrical poetics. This power is applicable to human agency. The large codes of fraud and woe are only as real as that which binds past to present. I claim the mountain has the power to sever these bonds. In my examination of "Ode to the West Wind" I incorporate James Chandler and Orrin Wang's understanding of Shelley's historical consciousness in order to show how Shelleyan love, influenced by his reading of Christ, consists in the chance of impossible beginnings freed from all context and determinates. The liberated self is free to the extent that she can call forth an upsurge of her own becoming from an event of suffering, a season of winter.

"Self and Love in *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*" most directly addresses the organizing question of this dissertation. In both poems, the "Large codes of fraud and woe," Law generally, is incarnated in figures of tyrannical evil. I argue that both Cenci and Beatrice perform the behaviors and express the attitudes that comprise the "dark idolatry of self," the narrow self. They are each afflicted with Satanic rather than Promethean impulses. I incorporate into my discussion Shelley's concept of "self-anatomy." My claim for *Prometheus Unbound* is two-fold: first, the poem dramatizes the truly moral individual's response to injustice through a gesture of forgiveness; and, secondly, the poem's singular fourth act parallels historically and universally the liberated self's journey to love in the political present.

"As Yet to Come: Beginning Again at the Triumph of Life," my concluding chapter, attempts to show Shelley's anxieties about the reification of thought, how "thought's empire over thought" might upend any Enlightenment project or liberated spirit. At stake in the poem is Shelley's inheritance of the Enlightenment belief in progress, in addition to Shelley's lifelong commitment to love's unchanging power to

defeat all threats against the possibility of freedom. I argue that *The Triumph of Life*, ironically, is a poem *of* love, in that it aspires to go outside itself as poetry. Although the title *The Triumph of Life* refers to the triumph of law and external legislations for the human spirit, the triumph of the immanent world, Shelley once again presents the darkest reality, a descent into hell, as the source for immense moral beauty and knowledge. I suggest that the fragmented status of the poem, inevitable because of Shelley's death, only serves to affirm the teleological dialectic that constitutes the guiding form of moral freedom. We can never get to the end of the poem because the poem never ends. Moral freedom begins in suffering the never-ending beginnings of history, the recognition that the present moment must become an eruptive dance in order to derive a redemptive form within the unanswerable chaos of the question, what is life.

CHAPTER ONE
From "Silent Eloquence" to a "Swoon of Joy": History and Futurity in *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*

It appears that circumstances make men what they are and that we all contain the germ of a degree of degradation or of greatness whose connection with our character is determined by events.

—Shelley, *Hellas*

To the pure all things are pure.

—Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*

Critics of Shelley's *Queen Mab;A Philosophical Poem* (1813) have frequently commented on its failures as an integrated work of art that realizes the poet's ambitious intent of representing a spiritual and political restoration of society. This opinion is attributable not only to Shelley's age at the time of its composition but also to claims that the poem's lyrical dream vision and philosophical notes do not quite cohere and the result is a poorly wrought fusion of Enlightenment doctrine and Romantic posturing.[34] In recent years the question of whether *Queen Mab* is a success or failure as a poem has become moot as trends in criticism have opened the poem up to more contemporary interpretive concerns, but the debate is worth emphasizing because it highlights the most striking aspect of the poem, its duel structure as lyrical poem and prose treatise. Furthermore, *Queen Mab* remains one of Shelley's most accessible and easy to read poems, despite its complicated movements and digressions, as well as constituting his first effort at what was eventually to mark his mature style, the cosmic dream vision that pits the barren past against a fecund future struggling to overcome the chaotic present. I want to argue that while *Queen Mab* does lack the power and unity of Shelley's later poetic efforts, the poem first showcases how Shelley brings together two disparate cognitive modes in order

[34] Donald Reiman tells us that "in the original edition of 1813 the poem occupies the first 122 pages and the notes run through page 240." *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Updated Edition*. Boston: Twayne, 1990. p. 13.

to dramatize a possible social transformation. The dialectic of reason and imagination, Enlightenment discourse and High Romantic poetry, comes to occupy a central concern as well as method for Shelley, as the dilemma of how poetry might "legislate" without codifying life becomes one of his most troubled aims as an artist.

In *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley offered an analogy of reason to imagination: "Reason is to Imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance."[35] I claim the same analogy operates for the nine cantos of poetry in relation to the poem's end notes. One cannot exist effectively without the other, yet by themselves they run either toward excess or aimlessness. As I argued in the Introduction, imaginative poetry is the language of love, and love motivates the expanded self's drive toward reconciliation with the external world. What sets *Queen Mab's* dialectical structure apart from Shelley's later attempts to reconcile different ways of thinking about the world is the immense presence and pull of how Necessity works in the poem. The materialist doctrine Shelley espouses throughout the poetry and prose of the work suggests that speaking "Nature's silent eloquence" is the desired telos of the species: "The Universe, / In Nature's silent eloquence, declares / That all fulfill the works of love and joy,— / All but the outcast man" (3.196-99). *Queen Mab* belies the more intense struggle to come in Shelley's work between the idolatrous and expanded self because it takes for granted that love conquers all. The sharp distinction between an inclusive, healthy notion of individual freedom and one that is based on the delusions of self-contempt has yet to emerge. Instead, the poem becomes a play of perspective in which Necessity, the impartial yet beneficent Spirit of Nature, which persists throughout the whole of *Queen Mab*, allows for the ideal perspective from which to understand the

[35] *Norton*, p. 511.

past, present and future. Unveiling natural law through the use of reason is the first step toward aligning the perspective of mind with Sprit of Nature. But this remains inadequate because the laws of civilization become rigid and "blunted by reiteration" (*Defence* 533), the result of the principle of calculation, a too heavy reliance on scientific and technological ways of controlling nature, as Shelley explains in the *Defence of Poetry*. I argue that the poem's solution to this inadequacy is poetry, imaginative and inspired creation, through which Ianthe's vision, a language that "creates anew the universe" (*Defence* 533) becomes a rebellious disjunction that threaten the social order of things.

The narrative whole and historical thesis that Shelley imagines in *Queen Mab* mirrors the Enlightenment dream of progress in which volition and law achieve synthetic harmony:

> Then, that sweet bondage which is freedom's self,
> And rivets with sensations softest tie
> The kindred sympathies of human souls,
> Needed no fetters of tyrannic law:
> Those delicate and timid impulses
> In nature's primal modesty arose,
> And with undoubted confidence disclosed
> The growing longings of its dawning love,
> Unchecked by dull and selfish chastity,
> That virtue of the cheaply virtuous,
> Who pride themselves of senselessness and frost. (9.76-86)[36]

[36] *The Major Works*, p. 67.

"That sweet bondage which is freedom's self" names also Shelley's utopian paradox of moral life, when the laws "Poets" legislate liberate the self from its own idolatry. By articulating the "silent eloquence" of nature's necessitarian law through the vital language of poetry, Shelley in *Queen Mab* adequates to the body of rational instrumentality a spiritual restoration of history.

Queen Mab is a poem that is shadowed by the radical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and whose myriad influences run the gamut from Lucretius and William Godwin to the French *philosophes*. In it Shelley reveals his concern with changing the world for posterity, which will continue to be a characteristic feature of how he views his relationship and non-relationship to the poetry reading public. In a letter to his publisher Thomas Hookham dated March, 1813 he writes of *Queen Mab*, "I am determined to give it to the world—I shall know at what a low level to scale my future literary worth & probably how to erase the memory of its deficiencies" (*Letters* I; 361). Other than when referring to the various juvenilia composed and published between 1808-1811, Shelley is rarely so modest and at the same time negatively critical of his poetry, at least not proleptically so. [37] Yet he uncannily judges future generations' critical assessment of *Queen Mab*, their likewise desire not to erase but to dismiss it from the body of major works as immature. In yet another self-diagnosis of the poem that shows Shelley's future hope and present understanding of the reality in which his work is received, he says in the same letter to Thomas Hookham, "I expect no success.—Let only

[37] *Zasrtozzi, a Romance* and *St. Irvyne, or The Rosicrucian*, the two Gothic romances published in 1810 and 1811 respectively, and Shelley's first and second books of poetry from 1810, *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire* and *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*, and *The Wandering Jew* of the same year, are all significant for the role their principle figure and theme would play in many different aspects of Shelley's life and poetry.

250 Copies be printed. A small neat Quarto, on fine paper & so as to catch the aristocrats: They will not read it, but their sons & daughters may" (*Letters* I; 361). This attempt to "catch" the aristocracy is mirrored in the way *Queen Mab* is constructed as both poem and philosophical essay. Shelley implies that its material glittering will solicit the interest of a materialistic class of society. The hope is that their reading of the poem will belie its appearance as a sort of fool's gold, and "catch" or indict their very covetousness. Shelley's wish for an expensive and elite edition of the poem allegorizes the institutional structures that are the target of its critique, the economic, religious, political, and social ideologies that the poem diagnoses and tries to cure.

The irony of the poem's popularity and singular political influence in the decades following his death has been noted before, notably its identification as the Chartist Bible. Besides sensational biographical accounts of Shelley's life and circle, *Queen Mab*; *A Philosophical Poem with Notes* was perhaps the most read of Shelley's works in the nineteenth century. In light of the poem's didactic title, its wide readership contradicts the early critical reception of his poetry; for example, Matthew Arnold's famous identification of Shelley with an ineffectual angel who beats his wings in the void. *Queen Mab* is also Shelley's most teleological work, the one that derives its authority and social reformism from the doctrine of Necessity, and so his poem most consistently labeled as Godwinian. As such, contrary to Shelley's comment about erasing the memory of its deficiencies, it aims not to erase memory and context in ungrounded negativity but rather to build on and recuperate the law of change into a total vision of social reality. Further, the principle of self that *Queen Mab* displays is never under threat of self-isolation or self-dissolution. As long as the mind can shift its perspective to that of the natural

harmony of Necessity, freedom is in a sense guaranteed. Yet any freedom that is guaranteed comes too easily, as Shelley's later poetry attests.

Shelley's first direct reference to *Queen Mab* is in a letter to Elizabeth Hitchener on December 11, 1811, in which he writes "I have now my dear friend in contemplation a Poem. I intend it to be by anticipation a picture of the manners, simplicity and delights of a perfect state of society; tho still earthly. […] I design to accomplish it and publish. After t{hat} I shall draw a picture of *Heaven*" (*Letters* I; 189). "Tho still earthly" is Shelley's way of emphasizing an actual and realizable "perfect state of society," one that adheres to the precepts of rational thought and is predicated on the moral precepts demanded by a necessitarian perspective and commitment to reality. Shelley will draw a picture of heaven *after* writing *Queen Mab* because the society the poem constructs obviates the drawing of pictures of heaven.[38] Earlier in this same letter, Shelley

[38] When discussing *Queen Mab*, which contains Shelley's most vitriolic attack on revealed religion and Jesus Christ, it is important to note that contrary to both popular and academic understandings of his religious beliefs, he was not an atheist, not in our modern understanding of the word, at any rate. Gavin Hopps convincingly demonstrates through an analysis of Shelley's letters and prose writings on religion that Shelley is never consistently or wholly atheistic. Hopps contends, "What we can see here, then, is the poet yearning in spite of himself for something he can't quite allow himself to believe in, which in turn won't allow his disbelief sovereignty either" ("Religion and Ethics," 129). Numerous letters of Shelley's can be quoted which suggest an individual who rather than simply not believing in God does not believe in any virtuous or beneficent effect resulting from attributing to the name God that which denotes human ignorance of the cause and origin of life, misery or the universe. As Shelley admits to Elizabeth Hitchener, "In this sense I acknowledge a God, but merely as a synonime [sic] for the *existing power of existence*" (*Letters* I; 101). Furthermore, close reading of Shelley's letters and poetry reveal that he professed a faith in human destiny and consciousness that can best be described as religious, in addition to having its ultimate source in the religious impulse of humanity. His frequent nihilistic bouts were often directed at the failure of metaphor or mind to conceive of or penetrate to the truth of things. This is evidence not of a rational atheist but a spiritual acolyte. If Shelley truly was one who denied all efficacy of supernatural appeal, then his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "Mont Blanc" (1816) represent two of the most devout atheistic prayers ever to make a sincere appeal to a supreme and unknowable entity. Gavin Hopps concludes his argument, "Attempting to separate the 'evil' from the 'cure' is the underlying, heroic aim of Shelley's major prose writings on religion—a project which, however baffled by his own prejudices, cannot legitimately be described as 'atheistic'" (131). There is also Edward Trelawney's anecdote, impossible to verify, of the occasion when he asked Shelley why he calls himself an atheist. Trelawney claims Shelley replied, "It is a word of abuse to stop discussion, a painted devil to frighten the foolish, a threat to intimidate the wise and good. I use it to express my abhorrence of superstition; I took up the word, as a knight took up a gauntlet, in defiance of injustice. The delusions of Christianity are fatal to genius and originality: they limit thought" (*Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*, 40). I emphasize and

breathlessly declares to Elizabeth Hitchener in a tone characteristic of Shelley's early letters, his resistance to what he calls "annihilation." He says, "every day makes me feel more keenly that our being is eternal—every day brings the conviction how futile how inadequate are all reasonings to demonstrate it" (*Letters* I; 201). *Queen Mab* becomes for Shelley a demonstration of the eternality of human goodness and perfection, a way to allegorize through a deified Necessity historical progress as the great narrative of the species. In all its capaciousness there is no room for either a process of becoming or the frequent cyclic shatterings of the rules governing society. The Kingdom of God will open to humanity as soon as Ianthe opens her eyes at the poem's end.

In one of the poem's notes on religion, Shelley remarks that miracles, martyrdoms, and prophecies are universal religious characteristics. He says of miracles that they constitute an "infraction of nature's law, by a supernatural cause; by a cause acting beyond that *eternal circle within which all things are included*" (Ingpen & Peck, 154; my emphasis). The "eternal circle within which all things are included" is what *Queen Mab* represents for Shelley's development not only as a thinker indebted to the radical Enlightenment but also as a poet. The individual can be, is, and finally will be, fully integrated into the larger Absolute because there is no threat of disjunction if there is nothing outside the circle, if there is no possibility of a radial break in the circle's circumference. It is important not to confuse the spatial and temporal metaphors that might be derived from Shelley's comment. *Queen Mab* is not a poem that emanates

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insist on disabusing ourselves of Shelley's "atheism" not only for its inaccuracy but also because by persisting in believing it we reduce to the simple and singular Shelley's immensely complex and unresolved response to the interpenetration of empirical facts and spiritual principles. In denying ourselves the critical power and value of suspension and, what Shelley names in "On Life" a "vacancy" (*Norton* 507), we forget that what Shelley identifies as the delusions of Christianity, or the delusions of any other revealed religion, are the delusions of the poet also, and are born in and sustained by the imagination. Saying that Shelley is an atheist is like saying that Blake is a Christian. Clearly both statements meet a relative test of truth, but clearly both surrender to an uncritical simplicity.

potential in the sense of its later reconfiguration as *Prometheus Unbound* (1820); *Queen Mab* is not potentiated toward the oak as the acorn is, not a "winged seed" that "lie[s] cold and low" ("Ode W. Wind" 7), but rather makes up both roots and tree: "The Past, the Present, & the Future are the grand & comprehensive topics of this poem" (*Letters* I; 324). Shelley attempts to present an organic and hermeneutical whole in the poem, one that mirrors the narrative whole of progressive history.

The image of the eternal circle is not indicative, at least not in this poem, of history as a cyclic repetition of growth and decay, monument and ruin; it is, to the contrary, indicative of the part *never* fully separating from the whole, of chaos being an illusion of human perception, not a cosmic truth derivable from scientific rationalism. The poem's primary narrator, the Fairy Mab, relates a tale that formally coheres and thematically reassures. Significantly, and as a point of direct comparison to Shelley's later poetry where the subject is not so easily reconciled to the object, Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, who in different poems Shelley renders as a representative figure of rebellion, implacable will, poet-revolutionary-errant, and abject outcast (a figure with whom Shelley personally identifies, in other words), concludes his long speech with the following words:

> Thus have I *stood*,—through a wild waste of years
> Struggling with whirlwinds of mad agony,
> Yet *peaceful*, and *serene*, and *self-enshrined*,
> Mocking my powerless tyrant's horrible curse
> With *stubborn* and *unalterable will*,
> *Even as a giant oak*, which heaven's fierce flame

Had scathèd in the wilderness, to *stand*

A monument of fadeless ruin there;

Yet peacefully and movelessly it braves

The midnight conflict of the wintry storm,

As in the sunlight's calm it spreads

Its worn and withered arms on high

To *meet* the quiet of a summer's noon. (*Major Works* 7.255-266; my emphasis)

The Wandering Jew speaks from a deceptively impassive and ataraxic perspective. The landscape Shelley places him into is draped with natural imagery. The analogy of a fully formed oak tree is characteristic of the acorn seed's progressive chronological development and the eternality that is associated with Ahasuerus's myth. The resulting picture renders an image of unity rather than the chaotically fragmented potential of the seed which might or might not grow into an oak tree. The image and the poem constitute the promised entelechy offered by both. Seven years later in *Hellas* (1821), when the Turkish sultan Mahmud hallucinates Ahasuerus in a vision, the temporal and political implications of Shelley's identification with the Wandering Jew will register radically different outcomes. But in *Queen Mab* Ahasuerus mocks his divine punishment in a world where things act on one another in conformity to the laws of Necessity. "History, politics, morals, criticism, all grounds of reasoning, all principles of science, alike assume the truth of the doctrine of Necessity" (Ingpen & Peck, 144), the notes to *Queen Mab* proclaim, and yet there is something too unreasonable and defiant about Ahasuerus's struggle with God's "whirlwind's of mad agony." If Ahasuerus's

"unalterable will" is eventually to become Promethean, then at this point it has a far way to go, since the tale he tells of God's injustice and sadism is identical to Jupiter's treatment of Prometheus. Mab dissolves Ahasuerus from the poem before he can forgive, before he can "unsay his high language."[39] In fact, Ahasuerus seems to have been bequeathed a historical inheritance absolutely contrary to Shelley's ideals of revolutionary liberty. In these his last words of *Queen Mab*, he identifies with a "monument of fadeless ruin," "stands" and weathers a revolutionary storm. In a reversal of conventional Shelleyan imagery, fire is associated with the tyrant rather than the emancipatory agent, and the "wilderness" is of Ahasuerus's own making, of his own "mocking."

Shelley is using the figure of the Wandering Jew to indict Christianity. He therefore must to a substantial degree reproduce and adhere to the well know story, but a psychomachian conflict emerges between Shelley's avowed hatred of Christianity and Ahasuerus's immensely seductive character as material for great poetry, in addition to the allure of offering Shelley a poetic doppelgänger. Ahasuerus's voice takes over the poem for several hundred lines, and, ironically, is the most convincing story the poem tells. Canto Seven, in which his story appears, also happens to begin with the most "familiar" and explosively anti-religious moment of the poem: "I was an infant when my mother went / To see an atheist burned" (7.1-2). [40] This anecdotal and seemingly slight though abrupt transition to the poem's narrative (Canto Six is a grand and sweeping accusation of the moral evils religion promulgates and Necessity's subsequent usurpation of them)

[39] *Prometheus Unbound*, *Norton*, 206.
[40] Anthony Howe focuses his attention on Shelley's familiar style in his essay on *Rosalind and Helen* (1817), *Julian and Maddalo* (1818), and "Letter to Maria Gisborne" (1820). Howe writes about how "The possibility of reaching an audience—which relies in turn upon a capacity for the familiar—is troublingly mixed up in the poet's stymied reaching out to truth" (*The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 323).

reveals how the trajectory of the poem's teleology moves from one fixed moment of historical perspective to another. Systematic and terrestrial, the poem builds monuments out of its landscape of ruins. It does so largely through a correspondence between words and things.

In destroying the name associated with a moral iniquity, the evil itself will be destroyed. Here is Shelley in "Ode to Liberty" (1820):

> O, that the free would stamp the impious *name*
>
> Of KING into the dust! or write it there,
>
> So that this *blot* upon the page of fame
>
> Were as a serpent's path, which the light air
>
> Erases, and the flat sands close behind! (*Norton*, XV.211-15, 313; my emphasis)
>
> ---
>
> That the pale *name* of PRIEST might shrink and dwindle
>
> *Into the hell* from which it first was hurled,
>
> A scoff of impious pride from fiends impure; (XVI.228-30, 313; my emphasis)

Of course, in 1820 Shelley's conception of the correspondence between words and things has changed considerably from his earlier commitment to the truth revealed by science and matter, but the urge to remove absolutely and blot from memory the faintest trace of religion or monarchy is clearly visible in *Queen Mab*:

> Now, to the scene I show, in silence turn,
>
> And read the blood-stained charter of all woe,

Which nature soon, with recreating hand,

Will blot in mercy from the book of earth. (6.54-57) [41]

The "blood-stained charter of all woe," notwithstanding its double-edged blow against both religion and the English constitution, does not clear up the political ambiguities that reside in the poem's imagery. Ahasuerus is left to stand as an oak tree, assuming a position of stability in the face of French revolutionary chaos. The representation of chaos in *Queen Mab* does not, as it does in *Laon and Cythna* (1817), which I examine later, blur and confuse the poem's telos, because in *Queen Mab* revolutionary change does not come about by a radical negative aesthetics of atelic empowerment; it is achieved through Shelley's deus ex machina, Necessity.

In the poem's appended notes devoted to Necessity Shelley writes, "The word liberty, as applied to mind, is analogous to the word chance, as applied to matter: they spring from an ignorance of the certainty of the conjunction of antecedents and consequents" (Ingpen & Peck *I*; 144). A considerable difference between Shelley's early and later poetics is the play and power that the idea "chance" holds. Liberty and chance in *Queen Mab* are associated with ignorance, a somewhat startling conjunction when one considers Liberty's place in Shelley's pantheon of watchwords. At this moment in Shelley's political system, however, liberty merely needs to be secured into the light from the darkness of custom, tradition, and the superstitious delusions of religion. The dialectical struggle that will result in a harmonious and perfect state of society is conceived structurally in *Queen Mab* between the imaginative dream and Enlightenment

[41] In his *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1858) Thomas Jefferson Hogg relates that when at Oxford, Shelley spoke of language as the study of "words and phrases, of the names of things," yet he spoke of the "physical sciences, and especially […] chemistry" as the study of "things themselves" (47).

discourse of the notes. The liberty of imaginative thought requires the structure and law of rational inquiry.

Shelley's doctrine of Necessity teaches there is a fixed and benevolent truth that lies within and animates the perceivable structure of natural reality. Necessity guarantees its correspondence to moral reality; the question is only whether we willingly adhere to it: "The precise character and motives of any man on any occasion being given, the moral philosopher could predict his actions with as much certainty, as the natural philosopher could predict the effects of the mixture of any particular chemical substance" (Ingpen & Peck *I*, 144). Without the governing system Necessity establishes, "we could not predict with any certainty that we might not meet as an enemy to-morrow him from whom we have parted in friendship to-night" (144), Shelley warns. Yet it is the *chance* that we can never in the first place know friend from enemy, good from bad, which will begin to occupy a central place in later poems such as *Julian and Maddalo* (1818) and *The Triumph of Life* (1822).

Within the allegorical technique *Queen Mab* employs, perfection is *already* immanent; it is not imminent, waiting on the horizon; it is not a future hope or chance, but rather is before our senses, given to us from Mab's supernatural perspective. As such, humanity must only "[pursue] its wondrous way":

> Below lay stretched the universe!
> There, far as the remotest line
> That bounds imagination's flight,
> Countless and unending orbs
> In mazy motion intermingled,

Yet still fulfilled immutably

Eternal nature's law.

Above, below, around

The circling systems formed

A wilderness of harmony;

Each with undeviating aim,

In eloquent silence, through the depths of space

Pursued its wondrous way. (2.70-82)[42]

If the beauty that Shelley claims for natural law operated in corresponding measure to our moral law, then the history of human misery that the poem narrates would cease to continue. Although Godwin's Necessity excludes free will, in *Queen Mab* Shelley's version of Necessity gestures toward an ideal morality similar to Kant's notion of free conformity to the law. In gratitude for revealing the story of human history, the spirit of Ianthe concludes, "when the power of imparting joy / Is equal to the will, the human soul / Requires no other heaven" (3.11-13). Power and will emerge together in *The Triumph of Life* also, yet by 1822 they are no longer coincident, intimating instead radical difference and irreconcilability: "And much I grieved to think how power and will / In opposition rule our mortal day […]" (*Major Works* 228-29).

Both Kenneth Neil Cameron and Art Young have noted unique features of Shelley's understanding and use of Necessity that make nearly impossible a philosophically consistent reading of *Queen Mab*. The poem, almost in spite of itself,

[42] A similar perspective is granted to the speaker of Volney's *The Ruins* (1790) by the genius who commands, "if thy heart can comprehend the language of reason, interrogate these ruins! Read the lessons which they present to thee!" (5). *The Ruins* is a primary source for *Queen Mab* in both theme and narrative structure, and Shelley returns to it when he writes *Laon and Cythna*.

belies an emergent idealism.[43] The issue the poem interrogates most consistently, however, is why custom's indoctrinations have replaced the true lessons derivable from and read within nature's "book." The poem offers its reader a new and radical reading of history and society. It presents the view that what has always been considered the *natural* law of things is an artificial lie. What has thus far been written in the book of Earth (6.57) has made positive social progress a utopian dream of the poet. *Queen Mab* aims at a declaration of natural literacy. According to Shelley, Nature *actually* teaches in its own language the opposite of what history teaches. Truth is not a record of human suffering and political evils; it is that the material and moral universe compose a narrative of perfect harmony and equality, where part and whole represent and contain one another. Reason is the intellectual cipher necessary to decrypt the moral and social perfection that is written in the stars.

As Mab explains it to Ianthe's soul, the equivalence between empirical and moral reality, far from preventing the possibility of change, in effect blesses it as the legitimating force of progress. Progressive or regressive historical and individual change is not reasonless and threatening, but the result of "majestic law":

> I tell thee that those viewless beings,
>
> Whose mansion is the smallest particle

[43] In *The Young Shelley* (1951) Cameron notes that Shelley's theory of Necessity differs from Holbach's in that the latter argues the "laws of Necessity are the same as the laws of nature […]. Shelley, however, departs from this strict materialism in his dualistic conception of Necessity as a spiritual force pervading matter but not identical with it" (254). Cameron concludes that this shows Shelley's emergent Platonism (256). In his second volume on Shelley, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (1974), Cameron artfully renders Shelley's evolved understanding of Necessity: "necessity is like a flowing river, which human power cannot do away with but can divert, one way or another" (332). Art Young in *Shelley and Nonviolence* (1975) maintains, "Early in his career Shelley had believed in the doctrine of Necessity as it was expounded by William Godwin; the doctrine was one of absolute physical, psychological, and moral determinism. […] But by the time Shelley wrote *Prometheus Unbound* his view of Necessity had changed. He no longer considered man a slave to Necessity, but a being with free will operating in a universe of Necessarian law. Man's will is free to make a choice between good and evil, and his act of choice will have the inevitable consequences" (24-25).

Of the impassive atmosphere,

Think, feel and live like man;

That their affections and antipathies,

Like his, produce the laws

Ruling their moral state;

And the minutest throb

That through their frame diffuses

The slightest, faintest motion,

Is fixed and indispensable

As the majestic laws

That rule yon rolling orbs. (2.231-243.)

Yet is the "minutest throb" the cause or effect of the immutable Laws governing affection and antipathy? Are the "Soul of the Universe" (7.190) and the "Spirit of Nature! all—sufficing Power / Necessity! thou Mother of the world!" (7.197-98) consubstantial with the objects and subjects they act upon? The answers to these questions might be as simple and cryptic as Demogorgon's response to Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*, when she asks who made Hell and all the horrors of life that seem like Hell, to which Demogorgon intones, "He Reigns" (II.iv.29). In *Prometheus Unbound* the answer is enigmatic (not in the sense that critics are bewildered by what Shelley means but that Demogorgon speaks to our inability ever to know who or what, besides ourselves, reigns). In *Queen Mab*, however, "He Reigns" would be celebratory in its indictment of God's injustice. But the permanent *is-ness* and immanence that "He Reigns" implies also parallels how Shelley's understanding of Necessity obviates certain philosophical questions that arise in the

poem, questions of whether Shelley subscribes to a more Lucretian atomic or Leibnizian monadic theory of self and society.

Clearly the coherence and perfection of the universe reveals a monadic wholeness of undifferentiated continuity and indivisibility where each discrete part partakes of, represents, and refers to the immense narrative entelechy of the entire system. On the other hand, Shelley's debt to Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* is all too evident.[44] The Letter's excess might be a killing force in *Queen Mab*, but we have no access to the Spirit which gives life, a spirit that is, crucially, indifferent to human beings, exacting neither human servitude nor love:

> all that the wide world contains
> Are but thy [Spirit of Nature] passive instruments, and thou
> Regard'st them all with an impartial eye,
> Whose joy or pain thy nature cannot feel,
> Because thou hast not human sense,
> Because thou art not human mind. (2.214-19)

As Kenneth Neil Cameron helpfully reminds us, Shelley agreed with Godwin that the "question of materialism, idealism, or dualism is irrelevant to the workings of Necessity.

[44] Lucretius has recently become the classical author *du jour* in several areas of literary studies, notably in the long eighteenth century. He was more read in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for his humanism than his atomic theory, however. For Shelley, Lucretius offered both an epistemological and aesthetic view of reality that at times corresponded to his own commitment to chaos, or dissolution, as the generating force of cosmic harmony. Several critics have written on Lucretian reverberations in Shelley's work. Notably Paul Turner in "Shelley and Lucretius." *Review of English Studies* 10.39 (1959): 269-82. Hugh Roberts writes, "The Lucretian *clinamen* […] is a point of entry for death, as loss of information, into a system, and to that extent an assault on memory, not its unrecognized continuation. But at the same time, its most interesting and original properties depend upon its relationship to the constant creation and deformation of reiterative circles" (*Shelley and the Chaos of History*, 259). *Queen Mab* is not consumed by the *clinamen* as *Laon and Cythna* is, and Lucretius's atomic theory provides Shelley in this early poem with a way to imbue Necessity with a flexibility and finesse, a material throbbing that mirrors conscious being.

The Laws of Necessity operate no matter in what medium one conceives of them as existing" (*The Young Shelley*, 256). Essentially, everything is in place for human progress to achieve its utopian destiny. The stars are aligned, but human history, and the allegories, myths, and stories it employs to construct its ideologies, which establish and maintain what Shelley considers to be the evil *par excellence* of society—custom—are oppressive lies that keep our eyes shut. Shelley therefore tells another story to the society immured in bad ones, an allegory of his own making: the allegorical dream-vision Mab grants to Ianthe.[45] A sort of unconscious intuition of the future's moral condition, therefore, affects their perspective and personality in the present. The situation is the same for Shelley's poetic representation of the potential for mass moral regeneration in 1813 in relation to 1820, when he writes *Prometheus Unbound*. And this difference hinges on perspective. All Ianthe needs to do is open her eyes at the end of the poem. She will thus carry the knowledge of the dream into the waking reality of the future.

A shift in how humanity perceives itself in relation to its suffering and degradation is the panacea for hell, yet Shelley in *Queen Mab* does not begin to interrogate and doubt the question of perspective itself, the question of whether the individual subject can ever be in stable coincidence not only with the objective world but also with the narrative of history. These are questions of reflexivity, which end up consuming the Wandering Jew of *Hellas*. For the most part, however, *Queen Mab* is a poem more referential than reflexive. Its referentiality is what makes it an ideal text for New Historicism, or the critical and cultural comfort derived from buttressing a causal

[45] The structure and form are not wholly original, as Shelley borrows from Robert Southey, Sir William Jones, and Volney, among others (Cameron, *The Young Shelley*, 244).

relationship between context and text against the transcendent claims of literature, the recuperation of atelic cultural forces through their unmasking of ideology.

Jerome McGann in his groundbreaking socio-historical reading of Romanticism, *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), announces his project as a "critical meditation on the recent history of Romantic scholarship insofar as that history may provide an example, or perhaps a case study, of how literary criticism, is involved with ideology, and how it might find the means for achieving a critical distance, however provisional, from its own ideological investments" (ix). McGann's desire for critical distance—and distance, separation, *perspective* (but the *correct* perspective, of course) is the goal of most professed critiques—ends up a mystified and ideological desire to flee from ideology, ironically to flee from (one's own) inheritance of history.[46]

I take no evaluative position on the positive or negative consequences of this desire to flee from the supposedly ideological forces that produce it, since each individual and culture simultaneously yearns for and shrinks from the doubleness of memory and history, the beauty and terror of nostalgia and escape. Yet what McGann's argument shows literary critics, both those who are sympathetic and opposed to it, is just how ideological ideology is, how near impossible it is to avoid the illusion of substituting one form for another when trying to demystify false consciousness. Of course, McGann is not unaware of this trap: "however provisional," he cautions in the quote above. Curiously, or perhaps not so in light of Shelley's uncanny identification and deconstruction of ideology (perhaps Shelley has anticipated too acutely his argument, "staining its white

[46] In this respect, the copious notes appended to the end of *Queen Mab* announce Shelley's critical intent literally, and the third and final epigraph to introduce the poem announces it figuratively, Archimedes's proclamation of a *perfect perspective*, "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the Earth."

radiance"[47]), McGann's chapter on Shelley amounts only to six pages, considerably less than that if one accounts for lengthy quotations of Shelley's poetry. [48] Less curious is that this chapter contains in my judgment McGann's most explicitly ideological claim. Unsurprisingly it refers not to Romanticism in particular but poetry in general, for poetry's power to extract and carry meaning independent of its "history" is what many historicists projects argue against.[49] McGann claims: "Poetry's first obligation is to reveal the contradictory forces which human beings at once generate and live through, and its second is to provide the reader, both contemporary and future alike, with the basis for a sympathetic and critical assessment of those forces" (121).[50] Ironically, McGann offers us poetry's purpose immediately after quoting thirty lines of a famous passage from

[47] *Adonais* (1821), 52.4.

[48] A chapter that adheres to the critical consensus of Shelley's futurity, which is evidence by the title, "Shelley's Poetry: The Judgment of the Future" (118).

[49] I would be naively stepping into the role of the "priests and clerics of Romanticism" (*Romantic Ideology* 1) if I failed to admit this claim as powerfully shadowed by an ideology of its own. I do not think it is born in ideology, however. McGann's categorical denial of it proves my point. If his statement, "This idea that poetry, or even consciousness, can set one free of the ruins of history and culture is the grand illusion of every Romantic poet" (137), is false, then the entire historicist project, in addition to the majority of the prevailing interpretive models and academic critical consensuses about art generally, collapse and become contributors to and representations of the "ruins of history and culture." The stakes are usually highest when the claims of poetry are reduced by critics to their lowest. Therefore, rather than identifying ideology and trying to effect its removal from critical consciousness, rather than fretting that "Today the scholarship and interpretation of Romantic works [might sometimes be] dominated by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (137), perhaps a more pressing and productive concern for academic readers of Romantic literature in the 21st century should be determining whether these very self-representations of Romanticism are in themselves good or bad, emancipatory truths or imprisoning lies. Do not some ideologies, some prejudices, some past claims emanate moral truths greater than the lies which might from time to time sponsor them?

[50] This is also about as far as one can get from a post-modern definition of poetry. It is absolutist in its inherent interdictions, and McGann offers a very utilitarian script for poetry to follow with its emphasis on referentiality and accessibility. The not so implicit demand that poetry must serve history, provide the present and future with "CliffsNotes" somehow that are sympathetic to the historical future's way of understanding life's contradictions, while also being representative of specifically human "adversative conditions," are all stipulations that echo in form if not content the obligations and requirements that the state often exacts—a social contract emerges, in other words, between text and critic. The idea that art ought to carry with it responsibilities to what is socially good is not new, and Shelley was often strongly committed to it. I mention it here because it seems consistent with Historicism's treatment of the text as a product that is inherently limited and determined by time and place, yet at the same time fully integrated into that specific temporal-spatial environment. Hugh Roberts critiques this interpreted model in *Shelley and the Chaos of History* (1997). He concludes, "To make the state available to us, hermeneutically, as an organic, aesthetic object, of which the parts consciously embody the whole, is the anti-utopian utopia secretly or openly promised by all the historicisms of the last century" (28).

Prometheus Unbound, which begins "And behold, thrones were kingless, and men walked […]" (III.iv.131), a passage often equated with Shelley's, at this point in his career, residual, Godwinianism.[51] In other words, this specific poetry is too utopian and *too* future-oriented for McGann, who says it is "not an instance of Shelley's greatest poetry" (120). We learn the problem is that unlike the last few stanzas of Shelley's *Adonais* (1821), verses McGann designates great, Shelley's promethean lines forget the present; *Adonais*, in contrast, reveals that Shelley's "implacable futurism is a function of his present attachment—indeed is a displaced reflection of his immediate (frustrated) 'hopes'" (122). The verses from *Prometheus Unbound* lack the "*adversative* conditions" (123; my emphasis) necessary to fully appreciate and, I assume, try and combat, if not one day resolve, the contradictions of human existence. McGann says, "what moves us in Shelley's poetry is his *devotion* to the realities of the human world he *knows*" (123; my emphasis).

For the most part, I agree with McGann's interpretive model. Maintaining a historical critical distance is essential when reading a poet like Shelley, whose historical consciousness drives much of his subject matter. At the same time, however, McGann's

[51] Yeats remembers in his essay *The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry* (1900), "I went to a learned scholar to ask about its [*Prometheus Unbound*] deep meanings, which I felt more than understood, and his telling me that it was Godwin's *Political Justice* put into rhyme, and that Shelley was a crude revolutionist, and believed that the overturning of kings and priests would regenerate mankind" (53-54). McGann quotes the poem's most crudely Godwinian passage, but he is wrong I think to determine that the passage does not speak to the present world of human suffering, that it is too removed from politics. First, he cites out of the contextual unity of the poem as a whole a passage that is about transcending context, a move seemingly contrary to the reading practices of historicism; second, and more significantly, he fails to see the positive tyranny that the litany of negative images and adjectives conceals and directly speaks to. This is to say, "thrones were kingless […], the loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains / Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man / Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless" precisely because Shelley has spent the entirety of the poem committed to the dire effects and frustrations of kings, ideology, slavery, circumscription, class systems, tribalism, and nation states. In the same year as McGann's study, Timothy Webb argues in "The Unascended Heaven: Negatives in Prometheus Unbound" (1983), "Shelley attempts to realize the potential of the tale *untold*" (711). The untold tale and, as McGann wants to emphasize, "the world which Shelley *knows*" are sharply different methodological uses of poetry.

now commonplace historicist argument that Romantic self-representations—the power attributed to imagination, for instance—are illusory evasions of history and politics, frequently seems to be absorbed uncritically, so as to constitute itself a historicist self-representation. Furthermore, where he is careful on several occasions to caution against worshiping the Romantic ideology, McGann uses religious terms such as devotion in order to divert the follower of his argument to the proper icon of religious enthusiasm, the "Idea of a fully human world" (122).[52] No doubt McGann is choosing his words strategically here, perhaps trying to soften the hermeneutic transition from text to context as the privileged model. For those uninitiated in reading the text as product rather than prayer, prophecy, profession or protestation, McGann's diction might undermine the exorcism he wishes to perform.

I mention McGann and historicism in the context of *Queen Mab* because its form and content suggest much more explicitly than poems like "England 1819" or *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819) that what Forest Pyle calls the "ideology of imagination" propels us toward history and politics, not away from them. Amid the fantastical dream of its hallucinatory allegory, the utopianism of *Queen Mab* is nothing other than the consequence of taking history and politics seriously, of it being too much with Shelley. [53] A rational Utopia grounded to reason by the law of Necessity only emerges in a visionary

[52] I imagine the idea and chance that the best of ourselves and humanity might not be *of* ourselves and humanity is not one that would ever occur to McGann. Its pursuit and representation, therefore, would constitute for him an evasion of immediate human issues, problems, and adversities.

[53] Pyle argues in the *Ideology of Imagination* (1995) the "demystifying and liberating aspect of Shelley's notion of the imagination is pervasive and compelling: one can in fact regard his negotiations between idealism and skepticism as the difficult forging of a political aesthetic for which the available secular and philosophical vocabularies are judge to be inadequate" (96). Pyle's claim is relevant to Shelley's strategy in *Queen Mab*, where idealism and skepticism create a distortion of perspective between the poetry and the notes, in addition to the voices of the poem, Mab's, Ahasuerus's, and the anonymous narrator. Pyle goes on to argue that Shelley "breaks" from his notion of imagination in *The Triumph of Life*, that he becomes more interested in its limits and the effects of a poetry that tries to incorporate an aesthetic representation of acknowledging not only the margins of imaginative territories of consciousness but an imagination without margins.

poem. The world *Queen Mab* imagines must lend itself to the otherness it desires through a rewriting of the history that gives birth to its dream. Thus, Shelley is both something of a historian and historicist in this early attempt at conquering history. What is so fascinating is the reflexive pull of aesthetics as the poem's narrative moves along the tracks of its allegory, and the light at the end of the tunnel is not utopia, but paraphrasing Robert Lowell, the train coming toward us.

James Chandler brilliantly spots the centrifugal and centripetal tensions that push and pull Shelley away from history. Even though he is speaking primarily of the poetry composed in and around 1819, the historicism he describes is relevant to both *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*:

> His historicism is the most self-conscious and the most "unwilling," and it is precisely in his awareness of its unwillingness that he most recognizes it as the product of a historicist epoch. It is not his own spirit, as he might have put it, but the spirit of the age-of-the-spirit-of-the-age. Shelley's work in 1819 provokes historical awareness of the condition of being historically aware. Shelley's mode of historicist representation and his concept of the historically representative are thus alike "mysterious," in a strict sense […]. (*England in 1819*, 489-90)[54]

Another way to concisely emphasize Chandler's distinctive analysis of Shelley's historical consciousness is to say that reflexivity, self-reflexivity, is just as central to Shelley's historical as aesthetic mode. Reflexivity is a turning, after all, toward the past, future, or toward one's mind and memory in the much maligned and misunderstood

[54] Incidentally, Hugh Roberts notes that the "spirit of the age" was a favorite phrase of Shelley's and that he might have coined its English usage (*Shelley and the Chaos of History*, 125).

Romantic inward turn; as such, this turning *ill-uminates* the future, becoming the imaginative perspective that facilitates the reflection in "mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present."[55] I hyphenate illuminate in order to show the paradoxical darkness and moral *ill* that any process of illumination reveals.[56] The future casts shadows on the present, which is to say it casts a spell. It is not a distant loadstar guiding the present toward the end of history or utopia. The future, as imaged in the *Defence of Poetry*, reveals to the present its utter absence of light, enlightens its potential through negation, a process repeated so often in Shelly. As Shelley will say in *On Life*, it creates a "vacancy." I will return to this idea in a later chapter, but its relevance to *Queen Mab* depends upon its structural absence in the poem, that the vacancy partly emerges but the progressive continuum of positive and absolute enlightenment prevails. It emerges since The Fairy Mab is also the Queen of spells, and the power of the poem's vision is its visionary rereading of history, not the polemical prose critique the notes constitute, however original the welding of the two are.

The necessary adjustment of visionary revisionism on which perfectibility depends is directly related to Ahasuerus's rewriting of history, which is a rewriting of myth. As a result of the vision of nature and the past Mab reveals for Ianthe's spirit, she feels rather than logically arrives at (a response the reader of the poem is intended to mimic) the altered and properly historiographic corrective lenses:

> The Spirit,
>
> In ecstasy of admiration, felt

[55] *Defence of Poetry*, *Norton*, 535.
[56] "So fleet, so faint, so fair, / The Powers of earth and air, / Fled from the folding star of Bethlehem; / Apollo, Pan, and Love— / And even Olympian Jove— / Grew weak, *for killing Truth had glared on them*;" (*Norton*, *Hellas* (1821), 229-234, 439; my emphasis).

All knowledge of the past revived; the events

Of old and wondrous times,

Which dim tradition interruptedly

Teaches the credulous vulgar

Were unfolded in just perspective to the view;

Yet dim from their infinitude.

The Spirit seemed to stand

High on an isolated pinnacle;

The flood of ages combating below

The depth of the unbounded universe

Above, and all around

Nature's unchanging harmony. (2.244-57)[57]

[57] "All knowledge of the past revived" uncannily anticipates Keats's *Hyperion* fragment, where Apollo is born into death and apotheosis. The relevant lines begin with Apollo reading the face of Mnemosyne, who is as silent as the "silent eloquence" of Shelley's Spirit of Nature, yet in which Apollo, like Ianthe, reads and learns a sublime lesson: "—Mute! yet I can read / A wondrous lesson in thy silent face; / Knowledge enormous makes a God of me, / Names deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions / Majesties, sovran voices, agonies, / Creations and destroyings, all at once / Pour into the wide hollows of my brain, / And deify me, as if some blithe wine / Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk, / And so become immortal" (*Norton*, III.111-20). Apollo's experience is as fecund and excessive as Ianthe's, and the image evokes the mind downloading infinite and crystal clear history, narrative, and myth. There is another interesting parallel that thematically joins each passage. Mab enchants Ianthe with the revival of "true" history and knowledge, untainted by "dim tradition" or custom, since she has the enchantresses's power to cast spells. Likewise, Apollo is left spellbound, drunk with a magic "elixir." "High on an isolated pinnacle," Ianthe "dies into life" (*Hyperion* III.130) with Apollo, but more literally, since a sleeping and enslaved society will drink from her elixir, charming it to wakefulness with the spell of *just* perspective, history and knowledge; Apollo dies into the life of the mind, Ianthe into the mind of life. I will return to this notion of "spelling" and "enchantment" in a later chapter. In yet another anticipation, in the case of Shelley's own work, *The Triumph of Life*, which has more in common with *Queen Mab* than many critics acknowledge, the last four lines of the passage quoted above in the text, specifically, "[…] combating below / […] unbounded universe / Above, and all around / Nature's […]" foretell the beginning of the 1822 vision: "[…] before me fled / The night: behind me rose the day; the Deep / Was at my feet, and Heaven above my head / When a strange trance over my fancy grew / Which was not slumber […] (*Norton*, 26-30). Crucially, the spatial orientations in the lines from the *Triumph* possess a depth and temporal dimension absent from the tripartite positioning of *Queen Mab's* above, below, and all round. In *Queen Mab*, Ianthe's relative position in space is given after the new and sublime perspective is granted; in the *Triumph*, however, the unique spatiotemporal orientation seems to initiate the trance-like vision, as if historical and spatiotemporal

Shelley puns "*just* perspective" in order to emphasize both the justice derived from the moral perspective and the simplicity and always-already immanence of the proper way of looking at things; "just," as in *only*, let Nature and its unchanging harmony be your guide, or "just," as in it is *only* Nature that is your guide, the visible manifestation of which is led forth by an invisible power; so visible renewal and regeneration will follow an altered optics. All three epigraphs come into play at this point also: Voltaire's "Crush the demon [Christianity]," Lucretius's, "[…] First, I teach of great matters, and [secondly] I free men's minds from the crippling bonds of superstition," and Archimedes's, "Give me somewhere to stand, and I will move the earth" (*Major Works*, 10). As "All knowledge of the past [revives]," this new history, which is also a prophetic luring of humanity into the hypostatization of a new collective mind, dissolves the false pedagogy of "dim tradition" and custom, along with, necessarily, Christianity and its hydra-headed superstitions.

As an explicit scene of instruction, this historical conversion experience calls attention to both the cognitive subject and object of cognition, yet it seems to emphasize the former, since the superstitions of Christianity, which must be crushed, are also its most poetic myths. The mind is capable of generating and believing each simultaneously, a problem Shelley solves through Ahasuerus, as he rewrites the essence of the Christian narrative in a ventriloquism of the voice of God, whom Shelley in both his works and letters is fond of pairing with the poet: "It justifies that bold and true word of Tasso—*Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta*."[58] Shelley was deeply absorbed in and at times seems to have employed mythology almost unconsciously in his poetry. He understood

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context knock unconscious the poet-speaker as he tries to flee into an aesthetics but, as though in quicksand, further sinks into ideology.

[58] *Defence of Poetry*, *Norton*, 533. "None deserves the name of Creator except God and the Poet." Norton notes, "quoted in Pierantonio Serassi's Italian *Life of Torquato Tasso* (1785)." Of course, the spirit in which Tasso refers to God and the spirit in which Shelley refers to God in *Queen* Mab reside together only in the letter, so to speak.

its power as allegory, belief system, and ethical criterion. He used it as a source for poetry in the same way Keats did, as an allegory for what the poet, poetry, and the past mean for the present, a method of generating new and re-mythologizing old myths to revitalize the present. *Prometheus Unbound* is the most significant example, but *The Witch of Atlas* (1820), *Adonais*, and *The Triumph of Life* are each laden with mythical topoi. The list goes on, of course. It is no coincidence that Harold Bloom entitled his first scholarly work *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959).

In *A History of Gnosticism* (1990) Giovanni Filoramo identifies the legitimizing power of *mythos* over and against *logos*, the philosophical dispute between poetic narrative and intellectual reason. What Filoramo argues has strong resonances to *Queen Mab*'s representation of Ianthe's perspectival awakening quoted above. [59] It seems almost that, through a trick of reason, the very *logos* of history will reawaken, by means of an unrealizable, utopian nostalgia, the ghosts of an irrecoverable past, to the point where 'the reality of myth remains and works within the very core of those narratives that are presented as explicitly historical.'[60] It is a paradoxical process of emptying, by means of the *logos*, a mythical shell whose substance is at the same time continually taken up,

[59] The many ruins of history that Ianthe passes over and bears witness to in *Queen Mab* will not remain remains, remnants, and fragments. Mab, the interpreting angel of the poem, makes whole what has been smashed through the allegorical dream vision of the quest; Shelley, more directly, tries to do the same through an appeal to the intellect in the philosophical end notes. Shelley's intention in *Queen Mab* is to present the reader with a self-generating whole, the telic structure and trajectory of which constitute and arrive at Enlightenment. Jessica Smith's argument in "The Dialogic Landscape of Shelley's *Queen Mab*" (1998) offers compelling evidence in support of reading both the poem and its competing voices as ruins, which, contrary to my own emphasis, are never recuperated. She contends, "Queen Mab's portrayal of the discursive metamorphoses arising through the construction of one discourse from the fragmentary appropriation of another enacts the production and reproduction of social attitudes (radical, conservative, tyrannical, or otherwise) […]. Each speaker, however, demonstrates her/his unawareness of these verbal dynamics, and therefore unwittingly implicates her or himself in contrary ideological stances" (141). I differ only in saying that Shelley's notes *of* (more than *to*) the poem act as the transparent ideological stance each voice must finally speak from. The critical act of the notes is a recuperative strategy to monumentalize the unwitting and unaware voices of ruin.

[60] Quotation from *Mito e storia nel pensiero greco*, G. F. Gianotti, ed. Turin: 1976, 183ff.

reread and reconstructed, as one sees in the fifth-century tragedians, who project upon them the preoccupations and problems of contemporary society.[61] In *Queen Mab* reason is presented not as a useful trick, either desultory or compensatory for the failures of superstition, but rather as the *raison d'être* for Being, the method of access to material and moral laws.

In July of 1812, Shelley wrote to Godwin, "Reason (if I may be permitted to personify it) is as much your superior, as you are mine. An hour & a thousand years are equally incommensurate with eternity" (*Letters* I; 316). If in Shelley's early metaphysics reason inexorably paves the path toward uniform truth, in his poetry he still must use the trick of allegorical vision to animate a past deadened by tradition, "reawaken […] the ghosts of an irrevocable past," as Ianthe "[feels] / All knowledge of the past [revive]." Filoramo quotes G. F. Giovanni's *Myth and History in Greek Thought* in order to emphasize that even in "narratives that are presented as explicitly historical," myth locates itself at the "core" and makes up the "shell." In one sense all history is myth, myth untranslated by logos into history. *Queen Mab* does not test this theory but confirms it. Shelley takes as his target the "historical" traditions he considers mythical, outright

[61] Shelley's "Gnosticism" is a fertile ground for study which, though much cultivated, seems only to become richer as more is written about the author's creative psychology, work and influences. I do not mean Gnosticism only as the set of principles, beliefs and myths of its various accounts and texts attributable to its diverse forms and schools in the second and third century, but also in the more modern and comprehensive sense as a synonym for a kind of immediate intuition or extension of consciousness, the desire for which originates in the anxieties, hopes and rebellions of a mind that knows it does not know or knows poorly, despite ever-increasing knowledge across the ages of history and individuals—the dream not of *Prometheus Unbound*, but the mind's Promethean dream to be unbound. In fact, in the early and unfinished narrative *The Assassins* (1814), Shelley equates the views of a group of Ismaili Shiite Muslims with Christian Gnostics (*Shelley and Scripture*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1994, 1). Bryan Shelley explains, "behind the complex systems of the Gnostics lay a sensibility of estrangement, a fundamental disposition to regard the world and its established creeds as hostile to the man of enlightenment. It is in this sense that a 'Gnostic' Shelley may be discerned. And it is this sense of alienation from society and its orthodoxy which informs both his idealization of Gnostic sectarian experience and his impulse to reinterpret scripture" (3). Gnostic motifs are present everywhere in Shelley's work, from the idea of a yearning for and recollection of one's celestial or spiritual home set against the misbegotten and corrupt corporeal world, to the emphasis on an androgynous generative vitality and the revelation of spirit to take place in unequivocal image (Filoramo 57-59).

distortions of nature's narrative, and reinscribes *Queen Mab* as a myth that logos translates into future history. Filoramo himself cannot help but employ mythical language in describing the relationship of *mythos* to *logos*. The "mythical shell whose substance" is emptied out by *logos* to be "continually taken up, reread and reconstructed" evokes archetypal perfection, a plenitude that in the process of being poured forth into existence is divided, separated, ironized; it evokes a fall, in other words, in which the return to oneness requires an obverse process of "rereading and reconstruction," the power of a revealer and intercessor.

Ahasuerus becomes Shelley's revelator, a sort of antichrist who translates myth back into history, opens the eyes of the "credulous vulgar" to the rot of custom's conspiracy. He both throws his voice high up into heaven and lilts it low into hell, nearer the contemporary pulse of the present. He says:

> From an eternity of idleness
> I, God, awoke; in seven days' toil made earth
> From nothing; rested, and created man;
> I placed him in a paradise, and there
> Planted the tree of evil, so that he
> Might eat and perish, and my soul procure
> Wherewith to sate its malice, and to turn,
> Even like a heartless conqueror of the earth,
> All misery to my fame.
> ---
> Yet ever burning flame and ceaseless woe

> Shall be the doom of their [race of men] souls,
> With every soul on this ungrateful earth,
> Virtuous or vicious, weak or strong,—even all
> Shall perish, to fulfill the blind revenge
> (Which you, to men, call justice) of their God. (*Major Works* 7.106-14; 121-26)

This version of God, a sadistic patriarchal tyrant full of self-contempt, lust and hate—each attribute or "principle of self" (*Defence*) the reverse of those Shelleyan moral and poetic precepts which are intended to nullify and transform them—reappears consistently in Shelley's work, notably as Othman in *Laon and Cythna*, Count Cenci in *The Cenci* (1820) and Jupiter in *Prometheus Unbound*. Ahasuerus's mockery of God is now doubled, once the Son and now the Father. Shelley's marks a break in the continuum of custom by enunciating the origin of society's self-given oppressions as the absurdity of their credulity; people have believed and have been taught the wrong story. Bryan Shelley's comment on Ahasuerus's speech in *Shelley and Scripture* (1993) explains how thinkers of the radical enlightenment abhorred certain tenets of Christian history: "The doctrine of election [was] the bane of the *philosophes*. In a universe governed by universal necessity, the idea of a chosen people can stand only for bigotry […]. The Phenomenon of the chosen few, with its corollary of the unchosen many, violated the Enlightenment spirit of universalism and toleration […]" (45). Underlying their protestations of what they generally considered Christianity to be, namely a reflection of and tool for the coercions of the political state, was a deeper anxiety that struck at the root

of how radical Enlightenment thinkers were beginning to perceive the operations of the cosmos.

The history of Christianity that the Bible relates is purposive in the same way as the utopian hope of Enlightenment progress, but many of its figures, images, events and laws seem beyond the pale of scientific and moral reason; there is no *necessary* justification for their existence and occurrence, besides the arbitrary whims of a maniacal and vengeful deity, according to Enlightenment thinkers. Moral law can of course be deduced from the laws and teachings of the Old and New Testament, but it is much more difficult to derive them as inductions. In an epoch where science begins to adopt an emancipatory role for humanity, believing in the mysteries of religion without being able to put them to material or moral service is not only no longer enough but too much—Q.E.D.[62] The *Necessity* of atheism becomes the only *chance* for progress. Shelley's views change over time, of course, and he will come to rely much less explicitly on scientific rationalism as a way to both recuperate political injustice and expand the discursive limits of his poetry, but in 1813 Reason remains sacred. As I suggested earlier, Ahasuerus's speech in *Hellas* reveals Shelley's distance from a view of the world that emphasizes scientific rationalism and an entailment between phenomenology and cognition. What

[62] Shelley ends his 1811 essay, *The Necessity of Atheism*, which was co-authored by Thomas Jefferson Hogg, "Every reflecting mind must allow that there is no proof of the existence of a deity.—Q.E.D." (Ingpen & Peck *V*; 209). "Q.E.D." is of course Latin for "which was to be demonstrated." Kenneth Neil Cameron explains that the possibilities of science attracted Shelley for two reasons: "He believed that it afforded a way to philosophic truth. The study of languages, he once commented to Hogg, was merely the study of "the names of things"; but by means of "the physical sciences and especially through chemistry," one could investigate "things themselves." In the second place, he believed that science provided an instrument for the amelioration of the human race" (*The Young Shelley*, 81). For a discussion of Shelley's use of science in his poetry, see Carl Grabo's *A Newton Among Poets: Shelley's Use of Science in Prometheus Unbound* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1968). Also see Marilyn Gaull's "Shelley's Sciences" (*The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Eds. Michael O'Neill, and Anthony Howe. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013. 577-93). And finally Arkady Plotnitsky's "All Shapes of Light: The Quantum Mechanical Shelley." Bennett, Betty T., and Stuart Curran, eds. *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. 263-274.

emerges is the feverish and contemplative reflexivity of the subject's perception, where the sun can just as easily burn as illuminate, and just as easily be the only source of Light in the universe.

> Nought is but that which feels itself to be.
>
> ---
>
> Thought
>
> Alone, and its quick elements, Will, Passion,
>
> Reason, Imagination, cannot die:
>
> ---
>
> —what has thought
>
> To do with time or place or circumstance?
>
> Would'st thou behold the future?—ask and have!
>
> Knock and it shall be opened—look and, lo!
>
> The coming age is shadowed on the past
>
> As on a glass. (*Norton*, 785; 795-97; 800-06)

Significantly, in this instance Ahasuerus uses the prophetic language of the New Testament not to parody a false perspective as he does in *Queen Mab*, but to metaphorize the truth of the historicized individual's relationship to history. The key to the future in the anti-materialist mode is not rewriting the past but properly interpreting desire in the present. Looking into the mirror of the present reveals the future, and unless a shattering of the image occurs, then its reflection persist. This is a significantly different temporal perspective from the assumed correspondence between natural and human law described in *Queen Mab*. The doctrine of Necessity no longer determines human agency; it is

mentally rather than materially oriented, more of the soul than the soil. The stuff that dreams are made on transcends "stuff."

The final canto of *Queen Mab* describes the utopian regeneration of a society functioning according to natural, and thus rational, motives. Custom itself reverses course and makes the lion lie down with the lamb: "custom's force had / made his nature as the nature of a lamb" (8.127-8). Fear of death abates:

> Mild was the slow necessity of death:
> The tranquil spirit failed beneath its grasp
> Without a groan, almost without a fear,
> Calm as a voyager to some distant land,
> And full of wonder, full of hope as he. (9.57-61)

Subject and object unite ("The Body and the Soul united then, / A gentle start convulsed Ianthe's frame" (9.232-32)) and the poem concludes with an image of human love, as Henry gazes on Ianthe's awakening spirit, which parallels both the love and awe that overwhelms Ianthe during her journey with Mab as well as the newly illuminated society awakening to its destiny. The poem can be understood as an instance of Shelley's reason reeling toward a utopian future, if only we could read history through the eyes of nature's benevolent order.

Before I turn to Shelley's "vision of the nineteenth century," *Laon and Cythna*, I want to remark how William Hazlitt's account of William Godwin's "achievement" directly applies to *Queen Mab*. It has such relevance perhaps because Shelley never again wrote a poem of such uncompromising hope and certainty, and never one that would

come back to intrude and haunt his ordinary and everyday world.[63] In the *Spirit of the Age* (1825) Hazlitt ironically describes Godwin's accomplishment in *Political Justice*:

> If it is admitted that Reason alone is not the sole and self-sufficient ground of morals, it is to Mr. Godwin that we are indebted for having settled the point. No one denied or distrusted this principle (before his time) as the absolute judge and interpreter in all questions of difficulty; and if this is no longer the case, it is because he has taken this principle, and followed it into its remotest consequences with more keenness of eye and steadiness of hand than any other expounder of ethics. […] By overshooting the mark […] he has pointed out the limit or line of separation, between what is practicable and what is barely conceivable […] has enabled others to say to the towering aspirations after good and to the over-bearing pride of human intellect: 'Thus far shalt thou come, and no farther!' (29-30).

Queen Mab is thus the furthest Shelley ever allowed reason to carry poetry,[64] and much of the reason lies with Godwin's influence. Shelley's *Queen Mab* is not simple,

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[63] In 1817 Shelley professed that *Queen Mab* "was composed in early youth, & is full of those error which belong to youth, as far as arrangement of imagery & language & a connected plan, is concerned.—But it was a sincere overflowing of the heart & mind, & that at a period when they are most uncorrupted & pure" (*Letters* I; 566). In January, 1817 John and Elizabeth Westbrook, the father and sister of Shelley's first wife Harriet Westbrook, who drowned herself the previous year, petitioned the Court of Chancery in order that Shelley lose custody of his two children by Harriet, Charles and Ianthe. *Queen Mab* was submitted as evidence that Shelley was morally unfit to retain guardianship. The charge was that he "blasphemously derided the truth of the Christian Revelation and denied the existence of God as the Creator of the Universe" (Jack Donovan, "Epic Experiments," *Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 257-58).

[64] In her notes on *Laon and Cythna* (*The Revolt of Islam*), Mary Shelley famously remarks, "Shelley possessed two remarkable qualities of intellect—a brilliant imagination and a logical exactness of reason. His inclination led him (he fancied) almost alike to poetry and metaphysical discussions. I say "he fancied," because I believe the former to have been paramount, and that it would have gained the mastery even had he struggled against it" (Ingpen & Peck *I*; 409). *Queen Mab* is not Shelley's only metaphysical poem, not at all, and Earl Wasserman used Shelley's "intellectual philosophy" as the interpretive key for reading all of his poetry, but *Queen Mab* is after all designated by Shelley *A Philosophical Poem*, and in it the struggle between what Mary Shelley calls imagination and metaphysics is better regarded as an embrace of the two mental faculties wherein metaphysics is the more encircling and grasps more earnestly lest the note of resistance it detects from poetry threaten the inter-discourse.

immature or an example of Shelley's philosophy put to verse, but for Shelley, whom Harold Bloom often characterized as the most urbane Romantic poet, it is to a remarkably degree sincere.[65] Its progressive march toward the utopia it describes and wishes to enact is relentless, absorptive and, most importantly, fateful. The poem describes the pitfalls of self-idolatry as it applies to the various ruling classes of society, but the central poison that infects the object of its critique is mankind's refusal to confront the solution that is everywhere present in nature. It is as if Shelley feverishly points—here, here! Open your eyes and look at what Mab is showing us from her Hall of Spells. The spell with which the self mystifies itself comes from within, not from without.

Laon and Cythna and the Wake of Broken Progress

Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century (1817) adapts the cosmic utopian dream vision of *Queen Mab* to the contingencies of specific historical and individual events. Under the guise of a Romance narrative Shelley aims to reimagine the political and moral consequences of the French Revolution; which is to say that he once again offers his vision of an ideal society and the injustices and human foibles preventing one. Whereas *Queen Mab's* dialectical progress was constitutive of the antithesis between rational discourse and a Necessity inspired by Love, *Laon and Cythna's* dialectical struggle progresses from the source of individual autonomy and freedom, staging a contest between redemptive will and the evils of human error. The poem asks the question, How can love inspire productive political action? Like Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*, Cythna embodies the idea of Shelleyan Love. And like Beatrice in *The Cenci*, she experiences the depths of human depravity, yet unlike

[65] Perhaps the poem's unabashed sincerity is why it is often ignored or merely footnoted, the famous dictum of Oscar Wilde that all bad poetry is sincere becoming something of a critical litmus test for judging the significance of a literary work.

Beatrice, she forgives her tormentors and overcomes the unrelenting torments of self-contempt and hate. In this way *Laon and Cythna* foreshadows Shelley's vision of the Promethean redemption of humanity; yet unlike both *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*, the work wades through the muck of political and moral realities.

In a still more salient comparison, since *Laon and Cythna* follows *Queen Mab* as Shelley's second mature vision of subjectivity and society,[66] Cythna undergoes a difficult education of misery from which she must "wake to weep." Whereas in *Queen Mab* Ianthe is given a vision in order to perceive its perfection and rational virtue, Cythna's vision of the world is replete with the immediate and sustained corruptions of any sort of knowable ideal. Amidst its fantastical romance narrative, the poem is decidedly more real than *Queen Mab*, as it confronts a significant development in Shelley's thought, the notion that love's liberatory force comes from its being both limiting and inclusive. The crux of Shelley's dialectical philosophy of human potential is love. The great impasse to his wished-for union of individual desire and cosmic necessity is the anxiety that the idealized perfection within the human heart is an illusion that cannot be satisfied outside itself.[67] But love's desire is worth the risk because it enlarges the circumference of the self beyond itself, making the greater human collective inclusive of love's object.

Laon and Cythna takes on this theme of self-isolation and then throughout the narrative deploys it as a generative model of both the beginning of self-autonomy and love. In the absence of others to fulfill the vacancy inside the self, one might turn toward

[66] *Alastor* (1815) followed *Queen Mab* chronologically, yet that poem's focus resembles a Wordsworthian mind-quest and lacks the immediate political and social concerns of *Laon and Cythna*.
[67] The "veiled maid" in *Alastor* whom the poet desires in a dream might, within this context of Shelley's moral dialectic, be understood as representing both a self projecting and consumption of its own failed attempt to meet genuine human needs, as well as the beginning of self-esteem and authentic love, since the "veiled maid" is an illusion, as is the internal chasm within the self, which Shelley describes as the foundation of love.

self-worship and self-contempt, the idolatry of the self. The poem's two heroes fall into literal and figural self-isolation and each escapes the trap of self-contempt. In canto three Cythna is enslaved by a band of soldiers, some of whom Laon murders. Physical resistance to violence or tyranny is for the most anathema to Shelley and Laon suffers for his crime, as the soldiers chain him to a column and he goes mad before a hermit eventually rescues him. Like Prometheus, a physical and moral bind follows Laon's decision to retaliate: "With brazen links, my naked limbs they bound" (III.xiv.123). With the hermits help, Laon learns a new language of love and hope with which he will try to redeem society: "And his soul-subduing tongue / Were as a lance to quell the mailed crest of wrong" (III.xvii.152-3).

Cythna, likewise shut up in a cave, becomes a representative of Shelleyan love. She overcomes the retreat to and the reality of the self, what she describes as: "We live in our own world […] / we are darkened with their floating shade, / Or cast a lustre on them" (VII.xxx.262-65). It is love that casts luster on the bleak condition of being separated from one's ideals in the actuality of real historical conditions. In the following pages on *Laon and Cythna*, I suggest that Cythna's universal command, "Reproach not thine own soul, but know thyself, / Nor hate another's crime, nor loathe thine own," is a way to avoid the corrosive effects of Shelleyan self-autonomy, a freedom cut off from the language of love and actions of social sympathy. Cythna's words recognize the presence of evil in human nature while urging a kind of self-forgiveness that would prevent such evil from inhibiting hope and political reform.

With *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century* (1817)[68] Shelley's attitude toward the most effective means of social reform and the most representative vision of historical progress changes. The poem shares with *Queen Mab* a similar structure and theme,[69] but differs substantially as a work more committed to the self-reflexive aesthetic mode than the referential historical

[68] In January 1818 the poem was reissued under a new title, *The Revolt of Islam*. The change was due to pressures on Shelley's publisher Charles Ollier from both customers as well as the possibility of being charged with blasphemous liable for the poem's negative treatment of religion and positive treatment of incestuous love. Jack Donovan writes in "Epic Experiments" that "the consensus nowadays is that *Laon and Cythna* demands primacy of attention as conforming to Shelley's unconstrained aims, *The Revolt of Islam* issuing from a set of circumstances so exceptionally coercive as to deny it both integrity and authority" (268). Ironically, however, it is just this coerciveness which Hugh Roberts cites in *Shelley and the Chaos of History* that makes *The Revolt of Islam* the more interesting version of the text: "Shelley's act of misrepresentation is itself theoretically interesting. The altered text becomes itself implicated in the contradictions and tensions it aims to explore. A text about power and reactions to power and 'Custom' is itself a product of an acquiescence to power and 'Custom'" (160). In spite of Donovan's claim, I have noticed that *The Revolt of Islam* is becoming the preferred text for more and more scholars and editions of Shelley's poetry. This might be the result of contemporary interest in post-colonial studies, in addition to the orientalizing effects and themes expressed in a work entitled *The Revolt of Islam*, not to mention the strong critical purchase and pull Islam itself elicits in our current geo-political context. I choose to use *Laon and Cythna* for this dissertation because it represents Shelley's original intent for a poem that is essentially a re-imagining of the history and events of the French Revolution, which Shelley famously called "the master theme of the epoch in which we live" (*Letters* I; 504). Although I consider the aesthetic or historical effects a poem produces or offers secure from the constraints of the author's intention, or the intention of any other contextual restriction, in the case of choosing *Laon of Cythna* I honor if not privilege intention. This is a work Shelley could not let go of, and in February 1821, almost four years after he began composing it, Shelley writes to Charles Ollier asking, "Is there any expectation of a second edition of the 'Revolt of Islam'? I have many corrections to make in it, and one part will be wholly remodeled" (*Letters* II; 263). Besides the central place it occupied in Shelley's psyche as representative of the central event of Shelley's historical consciousness, by using *Laon and Cythna* I also wish to emphasize Laon and Cythna; that is to say, the two *individual* characters and how their love for each other and their "genius" contributes to the amelioration of the social chaos Shelley places them into. As Shelley said of the poem, it is a "story of human passion" (Letters I; 557) and "speak[s] to the common & elementary emotions of the human heart" (Letters I; 563). Both the human heart and human emotions are universalized through Laon and Cythna's incestuous bond. At the top of the fourth page of the *MS. Shelley adds. e.14* and beneath an absentminded doodling of bushes, Shelley has scratched out "Many shall feel who dare not speak their feeling / Many shall […]" (*The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, ed. Tatsuo Tokoo, 1992). Nothing else is written on the page. Not to use *Laon and Cythna* as the primary text seems to me unnecessarily to unscratch that line, and thus corrupt the spirit in which the poem was conceived.

[69] Once again Shelley borrows heavily from both Volney's *The Ruins* and Southey's unfinished romance *Ahrimanes* (1815). The strong Manichean struggle and Zoroastrian duality that pervades *Laon and Cythna*, and is introduced in the first canto with the symbolic contest between the eagle and serpent, has its source both in Volney and Southey. Volney identifies "Ahrimanes, or Satan of the Persians" (96), the eponymous figure of Southey's romance. James Rieger notes of this work, "Ahrimanes […] Zoroaster's principle of universal filth and darkness (*angrō mainyush = evil spirit*), will remain locked in nearly equal combat with Ormuzd (*Ahura Mazda*), the god of light and life, until the latter triumphs at the end of history" (*The Mutiny Within*, 100). Rieger reports that Shelley's "interest in Persian dualism dates from the summer of 1813" (100). Manichean themes and narrative struggles recur in Shelley, most explicitly in *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*.

mode of *Queen Mab*, in part because it emphasizes the relationship of individual passion and genius to collective destiny. The "influence of individual genius" to which Shelley refers in his letter to a publishing house[70] is a reference both to Laon and Cythna as the poem's heroes and also to himself as a poet whose genius is sharply developing. Laon is a representative and universal figure in the poem, which is to say he also exemplifies the kind of world-changing poet and good citizen Shelley himself aspires to be. It seems the more sophisticated and focused Shelley's poetry became, the "more attention [given] to the refinement and accuracy of language, and the connection of its parts" (*Letters* I; 557), the more "violence & revolution" is "relieved by milder pictures of friendship & love & natural affections" (*Letters* I; 563), then the more Shelley pits individual psyche against collective history. The contradictions and tensions that moil within this contest reflect and are transposed into the language of his poetry.

What in *Queen Mab* elicits a shift in the people's perspective on their relation to history, in *Laon and Cythna* elicits a perspectival shift on perspective itself. One reason for this paradigmatic pull toward centripetal interiority is that like in *Prometheus Unbound*,[71] *Laon and Cythna* strives for an allegorical representation of the operations of the human mind: "The Poem […] (with the exception of the first Canto, which is purely introductory), is narrative, not didactic. It is a succession of pictures illustrating the growth and progress of individual mind aspiring after excellence, and devoted to the love of mankind" (*Longman*; Preface 33). The narrative context, therefore, if we take Shelley

[70] Shelley wrote to Longman & Co. describing the story the poem tells as "the *beau ideal* as it were of the French Revolution, but produced by the influence of individual genius, & out of general knowledge" ((*Letters* I; 564).

[71] In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley explains, "The Imagery which I have employed will be found in many instances to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed. […] My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence" (*Norton*, 207).

at his word that his intentions are to tell a story *of* moral excellence rather than a story that moralizes, describes a dualistic struggle between both good and evil and individual and history.[72] From this universal psychomachia emerges a subject with a historical double consciousness. Added to the recognition of one's historicity is the recognition that one's desires aim beyond historical subjugation. Laon and Cythna must teach this sophisticated historical awareness because they become models of self-representation. They are able to overcome the egotistic aims of the idolatrous self. One aim of the poem, then, becomes didactic, insofar as it becomes an exemplary application "of a liberal and comprehensive morality" based on the "doctrines of liberty and justice" and the "faith and hope of something good" in the face of "violence," "misrepresentation" and "prejudice" (Preface 32). Shelley is, along with his hero and heroine, a teacher in *Laon and Cythna*, more so than in any other poem he wrote.

Constituting twelve cantos, the great majority of which are written in Spenserian stanza ("because […] there is no shelter for mediocrity; you must either succeed or fail," Shelley says in the preface), the work is over 4000 lines and remains Shelley's longest

[72] Earl Wasserman is not exactly silent on *The Revolt of Islam* (the title and text he employs), but in his comprehensive and influential study on Shelley's poetry and philosophy he cites it sparingly and only in relationship to other works and ideas. Perhaps indicative of the confused status of the poem itself, as a compound of historiography, allegory, and romance, in addition to Shelley's self-suppression and revisioning of many of its passages, the poem is neither sufficiently skeptical nor sufficiently idealistic for Wasserman's project. However, he does introduce and comment on an early manuscript section of the poem, which he identifies as the "rejected Introduction." The concluded lines of Shelley's discarded passage read, "—each human phantasy / Hath such sweet visions in the solitude / Of thought, that human life (this drear world) like heaven wd. Be / Could words invest such dreams with immortality." Of this passage, which is an example of Shelley's tendency to express intractable despair alongside of unrealizable hope, Reiman writes: "It is clear that when Shelley extends his field of vision beyond mortal life he can no longer speak as the reformer outlining a program of earthly perfection, or that whenever he despairs of a durable human utopia he must seek some transcendent explanation for the mind's ability to conceive of and yearn for perfection but not to attain it" (188). The historical event that *Laon and Cythna* records and then poetically resounds is of course just this "despair of a durable human utopia," emitted in the breath of those who wished that France's republican experiment answered its purpose. The poem becomes implicated in the same historical uncertainty. Shelley announces its purpose as "an experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives" (Preface 32).

poem. No doubt due to its length, *Laon and Cythna* is probably Shelley's least read major work, and until recently large swaths of it were considered some of Shelley's worst poetry. Often identified as a transitional poem in terms of how it represents and acts upon Shelley's historical and political awareness, Kenneth Cameron's introduction of the poem still remains relevant today:

> Of all Shelley's major poems, *The Revolt of Islam* is the most neglected. True, it is often poorly written, perhaps partly because Shelley's sense of "precariousness" urged him to haste, and partly because in his mood of "sustained enthusiasm" his ideas tumbled out one after the other and he paid little attention to the niceties of style. Furthermore, the poem is overlong and sometimes lacks unity of structure and mood, incongruously mixing realism and fantasy [a criticism Donald Reiman also makes].[73] Yet it is a poem of great power, giving in impressionistic form, a panoramic picture of the age. […] The poem is, in fact, an invaluable storehouse of Shelley's ideas, and a touchstone for the interpretation of other poems. (*Shelley: The Golden Years*, 311)

Cameron's observations that the poem has great power and is an invaluable storehouse of Shelley's ideas inform and confirm each other. Lines, passages, images and ideas in *Laon and Cythna* anticipate and, when returned to, shed light upon later works such as *A Defence of Poetry*, the prose essay *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1819), "Ode to the West Wind" (1819), and *The Triumph of Life*. Chief among these ideas is

[73] Donald Reiman unequivocally concludes, "*The Revolt of Islam* is not a good poem, but it is an important one in Shelley's development. […] *The Revolt of Islam* fails as a poem because Shelley tries unsuccessfully to fuse didactic-expository passages, a romance narrative, and mythic or symbolic passages (that sometimes descend to unsophisticated allegory)" (*Percy Bysshe Shelley: Updated Edition*, 1990, 42-3).

how poetry can serve as an alternate history of the past, thus securing for the future a stable perspective from which to reveal itself. However, this is an idealist notion (poetry as repaired history in order to "fix" the future), one that Shelley carries over from *Queen Mab* into *Laon and Cythna*. Yet in the latter work we begin to see the breakdown of Shelley's belief in an absolute integration of the individual within society, the recuperation of history into its destined telos.

A crisis becomes discernable in the necessitarian-oriented progression of history, a history within which the individual seems to have no say or no effective means to shape and disrupt. But in *Laon and Cythna* the breakdown of progressive expectations seems not to emerge at first sight. The opening canto of the poem evokes history as the endless cycle of the forces of good struggling against the forces of evil:

> Around, around, in ceaseless circles wheeling
> With clang of wings and screams, the Eagle sailed
> Incessantly—sometimes on high concealing
> Its lessening orbs, sometimes as if it failed,
> Drooped through the air; and still it shrieked and wailed,
> And casting back its eager head, with beak
> And talon unremittingly assailed
> The wreathèd Serpent, who did ever seek
> Upon his enemy's heart a mortal wound to wreak. (*Longman*; I.x.208-16)

"Sometimes" and "sometimes," "and still" and "who did ever seek," a temporal language of individual resignation, helplessness and submission to external forces, set against the eternality of fate and the implacable circumference of repetition; this is the world the

visionary poet of Canto One first witnesses, a consequence of the perspective described in the poem's first line: "When the last hope of trampled France had failed" (I.i). Failure in the face of both crushing fate and the notion of history as a record of human misery and defeat is the vast framework within which the drama of the poem, in addition to the Enlightenment response to the aftermath of the French Revolution,[74] enacts and realizes itself. In the context of the deterministic dualism Shelley imagines above with the serpent (representing good, according to several ancient Gnostic sects) and the eagle (representing evil, perhaps aligned with the Imperial Roman standard or signet),[75] pressure is placed on human will to exert itself authoritatively yet justly.

Of great help in understanding *Laon and Cythna's* Manichean framework is Shelley's general conception of it in his brilliant and much too neglected satirical essay, "On the Devil, and Devils" (1820).

> The Manichean philosophy respecting the origin and government of the world, if not true, is at least an hypothesis conforming to the experience of actual facts. To suppose that the world was created and is superintended by two spirits of a balanced power and opposite dispositions, is simply a personification of the struggle *which we experience within ourselves*, and which we perceive in the operations of the external things as they affect

[74] It could be argued that the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution had only just concluded three years prior to the composition of *Laon and Cythna* with the Congress of Vienna, some of the political representatives of which Shelley allegorizes later in the poem. As Shelley writes in the preface, "The panic which, like an epidemic transport, seized upon all classes of men during the excesses consequent upon the French Revolution, is gradually giving place to sanity" (35).

[75] James Rieger notes the inconsistency with which Shelley employs his symbols in *Laon and Cythna*. He writes, "Even the comparatively clear-sighted reformers of that world will launch the emblem of an eagle into the republican dawn of which they dream [which occurs in Canto Eleven, at odds with its representation of evil in Canto One]. Imaginal consistency is the hobgoblin of the *bien-pensant* poet, theosophist, or political liberator because images may or may not be faithful to worlds outside the sensorium of individual witness" (*The Mutiny Within*, 103).

> us, between good and evil. The supposition that the good spirit is, or hereafter will be, superior, is a personification of the principle of hope, and that *thirst for improvement without which, present evil would be intolerable*. The vulgar are all Manicheans […]. (Ingpen & Peck *VII*, 87; my emphasis).

Shelley goes on to say that God and Devil are mere personifications of pleasure and pain; therefore, *of course* the "vulgar" wish for and mythologize the eternal victory of pleasure over the ephemeral nature of pain. Yet the site of this struggle, as Shelley makes clear, is the individual, how he or she perceives history, "the operations of the external things as they affect us." And so it is in *Laon and Cythna*, where to an extent that creates tensions for Shelley's desire to derive and differentiate human agency from the around*ness* of the tyranny-revolution-tyranny paradigm that is "unremittingly" and "incessantly" "ceaseless," the liberatory power of Laon and Cythna's poetic utterances at times come dangerously close to translating the oppressive power they want to dissolve.

Though the poem yearns for clear models of historical progress and presents its two heroes as ideal embodiments of world-historical figures, Christ-like poets who speak the truth of universal virtue, benevolence, and liberty, nonetheless the poem teems with passages and imagery that contradict and problematize its "paths of high intent"[76] (Dedication viii.65); *Laon and Cythna* betrays a skepticism opposite the "*beau ideal*" Shelley names it (*Letters* I; 564).

Because there is no inherent predisposition within the makeup and function of civil society toward either a state of slavery or tyranny, argues Shelley, disruptive and

[76] Shelley's "paths of high intent" refers both to the considerable ambition he musters at age 25 in order to compose an English epic in the tradition of Spenser and Milton and also to his desire to give *intention* to the direction of the future, open a space for human agency within the sightless confinement of fate.

transformative social forces, such as those that attended and propelled the French Revolution, are to be welcomed not as portents of anarchy but as evidence of positive change. Custom, law, authority, tradition, power, and even memory, are so many historical bonds that lay an oppressive claim to the present, making the future a servant to the past. In order to conceive the political state as subject to the authority of the doctrine of Necessity, thinkers of the radical Enlightenment must divest themselves from any attachment to the inviolate enshrinement of tradition and custom, and so sever the servile indebtedness of the future to the past and present. As Shelley remarks in the preface to the poem, the great error of the Enlightenment response to the French Revolution (the error of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, Shelley thought) was to believe:

> whole generations of mankind ought to consign themselves to a hopeless inheritance of ignorance and misery, because a nation of men who had been dupes and slaves for centuries, were incapable of conducting themselves with the wisdom and tranquility of freemen so soon as some of their fetters were partially loosened. (*Longman*; Preface 35)

As free and self-given expressions of will supplant political oppression masquerading as Necessity, Shelley responds poetically with a new conception of Necessity. It appears late in the poem, and constitutes the single instance, as opposed to the multiple instances in *Queen Mab*, of Necessity as the governing assumption of history. I will return to this idea shortly, but suffice it to explain here the flawed moral logic Shelley attacks in the above quote.

If a cause is morally justified, then consigning it to oblivion when corrupted effects follow from it only ensures a continuation of the corrupted effects. This is one lesson the story of the poem teaches. In Canto Five the revolutionary patriots of the poem, inspired by the example Laon and Cythna set through their passionate rhetoric of liberty and merciful response to scorn and violence, find themselves victorious over the forces of Othman, the Turkish tyrant. However, the cycles of history revolve in the next canto, and Othman, whom Laon saves from the vindictive mob with the Christic words, "What call ye *justice*? Is there one who ne'er / In secret though has wished another's ill?— / Are ye all pure? Let those stand forth who hear, / And tremble not" (V.xxxiv.2017-20), regains totalitarian control. Forgiving Othman, their supreme trespasser, dooms the success of the rebels, and in the canto that follows the forces of evil wreck havoc on the masses. But Shelley's point is to show that repaying scorn with scorn perpetuates the inexorable revolutions of good and evil, that to exact vengeance or indulge vindictiveness, one of the most primal impulses of humanity, is to subordinate human will to an impassive and unalterable history, making history into an alien and unrepresentable force.

Acknowledging history as a force that cannot be aligned with liberal morality, or aligned only with the individual and collective consequences of immorality or amorality, is for Shelley synonymous with renouncing and abandoning humanity's potential for improvement. In *Queen Mab* the moral and material forces governing existence were coincident with each other with the drawing of the proper perspective. In *Laon and Cythna* history cannot so easily become self-identical to the enlightened aspirations of human will, since evil enters the world as an active force. Shelley's principle of

forgiveness, which throughout his prose and poetry is articulated in a multitude of different ways, conquers vindictiveness with the introduction of Necessity newly conceived. In Canto Nine, where significantly the genesis of "Ode to the West Wind"[77] occurs, laying the foundation for the seasonal structure of Shelley's imaginal politics of rebirth and hope, Cythna declares:

> In their own hearts the earnest of the hope
> Which made them great, the good will ever find;
> And though some envious shade may interlope
> Between the effect and it, One comes behind,
> Who aye the future to the past will bind—
> Necessity, whose sightless strength forever
> Evil with evil, good with good must wind
> In bands of union, which no power may sever:
> They must bring forth their kind, and be divided never! (IX.xxvii.3703-11)

Once the like effect follows the good or evil cause, how is the "earnest of the hope" to keep the promise of itself within the hearts of a degenerated society, and in the face of a "sightless" Necessity which "no power may sever"? No easy answer resolves the dilemma this question poses, but Shelley's conception of Necessity, "sightless" and intentionless though it may be, is at the very least manipulable at the moment prior to the "interloping shade's" arrival. That is, for hope to be redeemable in the future, for the

[77] Cameron speculates that Shelley derived the idea for his famous ode and of a revolutionary spring generally from Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791). He quotes Paine: "What pace the political summer may keep with the natural, no human foresight can determine. It is, however, not difficult that the spring is begun" (*Shelley: The Golden Years*, 331). Rieger argues that the main metaphor the ode invokes was present in Shelley's symbolism much earlier, specifically in his revision of *Queen Mab*, *The Daemon of the World*: "When west winds sigh and evening waves respond / In whispers from the shore: / 'Tis wilder than the unmeasured notes / Which from the unseen lyres of dells and groves / The genii of the breezes sweep" (Ingpen & Peck *I*; I.51-55).

future to keep hope's promise, the darkness of social and political ignorance must yield to illumination. Kenneth Cameron artfully renders Shelley's evolved understanding of Necessity as "a flowing river, which human power cannot do away with but can divert, one way or another" (*The Golden Years*, 332). In the stanza quoted above Necessity is imagined as somewhat more implacable and imposing than a flowing river, yet Cameron is correct that room is made for the influence of human intentions. The space that opens up for the future requires a balance between knowledge and practice, in this case the historical turning point of turning enlightenment thought into political action. This is what Shelley means when he writes in the preface:

> The French Revolution may be considered as one of those manifestations of a general state of feeling among civilized mankind, produced by a defect of correspondence between the knowledge existing in society and the improvement, or gradual abolition of political institutions. The year 1788 may be assumed as the epoch of one of the most important crises produced by this feeling. […] Can he who the day before was a trampled slave, suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing, and independent? This is the consequence of the habits of a state of society to be produced by resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long-believing courage, and the systematic efforts of generations of men of intellect and virtue. (35-36)[78]

[78] In what is a more sharply conceived expression of this same idea, Shelley says in the *Defence of Poetry*, "We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest" (*Norton* 530). Even in the *Defence* this idea of excess is expressed multiple ways. I will return to it in a later chapter. It is a key notion of Shelley's aesthetics and stands in ironic relation to it. In *Laon and Cythna*, particularly in Canto Nine, it begins to take shape.

It is difficult to say whether Shelley believed the revolution came too soon or too late, but based on how Necessity is conceived in *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley might insist the revolution came at its appointed time, and that "men of intellect and virtue" bear the fault of its failure.

In an age where the "most ardent and tender-hearted of the worshippers of public good, have been morally ruined" (Preface 37) by despair, how does one begin to construct a politics based on hope? After over two decades of war, and the continual brutal suppression of political dissent, where does one turn for republican ideals, signs of justice and liberty? Contrary not only to where Shelley might turn aesthetically in poems after *Laon and Cythna* but also to much of the most powerful imagery within *Laon and Cythna*, apocalyptic completion gives way, at least in the preface, to "systematic efforts of generations." Regardless, the progressive process of political work must begin with a sudden spark, which is the hope and belief in what Shelley calls the "reflux in the tide of human things which bears the shipwrecked hopes of men into a secure haven" (Preface 35).[79] "Methinks, those who now live have survived an age of despair" (Ibid.), Shelley speculates. Yet these words mean more than they say in the context of "sightless"

[79] Shelley's preface to *Laon and Cythna* shares with Immanuel Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment" (1784) the same urgency and resonance of human action to overcome its own limitations. Kant's essay famously begins, "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity" (17). More directly related to political revolutions and their failure to effect moral edification, Kant claims, "Perhaps a revolution can overthrow autocratic despotism and profiteering or power-grabbing oppression, but it can never truly reform a manner of thinking; instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones they replace, will serve as a leash for the great unthinking mass." Kant's historical prescience is obvious, and Shelley dramatizes the idea in *Laon and Cythna*, insisting that more must change than the mere forms with which we recognize and understand power. Also, the notion of "reflux" appears in the *Defence of Poetry*, yet there it corresponds more to the individual poet than the spirit of the age, although one inspires the other: "But in the intervals of inspiration, and they may be frequent without being durable, a poet becomes a man, and is abandoned to the sudden reflux of the influences under which others habitually live" (*Norton* 534). "Shipwrecked hopes" is analogous to "habit," it seems, "and secure haven" to "inspiration." In the "Ode to the West Wind" hope tries to inhale the power that compels the wind in order to secure and sustain a structure and form in which a moment of hope might breathe.

Necessity, the idea that good from good and evil from evil always springs. Art Young in *Shelley and Nonviolence* (1975) reminds us:

> Early in his career Shelley had believed in the doctrine of Necessity as it was expounded by William Godwin; the doctrine was one of absolute physical, psychological, and moral determinism. […] But by the time Shelley wrote *Prometheus Unbound* his view of Necessity had changed. He no longer considered man a slave to Necessity, but a being with free will operating in a universe of Necessarian law. Man's will is free to make a choice between good and evil, and his act of choice will have the inevitable consequences. (24-25)

If history and the eternal war between good and evil it records is merely a cyclical repetition, then creating the conditions necessary in which appeals to the good might be made, particularly appeals to the good made systematically over the course of generations, threatens to become a futile enterprise for the equally futile goal of political liberalism. However, when read in the name of Shelley's commitment to the potential of human agency to choose and therefore generate good, "Methinks *those who live now* have survived an age of despair," revitalizes the spirit of the present as the site of the future, as "One comes behind, / Who aye the future to the past will bind."

Those who live now, by their very presence and existence, have *necessarily* survived an age of despair. The age of despair refers to moments pregnant with possibility that dissolve into the past without having been absorbed by the spatio-temporal structure that is, paradoxically, both exterior to and included within it, the future. From this perspective the present is analogous to the fragment, the potential power

of which represents or generates the absent narrative or wholeness to which it intends and hopefully cam exceed, according to Shelley's futural politics. In the context of Shelley's comments in the preface and the way in which Necessity is rendered in the poem, the present is always-already surviving the despair that threatens it, insofar as the future is distanced from it. Not only the future but the present also must remain "unthought" and "untold," as the supernatural woman in Canto One tells the visionary poet (I.xxv.344).

The present betrays its despair when it becomes reclaimed by the known past rather than the unknown future. It must resist historicization. Necessity in *Laon and Cythna* is unconquerable, yes, but it is born each and every moment, and therefore subject to the choices made each and every moment. In *Queen Mab* Necessity was colored with a conscious and benevolent hue, waiting for when humanity's perspective would align itself to the natural and material law of the universe—Necessity as spirit. In contrast, Necessity is now faceless, dead and inanimate, a blind force that provides shape to the intentions of two immediate and animating powers, good and evil—Necessity as form. Because Necessity is no longer a pervasive spirit that is part of the micro-and-macroscopic designs of reality but a form that is teleological only after the fact, in cause rather than purpose, hope must emerge in its place, urgent, pressurized and demanding.

We now are in a better position to understand the ideal response to the failures of the French Revolution Shelley offers in the preface: "resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long-believing courage, and the systematic efforts of generations of men of intellect and virtue." No longer guaranteeing for history its eventual realization as a journey home or origin discovered, the introduction of a different understanding of Necessity calls for a different understanding of time. In a

footnote to his essay *On the Punishment of Death* (1816-17), composed around the same time as *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley describes two distinct notions of time-consciousness. Shelley says in the note:

> The savage and the illiterate are but faintly aware of the distinction between the future and the past; they make actions belonging to periods so distinct, the subjects of similar feelings; they live only in the present, or in the past, as it is present. It is in this that the philosopher excels one of the many; *it is this which distinguishes the doctrine of philosophic necessity from fatalism*; *and that determination of the will, by which it is the active source of future events*, from that liberty or indifference, to which the abstract liability of irremediable actions is attached, according to the notions of the vulgar. (Ingpen & Peck *VI*; 189; my emphasis)

Significantly, the passage he footnotes begins with a discussion of vengeance, the exacting of which is perhaps the first and surest way to transgress the only law that according to Shelley both governs all morals as well as constitutes the secret to them all, love. Shelley distinguishes the imagined debts ("abstract liability") we owe to deeds already performed ("irremediable actions"), orienting love-inspired action away from notions of obligation, which for Shelley create stoicism at best and slavery at worst. In other words, the philosopher acts in the hope *of* and with the chance *that* his actions will plant the seeds of future events; the "vulgar" act in the hope of and with the chance that they will uproot and impact what has already occurred. One model of conduct is ungrounded and open; the other grounded (in the ground, so to speak, if vengeance is the motivation) and closed.

Robert Mitchell astutely derives the origin of Shelley's critique of state finance and the national debt from his digression into modes of time-consciousness in *On the Punishment of Death*.[80] In "The Ghost of Gold"[81] he argues, "What Shelley called a 'philosophic' sense of necessity […] located the origin of the future in the present, rather than the past, and sought to enable potentials, rather than plotting probabilities" (202). Mitchell argues the "savage" sense of Necessity is located in the past. Though in *Queen Mab* Necessity is akin to the immanence of Nature's Spirit, it still carries a trace of this "savage" rendering of it, since that poem comprehends, as Shelley claimed, "The Past, the Present, & the Future," a total and absolute system. A fully comprehensive system cannot generate excessive or disruptive potentials. Only within an uncomprehending system, or along the horizon of an incomprehensible future, does hope or will have any purchase on "philosophic" Necessity.

"Thus the dark tale which history doth *unfold* / I knew, but not, methinks, as others know, / For they weep not […]" (xxxviii.460-62; my emphasis), the supernatural woman tells the visionary poet in Canto One. To "unfold" refers to the revelation of an already enclosed system. Another iteration of telos, "unfold" belongs to the imagery, thinking, and temporal poetics of *Queen Mab*. As such, it occurs four times in that poem, most significantly when the Fairy declares there is no God, and "unfold" naturally

[80] Whenever one speaks of debt in any sense, economic analogues are inevitable. Determining the extent to which the historical origins of the notion of debt are based in economic and socio-religious exchanges seems like a worthy, and maybe impossible, endeavor. This is particularly true in light of Shelley's famous reckoning of God and Mammon in the *Defence*. Between the antithetical spheres of consciousness of Love and Money, love *of* money appears to take shape, especially when applied to our secular modernity. Perhaps it was always so. Shelley's idea of love as a centrifugal going out of ourselves was always in a similar manner threatened by a centripetal love of self. Jupiter and Count Cenci embody the failure of love's potential for expansiveness. They are Prometheus bound and Beatrice's tragedy, respectively.

[81] Mitchell, Robert. "The Ghost of Gold: National Debt, imagery, and the politics of sympathy in P. B. Shelley." *Sympathy and the State in the Romantic Era: Systems, State Finance, and the Shadows of Futurity*. New York: Routledge, 2007. 163-205.

substitutes for the supernatural revelatory acts of knowledge and truth attributed to a deity: "let every seed that falls / In silent eloquence unfold its store / Of argument" (7.19-21).[82] I mention the specific way Shelley imagines "dark history" at the beginning of *Laon and Cythna* because it provides an important contrast to Shelley's imaging of the future. The Woman whom the visionary poet meets on a seashore after having witnessed symbolically the chaos and aftermath of the French Revolution sails him in a boat across the sea to a "pellucid plain / Of waters" (xlviii.554-55), where the Temple of the Spirit is located. The Temple of the Spirit is central to both Canto One and Twelve, framing and unifying the narrative proper and the poem's representation of history. Along the way, she relates to him her own history, and instructs him: "Speak not to me, but hear! much shalt thou learn, / Much must remain unthought, and more untold, / In the dark Future's *ever-flowing* urn" (I.xxv.343-45; my emphasis).

From the most provocative and polysemous images of the poem, "the dark Future's ever-flowing urn" and "the dark tale which History doth unfold," multiple critical antitheses emerge. "Flow" or "flowing," which only occurs twice in *Queen Mab*, once to indicate the transience of human life and works,[83] another time to comment on the moral degeneracy of the symbiotic relationship between church and state,[84] is used approximately three dozen times throughout *Laon and Cythna*. The discrepancy is attributable to Shelley's developing sense of both futurity and Necessity. The "dark Future's ever-flowing urn" incarnates what will become one of the most remarkable features of Shelley's poetry, the attempt to render visible and generate potentials (both

[82] "Unfold" also occurs in *Queen Mab*, as it does in *Laon and Cythna*, to indicate the nature of what History tries to hide and mystify, essentially pain and misery. Mab says: "I will not call the ghost of ages gone / To unfold the frightful secrets of its lore" (8.42-3).
[83] "And midst the ebb and flow of human things" (8.55).
[84] "Then grave and hoary-headed hypocrites […] Have crept by flattery to the seats of power, / Support the system whence their honours flow" (4.203, 206-07).

prospective and actual) from systems of dissolution and convergence. *Laon and Cythna* is therefore the origin of this attempt, since individual genius works together with the blind forces of history to construct liberated and liberatory futures, futures that can "swoon" the present.[85]

The two[86] "swoons" of the poem, therefore, must also be brought near and read together, for they are intertwined and spirally conjoined around the axis of the historical future and Shelley's supra-historical axis of Love. In the first instance Laon imagines that his own "vital words and deeds" (II.ii.681) will burst forth into history a volcanic eruption of revolutionary freedom. The apocalyptic imagery both dissolves and converges:

> —I will arise and awaken
> 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—

[85] In the fourth note Shelley appends to the end of *Hellas*, he says: "It appears that circumstances make men what they are and that we all contain the germ of a degree of degradation or of greatness whose connexion with our character is determined by events" (*Norton*, 463). However, it remains unclear whether a corresponding "degree of degradation or of greatness" attached to the historical events themselves has any influence on their determination of character. Does the Peterloo Massacre mold character in the same way and to the same degree as the defeat of Napoleon? In *Laon and Cythna* Shelley claims a moral maxim that seems at odds with what he appended to *Hellas*: "To the pure all things are pure" (VI.xxx.2596). Of course, "pure" evokes an idealization that is absent from the notes to *Hellas*.

[86] There is, in fact, a third "swoon," but it appears in the more restricted and referential sense, denoting only Laon's unconsciousness when attacked by his captors: "for a stroke / On my raised arm and naked head, came down, / Filling my eyes with blood—when I awoke, / I felt that they had bound me in my swoon" (III.xi.1201). Denoting unconsciousness is the point in all three instances of the word, but when history and sex, particularly the incestuous relationship of Laon and Cythna, modify "swoon," unconsciousness expands beyond its referent into transformative consciousness. Its final appearance is as "swound," when Laon, in the world between life and death ("Yet,—yet—one brief relapse, like the last beam / Of dying flames […]" (XII.xvi.4585-586) glimpses, "as in a swound, / The tyrant's child fall without life or motion / Before his throne, subdued by some unseen emotion" (4591-593). Othman's child was ostensibly conceived when he raped Cythna, yet the child identifies with Laon, and accompanies Laon and Cythna in the afterlife to the Temple of the Spirit. The child's swoon acts as a psychological rite of passage into the new sphere of consciousness and reality.

It may not be restrained! (II.xiv.784-89)

The second instance is specifically individual, and marries the sexual and moral embrace between Laon and Cythna. Although according to the plot of the romance, Cythna is properly Laon's sister, she is better understood as his anima, episychidion or "Soul-song,"[87] the "being within [his] being" that poetry, and love, creates (*Defence*, *Norton*, 533). In a sense, she *is* Laon's poetry. In the Temple of the Spirit, she sits beside Laon, "like his shadow there" (I.lx.660). As such, the sibling love between Laon and Cythna, "the one circumstance which was intended to startle the reader from the trance of ordinary life" (47), as Shelley writes in the preface, is more than a mere attack on social customs through the introduction of social taboo; it is a representation of Shelleyan love at its most human and ideal level. Because Cythna is a part of Laon, resides within his very blood, so to speak, his love for her cannot be perverted, in the sense that it will not devolve into self-contempt or self-obsession. Nor will it be tainted with jealously, rivalry, or sensuality. Ironically, the social perversion prevents the poetic one; the "crime of convention" prevents the more serious moral one, the repression of a benevolent and universal feeling (Preface 47). Amid their "liquid ecstasies" (VI.xxxiii.2629), Laon describes the consummation of their love in terms of dissolution and convergence:

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

[87] James Rieger prefers Neville Rogers's translation of Shelley's title *Episychidion*, "Soul-song," in *Shelley at Work: A Critical Inquiry* (Oxford, 1956, 245). Rieger goes on to say of Shelley's title and poem, "an episychidion is to souls what an epithalamion is to bodies and bedchambers. It is a hymn for the marriage of minds, and Shelley's poem is the first of the genre" (*The Mutiny Within*, 185).

And speechless swoon of joy, as might befall

Two disunited spirits when they leap

In union from this earth's obscure and fading sleep. (VI.xxxiv.2634-640)

"The swoon of ages" and "swoon of joy" join collective to individual energies, the passing and passion of ages to the passing and passion of the instant, the "tale of passionate change, divinely taught" (liii.603) of Canto One to the "deep and mighty change which suddenly befell" (xxx.4719) of Canto Twelve—The swoons of *Laon and Cythna* pour into and fall from the "dark Future's ever-flowing urn." Beyond the simple definition of fainting or losing consciousness, the OED traces "swoon" to the Old English *swógan*, which means to overgrow or choke, the condition of being overcome. It refers to excess, in other words, severe depravation or sever overabundance, as do so many of Shelley's spheres of consciousness, images, metaphors, figures of polysemous construction, and his representation of the relationship of present to future. The contemporary American poet Michael Palmer compares this quality of Shelley's poetry to the gaze represented in Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin interprets in "Theses on the Philosophy of History." He calls it "backward-forwardness" (196).[88] If the "swoon of ages" is a backward sliding into sleep, a swoon that began long in the past, induced by custom, superstition and moral degradation (the spell of which Laon breaks with his sulphurous smelling salts), then the "swoon of joy" is a forward-gathering summons of human love. It casts its own unique spell in extracting and abstracting poetry from custom, history and the "sickness" of its own "[depth]" and "[speechlessness]." The ennobling "swoon of joy" is thus not exempt from the same torpor and thanatic

[88] Palmer, Michael. "Some Notes on Shelley, Poetics and the Present." 1991. *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*. New York: New Directions, 2008.

imagery— "sickness," "deep," "speechless" and the "leap […] from this Earth's obscure and fading sleep"—that is clearly explicit in "the swoon of ages" as the "snows" of the frozen multitude.

The swoon distends and overshoots its own referent, fallen into either a state of convergence or dissolution. The condition to which the swoon refers, whether it affects and occurs in history, love or poetry, is the condition that empowers blankness, absence and unconsciousness. Paradoxically, by referring to itself, "swoon" refers to that which is not itself, the unimagined and *un*conditional negative power that resides elsewhere than the conscious subject, and from which Shelley claims inspiration. As a state of ecstasy, a state of "choking," which renders us mute and deprives us of breath, while simultaneously restores us to the most primal communicative mode as we gasp and convulse for a literal inspiration that only further expires us, swoon positively nominates Shelley's nugatory aesthetics. It is what makes an idealist or skeptical, teleological or fragmentary, reading of *Laon and Cythna* impossible to resolve. If the hero and heroine must be immolated upon a bier in a kind of swoon, and then journey in a kind of supernatural afterlife to the hovering sphere of the Temple of the Spirit, a more isolated and apolitical retreat into the mind's own reality is difficult to imagine. Yet, as ever with Shelley, what heats and harbors hope are the ashes and embers of the poets of the past, the consumed remains of his world-historical-figures left behind in the smoldering bier. And so the "dark Future's ever-flowing urn" comes to contain the hope of the present in the same negative process as Shelley's use of "swoon."

Maureen McLane writes her own critical ode to Shelley's futural urn, deciphering its temporal structure and aesthetic significance for *Laon and Cythna* (She prefers *The Revolt of Islam*) and Shelley's poetry generally:

> Its contents, "ever-flowing," seem to be the vital waters of the future, and not the incinerated *materia* of history and death. […] This urn both flows and resists. […] This urn negates, as it were, affirmatively: the "unthought" and "untold" contents of the urn present neither a defeat of interpretation, nor a crux of decipherment […] but rather an as-yet-unrealized potentiality of thought, speech, and action harbored in the dark recesses of the Future. Shelley has found in this image, the very figure of what may yet be figured, the as-yet-unfigured. […] What could signify the pathos of remains (bodily, cultural, historical) instead objectifies the structure of Futurity. (124)[89]

By giving form to the "as-yet-unfigured," by objectifying it, Shelley "negates, as it were, affirmatively"; by writing the future as if it were poetry, he is able to glimpse the future's

[89] McLane, Maureen N. *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. In a strange but perhaps inevitable critical instance of synchronicity, the second definition for the OED's entry on "urn" cites the phrase *in the urn*, meaning "not yet discovered, or unknown." Its relevance to McLane's understanding of Shelley's futural urn is obvious, but the example quotation the OED gives is taken from Sir Thomas Browne, from whom Shelley received an education in renaissance skepticism, C. E. Pulos tells us in *The Deep Truth* (37). The quotation is from *Hydriotaphia* (1658), a work Shelley must have read, if not directly turned to for inspiration conceiving the image of the urn: "That great Antiquity America lay buried for a thousand years; and a large part of the earth is still in the Urne unto us." One thinks of the subterranean world of *Prometheus Unbound*, both below and above us, its (and Demogorgon's) refusal to hear us, as the poem's epigraph suggests, its refusal to render up its secrets. Several years later in *Hellas* Shelley unearths his urn. He cautions in the poem's final chorus, an apocalyptical appeal to spiritual regeneration, "Cease! / drain not to its dregs the urn / Of bitter prophecy" (1098-1099). I read in these lines a profound skepticism, an anticipation of evil's return, since at the dregs of prophecy traces of past prophecy settle. Whether these prophecies were fulfilled or represented merely the fevered dreams of poets, they are too near the past and present world of suffering, frozen rather than flowing in the future's open chance.

light that shines forth from the dark eclipse of the present, in the same way "moonbeams behind some piny mountain shower, / [visit] with inconstant glance / Each human heart and countenance" (5-7).[90] He renders the future sensible, in other words, so that it yields a greater aesthetic and political payment to both the present and presence of the subject than would inspired intuition alone.

The rendering of a sensible future grounds the correct perspective of the self. It is the beginning of a turning away from a past, both individual and collective, that inhibits progress. Cythna's great utterance of the poem, which also acts as an ethical injunction within Shelley's moral conception of human desire, flows from an act of forgiveness. What is forgiven necessarily occupies the past, but it also clears a path for future hope. In Canto Eight she speaks to the mariners who have rescued her from a lonely crag in the sea:

> Reproach not thine own soul, but know thyself,
> Nor hate another's crime, nor loathe thine own.
> It is the dark idolatry of self,
> Which, when our thoughts and actions once are gone,
> Demands that man should weep, and bleed, and groan;
> O vacant expiation! be at rest.—
> The past is Death's, the future is thine own;

[90] "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1816), *Norton*, 93. The subject of the "Hymn" appears in stanzas three to five of the dedication to *Laon and Cythna*. In both cases, Shelley (perhaps not Shelley in the "Hymn" if we are to avoid the biographical fallacy), relates in what reads like a religious (perhaps better understood in the sense of the word's root, "consciousness") conversion *the* transformative moment of his life as an artist and man devoted to the good. Shelley details the account in several letters also. In the dedication "To Mary——" of *Laon and Cythna*, the poet says, "'I will be wise, / And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies / Such power, for I grow weary to behold / The selfish and the strong still tyrannise / Without reproach or check.' I then controlled / My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold" (4.31-36). More poignantly yet controlled, the speaker of the "Hymn" intones, "I vowed that I would dedicated my powers / To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?" (61-2).

And love and joy can make the foulest breast

A paradise of flowers, where peace might build her nest. (xxii.3388-3396)

A repellant act not only within Shelley's moral code but also within his conception of an inclusive and collective self, vengeance narrows even further the narrow circumference of the unimaginative and idolatrous self. Cythna's words make it clear why this is the case: The past is death. The autonomous self lives in the delusion that the past justifies present and future emotional pain, when in reality the past justifies only the self-contempt that feeds on pain. The moral challenge that Cythna issues the mariners appears extraordinarily difficult because it calls for a new reading of self-regard, a radical selflessness in which knowledge of the self means giving oneself over to the vacancy love creates. In the next two chapters, I explore in more detail how love generates hope from a vacancy that can be both isolating and inclusive.

CHAPTER TWO
Lyrical Morality

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of the
summer stops

To imagine winter? When the leaves are dead,
Does it take its place in the north and enfold
itself,
Goat leaper, crystallized and luminous, sitting

In highest night?

—Wallace Stevens, "The Auroras of Autumn"

"Mont Blanc" (1816) and "Ode to the West Wind" (1820) portray and enact Shelley's conception of moral agency, which offers us a glimpse of the possibility of Promethean subjectivity. By reading the two poems as allegorizing the poet-narrator's relationship toward "Power" and "Love," the significance of these ideas in terms of Shelley's conception of the expanded, inclusive self can be better recognized. The consequence is a more profound, and practical, critical apprehension of Shelley's comprehensive, and often cryptic, claims for poetry. I argue that trying to understand how Mont Blanc teaches virtue and how the west wind carries human happiness is vitally important when reading two of Shelley's most canonized and written about poems. In doing so, I contend, "Mont Blanc" and "Ode to the West Wind" offer the reader more than the pleasure of experiencing a purely aesthetic achievement; instead, the poems reveal themselves as ethical instruments that posit and apply a set of moral principles, the political impact of which most of Shelley's poetry tries to realize. I argue in this chapter that "Mont Blanc," rather than presenting a solipsistic meditation on the mind and reality, one which offers no definitive answers for the poet-speaker, is actually a much more

emphatic articulation of Shelley's moral philosophy and the affirmative lessons that nature can teach the individual and society. In an unpublished fragment, Shelley names the knowledge these lessons carry the "religion of eternity."[91] It is the perspective of virtue that comes with meditating on nature's tremendous forms, when we see beyond ourselves. The end of the poem might question the availability of this lesson, but the journey to Shelley's famous question plants along the way positive signposts of moral knowledge. Moreover, "Mont Blanc" generates a narrative of the human mind in the context of historical natural change, attempting to reconcile both existential and political consciousness.

I argue that "Ode to the West Wind," in thematic contrast but moral continuity, imagines and actuates the real world consequence of "Mont Blanc's" moral knowledge. The poem functions as a sort of Promethean pamphlet on effective political action, yet once again the lyrical address to the wind ends with a question, disrupting the accessibility of its effect. Rather than constituting an invocation to the seasonal cycles of birth, death, and re-birth, which allegorically parallel the potentialities of political and moral revolution, "Ode to the West Wind" defines, directs, and enacts immediate moral action. In the "Ode" the poet-speaker makes claims for universal moral and political regeneration under the guise of a subjective quest for annihilation and transformation. Even though these claims are made from the self-isolated perspective of a lyric, the poem is not about the seductions of self-dissolution; instead, the quest the poem describes involves the struggle of individual love expanding into the possibility of universal love. The leap from the individual to the universal is in part possible because of Shelley's adherence to the moral philosophy of "virtue is its own reward" (230); therefore, the

[91] I discuss *The Coliseum* (1818) at the conclusion of this chapter.

smallest individual gesture of good is as vernal, and reverberates, as the largest collective one.[92] Finally, I argue that the two poems are dialectically related. What unites them is the poet-speaker's submission to the "Power" of which Mont Blanc is the visible manifestation, and her mastery of the "Love" that the omnipresent wind, itself compelled by the same "Power" named in "Mont Blanc," makes felt. In my final analysis, the mastering of Love becomes a submission to Power as the poet-speaker implores the spirit of the wind to destroy in order to preserve. Yet what happens instead can be read as a reinscription of the limits from which the poet-speaker tries to free himself. As a result, I try to offer an answer for how Mont Blanc can "repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe" (80-81), and how a poet's "dead thoughts" (63) can "quicken a new birth" (64).

Earl Wasserman argues that "Ode to the West Wind" represents a "full exploitation of the implicitly religious character of *Mont Blanc* and is Shelley's prayer to the divine Power corresponding to his prayer to Intellectual Beauty" (238).[93] Wasserman's reading of the relationship between the two poems is not radically different from my own, insofar as he sees in the "Ode" a "release into Existence of the Power that will effect man's moral regeneration" (239), yet I want to emphasize a more explicit moral framework within which both might be understood. In the two fragments *On Christianity* (1820) and *Speculations on Morals* (1816), Shelley outlines moral and aesthetic principles that make possible such an understanding of the two lyrics. I will begin by discussing *Speculations on Morals* and "Mont Blanc," since in the former Shelley asks the fundamental question of why someone should be good in the first place, and in the latter the possibilities, affirmations, and influence for goodness seem few. I

[92] *On Christianity*. 1820. Julian Edition. *VI*. Gordian Press, 1965.
[93] *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Johns Hopkins, 1971.

will then transition to a more in depth reading of the connection between morality and divinity in *On Christianity* and "Mont Blanc."

Shelley's reason why virtue, of which benevolence and justice are the two principle attributes, should be an object of desire rests on utilitarian arguments influenced by William Godwin's thinking. After postulating that "when a human being is the active instrument of generating or diffusing happiness, the principle through which it is most effectually instrumental to that purpose, is called virtue" (73), Shelley argues that virtue promotes human happiness because it produces the greatest amount of pleasure, which is good. [94] Any amount of pain is necessarily evil, and we desire its cessation to the degree that we can disinterestedly imagine and perceive our own sufferings in another. Understanding and desiring the good becomes tantamount to a highly cultivated sense of pleasure and pain. "Pain or pleasure," Shelley argues, "if subtly analysed, will be found to consist entirely in prospect. The only distinction between the selfish man, and the virtuous man, is that the imagination of the former is confined within a narrow limit, whilst that of the latter embraces a comprehensive circumference" (75). Virtue or vice are thus differences of degree, separated according to the degree of force the active imagination works on the sensory perceptions. And it is crucial to begin readings of "Mont Blanc" and "Ode to the West Wind" with a clear conception of the interconnectedness between sensory perception and virtue, since the lyric mode presents the poet-speaker in "savage solitude" (76), cut off from the cultivating influences of society. Shelley writes that "selfishness […] is the portion of unreflecting infancy, and savage solitude, or of those whom toil or evil occupations have blunted and rendered torpid" (76). Standing before and below Mont Blanc provides the poet-speaker with

[94] Shelly. *Speculations on Morals*. 1816. Julian Edition. *VII*. Gordian Press, 1965.

"disinterested benevolence," the "product of a cultivated imagination," rather than the dark musings or narrow affections of "savage solitude" (76). This is because nature, "And *this*, the naked countenance of earth, / On which [the poet-speaker] gaze[s], even these primeval mountains / Teach the adverting mind" ("Mont Blanc," 98-100); they teach virtue by preparing the mind for receiving truth through the sense perceptions. In *On Christianity* Shelley argues that "truth cannot be communicated until it is perceived" (243), and it cannot be perceived until the mind is in a "favorable disposition" (243) toward it. Mont Blanc fosters this disposition because, as natural object, it communicates virtue with "entire sincerity" (243), as "naked countenance" (98), without the confused perversions of meaning that often accompany rhetorical figures of speech and writing.

The section on virtue in *Speculations on Morals* begins with the condemnation of "[a] common sophism, which, like many others, depends on the abuse of a metaphorical expression to a literal purpose" (74). The sophism alluded to is a consistent refrain in Shelley's poetry and prose; namely, that "[d]uty is obligation" (74), the idea that moral behavior is motivated by some reward, and, conversely, immoral behavior is avoided because it brings about punishment. More than any other concept of moral law that Christianity or organized religion teaches, it is this one Shelley attacks most rigorously. He calls it the "philosophy of slavery and superstition" (74). As I stated above, the only true moral philosophy for Shelley is that virtue is its own reward, and this is the case primarily because he understands human nature to possess an inherent tendency toward goodness and principles that are benign, benevolent, beneficent and compassionate (which are also his favorite descriptors of the ruling Principle, Power, Agent, or Spirit of the universe). His argument for why we should choose good over evil if good does not

always bring reward derives from his claim that "benevolent propensities are […] inherent in the human mind. We are *impelled* to seek the happiness of others. We experience a satisfaction in being the authors of that happiness" (77; my emphasis). Pleasure inheres in goodness, pain in evil. We are impelled toward good and benignant principles because for Shelley thoughts and things are constituent of the same force or power that impels the moral and material universe. The Power named four times in "Mont Blanc" is the "secret strength of things / Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome / Of heaven is as a law" (139-141). This power is necessarily good; though our responses toward it might make us experience "awful doubt" (77), it is in no way an evil principle. It is the same power that Shelley describes multiple times in *On Christianity* when he renders different impressions of God. It is the "interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things" (230). Christ, according to Shelley, "represents this power [God] as something mysteriously and illimitably pervading the frame of things" (230), as the "benignant visitings from the invisible energies by which [one who has seen God] is surrounded" (231). [95] And, in direct support of the claim for a universal Power that is inherently good and impels our own inherently "benevolent propensities," Shelley argues:

[95] The essay *On Christianity* is also Shelley's essay on Jesus Christ. The majority of it is devoted to an interpretation of Christ's teachings. I want to emphasize that the Christ Shelley imagines in the essay is a Poet in the highest sense, and accorded all the attributes of one as outlined in "A Defence of Poetry." Shelley, in effect, sees in Christ a great deal of himself as an artist. Therefore, it is often difficult to separate what is Shelley's interpretation of Christ's teachings from Shelley's interpretation of the New Testament and, more difficult still, Shelley's own claims on the nature of God, morality and equality. The essay contains what would have made an appropriate epitaph for Shelley himself, though the words are of course describing the Sermon on the Mount: "He tramples upon all received opinions, on all the cherished luxuries and superstitions of mankind. He bids them cast aside the chains of custom and blind faith by which they have been encompassed from the very cradle of their being, and become the imitators and ministers of the Universal God" (243).

> In every case the human mind enjoys the utmost pleasure which it is capable of enjoying. God is represented by Jesus Christ as the Power from which or thro [sic] which streams of all that is excellent and delightful flow; *the Power which models, as they pass, all the elements of this mixed universe to the purest and most perfect shape which it belongs to their nature to assume*. (234-35; my emphasis)

It is difficult to interpret this claim otherwise than as the affirmation of a ruling necessity that is also necessarily good. When reading "Mont Blanc," however, the Power seems very far from distributing good across "The works and ways of man" (92); at best it is imagined as indifferent, removed, alien, and absent a will or intention. There is an earlier corollary to the lines quoted above from *On Christianity*, which applies the modeling of "elements of this mixed universe" to more specifically human ones, and which might account for the impassive tone pervading "Mont Blanc." After discounting as ridiculous and fanatical the doctrine of a "peculiar Providence," the idea that God will "punish the vicious and reward the virtuous," Shelley counters that God is not one who exacts vengeance and consigns to hell "the most venerable of names [Shelley is referring to the great Poets of the past]" (232). Rather, he writes, God is representative of "that merciful and benignant power who scatters equally upon the beautiful earth all the elements of security and happiness, whose influencings are distributed to all whose natures admit of a participation in them, who sends to the weak and vicious creatures of his will all the benefits they are capable of sharing […]" (232-33). Just as vice and virtue are largely matters of degree rather than kind, denominators of how capacious or narrow the circle of self becomes, the "weak and vicious" might see God in proportion as they

"are capable," to the extent they "admit of a participation" in the freely given "elements of security and happiness." Whereas in "Ode to the West Wind" we see full admittance to participation in this Power, or at the very least a prayer for such admittance, "Mont Blanc" is yet a beginning or an end; the senses are still awakening, or, conversely, they are retrospectively imagining the hopes and promises of Mont Blanc's "mysterious tongue" (76) in the face of a failure, a failure to, as Wasserman put it, "release into Existence […] the Power that will effect man's moral regeneration" (239).

Moreover, the Power of Mont Blanc is rendered visibly by the senses, and though this is also true of the materiality of the text "Mont Blanc," the Power in the poem is further rendered positively in metaphorical language—"awful scene, / Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down" (15-16). The *actual*, the *essential* Power, the thing-in-itself remains invisible, muted, unknowable and impermanent, "Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (97), "still, snowy, and serene" (61). The Power reveals itself and is experienced as darkness and light, "shadows and sunbeams" (15), and the poem and mountain are "some faint image" (47) of it, outward manifestations of Shelley's universal benignant principle. James Rieger argues that "Power is inscrutable except through its outward emblems. But 'This, the naked countenance of earth' and 'these primeval mountains' suggest the force informing them even as the experiential accidents of bread and wine lead 'the adverting mind' to bleeding flesh, the substance they conceal from taste and eyesight (98-100)" (90).[96] But how is one lead from bread and wine to bleeding flesh, Mont Blanc to "a faith so mild" (77) and the "repeal / [of] Large codes of fraud and woe" (80-81)? Interpreting Christ's declaration that man does not live by bread alone, Shelley writes, "[p]ermit, therefore, the spirit of this benignant principle to visit your

[96] *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. George Braziller, 1967.

intellectual frame, or, in other words become just and pure" (*On Christianity*, 248). Yet how does the mountain impel justness and purity?

One response to this question begins with the confusions of meaning that often accompany rhetorical figures of speech and writing, and nature's own special communicative method regarding them. I mentioned above that in *Speculations on Morals* Shelley argued how the "philosophy of slavery and superstition," or moral duty being *bounded* to an obligation, was a sophism attributable to the "abuse of a metaphorical expression to a literal purpose" (74). His thoughts on correct interpretive modes occur twice in *On Christianity*. He says Jesus Christ "attributes to this power [God] the faculty of will. How far such a doctrine in its ordinary sense may be philosophically true, or how far Jesus Christ intentionally availed himself of a metaphor easily understood, is foreign to the subject" (235). If it is foreign to the immediate subject at hand in this section of the essay, since he continues to show how the will attributed to God becomes reflected in humanity's selfish will, thus perpetuating the notion that God intentionally inflicts pain on beings whom he has "endowed with sensation" (239), it is certainly salient to my larger point that reading rightly the character of an expression, whether word or image, is essential for Shelley's notion of developing the right character. Later on in the essay, Shelley again cautions against the trap of literalism, where he interprets Christ's expressions of moral philosophy: "If we would profit by the wisdom of a sublime and poetically mind [Christ's] we must beware of the vulgar error of interpreting literally every expression which it employs" (247).

This claim above concludes one of the more sophisticated and revealing sections of the essay, where Shelley admits that Christ, like all great reformers, employed a

refined and highly developed rhetorical method not only to communicate his message but also, more significantly, to prepare and essentially model his audience's mind for the truth. In order to do so, argues Shelley, Christ, or any great reformer, must clothe his language in the familiar images and metaphors, values and prejudices, of his audience. Shelley admits that this entails deception and insincerity, and laments the fact, but "this practice of entire sincerity towards other men would avail to no good end, if they were incapable of practising it towards their own minds. In fact, truth cannot be communicated until it is perceived" (243). And the truth must be perceived with the clarity of a "precise and rigid image which is present to the mind" (243), which cannot occur until the senses are sharply attuned to its timely reception. The proper disposition toward the truth readies and prepares the individual for a particular moment of sensory experience, a new vision in the most comprehensive sense, one where understanding, knowledge, desire, and action converge. Rereading Christ's message, Shelley enumerates specific ways of living and thinking that prepare the individual to see God and know the truth. "Who dares to examine and to estimate every imagination which suggests itself to his own mind, who is that which he designs to become, and only aspires to that which the divinity of his own nature shall consider and approve," Shelley breathlessly exhorts, in reality playing the role of the rhetorically sophisticated reformer, delivering Christ's teachings in a manner suited to his own emphasis on the moral consequences of imaginative creation.

Shelley's critique is at once his interpretation of Christ's teachings and his own experience with Intellectual Beauty and its Power. There is a clear analogy between the poet-speaker hearing the voice of Mont Blanc and those who hear the true message of Christ. As imagined and read by Shelley, Christ experiences and embodies divine

visitation; they both "have seen God, have, in the period of their purer and more perfect nature, been harmonized by their own will to so exquisite [a] consentaneity of powers as to give forth divinest melody when the breath of universal being sweeps over their frame" (232). [97] In both this and the context o f "Mont Blanc," seeing God is "consentaneously" *feeling* God; or, somewhat more in line with the process by which Shelley composes "Mont Blanc," feeling God precedes the harmonizing Power through which the "divinest melody" of the poem manifests in language. Just as Shelley makes clear at the conclusion of *On Christianity*, that the "system of equality which they [Christ's apostles] established, necessarily fell to the ground, because it is a system that must result from, rather than precede the moral improvement of human kind" (251-252), so too must the poet-speaker's sensory perceptions improve to the point of a "consentaneity of powers" in order to understand, and make others understand, the voice of the mountain, the wilderness's "mysterious tongue" (76). Another look is required at the lines "And *this*, the naked countenance of earth, / On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains / Teach the adverting mind" (98-100) to make explicit nature's communicative powers in effecting virtue.

The *this*, the "naked countenance of earth," reveals an instance in which nature is entirely bereft of metaphor by the poet-speaker's gaze. There is no longer any possible misunderstanding attributable to confused literal or metaphorical interpretations of the text. This is because, in effect, there is no more text, only a "naked countenance." However, and I will return to this issue momentarily, of course a text remains present,

[97] When I say that Shelley has been visited by the divine, I mean to describe his own accounts in poetry and letters of creative inspiration and Intellectual Beauty. These same accounts are what drive his interpretations of Christ's moral philosophy. This is to say that I am not drawing on any specific theological or mystical tradition of encounters with divinity.

one which refers to its very absence as "naked countenance," and, moreover, there is a subject "I" reading, or "gazing," on it. At this moment of the poem too, the poet-speaker both suffers and recognizes the specific knowledge that nature teaches; namely, that "Power dwells apart in its tranquility / Remote, serene, and inaccessible:" (96-97), lines immediately preceding the "naked countenance of earth" that teaches this knowledge. There is also a truth about the relationship between nature and history revealed in "even these primeval mountains," that nature is endowed only with our own histories, that it possesses none of its own, that time itself appears not to be one of its inherent attributes—"the strange sleep / Which when the voices of the desert fail / Wraps all in its own deep eternity" (27-29); "all seems eternal now" (75); and the beginning line, of course, "The everlasting universe of things" (1), of which we are a part and separate.

The encounter with the naked countenance of earth reconfirms that, like some pure primeval language which would parallel primeval nature, like a language entirely bereft of metaphor and coincident with all referents, would dissolve history and memory. One can hear this in Shelley's letter to Thomas Love Peacock when he and Mary visited Chamouni: "I never knew I never imagined what mountains were before" (*Letters* I; 497). In other words, I never knew I had no memory of mountains until I gazed on mountains so imposing that I forgot the memories of mountains that obviously I had imagined. The italicized *this* is actually a struggle to metaphorize a faceless face that will not return the poet-speaker's gaze, to mark the "primeval mountains" as the beginning of history rather than beyond history. It is an attempt to inscribe a face onto the blankness of an unrecognized "other" in order to create a community. Yet Mont Blanc is always there in its absence—"the power is there" (127) might be read as both reassuring mantra and

emphatic declaration—in its literal metaphorization of the Power that, like itself, "dwells apart," inaccessible to human knowledge, but profoundly affecting human sensory perception, which for Shelley is the source of truth. The lesson nature teaches the individual who rightly interprets its voice is not the naturalization of solitude, but the solitary nature of acquiring its moral knowledge, which the "wise, and great, and good / Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel" (82-83). "*This*" is the moral knowledge drawn from the realization that nature is the extreme Other, yet as such nature most animates individuals in solitary encounters. Because nature carries no memory or history, it is free to teach the solitary and "adverting" mind the moral imperative of community.

Within this sphere of essential difference between individual and social existence, Shelley lays down his most powerful claim for moral science. Through a surface/depth analysis of human behavior, Shelley constructs two distinct "classes of human agency, common in a degree to every human being" (*Speculations on Morals*, 82). The image he conveys of human society is extensive and merits extensive quotation.

> To attain an apprehension of the importance of this distinction, let us visit, in imagination, the proceedings of some metropolis. Consider the multitude of human beings who inhabit it, and survey in thought the actions of the several classes into which they are divided. Their *obvious actions are apparently uniform*: the stability of human society seems to be maintained sufficiently by the *uniformity of the conduct of its members*, both with regard to themselves, and with regard to others. The labourer arises at a certain hour, and applies himself to the task enjoined him. The functionaries of government and law are regularly employed in their office

> and courts. The trader holds a train of conduct *from which he never deviates*. The ministers of religion employ an accustomed language, and maintain a decent and equable regard. The army is drawn forth, the motions of every soldier *are such as they were expected to be*; the general commands, and his words are *echoed* from troop to troop. The domestic actions of men are, for the most part, *undistinguishable one from the other, at a superficial glance*. The actions which are classed under the general appellation of marriage, education, friendship, &c., are perpetually going on, and *to a superficial glance, are similar one to the other*.
>
> But, if we would see the truth of things, *they must be stripped of this fallacious appearance of uniformity. In truth, no one action has, when considered in its whole extent, an essential resemblance with any other*. Each individual, who composing the vast multitude which we have been contemplating, has a peculiar frame of mind, which, whilst the features of the great mass of his actions remain uniform, *impresses the minuter lineaments with its peculiar hues*. (81-82; my emphasis).

This passage is striking for several reasons, not the least of which is the moral corollary of stripping false uniformity to "naked countenance of earth," or gazing on "primeval mountains" (original and ancient mountains, without comparison) to the absence of "essential resemblance" each person has to one another. The mountains Shelley imagined prior to Mont Blanc and its "subject mountains" (62), prior to his never knowing he never imagined, were obvious, uniform, superficial, and "such as they were expected to be." The naked countenance and blank expression of Mont Blanc's whiteness

is ironically what "impresses the minuter lineaments" of each individual's relationship toward one another with its "peculiar hues." The sui generis aspect of Mont Blanc and the poet's disposition toward it teaches the "adverting mind" because the mind is now in a receptive mode, a passive though critically alert form of consciousness in which "Large codes of fraud and woe" no longer can be inscribed through a uniform, predictable, conventional, and uncritical life.

William Keach concludes his reading of the poem by noting that its final word, "vacancy" (144), in its ambiguous relationship to the overall rhyme sequence, suggests Shelley is responding to David Hume's argument that "the mind's attempt to make sense of them [the operations of the phenomenal world] as necessity are nothing more than arbitrary impositions" (200).[98] Keach then quotes, in fact, a passage from Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that might have been at the forefront of Shelley's mind when he claimed "no one action […] has an essential resemblance to any other." Hume claims that "[e]very effect is a distinct event from its cause. It could not, therefore, be discovered in the cause, and the first invention or conception of it, a priori, must be entirely arbitrary. And even after it is suggested, the conjunction of it with the cause must appear equally arbitrary" (19). Thus, the invention and imaginative leap of faith we engage in when we ascribe any determinism to the physical laws of nature is as illusory and superficial as deriving moral knowledge from the general "proceedings of a metropolis."

Paul de Man has constructed an entire reading practice centered on a similar idea, the "positing power of language" (116).[99] Shelley's language, according to de Man, acts

[98] *Shelley's Style*. Methuen, 1984.
[99] "Shelley Disfigured." 1979. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. Columbia UP, 1984.

with such force that whatever determinism can be ascribed to it is interpretable only in the very act of its occurrence; it imposes itself like a freely occurring catastrophic event: "The positing power of language is both entirely arbitrary, in having a strength that cannot be reduced to necessity, and entirely inexorable in there is no alternative to it. It stands beyond the polarities of chance and determination" (116). Like the sun, de Man insists, it appears "detached from all antecedents […], of its own related power" (116). Because "language cannot posit meaning" (117), according to de Man, meaning and sense follow from our imposing it onto the senseless positings of language. Language is natural and we *impose* its positivity in order to construct ideologies, histories, philosophies, any system of knowledge. We pretend, in other words, or else never gain the insight that we are the blind products of mad words. De Man makes his case for the positional power of *language* specifically, and argues Shelley's power as a Romantic poet coincides with it alone, not Shelley's historical role and place within the larger revolutionary spirit of his time. He and other deconstructionists have therefore been criticized for too great a concern with the "sheer power of utterance" or the destabilizing cultural conclusions that ensue when "language cannot posit meaning" (117).

These criticisms are merited, but as we have seen, Shelley's argument for moral knowledge anticipates de Man's claim that "nothing […] ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere" (122). The Power of Mont Blanc is positional in that it imposes itself, like the snow that deposits there, on the mind that recognizes it. Recognition of that Power partly consists in knowledge of the moral freedom of random acts independent of the past. Within the superficial mode of moral perspective it is the past that for Shelley informs the behaviors,

values and beliefs acculturated by custom and convention. The past is what makes us homogenously superficial in our relations with other people and with institutions. Shelley describes it as the power of what we might call ideology, its influence and compass is that pervasive:

> Almost all that which is ostensible submits to *that legislature created by the general representation of the past feelings of mankind*—imperfect as it is from a variety of causes, as it exists in the government, the religion, and domestic habits. *Those who do not nominally, yet actually, submit to the same power*. The external features of their conduct, indeed, can no more escape it, *than the clouds can escape from the stream of the wind*; and his opinion, which he often hopes he has dispassionately secured from all contagion of prejudice and vulgarity, would be found, on examination, to be the inevitable excrescence of the very usages from which he vehemently dissents. *Internally all is conducted otherwise; the efficiency, the essence, the vitality of actions, derives its colour from what is no wise contributed to from any external source*. (*Speculations on Morals*, 82-83; my emphasis).

The distinction is between the power of the world, which imposes itself on us from without and without our even knowing it, making us ventriloquize the opinions, behaviors and values of others, and the Power of which Mont Blanc is the worldly emblem. The twin effects of the wilderness's "mysterious tongue" (76), which are "awful doubt" or "faith so mild" (77), disclose themselves according to our ability to interpret and read morally. The one remains tethered to the past, the other grounds itself in nothing

but the spontaneously free occurrence of the moment, from which the future begins. If, according to Shelley, we refuse to visit "[t]he deepest abyss of this vast and multitudinous cavern," the source of our internal goodness, and only rely on that "legislature created by the general representation of the past feelings of mankind," then we are imprisoned by perpetual reference to a false law. The past is death, as Cythna declared in *Laon and Cythna*, so virtue begins with self-forgiveness and the prospect of future pleasure. Jerrod Hogle's reading of "Mont Blanc," as does his reading of all Shelley's poetry, relies on the endless transformation and concealment of the referent. He sees in "Mont Blanc" a "desire to penetrate every complex to 'something' deeper or higher and a need to divert every glance at any target (outward or inward) toward some different point, some resemblance, where that something might possibly lie."[100]

I understand Hogle's claim to be Shelley's moral problem in the poem, one his moral theory seeks to solve. The 'something' to which Hogle refers has too many referents. The need for a moral theory follows from rather than founds itself in the endless multiplication of referents, their displacements and transformations. An act of goodness must be self-contained and free from the "inevitable excrescences" of the past. Otherwise, "The secret strength of things / Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome / Of heaven is as a law" (139-141) becomes a vacant placeholder for more finite worldly "codes of fraud and woe" (81), rather than the love which penetrates the healthy, Promethean self-consciousness.

It is not by chance that Shelley quotes Wordsworth twice in these two pieces on morality, once in *Speculations on Morals* and once in *On Christianity*. In each instance

[100] *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works*. Oxford UP, 1988. 76-77.

Shelley chooses "Tintern Abbey," a poem of excessive memory that demands recovery and integration. Toward the conclusion of *Speculations on Morals* Shelley names Wordsworth's "—'those little, nameless unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love'" which exert the "vital influence on the happiness of others […] so much the more are they distinct from those of other men"[101]—"Unremembered" and so separate from the "legislature created by the general representation of the past feelings of mankind." They constitute the actions of the moment in their quotidian steadfastness. They make life worth living and represent a well lived life. These acts are "nameless" because to name them would systematize and narrativize them into both abstractions and memory. They work outside the contiguities of legislated laws and the external relationships between members of a community. These are the vital actions of our humanity or inhumanity "so that hemlock continues to be poison, and the violet does not cease to emit its odour in whatever soil it may grow" (*Speculations on Morals*, 83). As I have been arguing, freed from the locks of custom, a self freed from the past is free to act from the difference that confers dignity, rather than the conformity that prevents it.

The second quotation from "Tintern Abbey" occurs in *On Christianity* in the section on God. Shelley imagines the emotional impact that Job and Ecclesiastes produced on Christ's "youthful hope," concluding that it "made audible to his listening heart 'The still, sad music of humanity / Not harsh or grating but of *ample power* **/** To chasten and subdue'" (229, "Tintern Abbey" 91-93; my emphasis).[102] In Wordsworth's poem, nature plays the music of humanity, or nature makes it heard, when once the poet-

[101] Shelley misses the exact quotation from "Tintern Abbey": "His little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love" (36-37). 82.
[102] Once again, Wordsworth's lines exactly read, "The still, sad music of humanity, Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power / To chasten and subdue."

speaker matures from the sensuous excesses of youth and enters a more deeply felt relationship toward the natural world. The "faith so mild, / So solemn, so serene" is Shelley's version of "still, sad music of humanity," except that Tintern Abbey does not seem to offer the poet-speaker Mont Blanc's potential for "awful doubt." This makes sense considering "Tintern Abbey" is a more particularized rendering of poetic meditation than the representative "Mont Blanc"; ironically, the mood of Wordsworth's poem feels more like his "own separate fantasy" ("Mont Blanc" 36) than Shelley's all-encompassing monologue. Yet the "ample power" of the "still, sad music of humanity," like the Power of Mont Blanc, chastens and subdues in the context of society. It makes empathic those who translate and those who hear its melody. Wordsworth is certainly one of the elite, one of "Mont Blanc's" "wise, and great, and good" (82) whose role it is to "Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel" the voice of the Mountain. And although according to "Mont Blanc" this process begins with a sort of revelatory decryption by individual genius of "Large codes of fraud of woe" (81), the desired aim is at its core social, communitarian and egalitarian. What is at stake is the moral being of humanity.

The "*adverting* mind" of "Mont Blanc" reveals a tension, or rather irony, of how the "wise, and great, and good" (82) translate the mountain's power, how the virtue of the few can become that of the many. Critics often mention the difficult syntax of "The Wilderness has a mysterious tongue / Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild, / So solemn, so serene, that man may be / *But for such faith* with nature reconciled" (76-79; emphasis mine),[103] but few critics have paid attention, perhaps ironically so, to the ambiguous meaning of "adverting," and what this means to a poem whose speaker is

[103] Wasserman reads this as "by means of such a faith alone." He also notes Shelley's earlier manuscript versions, 'With such a faith' and 'In such a faith.' *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. p. 235, note 21.

alone both in nature and, as the final lines suggest—"And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142-144)—possibly *all* alone by virtue of thought itself. The choice of "adverting" to describe "*the* mind" (my emphasis), significantly not *my* mind or mind*s*, seems like a curious choice at first, if only for no other reason than Shelley never used the word again in any of his published poems. "Advert" of course means to pay attention to or take heed of, to refer someone to something. "Adverting" entails a turning like troping, and its placement as a modifier for "mind" at this moment of the poem, when "*this*, the naked countenance of the earth" (97), that which the poet-speaker can hardly name or adopt the proper stance toward, marks a crisis of reference, since the blank peak of Mont Blanc will not return the gaze of its beholder.

Further complicating the relationship of gazer to the object of gaze is the syntax of "On which I gaze" (99). Does this mean that the "naked countenance of earth" is the object of the poet-speaker's gaze, or is the "naked countenance of earth" the place *from which* the poet-speaker gazes? That is, does the poet-speaker refer to standing literally on the earth, the ground, thus erasing any possibility of inscribing a face onto the "naked countenance"? Does the earth become the *ground* of the poet-speaker's reference; does nature become the grounds for all possibility of reference, and, if silence and solitude are vacancy, if the gap between the mountain and the man is irreconcilable, then what does that say about the reality of the man?

These questions inevitably present themselves to readers of "Mont Blanc" but I am more interested in how the "naked countenance of the earth" teaches the "adverting mind" its specific lesson of moral being. Sublimely impressed by the scenery and

landscape of the Chamouni valley, the Arve and Mont Blanc, Shelley writes in his letter to Thomas Love Peacock: "All was as much our own as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others, as now occupied our own.—Nature was poet whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than that of the divinest" (*Letters* II; 497). Here the mountain defaces Shelley, renders him breathless, certainly not dead but near that state where life approaches death in the blank awe of its impassiveness. Shelley reads the poem that the mountain is writing. It then becomes not a matter of the "adverting mind" turning toward and taking heed of the voice of the mountain, but "a()verting" the mountain, that is to say turning away and avoiding it, so becoming the *ground* or the "creators of such impressions in the minds of *others*." The blank placeholder of a single letter, a vacancy, in other words, since Mont Blanc can only write vacant characters as the "naked countenance of the earth," turns the author of it into the gazer and Shelley into the object of the gaze. The otherness of nature passes into the nature of others by virtue of Shelley's interpretation of its face. In this sense the power made manifest in the mountain remains *the un*acknowledged legislator of the world.

When it comes time for Shelley himself to compose the poem that he reads in Mont Blanc, the inverse occurs and it is the poet-speaker's face that gazes on and adverts to the blank whiteness of the mountain. Yet Mont Blanc retains something of this interchange in the neutral "adverting mind." A considerable portion of this mind is the Power of Mont Blanc, which is why the line does not read "Teach *my* or *man's* adverting mind or *minds*." [104] Though the "naked countenance of earth" will not return the poet-speaker's gaze, the "*this*" which tries to name it recognizes the possibility of the double

[104] This is also immediately evident in the poem's opening: "The source of human thought its tribute brings / Of waters,--with a sound but half its own" (5-6).

turn carried within "a()verting," a turning away from the mountain and toward the social, as well as a turn toward the mountain and away from the social. The vacant character that Mont Blanc presents to the beholder of it becomes something entirely different at the end of the poem: "[N]aked countenance" is now *thee* and *thou*: "The secret strength of things / Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome / Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!" (139-141), and "what were thou […]" (142). The "adverting mind" of the poet-speaker, far from alienated or terrified by the nothingness that seems to lurk just beyond the limits of the final lines, breaches through the vacancy by paying excessive attention to the Power that inhabits Mont Blanc. If the poet-speaker continued the poem, continued heeding the fantasy of his own imaginings in the face of the mountain, then silence and solitude might only be vacancy. Yet Mont Blanc and the poem teach the moral imperative that the "wise, and great, and good" must avert their minds from the faceless mountains to begin their moral work among human faces, to begin a community of people rather than primeval mountains, earth, stars, and sea. Through its perceived indifference of, and distance from, us, the mountain teaches love by making accessible the sympathy that interpenetrates the human community.

"Ode to the West Wind" and the Moral Limits of the Poem

In "Mont Blanc" the power was *there* (127); yet in "Ode to the West Wind" the power, or rather the wind, moves *everywhere* (13). In the "Ode" there are no "wise, and great, and good" to translate, interpret and communicate moral truth to others; yet there is an "I" that "fall[s] upon the thorns of life" and "bleed[s]" (54). "Mont Blanc" represents the morality of the head; the "Ode" represents the morality of the heart. The immense form that so shocked Shelley's senses at Chamounix becomes flesh in the "Ode," its

"incantation" (65) aspires to incarnation. [105] Even an analogous vacancy carried over into the "Ode," the subterranean "chasms," cannot escape the wind, as the "Atlantic's level powers / Cleave themselves in chasms" (37-38). The cosmic indifference that "Mont Blanc" speculates careens into a manic engagement with the wind, echoing a divine afflatus that seeks effect outside the world of the poem. Insofar as "Mont Blanc" meditates on what is real, questioning even the reality of its own meditation, Shelley presents "Ode to the West Wind" as the real thing, as the *this* at the heart of change, a poem so invested with moral and elemental transformation that the driving hope of both it and its speaker is metamorphosis by wind and fire. The "Ode" tries to move beyond its structure as a poem, just as the speaker of it tries to move beyond the limits of self-consciousness.

But the problem is that "Ode to the West Wind" remains the petition—an apostrophe seeking the immediate address of presence—of a poet at a particular time and place in history, even as the speaker commands the wind to generate the future from the remains of the poem, spring from winter. By remains I refer not only to the regenerative cultural and moral nourishment attributed to the "dead thoughts" (63) and combustible "words" (67) of the poet-speaker, but also to how Shelley sees himself proleptically as poet, as he imagines himself in the posthumous future, "like a corpse within its grave" (8). More than just the west wind is petitioned in this text; a plea is also made for an afterlife for both poet and poem, and this imagining of a posthumous future accounts, along with the "Ode's" ritualistic and incantatory overtones, for the strong solicitation of the reader's response. "[H]ear, O, hear! O, hear! O, hear!" (14, 28, 42), the exclamatory

[105] Upon describing the Chamounix valley and Mont Blanc to Thomas Love Peacock, Shelley wrote: "And remember this was all one scene. It all pressed home to our regard & to our imagination" (*Letters* I; 497).

refrain, is part of the poem's magic, a way for the reader to re-invoke "the breath of Autumn's being" (1) through the simple homophonous command of presence and prayer. And it is this comprehensive democratic participation in the spell of the poem[106] which informs its moral imperative: Love.

The poem's straining beyond its own textuality to become one with the wind has its moral equivalent in Shelley's definition of Love: "The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (*Defence*, 517). Several sentences later in the *Defence of Poetry* the imagination is named as the "great instrument of moral good." Shelley asserts that "[p]oetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it […]" (517). If the "Ode" is conceived as an imaginative circumference, then clearly an eruption occurs that breaks its boundary, an eruption both temporal and social. This eruption entails a loss, a sacrifice of the present self for the future, expansive self. Beyond the Orphic myth of self-dissolution/dismemberment, the destruction that precedes and predicts regeneration, the process of self-transformation that the "Ode" describes is a selfless act of love for the social (and future) good. The fear and promise of the final famous question, "O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?", issues forth from the leap of faith it implies. As I quoted earlier, Shelley wrote, "Pain or pleasure, if subtly analysed, will be found to consist entirely in prospect." The imaginative individual sees further than the selfish one. In the "Ode" the poet-speaker cannot see far enough. In essence, he thus blinds himself so that others might see. The self-dissolution that the

[106] It would not be unreasonable, then, I think, to read "Ode to the West Wind" as one of the specific spells referred to at the end of *Prometheus Unbound*: "These are the spells by which to re-assume / An empire o'er the disentangled Doom" (4.568-69).

poem seems to offer as a path toward social renewal is necessary to transport the poem's audience from a state of slumber to wakefulness.

Therefore I want to argue that "Ode to the West Wind" is an instrumental instance of Shelley's future-oriented politics, aesthetics, and, not often assigned under this familiar temporal category for Shelley, morality. First, the poem's heavy reliance on the reader's participation in the orphic ritual it enacts promotes a transhistorical moral communion between poet and audience; and, secondly, the poem relies on the anticipation of both the poet-speaker's death and the death of the historical context everywhere present in the poem as sacrifices for the moral good of society. Yet the power of the west wind is transferable to whoever recites the words of the "Ode." The speaker inhales the wind in order to exhale a regenerative breath, inflaming in the process the ashes and sparks of history's fading coals. This explanation is not necessarily a novel interpretation of the reader-response element of the poem,[107] yet by reading "Ode to the West Wind" in conjunction with critical debates about the poem's historical consciousness, the urgent and expansive moral case that the "Ode" presents becomes clearer.

In the seminal biography *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1975),[108] Richard Holmes details several of the unorthodox methods Shelley employed after returning from Ireland in 1812

[107] James Chandler notes: "That same breath, furthermore, is shared not only between the poet and the wind but between the poet and his reader as well; the breath of the reader's incantation makes this change possible. There is a strong sense in which the West Wind's inspiration has been interchangeable with the readerly audience from the start. How else can we explain the poem's repeated exhortations to a 'breath' that it 'hear' the poet's words?" (*England in 1819*, p. 553, note 41). How else, indeed. Yet I would add that though the exchange between poet and reader in this poem is often mentioned, it rarely receives a full analysis. It merits one since the moral sense of the "Ode" lies in its capacity to enlarge the circumference of the world's moral spirit. James Rieger understands the diction of the poem as "reach[ing] back beyond *canere* ('to sing or prophesy') and *cantare* ('to sing or bewitch') to the Indo-Germanic KAN or HAN ('to sound'). It evokes memories of the birth of language itself, the 'perpetual Orphic song,' and of villages where music had the potency of magic and the lyrist and the shaman were a single person" (*The Mutiny Within*, p. 181). Shelley intended his poem as a magic spell to be cast against the imperfect world, as a rhythmic rattling-out of the trance of history.

[108] *Shelley: The Pursuit*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1975. 148-50.

for distributing his radical political writings. Holmes describes how Shelley threw bottles filled with what he called "vessels of heavenly medicine" (his *Declaration of Rights* and the "The Devil's Walk")[109] into the sea, constructed miniature boats laden with his political pamphlets which he set sail, and, as the sonnet "To a balloon, laden with Knowledge" (1812) attests, attached his early seditious writings to fire balloons. [110]

Notwithstanding the brash naiveté and romantic aspirations of these youthful attempts to incite political and moral change, anticipated perhaps by the insomnia-fueled distribution of *The Necessity of Atheism* on the grounds of Oxford University over a year earlier, we get the sense of absence and mediation in Shelley's relationship toward his public, even at this early stage of his career. His ideal reader and his ideal time have not come yet; they are, in fact, "far behind" him. This literal send off of his writings into the ocean, consigning his words both to possible death yet also to possible rebirth in an unknown context with an as yet unknown audience (readers everywhere and nowhere, all future readers and no future readers), mirrors the desire for annihilation that gives the "Ode" its power. One must also read the lines "If I were […] / A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share / The impulse of thy strength" (44-46) in an entirely new light. The message in a bottle metaphor, the moral tenor in the poem's vehicle, becomes compounded and problematized by the fact that Shelley previously had literally committed a portion of that "I" into the contents of the bottles tossed into the sea, the Bristol Channel fed by the "Atlantic's level powers" (37); but the image in the poem and the biographical fact speak to the relentless identification of the poet-speaker with the west wind. The same comparison can be made of Shelley's fire balloons "spread / On the

[109] Each written in 1812.
[110] "the Fire thou [the balloon] bearest" (5) is likened to "A Sun which o'er the renovated scene/ Shall dart like Truth where Falsehood yet has been" (13-14).

blue surface of thine airy surge […] from whose solid atmosphere / Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst" (18-19, 27-28). The point of departure for these literal speech acts, the "going out of our own nature," is the moral spirit of nature, whether air, water, or earth. Shelley's actions in 1812 intentionally resign and cede control of his words to their natural end in an effort to "share / The impulse of thy strength, only less free / Than thou, O, Uncontrollable!" (45-47).

In the context of the poem this constitutes the paradox of religious humiliation. Whereas in "Mont Blanc" sublimity substantially informs both the poet-speaker's perception of the external world and the moral lessons derivable from it, in the "Ode" the wind's descent into the poet-speaker carries him toward a condition of decomposition and annihilation.[111] But of course the symbolic sundering of the poet-speaker's self through the inhalation of the wind is a sublime elevation in its own right. James Rieger argues that the "Ode" is a completely Christian poem, citing the apostle Paul as the germ of the metempsychosis that the poem describes: "*Thou* fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die […] So also *is* the resurrection of the dead. [112] It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power" (I Cor. 15.36, 42-43). The way down as the way up is an ancient conceit ("Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth" (64)) but we must

[111] Kant argues that nature can arouse sublimity if "we judge it in such a way that we merely think of the case in which we might wish to resist it and think that in that case all resistance would be completely futile." Mont Blanc would be considered sublime in this context because "the sight of [it] only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call [such objects as Mont Blanc] sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature." *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. 1790. Trans. Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 144-45. The mountain elicits in the human mind the same universal Power of which it is a manifestation, through a process, according to Kant, of dominion and superiority. The process seems to reverse itself with the wind, as the poet-speaker elicits in the wind a power of self-dissolution.

[112] *The Mutiny Within*, p. 172.

question what or who dies in the poem and what or who is resurrected. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, a dialectic between submission and mastery joins together the moral moods of "Mont Blanc" and "Ode to the West Wind." Submission to the mountain's power redounds with mastery of the west wind's love; and to master love is to submit to power. The implicit dialectic operating at the end of the poem's first stanza, "Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and Preserver" (13-14) becomes translated in the last as a direct and desperate plea to overcome the limits of self and poem: "Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" (61-62).[113] The poet implores the spirit to destroy him in order to preserve him; yet this occurs in the context of a curious grammatical substitution. In one sense "My" and "me" refer directly to Shelley himself, since in the previous fourth stanza we read:

> If even
>
> I were as in my boyhood, and could be
>
> The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
>
> As then, when to outstrip the skiey speed
>
> Scarce seemed a vision; (47-51)

And then the fourth stanza's final couplet reads: "A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud" (55-56). "Tameless, and swift, and proud" are both positive and negative attributes of Shelley, the wind, and the reader. Their qualities merge into the dialectic of submission and mastery. However, if the poet is already too much like the wind he calls on to transform him, tameless, swift, and proud, then there is little chance of being reborn as that wind. Yet if the wind is

[113] One hears echoes in this command of John Donne's Holy Sonnet "Batter my heart": "Take me to You, imprison me, for I, / Except You enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me" (12-14).

"Uncontrollable" (47) and, as "less free" (46), the poet is in fact qualitatively different than the wind, then the chance of material and moral regeneration "by the incantation of this verse" (65) seems only a rhetorical hope, because the grounds for renewed life would always remain a condition of servitude, of being "less free"—to incant the poem would always reinscribe its limits as poem.

This is part of the paradox that occupies the space of the poem's possible moral efficacy. If we turn back to the explicit and emphatic use of pronouns toward the end of the poem, the "If I" (43-44) repetitions, "I fall" and "I bleed" (54), "too like thee" (56), "Make me thy lyre" (57), "Be thou […] My," "Be thou me" (61-62), and "my words" and "my lips" (67-68), then determining who they ultimately refer to, poet, wind, or reader, becomes an impossible task, but this is the point. Their confusion and "vacancy" call attention to Shelley's claims in *On Love* (1818) and *On Life* (1819). At the very beginning of *On Love*, Shelley admits, "I know not the internal constitution of other men, or even of thine whom I now address" (*Norton* 503).The next paragraph begins in an oddly accusatory tone: "*Thou* demandest what is Love" (503). We do not know who *Thou* is, anymore than Shelley knows who he now addresses with his words. In *On Life* Shelley probes even further into the literal and metaphorical unknown:

> The words, *I*, *you*, *they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. […] The words I, and you, and they are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. It is difficult to find terms adequately to express so

> subtle a conception as that to which the intellectual philosophy has conducted us. *We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know*. (*Norton* 508; my emphasis)

In this passage, where we see a movement from "assemblages," or a gathering together, to abandonment, a scattering apart, an image of Orpheus appears and with it a clearer picture of the reader's transhistorical role in "Ode to the West Wind."

I will first briefly comment on what might be termed Shelley's orphism in order to show the reader's transhistorical role in the poem, and then secondly I will show how James Chandler's historicist and Orrin Wang's deconstructist reading of the "Ode" adhere to and are influenced by Shelley's orphism. In *Prometheus Unbound*, the principal poem of the volume in which the "Ode" was published, Shelley famously called language "a perpetual Orphic song, / Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng / Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were" (4.415-17). Orpheus, however, in the myth as Ovid tells it in *Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.), eventually ends up senseless and shapeless, having been thrashed, dismembered, and stoned to death by a mob of Thracian women, the Maenads, devotees of Bacchus, who appear in Shelley's "Ode." The reason for their murder was Orpheus's subsequent swearing off all women upon losing Eurydice to the underworld, to which the "Ode's" third line, among other meanings, references: "Like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing" Orpheus's gaze. In the poem's most explicit allusion to Orpheus's sacrifice, we see "Like the bright hair uplifted from the head / Of some fierce Maenad, *even from the dim verge* / Of the horizon to the zenith's height, / The locks of the approaching storm" (20-23; my emphasis); or that "verge where words

abandon us," that verge when the myth might metamorphosize into history. Ovid's account of the death of Orpheus, and the spirit of the myth of Orpheus, inhabit the whole of Shelley's poem:

> They [Maenads] hastened back
>
> to finish off the seer, who, with raised hands,
>
> spoke words unheeded for the first time ever,
>
> ---
>
> and past those lips—ah, Jupiter!—to which
>
> the stones would listen and the beasts respond,
>
> his exhaled ghost receded on the winds.
>
> For you now, Orpheus, the grieving birds,
>
> the thronging beasts, the sharp, unyielding rocks,
>
> the trees that often gathered for your songs,
>
> and which, like men who tear their hair in grief,
>
> have shed their leaves for you—all these now wept,
>
> ---
>
> His limbs lay scattered all about;
>
> ---
>
> Now head and lyre are borne down to the sea
>
> ---
>
> The shade of Orpheus now fled below,
>
> and recognized all he had seen before. (*Metam*., XI, 53-85)[114]

[114] *Metamorphoses*. Trans. and ed. Charles Martin. Norton: New York, 2010.

The poet-speaker in the "Ode" exclaims, "I bleed" (54) and shares, as his communicant, Orpheus's suffering and, he hopes, his fate. One might conclude that it is actually Orpheus who bleeds: "the stones were reddened with a poet's blood" (*Metam*, XI, 27). Often read as Shelley's high Romantic histrionic shrilling, "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" is rather an identification with the mystery and power of ancient Dionysiac, Orphic, and Christic sacrifice. Rieger notes the dialectic nature of the particular ritual being invoked: "He (Orpheus) celebrates a feast in which he is at once the minister, the eaten god, and the human devourer, fulfilling thereby the triple function formulated by the terrible figure at the center of every Eucharist: *hoc est enim meum corpus*."[115] If we begin to view the relationship between poem and reader as eucharistic, as a shared communion of the west wind, then "this is my body," this is my blood, would seem to constitute the implicit utterance the wind and reader must hear, the structuring and literal form behind the poem's metaphorical content. "This is my body" is a simultaneous declaration of subjectivity and objectivity, body and spirit, individual agency and historical fate.

Reading the poem in terms of the Eucharist and Orpheus myth can, of course, produce uncritical and supranatural interpretations of the poem's intentions to effect a moral spring, interpretations that adhere to and are partly informed by Shelley's divine claims for poetry in the *Defence*. For example, future readers or future poets consume Shelley's body in the process of incanting the poem, or, conversely, kill and dismember Shelley's body, becoming the hierophants of an incantatory and sacrificial ritual, thereby assuming the moral responsibility to trumpet the poem's prophecy. Reading the poem under the shadow of such a Romantic ideology, however, turns out not to be as uncritical

[115] *The Mutiny Within*, p. 181.

as it sounds, when the creative and destructive aims of these myths and ceremonies are interrogated through the lens of contemporary debates about the poem's historical consciousness.

A barren winter rather than fecund spring enshrouds the poem's historical context. The "Ode" would not be necessary in a world where the forms of social life were as consistent and unchangeable as the seasons. Winter might be *the* season of all *presents* where "A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee" (55-56), where individuals and societies suffer the hope of a far off future spring. But is winter an effect of specific historical contexts or are historical contexts themselves the cause of winter? Both James Chandler and Orrin Wang read the "Ode" as confronting and coming to terms with history, yet each responds differently to this confrontation. Each also avoids reading the poem as staging a subjective redemption for the poet and his words; that is, they downplay the mystical or religious qualities inherent in its diction, imagery, and tone while emphasizing its political and historical complexities.

In opposition to Harold Bloom and his teacher Frederick Pottle, whose 1952 essay "The Case of Shelley"[116] Chandler cites as highly influential to Shelley's critical reception in the decades that followed, Chandler writes that "I do not deny that the *Ode* is in some sense about 'the nature and function of the nabi in relation to his own prophecies.' […][117] By contrast I wish to show that Shelley's conception of the prophetic 'spirit' is a good deal more Spinozist, and a good deal less, well, 'literal,' than Bloom's account would suggest."[118] Orrin Wang makes the same point when he writes that it is "besides the point in the 'Ode'" to "see its wager in terms of the poet's survival or

[116] Pottle, Frederick A. "The Case of Shelley." *PMLA* 67.5 (1952): 589-608.
[117] The *OED* defines "nabi" as a person "inspired to speak the word of God."
[118] *England in 1819*, 531.

redemption. The poet is not in danger in the last portion of the 'Ode'; *the wind is*, insofar as we define the wind as an independent event or force beyond the poet's invocation."[119] This seems to me precisely why the poet is in danger, that the wind *might be* beyond his invocation, that he might stand completely separated from any influence over it. For if it is, then the poem's "spring" is, in fact, too far behind, and only at the mercy of chance or the pen of the poet will it be realized as morally regenerative rather than a natural cyclical occurrence. But Wang's claim also suggests that though the wind is a force beyond the poet, a power moving everywhere, it everywhere determines and conditions the poet's own power. The separation of poet and wind is more like a separation of individual will and historical fate; in this light, the incarnation of wind into the flesh of poet and form of poem is more a liberation from an uncontrollable power than the assumption of it.

The wind is constitutive of the power that for Shelley *causes* poetry, rendering the poet's role a passive effect. Hence the famous fading rather than fully engulfed image of the coal in Shelley's metaphor of inspired composition. If the poet was capable of causing the wind, then Shelley's conception of poetry as a divine descent into the sublunary world, as an enactment and participation in the impulse behind the ancient mysteries, would render the wind the supplicant of the poet. But Wang's comment that the wind is threatened by virtue of its independent relation to the poet's will echoes Chandler's argument in *England in 1819*. Like Shelley's claim that "even whilst they [poets] deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve, the Power which is seated upon the throne of their own soul" (*Defence* 535), both Chandler's and Wang's arguments are structured around the logic of causality. Wang defines the wind historically and

[119] *Romantic Sobriety: Sensation, Revolution, Commodification, History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2011. p. 179.

relationally, in much the same way that Chandler employs his concept of "the case" and "casuistries" generally. Chandler's treatment and conception of "the case" are nearly as exhaustive, comprehensive, and mercurial as the effects he insists were produced by a Romantic alteration in how "the case" was understood; but, in short, "the case" for Chandler represents a new way of understanding the relationship between individuals and their historical situations.

Chandler's idea of the case is best understood in terms of its complement "casuistry," or case-based reasoning. Casuistry is a complicated concept used in many different disciplines and by many different theorists, but its most basic definition of case-based reasoning describes Chandler's use of it. The title of Chandler's book, *England in 1819*, calls attention to a casuistic quality: disruption. There is something special about the condition of the state, political and literary, in the year 1819 that leads to England, and its literature, falling away from their normative "case." The usual principles no longer apply, in other words, perhaps even the relation that binds together principles and their application. As Wang points out in his criticism of Wasserman's understanding of the wind as always operating in accordance with the same law, an anti-casuist perspective, the wind is less a consistent law than a critique "about the event of *relation* itself, of which the figures of cause and effect would be one category" (174). Citing the writings of André Jolles, Chandler claims that the case is the "occurrence of an anomaly for such a [general or normative] system or scheme. […] It is always calling for judgment, and it is by virtue of judgment that it offers formal mediation between the particular and the general, between instance and rule, between circumstance and principle" (208-09). Shelley's writings in and around 1819 become anomalous to their

historical situations in their awareness and development of a new form of historicism, what Chandler calls "historicist casuistry" (527), an alteration in the "concept of the case" which alters "the concept of the cause" (527).

I read both Chandler's and Wang's treatment of Shelley's historicism, specifically regarding "Ode to the West Wind," as equally committed to accounting for the prophetic, self-destructive, and ritualistic qualities of the poem, yet in terms of the historical pressures that limit, and, paradoxically, expand them. As Wang concludes, the poem is a representative case of "*A history without context*—that is what Shelley's wind inspires" (175). And as Chandler concludes, the "Ode" dramatizes the "paradoxical encounter between […] the Spinozist spirit of God, and a poet-philosopher who aims to represent in words and figures the power that moves him, but who understands, by virtue of the theory itself [that prophecy cannot be reconciled to intellectual systems], that he cannot finally understand the power he presents" (548). These two readings of the poem, history without context and knowledge of ignorance, both presuppose a liberation from causes that condition and determine change. In the poem this cause takes the form of the wind, but *as a figure in a poem*, it also takes on the form of an effect. One cannot but help hear in the poem the pleas of a poet seemingly out of options and choices to change his world, and, confronted with this situation, the poet-speaker desires to assume the form of that power which both enables and limits choice. The prayer of the speaker, transmutation of poet into wind and wind into poet, is a desire not only to possess the power of the wind and wield it but also to annihilate it. In this sense the wind is threatened, but threatened by the poet.

The poem clearly suggests that the driving of the poet's "dead thoughts" (63) to "quicken a new birth" (64), the scattering of the poet's "words among mankind" (67), and the command to be "The trumpet of a prophecy" (69) can only occur within the breath and body of the speaker. The wind does not do any of these things alone, but only in relation to the inhalation and exhalation of the mouths of the poem's speakers, those "chasms" into which the "Atlantic's level powers / Cleave themselves" (37-38). Hence "cleave," a verb the definition of which is cleaved neatly in two: to divide and adhere, to split and stick fast to. Shelley recognizes and represents the power of the omnipresent wind as a limitation of the future "case" of the poem itself to usher in spring. He steadfastly sticks his hopes to the wind because there is no lesser power, but he sings to it also to split it up for the sake of the poem's unknown future. Like Wang's history without context, the "Ode" enacts an effort to particularize universality across the unknown future, across the winters of future historical moments and events, their contexts. But context in this "case" is the con of both history and the text; it both steers their directions against each other and dupes those who critique one in terms of the other into believing that the poem presents an awareness of its own historical situation. History always mediates the historical critiques that seek to contextualize it, in the same way the wind mediates the poet's effort to inspire it.

But it is not the case that the poem presents an awareness of its own historical situation; not exactly, at least. It presents the knowledge of an awareness that this awareness is part of the dream of a redemptive history, and, as such, extraordinarily difficult to achieve. As Chandler rightly detects, the only historical awareness that the poem develops is a sort of casuistry, the hope and despair that we can never completely

know our own historical moment, let alone understand it and apply the principles of the past to adjudicate the historical events that persist to rise up before us. The causes are too much like the effects. The wind moves everywhere, there is no isolating it and abstracting it from any context because it is the context of context: The "heavy weight of hours [which] has chained and bowed / One too like thee" (35-36). We are too like the external forces that determine our relations toward those forces, which condition our actions within the fields they define. "Ode to the West Wind" is too much like the world in which it was borne. Its recognition of this, its "deep autumnal tone, / Sweet though in sadness" (60-61), is a desire, a "drive," for release across innumerable unknown future contexts. The "heavy weight of hours," or this heavy *wait* of *ours*, is a shared communion of the winter that still persists.

Our historical moment, our critique of the poem and Shelley's poetry, each reading and interpretation of it becomes as cyclic as the seasonal analogy it employs—we are "One too like thee." Shelley warns that "we consider our own nature too superficially. We look on all that in ourselves with which we can discover a resemblance in others; and consider those resemblances as the materials of moral knowledge. It is in the differences that it actually consists" (*Speculations on Morals*, 83). The "Ode" inscribes these differences in its apostrophic address to the wind, a figure that, like the poem's future readers, are both accidental and intentional. The ethical response to our relation toward the winds of history, a relation of ignorance and blindness, determines whether the wind will blast from behind and through us toward spring, or remain a stubborn impasse blowing against our efforts to progress forward and understand the meaning of our specific historical moment and case. The response must only be "tameless, swift and

proud" in our certainty that we cannot know the historical nature of our present moment by comparing it with our past, but only by acting *as if* the future will be unimaginably different from the past.

This is true also for our ethical response to others whose differences from us, like the difficult difference of individual from historical moment, contain the germ of moral knowledge. But it is beginning from a stance, a source, of not knowing, the planting the seed of a chance, that best opens up the hope and ethical possibilities of "Ode to the West Wind." The whole poem is just that, a chance, "O Wind, / If winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (69-70), the question mark constitutive of human uncertainty even in the face of the most repetitive and certain human experience, the experience of the natural cycle of the seasons. But the only rhetorical element about the poem's last line is its implicit moral imperative that we must act *as if* spring will not, as it always has before, come again. Not to do so is indicative of winter-thinking and winter-acting, a hopeless sleep at odds with one of the poem's key images, "unawakened earth" (68). The "unawakened earth," the perfect description of winter, is the object of the imaginative call toward the future; the "trumpet of a prophecy" (69) must echo back into each present where it is made, a present that is not yet awake. It might seem intuitive to conceive of the "unawakened earth" as the world that sits side by side in the poem's own historical moment, but it is actually a description of the poem's future destiny, our own present. With every critique of the poem, we still are living as if asleep, but with every critique we still live in the chance it tries to offer. "[B]y the incantation of this verse" (65) punningly suggests a *versus*, a contest against the history that necessitated it, a dialectical

interplay between reader, critic, poet, individual, what have you, and the "spirit of the age" (*Defence* 535) moving everywhere, inside and outside the poem, like the west wind.

This spirit of the age is an elusive and amorphous entity to invoke, much less understand, describe, or direct. Shelley's words say as much at the end of the *Defence*: "It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age" (535). The meaning here inevitably becomes confused, since measuring a circumference is entirely within the realm of possibility, circumferences themselves measure, but measuring an "all-penetrating spirit" is impossible. It is this impossibility that the "Ode" describes, however, and instructs. The "Ode" closes when merely read, but "by the incantation of this verse" it opens. Perhaps then the celebrated writers of Shelley's day are so astonished because they witness impossible things for which they are only partly responsible. The spirit of the age ignites the "electric life which burns within their words" and makes the impossible possible. But the "present day" to which Shelley refers, 1821 or so, burns with such electric life because it is the effect of innumerable antecedent causes, the electric life of Dante, Shakespeare, Calderón, Milton, Goethe, Wordsworth, and many others. According to Shelley, each prayed to the wind, and the wind became their breath. Each wrote with an ignorant and dim instinct of the future compositions they were helping to create. Each created a history without context in speaking *through*, in the sense of both going beyond and within, the context of their history.

In an 1822 letter to John Gisborne, Shelley surmised that "[p]erhaps all discontent with the *less* (to use a Platonic sophism) supposes the sense of a just claim to the *greater*" (*Letters* II; 406). In the same letter he writes: "*Cypriano* evidently furnished the *germ* of Faust, as Faust may furnish the germ of other poems; although it is different from it in structure & plan, as the acorn from the oak." Hugh Roberts sees in Shelley's analogy not a Coleridgean organic multeity-in-unity, but "Lucretian terms of disjunctive iteration" (314).[120] He observes that "Shelley thinks of the acorn as a 'germ' (or 'seed') in the Lucretian atomistic sense. Cyprian does not become Faust through organic necessity any more than the 'other poems' to which Goethe's play may one day give rise can be foretold by inspecting the seeds that constitute the *pépinière* that is Faust. What strikes Shelley about the relationship between oak and acorn is not their organic unity but their striking dissimilarity in 'structure and plan'" (315). Shelley's "Ode" is self-consciously aware of itself as a "disjunctive iteration," and its ending imagery as near to a *pépinière* as a poem gets without becoming fertilizer, but of course it desperately asks to be fertilizer. The poem knows that historical context is an illusion of history, that it is, like the wind, *felt* but never seen or known in any complete way. Like the "all-penetrating spirit," like the spirit of the age, it cannot be measured even though often referred to, named, supplicated, and thought.

For instance, *England in 1819* refers to a specifically circumscribed historical context, but there are infinite others that stand behind, within, and in front of it, like the relation of the west wind to the poet who invokes it. As a work that intentionally addresses the future and is laden with figures of transformations, motion, and instability, the "Ode's" message mirrors the *chance* Shelley took in 1812 sending his writings off

[120] *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1997.

into unconceived oblivions, yet by virtue of the as yet and unknown contexts to which they might arrive, Shelley's actions became all the more generative and relational, all the more contextless; or, conversely, all the more involved in one context that proliferates into many. Moral meaning in the world the "Ode" describes, which is riven with a "discontent of the *less*" that veers into a "deep autumnal tone" (60), which is nevertheless "Sweet though in sadness" (61), its "just claim to the *greater*," consists in the chance of impossible beginnings.

How to proceed, though, in the face of what is felt and experienced as an impossibly unconquerable winter? If, as Wang contends, "Ode to the West Wind" inspires a history without context, it is, as I have been arguing, acutely aware not only of its own history, but of history as a cause of historical awareness. Shelley's comment in *Speculations on Morals* bears repeating: "*Those who do not nominally, yet actually, submit to the same power*. The external features of their conduct, indeed, can no more escape it, *than the clouds can escape from the stream of the wind*" (82-83; my emphasis). Far from escaping the stream of the wind, the clouds, "Angels of rain and lightening!" (18) assume the "tangled boughs" (17) of airy branches and the Maenad's hair, finally imaged in the "locks of the approaching storm" (23). The ideological power that Shelley references determines both nominal and actual action, as the wind simultaneously renders clouds as water and fire, branches and hair, even as the ambiguous two key words, "locks" and "storm," render access to their meaning seemingly unapproachable. Is the storm an apocalypse, the death of the poet or poem, the difficult and violent process of change itself, the beginning or end of the future, the final lines and images of the poem, or the critical attempt to read and interpret any of these possible meanings? My answer is

that the storm is another image for the dizzying verge of an abyss where words abandon Shelley, the place his thoughts on life led him in the eponymous fragment quoted earlier. "Those who do not *nominally*, yet *actually*, submit to the same power" anticipates the unveiling that "The words, *I*, *you*, *they* are not signs of any *actual difference* subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are *merely marks* employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. […] The words I, and you, and they are *grammatical devices invented* simply for arrangement and *totally devoid* of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them" (*On Life*, 508; my emphasis). The words or "merely marks" that Shelley refers to, palpably real in the phenomenal world, become for him upon skeptical examination placeholders describing the seemingly homogenous, stable and uniform relationship between a text and its context.

The "*I*, *you*, *they*" are marks like the historical moment that prompts the plea of the poem to become more than "merely marks" or a mere "invention," a complicated "grammatical device" determined by and always subjected to history. The poem directly addresses this same force, the wind that moves everywhere but is nowhere in particular, a history or ideology represented as a past that is *past* doing anything about. The very impossibility of changing the nature of change, Shelley's understanding of an eternal mutability that is itself impervious to any representational context is at the center of the poem's internal figurations. Both "ashes" and "sparks" (67), refuse and fuel, are the marks and signs of the poem's acceptance that only in coming to terms with what it is not, the double knowledge of both its own ignorance and that spring will break only in a future "too like thee" because winterized in its own historical moment, can the poem ignite any moral flame and be read in its own singular context. Because the speaker has

learned that we can never know beforehand the path that leads *in advance* of it, like Shelley's fire balloons and "vessels of heavenly medicine" cast into the ocean, the only chance for spring is the question that transports it from season to "sore need." The chance is the same, as I have argued, for true self-knowledge in the Shelleyan sense. Since the past is a wintry death, freedom and renewal only occur through a selflessness grounded in forgiveness. This self-forgiveness is to the individual what a history without context is for the poem itself. The potential rebirth carried within each issues forth from the spontaneous chance of abstracting meaning not from the irremediable past but the promise of a yet to be imagined future.

As a concluding remark, I want to show how a passage in Shelley's prose fragment *The Coliseum* (1818), an aborted narrative written after the first act of *Prometheus Unbound* that happens to offer us glimpses of Shelley's most compelling thoughts on ruins, death, love, and social communion, might carry forward the story of how "Mont Blanc" and "Ode to the West Wind" teach a moral lesson founded in the notion of power and love. *The Coliseum* tells the story of an old blind man and his daughter, Helen, who visit the ruins of the Roman Coliseum during the feast of the Passover. *The Coliseum* remains a neglected text in critical studies of Shelley's work, particular his mature work, although Timothy Clark published a detailed examination of it.[121]

I want to conclude this chapter by briefly commenting on the fragment's most metaphysical and moral expression, articulated by the old blind man, sitting with his daughter and a pagan stranger inside the ruins of the Coliseum. This is also the most noteworthy passage of *The Coliseum*.

[121] "Shelley's 'The Coliseum' and the Sublime." Durham University Journal 85.54 (1993): 225-235.

> The internal nature of each being is surrounded by a circle, not to be surmounted by his fellows; and it is this repulsion which constitutes the misfortune of the condition of life. But there is a circle which comprehends, as well as one which mutually excludes, all things which feel. And, with respect to man, his public and his private happiness consist in diminishing the circumference which includes those resembling himself, until they become one with him, and he with them. It is because we enter into the meditations, designs and destinies of something beyond ourselves, that the contemplation of the ruins of human power excites an elevating sense of awfulness and beauty. It is therefore that the ocean, the glacier, the cataract, the tempest, the volcano, have each a spirit which animates the extremities of our frame with tingling joy. It is therefore that the singing of birds, and the motion of leaves, the sensation of the odorous earth beneath, and the freshness of the living wind around, is sweet. And this is Love. This is the religion of eternity, whose votaries have been exiled from among the multitude of mankind. O Power!" cried the old man, lifting his sightless eyes towards the undazzling sun, "thou which interpenetrates all things, and without which this glorious world were a blind and formless chaos, Love, Author of Good, God, King, Father!" (304).[122]

When read together, the dramatic action and movement of "Mont Blanc" and "Ode to the West Wind" mirror the movements Shelley describes above. At first "Mont Blanc"

[122] Ingpen, Roger, and Walter E. Peck, eds. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Julian Edition. Volume *VI*. New York: Gordian Press, 1965.

excludes and repulses, expanding rather than diminishing the circumference of the self's moral circle. Whatever "tingling with joy" the powerful peak inspires is at first tinged also with the dread and "awful doubt" that the joy is ours alone, excluded from other human beings. But in moving through this "meditation" into "something beyond ourselves," something so distinctly beyond ourselves as the highest peak in Europe, by "surmounting" the mountain, and coming to see that by virtue of "our fellows" the circumference of the circle of self diminishes, "Ode to the West Wind" begins to take the moral shape it does, a metaphor for inspiring the spirit that animates all living things. The paradox is that the intense selfishness of the "Ode," its radical subjectivity, must become pitched to the highest possible tone until it can fall away, making many separate individuals one. The self becomes an idol to be sacrificed in service of a greater selflessness. The speaker of the "Ode" is a votary of the "religion of eternity," and *must* be exiled and extinguished as a sacrifice in the service of the ashy remains that will spark into eternity with each incantation of the poem. Finally, the fact that "Love" is apostrophized in the above speech right alongside "God, King, [and] Father" is not without its irony and oddity. But then these marks and signs become "*totally devoid* of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them" (*On Life*, 508; my emphasis) when they collapse from the outer repulsive circumference of Shelley's moral circle. It appears that Shelleyan Love diminishes them all, the self most of all. Love, like virtue, is its own reward for Shelley, and "animates" the self beyond its private and protected sphere of consciousness into something that it is not, as well as something that it is not yet. The evolution of this kind of self-transportation into the Shelleyan values of the true, good, and beautiful is earned through struggle and suffering, as I will attempt to show in

the next chapter. Further, Shelley is particularly invested in exploring how closely related are idolatrous self-contempt and Promethean self-knowledge, since the mind's commitment to either does not presuppose freedom from either.

CHAPTER THREE
Self and Love in *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*

I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.
—Herman Melville (To Hawthorne, 17 Nov. 1851)

As myths, of course, both Satan and Prometheus are torch-bearers for the human race; they reveal knowledge and help make humankind more like the gods they worship.[123] For an antinomian poet like Shelley, the self-suffering caused by each figure's rebelliousness against authority offers an enticing subject for poetry. But as Shelley makes known, Satan falls short of Prometheus's high perfection as moral hero and representative of redemptive history because he "engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry." Shelley conceives this idea as an insidious dissection of one's subconscious thoughts, calling it in preface to *The Cenci* the "anatomizing casuistry" that Beatrice elicits from us when we sympathize with her feelings and actions. Pernicious casuistry entails a kind of psychic exploration that leads to alienation, isolation, and separation from others. By bridging the abyss between what is possible and what is justifiable, it connects reason and motivation to the darkest thoughts of the mind. For Shelley it makes evil not only potentially pervasive, since the thoughts and instincts revealed by "self-anatomy" are available to anyone who goes looking for them, but also difficult to

[123] In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley differentiates Satan from Prometheus, indirectly identifying the former with Beatrice: "The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. In the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling, it engenders something worse. But Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends" (*Norton* 207). I will say more regarding "pernicious casuistry," "pernicious mistakes," and "anatomizing casuistry" later on in this chapter, but suffice it to say here that Shelley's identification of Beatrice with Satan compels reading *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* as two sides of the same face, or as Beatrice's epithet for death, "Thou double visaged shadow!" (3.1.179). To a great extent the plays tell the story of paradise lost and regained.

distinguish from rationally derived moral conduct.[124] Earl Wasserman remarks that "because reasoning is a critical examination of the processes of the intellect, its by-product is to lay bare the mind's defects and the potentialities of the 'error' of evil."[125] He goes on to quote an early letter of Shelley's in which he explains to Elizabeth Hitchener how reason can "sanction an aberration from reason."[126]

I would argue that *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* play out the consequence of Shelley's paradoxical statement "Reason sanctions an aberration from reason," not in terms of any restricted sense of logic or rationalism, but in the more extended sense of ethics and selfhood. The poetry that most closely follows from Shelley's understanding of "self-anatomy," and its opposite self-love or self-knowledge, makes accessible to us Beatrice's tragedy and Prometheus's liberatory rhetoric. The centrality to Shelley's work of the distinction between self-contempt and self-love is such that it inevitably takes into account and influences temporal concerns, as well as aesthetic and political consequences. For this reason *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* offer readers of Shelley's poetry a glimpse into the poet's idea of a Heaven and Hell.

Romanticism as a whole frequently explores methods of self-interiority that seek to integrate the individual with nature and society, or explores those methods that make impossible such integration. The Romantic poet at the very least attempts to understand, as well as problematize, these relationships, frequently from the perspective of an individual self-consciousness. The healthy mind, according to Shelley, engenders an expansive and inclusive model of selfhood, yet pernicious casuistry is a solipsistic model

[124] In *The Cenci* Orsino says "Such self-anatomy shall teach the will / Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers, / Knowing what must be thought, and may be done, / Into the depth of darkest purposes" (II.ii.110-13).
[125] *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, p. 111.
[126] Ibid. To Elizabeth Hitchener, 20 June 1811. *Letters* I; 109.

of self-idolatry. The potential for self-delusion and self-hatred, which mark the beginning of social and political orders justified and perpetuated by inequality, is omnipresent. I contend that this fact explains how *Prometheus Unbound* ends with both the fear and promise of the future, as well as how the trauma *The Cenci* expresses (and fails to express) is more disturbing than its tragic narrative. In their suggestion of original sin, the Furies of *Prometheus* are emblematic of how Shelley understands the psycho-ethical challenge of humankind:

> Thou think'st we will live through thee, one by one,
> Like animal life, and though we can obscure not
> The soul which burns within, that we will dwell
> Beside it, like a vain loud multitude
> Vexing the self-content of wisest men—
> That we will be dread thought beneath thy brain
> And foul desire round thine astonished heart
> And blood within thy labyrinthine veins
> Crawling like agony. (1.483-90)

Prometheus's response makes all the difference between the two plays: "Why, ye are thus now; / Yet am I king over myself, and rule / The torturing and conflicting throngs within / As Jove rules you when Hell grows mutinous" (491-94). I will later on in this chapter discuss how one reader of *The Cenci*, Sean Dempsey, understands Beatrice's failure to act as "king over herself" as the result of her failure to sever what he calls "passionate attachments," which, as I see it, correspond to the "dread thought" and "foul desire" the Furies describe. In this way the two plays are riven by a moral dialectic in

which, on one hand, desire is fulfilled, while on the other it is repressed. This is not what one would expect from an author whose poetry frequently celebrates the excess of imaginative inspiration, but even the most extreme transports of poetic fancy are always measured against the precepts of his ethical system.

Shelley composed *The Cenci* (1819) for a mass audience and had high hopes it would sell well, even imagining that its "presentation at Covent Garden" would garner him fame: "After it had been acted & successfully (could I hope such a thing) I would own it if I pleased, & use the celebrity it might acquire to my own purposes.—" (*Letters* II; 102). That Shelley wished to remain anonymous in relation to *The Cenci* (up until its possible success, of course) is telling. Not only does it speak to his understanding of how his reputation for political and religious radicalism might overshadow and devalue his work, but it speaks also to the nature of the play's controversial themes, the dark picture it reveals of society and human nature, psyche and history. Shelley explored incest as a theme in *Laon and Cythna* also, where it was likewise subjected to a censor's rebuke, yet there it functioned as an ideal representation of pure love rather than the basest expression of paternal hate. The world Shelley imagines in *The Cenci* is no place for "beautiful idealisms of moral excellence."[127] Justice and morality are presented as arbitrary placeholders capable of easy manipulation in the hands of self-serving men and women who serve perverse notions of God, state, and father. This is not only because Shelley's tragedy lacks classical catharsis, or that its central and unspoken act is incestuous rape (and Beatrice's response to it), but also because it reflects a strain in Shelley's thought that is deeply committed both to progressive and radical political

[127] Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*. *Norton*, 209.

change. Such a notion of change, I hope to demonstrate, is bound to the ideas of imagination and poetry that Shelley outlines in *A Defence of Poetry*.

Shelley makes perfectly clear in the drama's preface why Beatrice Cenci is a tragic figure. He writes that the highest aim of drama "is the teaching of the human heart […] knowledge of itself" (*Norton* 142). Beatrice's heart is unreceptive to this knowledge, that "[r]evenge, retaliation, atonement are pernicious mistakes," in part because her father, by raping her, rips out her heart (142). Count Cenci's rape of Beatrice and her retaliatory parricide challenge the audience's expectation of cathartic experience, as neither character learns the cause of their desires or sufferings. Those who rule *The Cenci's* social, political, and religious institutions are perverse figures of the principles and laws they represent and profess. "[T]his black guilty world […] where none are true" enunciates the problem. Insofar as the oppressed continue to seek in the conventional avenues of justice their deliverance, the world remains too great a prison (5.3.102 and 68). Escaping its immurement, justifying a coherently just system of order and truth within it, and adopting a well-armed defensive posture against it, are the principal themes the play dramatizes, yet the tragedy is that Satanic impulses triumph over Promethean ones.

As several critics have noted, the drama ends in paralytic stasis because Beatrice maintains her innocence in spite of her guilt and Count Cenci descends into a rapacious parody of a psychotic god. [128] This irresolution resists the anagnorisis of classical tragedy,

[128] Sean Dempsey argues that the play presents the audience with an "impossible ordeal" in order to show them a new path toward liberal reform, one that is necessary in the political climate of 1819 where a perpetual state of exception and emergency is maintained in which order is founded on the notion that the "law is the law." He argues that "Beatrice's delusional refusal to take responsibility for her actions and her stubborn unwillingness to break from a social framework that had proven false is presented as a challenge to the audience's own refusal to wake up from the subliminal impulse that keeps them enslaved to the

the moment the hero discovers their true character, which leads to the greater recognition that because freedom is illusory it must be subordinated to anterior or external systems of power, such as those expressed by fate.[129] Yet the exceptional status of *The Cenci* as tragedy stems from the way it refuses the audience this debilitating knowledge because it serves no radical political aim.

Shelley intended the work as a stage play, a self-evident but sometimes unmentioned fact when it is read alongside *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), the fourth act of which Shelley wrote immediately after *The Cenci*. In *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1820), begun a few months after completing *The Cenci*, Shelley attacked the "most fallacious" reasons nations cite for contracting and increasing public debts. He concludes that the state's usual argument of exigency never holds true because the "history of nations presents us with a succession of extraordinary emergencies; their existence is perpetually threatened by new and unexpected combinations and developments of foreign or internal force" (*Major Works* 661).

In other words, *The Cenci* is an exceptional work for an exceptional time, a period in which the deeper tragedy is that each moment of individual freedom exposes itself to the risk of an "extraordinary emergency" and "perpetual threat," rendering freedom only a negative escape of "the necessity of circumstance and opinion" (Preface 141). For individuals living under a strict social hierarchy where authority achieves legitimization from violence and fraud, where torture is the test of truth and knowledge of the right becomes ignorance of the real, the struggle against suffering and despair,

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matrix of a discredited social framework" (882). "The Cenci: Tragedy in a Secular Age." *ELH* 79.4 (Winter 2012).

[129] In the section devoted to the parts of plot, Aristotle discusses reversals, recognitions and sufferings. Anagnorisis is a recognition that marks a "change from ignorance to knowledge […] in addition misfortune and good fortune will come about in the case of such events." *Poetics*. Trans. Richard Janko. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987. p.14.

fatalism and moral compromise, simultaneously proceeds from and moves toward the "sad reality" that emanates from any ostensible source of love or order (Preface 140). [130]

In other words, *The Cenci's* reality is one in which, to quote James Rieger, "the whole creation is a syphilitic chancre and the god of this world (Shelley argues from design) a witty degenerate" (*The Mutiny Within*, 112). Indeed, there is an indefinite yet grotesque quality to the way Shelley presents Count Cenci's absolute evil that resists interpretation; his character seems to lack conceivable human agency, desire or motivation. Earl Wasserman explains Cenci's overwhelming evil as the result of Shelley's Manichaean system: "Like God, he is the fatherless father, the uncaused cause, the point behind which succession cannot be palpably traced" (*Critical Reading*, 87). But just as Prometheus forgives and rejuvenates the world spirit, Cenci chooses vengeance and casts the excruciating pain of his age and appetite into all that surrounds him: "I do not feel as if I were a man, / But like a fiend appointed to chastise / The offenses of some unremembered world" (4.1.160-62).

Perhaps the clear associations Shelley emphasizes of God with Tyrant/Cenci/Father accounts for his evil, yet the Count remains in many ways a figure both inside and outside the drama itself, very much like Shelley describes Italy's Catholicism: "interwoven with the whole fabric of life," yet "never a [moral] check" (Preface 143). The amalgamation of Catholicism (religion generally) with the forces of ideology and superstition into the sensual and intellectual fabric of life prevents an imaginative overcoming of them through love. I contend that if *Prometheus Unbound*

[130] The drama suggests that violence and fraud are constitutive of the establishment of all law. There is no escape from either church or state, ideology or force, except in the individual's imaginative relation toward such oppressive and pervasive institutions. The irony of Godwin's insistence on private judgement and dispassionate reason, that they remain the guiding principles of the inviolable human mind, an insistence from which Shelley never wavered, is that it requires the possibility of a space of perpetual separation and exclusion from others, no matter how benevolent or just the ideals or realities of the community.

might alter, at the very least awaken, the imaginative and moral perceptibility of an elite class of readers, then *The Cenci* might clear a path for an elite class of citizen-subjects to politically and morally navigate, by mimetically demonstrating hope in hell (or England in 1819). The play offers to the audience a way to rebel against the seemingly insurmountable power of God, state and the father, which is to say the drama might inspire its audience to say 'no' to the pervasive ideological influences of a ruling order that attempts to elicit a submissive 'yes.' It reduces reason to its reductio ad absurdum, in an attempt to show that the Enlightenment dream of reason, when abandoned by the imagination and absorbed into a "calculating principle" isolated from Poetry, produces monstrous nightmares. As Shelley says in the play's dedication to Leigh Hunt:

> Those writings which I have hitherto published, have been little else than visions which impersonate my own apprehensions of the beautiful and the just. I can also perceive in them the literary defects incidental to youth and impatience; they are dreams of what ought to be, or may be. The drama which I now present to you is a sad reality. I lay aside the presumptuous attitude of an instructor, and am content to paint, with such colours as my own heart furnishes, that which has been. (*Norton* 140).

The most significant of "[t]hose writings" to which Shelley refers, *Queen Mab*, *Alastor*, and *Laon and Cythna*, are called "visions which impersonate." Each not only imagines the ideal society, poet, or politics, but also plays a part in the drama of what is described in *The Coliseum* as a "circle which comprehends […] all things that feel" (Ingpen & Peck 304). The well-lived poetic life "consist[s] in diminishing the circumference which includes those resembling himself, until they become one with him, and he with them"

(304). This centripetal movement toward the annihilation of all difference between self and other entails a paradoxical movement outside and beyond the self. The expansive self, uninhibited by utilitarian desires, overleaps its own selfish horizon of consciousness in order to sympathize with not only the feelings of others but also their very existence.

According to Shelley, we cannot love until we become estranged from ourselves; we cannot become one with another until we have altered our perspective in such a way that we perceive our own experience beyond what has passed. We cannot love until we perceive our perspective and its perceptions, until we become who we are not. We cannot have faith in worldly institutions until, as Shelley explains of Italian Catholicism, we have a "check" on "passion," "persuasion," "excuse[s]," and "refuge[s]," or all those methods of doctrinal and political control that contemporary ideological critiques seek to expose. The tragedy lays bare the consequence of appealing to the torturer for relief from the appeal, the consequence of intellectually and morally resigning oneself to historical determinism, where effective and insidious enslavements often occur under the guise of progress and reform. As Sean Dempsey argues in his study of *The Cenci*:

> Such tautological assumptions [that the Law is *the Law*][131] can only be supported by a passionate attachment to the truth of this proposition, an attachment inculcated in subjects through the threat of violence as well as through subtler forms of persuasion. The challenge political reform faces is that such passionate attachments are largely subliminal and endure even

[131] Dempsey's "tautological enunciation" is drawn from Eric Santer's reading of Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996, 10.

> after the particular arrangements of a given institutional order are overthrown. (893)[132]

Dempsey makes a convincing argument for the affective bond that "passionate attachments" play in Shelley's claim that beliefs are not acts of volition. He argues that *The Cenci* serves to warn the audience that passionate attachments prevent us from thinking and acting as free individuals capable of rational judgment. Only "a skeptical divestment from passionate attachment" will properly arm someone against the material and moral oppression of an authoritative order grounded in violence and fraud (893). This is because removing a blinding passion, reflected in and originating from the very corrupt institutions under which it suffers and to which it petitions redress, strikes at the spirit rather than merely the form of evil. As Shelley says in *A Philosophical View of Reform*:

> The Revolution in France overthrew the hierarchy, the aristocracy, and the monarchy, and the whole of that peculiarly insolent and oppressive system on which they were based. But as it only partially extinguished those passions which are the spirit of these forms a reaction took place which has restored in a certain limited degree the old system—in a degree, indeed, exceedingly limited, and stripped of all its ancient terrors. (645)

"Extinguishing" the passions, the essential props of oppressors as well as fuel for the oppressed, marks the beginning of love. These are not simply the healthy passions of an imaginative mind, however. Extinguishing love does not of course proliferate love. But what requires suppression is the echo-chamber of historical grievance, no matter how atrocious, as Shelley's play tries to demonstrate. Beatrice's fall entails succumbing to an overwhelming passion, vengeance, which Shelley describes in *Peter Bell the Third*

[132] "The Cenci: Tragedy in a Secular Age." *ELH* 79.4 (Winter 2012).

(1819) as "that weed / From which the worms that it doth feed / Squeeze less than they before possessed" (3.239-41). The image evokes the snuffing out of the candle wick which figures so prominently in Giacomo's (Count Cenci's son) third act monologue, which likewise begins with man as worm: "What! can the everlasting elements / Feel with a worm like man?" (3.2.2-3). Giacomo continues, ironically apostrophizing the lamp in a scene which symbolizes moral darkness, in which he "still [doubts] if that deed [murdering Cenci] / Be just which is most necessary" (3.2.7-8).[133] The challenge of *The Cenci's* world and the one it reflects is overcoming the gap between justice and necessity, the future and present, poetry and history which, as I will later discuss, must first begin with the intentional opening of the gap between ourselves and community. At this point in the play, however, when the first attempt on Cenci's life is uncertain, Giacomo is subsumed into a body and spirit completely out of his control. He is unable to abstract himself from the source of his own history. He is unable to differentiate himself from it, which is the desired aim of the system of authority that Cenci embodies:

> O,
>
> Thou unreplenished lamp! whose narrow fire
>
> Is shaken by the wind, and on whose edge
>
> Devouring darkness hovers! Thou small flame,

[133] Shelley uses identical language when discussing the failed French Revolution in *A Philosophical View of Reform*: "If a just and necessary revolution could have been accomplished with as little expense of happiness and order in a country governed by despotic as [in] one governed by free laws, equal liberty and justice would lose their chief recommendations, and tyranny be divested of its most revolting attributes. Tyranny entrenches itself within the existing interests of that great mass of the most refined citizens of a nation and says, 'If you dare trample upon these, be free.' Though this terrible condition shall not be evaded, the world is no longer in a temper to decline the challenge" (*Major Works* 644). Tyranny (ideology) conditions those who would best be served by its eradication, or those who would best govern in its absence, to desire the good only at the expense of their "happiness and order." Thus freedom becomes not an ideal end but a means to end their "existing interests." The world, in contrast to "the most refined citizens of a nation," is already trampled upon by the existing interests of its rulers, and will accept the challenge. And more blood will spill, Shelley implies, and history attests.

Which, as a dying pulse rises and falls,
Still flickerest up and down, how very soon,
Did I not feed thee, wouldst thou fail and be
As thou hadst never been! So wastes and sinks
Even now, perhaps, the life that kindles mine:
But that no power can fill with vital oil
That broken lamp of flesh. Ha! 'tis the blood
Which fed these veins that ebbs till all is cold:
It is the form that moulded mine that sinks
Into the white and yellow spasms of death:
It is the soul by which mine was arrayed
In God's immortal likeness which now stands
Naked before Heaven's judgement seat! (3.2.8-23)

Giacomo's speech reveals several interrelated threads of repression operating in *The Cenci*, those that are maintained by the powers that rule the individual's life and beliefs. While Shelley presents these forms of oppression as originating outside the individual, he also suggests that they persist and expand by virtue of the individual's erroneous responses toward them, acts of rebellion which are themselves legitimized only by force and passion. They are representations of how pernicious casuistry justifies moral error.

Oppressor and oppressed perform their roles in *The Cenci* within the boundaries of a single enclosed system, which cannot lend itself to a love that might burst beyond its own phenomenal sphere of reality into what it is not. Giacomo finally arrives at these very terms: "We / Are now no more, as once, parent and child, / But man to man: the

oppressor to the oppressed" (3.1.282-84). And as if to further awaken the audience to the urgent social and political contest that Beatrice's rebellion dramatizes, that not only her and Giacomo's liberty and dignity are at stake, but also their own, she universalizes the opposing forces: "and what a tyrant thou art, / And what slaves these; and what a world we make, / The oppressor and the oppressed" (5.3.73-75). [134] Giacomo's paranoid expression of grief for desiring and then conspiring to murder his father, and the realization that the event might be occurring at this very moment, begins with his apostrophe to light, morphs into a blurring of his father's existence with his own, and ends with God because he feels if not fully comprehends that even parricide will not free him from the immanent "brokenness" of his existence and the cultural and political institutions determining it. Giacomo drowns in a sea of ideological sensations, while helplessly recognizing the absence of an alternative. "[N]o power can fill with vital oil / That broken lamp of flesh," he says, since the lamp of flesh furnishes the sole source of illumination in this world, conceived as every category of existence in "blood," "form" and "soul." Merging into an unholy trinity of nature, art and spirit, the image cluster evokes its Promethean antithesis in Matthew: "Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved" (9:17). As I have argued, the free individual within Shelley's ethical system must reevaluate past traditions, customs, beliefs, and behaviors in order to preserve the future and enter freely into the future, to pre-serve that which has not yet arrived, to serve before that which will not requiring serving after.

[134] "Thou" refers to the Judge at the show trial of Marzio, Lucretia, Giacomo, and Beatrice, yet can also be read as a significantly all-encompassing name for the world's law.

Of course, accomplishing this radical renewal is not unlike effecting a reversal of time itself, "making the earth grow young again."[135] Yet the weight of history and the human passions it elicits torment Giacomo and Beatrice alike, embodied in the cruelly old Cenci, who "Masked in grey hairs and wrinkles" haunts Beatrice even in death. And the old pope himself, likewise repelled by the young, declares that

> Parricide grows so rife
> That soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young
> Will strangle us all, dozing in our chairs,
> Authority, and power, and hoary hair
> Are grown crimes capital. (5.4.20-24)

It is, in fact, the age-old, Old Testament response of Giacomo and Beatrice to these aging representations of an ancient world order that renders them unable to differentiate themselves from the falsity of its claims to power. The response to illegitimate power and dogma must originate from beyond the mental and emotional concepts determined by them. For this reason and unable to differentiate his identity in the present from any possible future identity, Giacomo cannot "[arrive] at the exercise of the highest powers to be attained by man" (*A Philosophical View of Reform*, 644). On the one hand, Giacomo clearly refers both to the lamp's diminishing fuel and the body's finitude when he exclaims, "how very soon, / Did I not feed thee, wouldst thou fail and be / As thou hadst never been!"; on the other, however, this admission becomes a self-directed charge of sanctioning the terms of life which both his creators, Cenci and God, bequeathed to him. The final three lines of Giacomo's speech quoted above, "It is the soul by which mine was arrayed / In God's immortal likeness which now stands / Naked before Heaven's

[135] *The Sensitive Plant* (1820). *Major Works*, 207.

judgement seat!" reveal the force with which he identifies his notion of self with external causes.

The same confusion arrests Beatrice's freedom of conscience to such a degree that she never fully rejects God nor truly accepts that He permits evil. At the beginning of the second act she bewails, "Thou, great God, / Whose image upon earth a father is, / Dost thou indeed abandon me!" (2.1.16-18). And later Cardinal Camillo, in conversation with Giacomo, remains hesitant that a petition to the papacy will succeed because, as he says, the pope "holds it of most dangerous example / In aught to weaken the paternal power, / Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own" (2.2.54-56). By the play's end, however, Beatrice feels the terrible consequence behind the absence of difference between God, Father, and Church, and momentarily understands her fate as a whimsical and nihilistic expression of the sadistic powers that rule the sublunary world, collapsing of course in the image of her father. She wonders:

> If there should be
> No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world;
> The wide, grey lampless, deep, unpeopled world!
> If all things then should be…my father's spirt […]. (5.4.57-60)

And she declares that "No difference has been made by God or man, / Or *any power moulding my wretched lot*, / 'Twixt good or evil, as regarded me" (5.4.82-84; my emphasis). Beatrice's words here tell the story of Promethean self-contempt; they are the utterances of one who has lost all human agency. Shelley cites institutions of power as the cause of this failure to think and act freely and beneficently. Explaining the cruelty and vengeance of the oppressed French people during and after the French Revolution, he

argues: “Their institutions made them what they were. Slavery and superstition, contumely and the tame endurance of contumely, and the habits engendered from generation to generation out of this transmitted inheritance of wrong, creating this thing which has extinguished what has been called *the likeness of God in man*” (*A Philosophical View of Reform*, 645; my emphasis). The statement evokes both the many references to extinguished light in *The Cenci* (in clear opposition to Promethean fire) and the last lines of Giacomo’s speech, “It is the soul by which mine was arrayed / In God’s immortal likeness which now stands / Naked before Heaven’s judgement seat!” (3.2.21-23). Shelley’s diagnosis of the evils of the Revolution and Reign of Terror does not absolve the victims of oppressive authority from their retaliatory vengeance but identifies its origin in a way that suggests genetic inheritance or blind acceptance of original sin.

If evil institutions make individuals evil, then simply casting out the institutions will promote individual virtue and eventualize societal perfection. This idea is reminiscent of Mary Shelley’s note to *Prometheus Unbound* in which she says of her husband that “[t]he prominent feature of Shelley’s theory of the destiny of the human species was, that evil is not inherent in the system of the creation, but an accident that might be expelled […] Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none” (Ingpen & Peck *II*; 269). Clearly *The Cenci* suggests otherwise, that merely willing something to happen is not enough and can, moreover, make the relationship between the person willing and the desired aim more destructive. The imperial will of man, as Shelley once identified it, is just as capable of creating as toppling empires. Thus, willing both that the government hold Cenci accountable for his

crimes and that he should be murdered for them makes Beatrice only more tragic and enmeshed in her own tortured attempts at justifying her condition.

Mark Canuel argues that the drama makes Beatrice into a "victim whose religious temperament and moral integrity have been drained of all self-determining authority" (256).[136] Beatrice's lack of agency is everywhere present in a play where all efforts at self-directed will are reflected back in the mirror images of authority which originate them and by which they are adjudicated. "Poetry is not like the reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will," Shelley argues in *A Defence*. And because, as Shelley insists, "A man cannot say, 'I *will* compose poetry,"' Beatrice will never be able to elicit justice or love from a world that anatomizes what is right and wrong, particularly since her own actions derive their legitimacy from the same methodology (*Norton* 531; my emphasis). And for Shelley principles of good and evil, right and wrong, are not so easily eradicated and instantiated, as Terence Hoagwood reminds us: "As in his treatment of metaphysical systems, Shelley does not polarize right from wrong, good from evil […] Shelley places political institutions, like metaphysical systems, within their determining contexts, but he detects and celebrates a progressive evolution" (*Skepticism and Ideology*, 180). Beatrice is likewise placed within her "determining context" and partly what keeps her there as a tragic figure bound to it is her "determination of will" combined with her reason, her belief that her actions are morally and divinely sanctioned (*Defence of Poetry*, 531).

There is no "progressive evolution" in *The Cenci* from idolatrous will into Promethean will because there is no room in its storehouse of "anatomizing casuistry" for poetry to inhabit, for the imagination either to generate new mental contexts and fields of

[136] *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing: 190-1830*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002.

vision or absorb already existing ones into itself. Poetry increases the powers of the imagination "by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food" (*Defence*, 517). Poetry creates the right kind of desire, a desire for desire rather than a desire for things, objects, or mere representations of objects and things, and poetry therefore opens the door from rational stagnancy and literalism into a space of both attraction, assimilation and absorption, as well as "new intervals and interstices"; it opens the door into a space for love, free from "anatomizing casuistry," which in *The Cenci* translates into the cruel prison of the body and mind dissecting itself. Shelley, in fact, employs both "anatomizing" and "casuistry" in *On the Devil, and Devils* (1820), a piece which can be read as a parodic critique of the moral principles dramatized in *The Cenci*.

> If the Devil takes but half the pleasure in tormenting a sinner which God does, who took the trouble to create him, and then to *invent a system of casuistry by which he might excuse himself* for devoting him to external torment, this reward must be considerable. (Ingpen & Peck 94; my emphasis).
>
> ---
>
> But to tempt mankind to incur everlasting damnation, must, on the part of God, and even on the part of the Devil, arise from that very disinterested love of tormenting and annoying, which is seldom observed on earth except from the very old…The thing that comes nearest to it is a troop of idle dirty boys baiting a cat; cooking, skinning eels, and boiling lobsters

> alive, and bleeding calves, and whipping pigs to death; *naturalists anatomizing dogs alive, (a dog has as good a right and a better excuse for anatomizing a naturalist,)* are nothing compared to God and the Devil judging, damning, and then tormenting the soul of a miserable sinner. (Ingpen & Peck 95; my emphasis).

Casuistry is the system which provides the excuse for dissecting dogs alive, and is itself a system of dissection, an effective means for applying, transmitting and perpetuating evil. In the first passage quoted above, God devotes man to "external torment," which in the context of *The Cenci* recalls the relationship of "anatomizing casuistry" to the sublunary body, the letter of the law generally, and to what Shelley calls in the *Defence* the "calculating faculty," "process," or "principle."

This principle is skeletal in nature, stripped of any "vital alchemy" or "electric life," as the word "anatomies" is employed in *Prometheus Unbound*: "The anatomies of unknown winged things" (4.303). In the *Defence* Shelley argues that the

> cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature. *The body has then become too unwieldy for that which animates it*. (531; my emphasis)

As a tragedy, *The Cenci* is animated by bodies that are impelled according to the calculating principle. Tortured and abused, they continually operate as prisons "to the internal laws of human nature," everywhere representing the excess of a hoard, exceeding "the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature," for

the law of the body is external and exists within the economy of reason where it *is* possible, contrary to Shelley's claim in the preface, for "one person to be truly dishonoured by the act of another" (142). It is I think impossible for readers of the play to deny that Beatrice has been truly dishonored by her father—this constitutes part of the "sad reality" Shelley shows us—, yet it is much easier to deny that Beatrice is in any way morally culpable either for her actions or the terrible results that befall others because of them. She inherits the evil of her father's casuistry, responding to it in the same mode, justifying and excusing, believing in and adhering to the same theological system in which that "very disinterested love of tormenting and annoying" absolves naturalists who anatomize dogs alive. She responds, in other words, not according to the "internal laws of human nature," but according to those external ones invented and maintained by priests, patriarchs, and politicians. Once again, she is representative of a model of selfhood motivated only by what it has experienced, not by what it *may* experience by going outside of itself.

According to Sean Dempsey, Shelley offers a middle option for navigating this world of false claims to man and God's laws in the figure of Orsino, the manipulative and cosmopolitan prelate who pressures both Beatrice and Giacomo to commit murder. Something of a manipulative con artist, one who has often been compared to Iago, Orsino escapes capture and punishment, and after leaving Giacomo hapless and conscience-stricken to be arrested by the authorities, vanishes from the play like a thief in the night.[137] In act two Orsino soliloquizes:

[137] Sean Dempsey argues that "Within Benjamin's political anthropology of the *Trauerspiel* the plotter (*der Intrigant*) is the third that emerges from the cleaving of sovereignty into tyrant and martyr." The former is of course Cenci himself and the latter is Beatrice. "The Cenci: Tragedy in a Secular Age." *ELH* 79.4 (Winter 2012). p. 894.

It fortunately serves my close designs

That ‘tis a trick of this same family

To analyse their own and other minds.

Such self-anatomy shall teach the will

Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers,

Knowing what must be thought, and may be done,

Into the depths of darkest purpose […]. (2.2.107-13)

The intellectual and psychological process that Orsino describes is an inversion of the imaginative Promethean process which begins with patience and endurance and ends with forgiveness and love. Rather than awakening a vacancy within the self, a space for natures not our own to inhabit and within which the self might unite with its perfect ideal projection, “self-anatomy” is the trick which “tempts our powers.” It leads not only to “depths of darkest purpose” but also to “the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart” (Preface 141). In Shelley’s moral universe, no application of evil will ever redound good, no amount of self-knowledge, when separated from selflessness, will ever inspire benevolent power. Orsino escapes the tragedy of *The Cenci* to be forever followed by a worse one, himself: “Oh, I fear / That what is past will never let me rest! […] But if I am mistaken, where shall I / Find the disguise to hide me from myself” (5.2.93-94 and 102-103). Orsino first manipulates, then invokes and laments, much like Jupiter does in *Prometheus Unbound*, the very power which reminds him that human desire starves itself when it hungers only for power. Even his name, Or/sin/O! evokes the fateful error of availing oneself to reason’s endless justifications and alternatives.

The outcome of Orsino's middle way between tyranny and revenge, his clever and cynical response to the very modern world with which he engages is self-contempt; it is his eulogy for what could have been, but for the Demogorgon-like power he chastises:

> I thought to act a solemn comedy
> Upon the painted scene of this new world,
> And to attain my own peculiar ends
> By some such plot of mingled good and ill
> As others weave; but there arose a Power
> Which graspt and snapped the threads of my device
> And turned it to a net of ruin…Ha! (5.2.77-83)[138]

In Shelley's conception of virtue, Orsino's flaw is that he is a perfect casuist, since he "mingled good and ill" to "attain [his] own peculiar ends." Orsino's wish to "act a solemn comedy / Upon the painted scene of this new world" reveals both his insincerity and the world's, that justice, law, tradition and culture are masks designed to hide motives of oppression and cruelty. Yet what is not a mask is the power that breaks through Orsino's "solemn comedy" as tragedy, as an indifferent oppressor of oppression and human desire. Earlier in the play he spelled out a method for success in a fallen world, which involved the placation of this power, this "dark spirt":

> I have such foresight as assures success:
> Some unbeheld divinity doth ever,
> When dread events are near, stir up men's minds
> To black suggestions; and he prospers best,

[138] Demogorgon explains the cause of Orsino's ruin quite clearly in *Prometheus Unbound*: "All spirits are enslaved which serve things evil" (2.4.110).

Not who becomes the instrument of ill,

But who can flatter the dark spirit, that makes

Its empire and its prey of other hearts

Till it become his slave…as I will do. (2.2.154-161)

The passage evokes evil incarnate, supplication to the devil, and, as "unbeheld divinity," both Shelley's belief that God and the Devil represent a "personification of the struggle which we experience within ourselves" and that there is a transcendent principle of evil the cause of which, like the cause of mind or the cause of transcendent benevolence and good, is unknowable to human understanding—as Demogorgon says in *Prometheus Unbound*, "the deep truth is imageless" (2.4.116). [139] Orsino's description for achieving power in this "new world" relies on the moral perversions of "self-anatomy" rather than the moral truths of "self-knowledge," the aim of tragedy which Shelley expressed in the preface: "the teaching of the human heart […] knowledge of itself" (*Norton* 142). "Self-anatomy" generates self-deceit and eventual self-contempt since it appeals to slavery rather than freedom; and it is self-contempt which opens the door for evil to enter.

As Orsino ironically soliloquizes, "I have such foresight," the error of his ignorance becomes clear, particularly since in the next line we read "unbeheld divinity." Orsino's vision extends only as far as his own desires. He sees, like Beatrice but for different reasons, unimaginatively. He and Beatrice likewise do not understand that, as James Chandler argues is one of Shelley's theatrical aims in *The Cenci*, they are "agents largely determined by the historical situation in which each appears" (*England in 1819*, 310). Chandler argues that Shelley intends to extend this recognition to the audience, that without it freedom from casuistry and self-anatomy remain a struggle. In the absence of

[139] *On the Devil, and Devils*. Ingpen & Peck. p. 87.

such a recognition, “black suggestions” substitute more ideal and imaginative responses to evil acts. These “black suggestions” constitute the ignorance and error of Beatrice’s parricidal motives and manifest themselves in the imagery of the play.

One of *The Cenci’s* reoccurring images involves darkness overcoming light, the extinguishing not of the passions but life itself, an overall sense of dimness, obfuscation and blindness. And it is through the lucid lens of Beatrice’s relentless clarity of and commitment to the justness of her parricidal act that we experience the drama unfold under the perverse and illusory quality of a nightmare. At the beginning of the third act (the rape occurs off stage in between the second and third act), Beatrice incarnates this quality that permeates the world of *The Cenci* like a flesh-eating bacteria does its host:

> There creeps
> A clinging, black, contaminating mist
> About me…’tis substantial, heavy, thick,
> I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
> My fingers and my limbs to one another,
> And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
> My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
> The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life! (3.1.16-23)

Beatrice most obviously refers to the inheritance of her father’s own pollution and poison, the exact nature of which is more ambiguous. On the one hand, the “mist” is seminal, and Beatrice finds in abstraction and metaphor the traumatic event that she cannot distinctly name; on the other, this passage functions literally in order to name the degradation and corruption of the body itself—the problem of flesh is that it is literal and

can destroy the spirit. In *Speculations on Morals* Shelley condemns "[a] common sophism, which, like many others, depends on the abuse of a metaphorical expression to a literal purpose" (Ingpen & Peck; *VII*, 74). The sophism is that duty entails obligation rather than disinterested value, and within the putrid picture Beatrice paints above an unbreakable connection between herself and her father emerges, not of any voluntary duty on her part but undoubtedly the consequence of obligation. And it is Beatrice's refusal to disavow and distinguish God as Father from Cenci as father that makes her prolonged suffering more tragic.

The relationship between duty and obligation, which Shelley called the philosophy of slavery and superstition, rests on the literal letter of the law, which is where evil is located in *The Cenci*, and which is why it destroys Beatrice's "inmost spirit of life." The metaphorical transfer of evil into Beatrice by her father, which Cenci hopes will persist after his death if Beatrice conceives, so strongly influences Beatrice's thinking and behavior ("for it glues / her fingers and her limbs together") that it resembles and anticipates Giacomo's self-described ideological imprisonment in the next scene, where he laments, "[N]o power can fill with vital oil / That broken lamp of flesh" (3.2.32-33) As such, the "contaminating mist" Beatrice describes should also be understood as an ideological lens through which she must now understand herself and the world. Raped by her father, she is now marked, and, in a way initiated, into a system of political and moral principles based not upon freedom and self-knowledge but slavery and self-anatomy, power and self-contempt. The same ideological lens alters the perspective of the audience, who with "restless and anatomizing casuistry […] seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification" (Preface

142). The lifting of this lens, which grants to the human heart the possibility of knowledge of itself (Preface), is the political and moral aim of the drama. Reaching this aim requires passing through Cenci's heart, whose restless and paranoid attempts at conquering self and world, lie at the center of the play. In *The Cenci* moral freedom is found not merely by flipping Beatrice's response to her father's immoral and over-reaching appetites on its side to discover another Prometheus, but by accounting for the nature and cause of those immoral and over-reaching appetites, which is to say by examining an aesthetics without ethics.[140]

Cenci's declaration of his self-destructive desire for his daughter, "The act I think shall soon extinguish all / For me" (2.1.188-89), expresses his overall design to become a black hole from which not even the future can escape the ruins he hopes to establish:

> Beatrice shall, if there be skill in hate
> Die in despair, blaspheming: to Bernardo [Cenci's son],
> He is so innocent, I will bequeath
> The memory of these deeds, and make his youth
> The sepulchre of hope, where evil thoughts
> Shall grow like weeds on a neglected tomb.
> When all is done, out in the wide Campagna,
> I will pile up my silver and my gold;
> My costly robes, paintings and tapestries;
> My parchments and all records of my wealth,
> And make a bonfire in my joy, and leave
> Of my possessions nothing but my name;

[140] Shelley would have agreed with Pascal that we can only know God by knowing our own iniquities.

Which shall be an inheritance to strip

Its wearer bare as infamy. That done,

My soul, which is a scourge, will I resign

Into the hands of him who wielded it;

Be it for its own punishment or theirs,

He will not ask it of me till the lash

Be broken in its last and deepest wound;

Until its hate be all inflicted. (4.1.49-68)

Count Cenci is suicidal in the sense that his annihilation cannot be differentiated from his apotheosis, because both are achieved at the extremes of a perverse regard for self, the moral limits of which Shelley abhorred. Cenci comprises and is consonant with excess, aesthetic and political. As Curran recognizes, "Cenci embodies the disease of the Romantic spirit" and "[i]n Cenci Shelley explores the dangerous solipsism of Romantic values, perverted if pursued to their extreme" (75).[141] Like Stuart Curran, Marc Redfield observes the close associations of Cenci to the Romantic poet. He notes how "[r]eaders have often observed that Count Cenci is a dark parody of the artist. He tells stories, manipulates the action, and fathers Beatrice's parricidal plot [it is Cenci rather than Beatrice who first fantasizes parricide]" (169).[142]

Certainly the deliriously precise yet sublimely absorptive above-quoted speech echoes Prospero's farewell to his powers and spells, to the extent of becoming its moral obverse. Yet rather than breaking his staff and drowning his book in acts of humility; rather than asking from the audience forgiveness, as Prospero finally does, Cenci aims

[141] *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1970.
[142] *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.

not to please but petrify, not to indulge but inflict. In a perfectly enmeshed resemblance to Shelley's attack in *Speculations on Morals* of "the abuse of a metaphorical expression to a literal purpose," Cenci carries his soul as Prospero carries his staff, yet the spirit becomes a literal "scourge" and "lash" that abuses the flesh, "broken in its last and deepest wound." The "broken lamp of flesh," which earlier in the play sets Giacomo despairing, is Cenci's weapon against any threat to his simultaneous quest for plenitude and vacancy.

Curran rightly argues that Cenci's crime against his daughter, because it sets in motion the total ruin of his family, becomes, as a symbol of his potency, "his greatest work of art" (79). Beatrice responds to this perverse "work of art" with an understandable passion for vengeance. She responds unimaginatively, in other words. She is guided by her intense examination of the almost imperceptible line between what right and wrong, virtue and vice; it is her intense examination and self-anatomy that, in part, creates the imperceptible line between good and evil. The difference is very slight between how she arrives at "Many might doubt there were a God above / Who sees and permits evil, and so die: / That faith no agony shall obscure in me" immediately after she considers killing her father, and "I have prayed/ To God, and I have talked with my own heart, / And have unravelled my entangled will, / And have at length determined what is right" (3.1.100-02 and 218-21). The difference is slight but severe, since she does not know what is right, she only determines it through the lens of her prayer to the same deity whose law she confuses with her father's. She feels her actions are justified, since she feels the overwhelming reflex of vengeance, reasoning herself back to her first passionate

response, an image of spilling her father's blood, which she imaginatively suppressed. She is fixated on the past, which, as Cythna revealed to the mariners, is death.

In our world outside this play and outside Shelley's rigorous moral compass, I hope that we would recoil at the suggestion that Beatrice should, in a sense, get over the past. But I surmise the moral advice being offered is less reckless than that. I think it involves the very difficult process of self-forgiveness combined with the faith that actions motivated by past suffering seem often to mirror and multiply the source of this suffering. It is not an easy faith to acquire, since every natural tendency we possess envisions the future through the lens of the past. But then the pain and tragedy of this play attests to the challenge. And, after all, the singular person who meets this challenge head on is no person at all, but a Titan.

One lesson derived from this conclusion that I would argue Beatrice teaches the audience is that we must learn how not to mimic the hatred that surrounds us in order to claim our freedom, political or otherwise. This is a somewhat disturbing and counterintuitive reading of Shelley's radicalism, since it entails a suppression of feeling. Yet it is just this sort of intentional self-repression, as well as regulation of the beliefs guiding and inuring one's "pernicious mistakes" that we see in Shelley's conception of love. As he says in the *Defence of Poetry*: "The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (*Norton* 517). Love becomes in its eponymous fragment that moment "when we find within our thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken […]" (*On Love*, 503). Discovering access to this void is as important as our point of departure from it, and usually much more painful.

Prometheus Unbound and the Necessity of Hope's Wreck

The problem was not an easy one. We are to start with the soul chained, aged, suffering; and we are to end with the soul free, rejuvenated, and blessed. The selection of the Prometheus story (a selection which seems obvious only because we did not have to make it) is the first step to the solution. *But nearly everything has still to be done*.

—C. S. Lewis

Frequently regarded as one of the great long poems of the nineteenth century, as well as Shelley's most ardent articulation and representation of a radical politics based on love, *Prometheus Unbound* presents the reader and critic with innumerable interpretive problems. One might expect this *Lyrical Drama in Four Acts* to express Shelley's moral truth most clearly, his final vision and hope of the political and aesthetic heights humanity might one day reach, the utopian wish fulfillment of both the Enlightenment and, more specifically, Godwin's *Political Justice*.[143] However, even though readers of the poem witness in Prometheus's liberation from Jupiter a change from vengeance to forgiveness, "nearly everything has still to be done," as Lewis observes. In one sense, then, Shelley's plea in *Prometheus Unbound* is not to offer an answer for the secrets of human destiny, but rather to make the case for humanity's ceaseless potential to elicit change from an unknown future. The aim, then, would be the discovery and relentless acquisition of self-knowledge, rather than the false freedom of idolizing another ideological entrapment. In another sense, though, the poem calls for a more measured response to the "sad realities" of the world. It solicits a moral calm that opens the possibility of a political critique that does not end in violent revolution. In the final, fourth act of the drama the two interdependent aims of love and law merge in a cacophonous eruption of poetic transport, suggesting Shelley's conception of self as the infinitely unfinished power of poetry.

[143] His "truth" at 27 years old, at least.

Because *Prometheus Unbound* is Shelley's most examined work, the poem presents the problem of being at once too self-evident and too enigmatic. For such a difficult poem, which allegorizes the operations of the human mind and dramatizes political idealism rather than the "sad reality" of 1819 England, it nonetheless communicates a very familiar Shelleyan message:

> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;
> To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;
> To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
> From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
> Neither to change nor falter nor repent […]. (4.570-575)

These are the instructions, the "spell," with which the poem ends, spoken not by Prometheus but by Demogorgon, who represents that power which, once Prometheus chooses to "forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night," overthrows tyranny (Jupiter). Demogorgon is both a personification of "The secret strength of things / Which governs thought" ("Mont Blanc") and the ultimate force behind a causality that governs human events. He is the mystery of cause given a face.

Demogorgon's incantation is meant to be cast at certain moments in history, when the world and human mind suffer chaos and error—the times are few, therefore, when Demogorgon's words might not apply to contemporary social conditions. That Shelley suggests the restoration enacted by *Prometheus Unbound* is not permanent reflects his belief in constantly safeguarding the conditions for fighting against future systems of oppression. "And If," as Demogorgon says in the same speech as above, "with infirm

hand, Eternity, Mother of many acts and hours, should free / The serpent that would clasp her with his length," which is to say if civilization should become once more misaligned from the inherent benevolence of natural necessity, then "These are the spells by which to reassume / An empire o'er the disentangled Doom" (4.565-569).[144] Unlike *Queen Mab*, *Prometheus Unbound* does not deliver an implicit utopia, where aligning one's perspective to benevolent necessity creates a new world. As many recent critics have noted, the poem displays spatial and temporal simultaneities which unify and also disjoin its four acts. It is much more of an apocalypse, in other words. Such representations of simultaneous history and experience speak to the apocalyptic nature of the work. Indeed, M. H. Abrams once argued that in *Prometheus Unbound*

> Shelley renders the universal history of man in the dramatic form of visualizing agents and their actions, and he represents man's accession to an earthly paradise not (in the usual eighteenth-century pattern) as the terminus of a long and gradual progress but (by a reversion to the Biblical design of history) as a sudden, right-angled breakthrough from misery to felicity.[145]

Abrams's reading of the poem highlights the distinction between historical progress and apocalypse, or the end of history. He uses the phrase "earthly paradise" to describe the end of history that the poem imagines. For Shelley, however, earthly

[144] The language Demogorgon uses in these lines is problematic from the perspective of Shelley's politics and ethics. "Disentangled Doom" is clear enough, but why must Promethean man, or the Promethean potential in man, raise yet another "empire" over it with the use of "spells"? In a post-Jovian world, employing Jovian methods, as Shelley asserts time and again in his writings, is immoral and counterproductive. Both "empire" and "spells" are closely related to the way in which Shelley understands language and poetry to confront and configure not the world but thought itself. They are forms, placeholders, for the good or evil carried within them.

[145] *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: Norton, 1971. p. 300

paradise resides not in the actual world of social and political reality but in the human mind. As long as humanity is subject to its own finitude, error and evil will remain as threats against love and imagination. *Prometheus Unbound* is thus not a utopian vision of hope or an instructional manual for its creation; the poem, like "Ode to the West Wind," which is in many ways its lyrical equivalent, tries to cast a spell against a commitment *only* to hope.[146] *Prometheus* allegorizes the mind's resistance to chance, mutability and oppression by showing that the best hope against these realities is a mind committed to the love and forgiveness exemplified by Prometheus. The journey of the expansive and inclusive self, free and without self-reproach, occupy the first three acts of the poem, which stand as a narrative totality. "Pinnacled dim in the intense inane," the final line of the third act, where Jupiter is overthrown and humanity is restored to its Promethean birthright, seems a fine description of a perfectly transparent and disinterested model of Godwinian moral agency. The image is oddly hollow, however, and the moral struggle undergone to achieve it does not anticipate the simultaneous joy and chaos of the fourth act.

How to account for the fourth act, then, has always been something of a critical dilemma. For a long time scholars have debated whether the final act is an aesthetic failure ruining the unity of the first three acts or an aesthetic necessity without which the drama as a whole would remain incomplete. Recent criticism on the poem, however, proceeds from an understanding that Shelley knew very well what he was about, and disagreements surround his intentions and their effect rather than the competency of his design. Earl Wasserman in his influential reading of the poem insists that it portrays

[146] "Ode to the West Wind" was included in the volume *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts, with Other Poems*, in August 1820.

Shelley's conception of the "One Mind" as it realizes itself perfectly within all modes of experience, thought and history.[147] Prometheus and Asia disappear in the fourth act, he argues, because Prometheus, as a perfected embodiment of the One Mind, now exists outside of time and language, and the drama must move in the final act toward the human mind.[148] Undoubtedly this is in part what happens in the poem, yet Shelley's philosophical conception of the One Mind is often different than its aesthetic representation in his poetry. He says in *On Life*:

> The words, *I*, *you*, *they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. Let it not be supposed that this doctrine conducts to the monstrous presumption, that I, the person who now write and think, are that one mind. I am but a portion of it. (*Norton* 508)

According to Wasserman's reading of Prometheus as the One Mind, Shelley's representation of it in language must always be partial and fragmented. Hence, as Wasserman argues, "when Prometheus enters his cave with Asia [in Act 3] the possibility of narrative has ended because he has passed beyond the limits of imagery and language" (360). Yet clearly Act 4 tells a story, even if it demonstrates the limits of imagery and language. Many readers have commented that the plot of the poem end after Act 1, that the moment Prometheus recalls his curse on Jupiter, the political and moral revolution Shelley dramatizes becomes a causal necessity. Indeed, the first three acts of *Prometheus Unbound*, under the guise of an individual's subjection to and subsequent overcoming of

[147] Wasserman understands Shelley's concept of the One Mind to be "identical with the ineffable oneness of Existence" (359).
[148] *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Johns Hopkins, 1971. 363.

history, tell the story of history's subjection to and subsequent overcoming of an individual. This story arc largely progresses along a linear temporal axis. Prometheus, as self-determining agent, is pitted against Jupiter, as history and fate.

Yet in Shelley's poetry, figures kindle both their opposites and their similarities, so that Prometheus and Jupiter capture in one another an identical pressure that eventually is released as a formal synthesis of the two. The poem's unbinding happens the moment Prometheus overhears his curse on Jupiter: "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" (1.303-305). Prometheus, however, will not and cannot speak it himself; he does not remember what he said, he cannot "recall" the words—"The Curse / Once breathed on thee I would recall" (1.58-59). Instead, with the help of his mother Earth, Prometheus calls on the Phantasm of Jupiter, which is nothing other than an *image* of Prometheus himself, to speak the vengeance that both grants and removes Jupiter's power. "Tremendous *Image*" (1.246; my emphasis) is how Prometheus addresses the Phantasm of Jupiter, who emerges through the rent veil that separates life from death, and the curse appears to Prometheus on a face with disfigured smiles, "[w]ritten as on a scroll" (1.263). The path toward future deliverance is here conceived in the two dueling narratives of time, sudden revelation and rigorous record, spirit and letter. Image here refers to a crisis in the gradualist narrative of political reform by naming the contradiction of its power. Just as Prometheus's liberation consists of identification with his captor Jupiter, image's transformative strength is present in the weakness of narrative; and as the first three acts comprise a narrative, so the last forms an ever-evolving image from disjunction and continuity.

The source from which Prometheus and image claim authority is not transcendental or permanent, so the proleptic leap that inheres in apocalypse permits *both* radical restorative change and tyranny. As Wasserman succinctly observes of Demogorgon, "[h]e is eternity because he is the infinitude of all the events that occur in time; but he also has 'direr' and forbidden names because, depending upon how Power is admitted by mind into actuality, potentiality can be released as a Jupiter or a revolution or any other disturbance" (372). The players in the drama are thus all subject to a Power beyond their reckoning or control. It is their response to this necessity that determines their fate. When we hear Prometheus describe to Asia the cave to which they will ultimately retire—"A simple dwelling, which shall be our own / Where we will sit and talk of time and change / As the world ebbs and flows, ourselves unchanged—/ What can hide man from Mutability?"—our first impression might be along the lines of Wasserman's assertion that Prometheus and Asia have left the drama for the perfection and permanence of the One Mind (3.3.22-25). But of course nothing hides man from mutability, and, as more of Prometheus's speech to Asia reveals, neither does anything hide Prometheus from it. He says that he and Asia will "Weave harmonies divine, yet ever new, / From difference sweet where discord cannot be" (3.3.38-9).
Within this endless generation of cognitive and aesthetic difference, new meanings and thoughts emerge, and with them the possibility of newer combinations and arrangements, evolving and disappearing all the time. The temporal design and flow of the work likewise moves from linear to circular, telic to atelic, sequential to simultaneous.

The fourth act of the lyrical drama helps to explain why these two modes of temporality and the methods for presenting them poetically constitute a mutual

embroilment between gradualist and apocalyptic expectations. If in the first three acts we are shown how each mind "contain[s] within itself the principle of its own integrity" (674),[149] which is also the principle of its disintegration (love and vengeance, truth and error), in the fourth we hear the music of the spheres and experience Shelley's orphic dance of language. "This far goal of time" becomes in act four an apocalyptic desire to "bear Time to his tomb in eternity" (4.14).

I argue that this desire taps into more than merely an evasion of historical tyranny, violence and contingency into a realm Shelleyan vacancy, an "intense inane" (3.4.204) or "shape all light" (353),[150] which nevertheless must be overcome or at least ethically informed. It also names a self-conscious confrontation between the record of history and the image of futurity, stabilization and annihilation.[151] The bearing of time to his tomb in eternity involves a simultaneous and inescapable application of the poetic method in which this act is expressed, the bearing of time to his *tome* in eternity. It is the attempt to disseminate and record the unwritable image of a continually dissolving (past) history that produces the effect of failure, which in turn necessitates the aesthetic and mystical excess of poetry in the fourth act of *Prometheus Unbound* and in much of *The Triumph of Life* also.

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[149] *A Defence of Poetry*. 1821. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*. Oxford UP. 2009.
[150] *Prometheus Unbound*. *1821*, and *The Triumph of Life*. 1822. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*. Oxford UP. 2009.
[151] As James Chandler understands Shelley's historical consciousness: "His historicism is the most self-conscious and the most "unwilling," an d it is precisely in his awareness of its unwillingness that he most recognizes it as the product of a historicist epoch. It is not his own spirit, as he might have put it, but the spirit of the age-of-the-spirit-of-the-age." Chandler's insight reveals that Shelley's historicism also bears within it the double demand of a transhistorical spirit. How is the force of history understood and employed in an age that defines itself by its own spirit of self-consciousness? Chandler's answer is casuistry. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998. 489-90.

I have mentioned the disjunction between the first three acts and the last, how a teleological temporality suddenly is subordinated to and subsumed under an atelic one. That Shelley accords high value never to settle upon one single perspective is evidenced by critical attention paid to the "difference sweet" of *Prometheus Unbound*. This is exactly what he criticizes Wordsworth for in *Peter Bell the Third*: "He had as much imagination / As a pint pot:—he never could / Fancy another situation / From which to dart his contemplation, / Than that wherein he stood" (4.298-302). Carol Jacobs notes that "the danger in Shelley (which is as much the comfort) is taking any one statement on language as the final word."[152] Indeed, the play of being and becoming, progress and apocalypse, revolution and repetition that finds its highest pitch in Act 4 seems to be the key to the work's political and poetic message, its dialectical entanglement of reality and representation, the relation of past to future. The always open possibility of the radical dissolution of language's semantic function, coupled with endless transformations of the objects, forms and referents of Shelley's representation of imaginative thought and poetry, both of which attempt to resist aesthetic formalization and political ideology, must lead to some ethical imperative or practical social program; otherwise, the fourth act mystic dance of the cosmos remains separate from human concern. Prometheus informs Asia that

> lovely apparitions dim at first
> Then radiant—as the mind, arising bright
> From the embrace of beauty (whence the forms
> Of which these are the phantoms) casts on them

[152] *Uncontainable Romanticism: Shelley, Brontë, Kleist. Baltimore*. The Johns Hopkins, 1989. note 37, p. 210.

The gathered rays which are reality—

Shall visit us, the progeny immortal

Of painting, Sculpture and rapt Poesy

And arts, though unimagined, yet to be.

The wandering voices and the shadows these

Of all that man becomes, the mediators

Of that best worship, love, by him and us

Given and returned, swift shapes and sounds which grow

More fair and soft as man grows wise and kind,

And veil by veil evil and error fall…(3.3.49-62)

As beautifully rendered a consecration of the medley between art, love and justice as this is, one cannot help but feel that it too might be just one more veil, another image representing potential hope rather than real change. "Dim" or "radiant" apparitions never cohere beyond the condition of a phantom. It is the mind that projects the "reality" which constitutes the veil of deep truth and beauty. "The wandering voices and shadows" and "swift shapes and sounds" are the "mediators / Of that best worship, love." Mediation cannot substitute for real presence. Prometheus adumbrates an aesthetics of love where art is not art unless it serves love, which in the poem and in Shelley's moral and metaphysical universe is the only permanent force.

Forms rather than any specific contents, whether political or aesthetic, mark Prometheus's speech. In this work and all of Shelley's poetry the most important condition of language is that it remains elastic, fluid and dynamic, that it never calcifies into one thought or one image, that after its communication into the world there remain

something possible, open, "unimagined" and "yet to be." In Act 4 language is defined by its ability to wrangle the wilderness of thought: "Language is a perpetual Orphic song, / Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng / Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were" (4.415-17). Language is orphic at the end of *Prometheus Unbound* because that which it rules, rebels; the perpetual ordering of its formal powers to shape and, like love, make "shiver / Thought's stagnant chaos" will always "revolve, subside, and swell" (4.379-380 and "Mont Blanc" 95).

Unsurprisingly, then, the poem's celebration and critique of language has lent itself to many deconstructionist readings. Chief among these is Carol Jacobs's. She concludes, correctly in my view, that the "eternity" the poem so vividly insists upon, imagines and strives toward, and which is the name Demogorgon adopts,

> [I]mplies anything but a state of permanence, for it operates rather as the perpetual disruption of temporal and spatial stasis, a disruption already at play, in a sense, in Prometheus's first monologue. As in "The Necessity of Atheism," eternity (or necessity) is the questioning of the concept of origin; it is the pronounced incomprehensibility of first cause and, it goes without saying, then, of telos. This is why *Prometheus Unbound* is not "about" a restoration to his proper place and proper authority of Prometheus as the origin of speech and thought, a movement toward apocalypse or utopia, a millennium or redemption, but rather the performance of perpetual if unpredictable revolution. (57)[153]

[153] "Unbinding Words*." Uncontainable Romanticism: Shelley, Brontë, Kleist*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. 19-59.

Impermanent, endlessly disruptive, dynamic, questioning, lacking a beginning or end, the "performance of perpetual if unpredictable revolution," are all frequent descriptors of Shelley's aesthetics and politics. Jacobs's unsurpassed deconstruction of the crisis of representation and speech in *Prometheus Unbound* is by now almost taken for granted. What I think is often lacking in readings that privilege Shelley's temporal disjunctions, spatial simultaneities, revolutionary and Promethean (as in literally "foresighted") rhetoric, even as they are regarded as both ahead of our own moment and capable of shattering ideological thinking, is the long range political goals of his poetry, the real reverberating effects on the world of a work as masterful and mystifying as *Prometheus Unbound*. Are there any?

The point has long been made of Shelley's influence in the nineteenth century on working-class radicals and Chartists, that *Queen Mab* had a direct political impact, that Engels once said "we all knew Shelley by heart."[154] With its lengthy notations appended at the end and the strong Godwinian influence on its philosophical themes, *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* is more explicitly political than *Prometheus Unbound* and clearly more accessible to the reading public. Yet *Prometheus* has higher and more far-sighted political pretentions. The rhetorical apogee of such political ambitions is of course the famous proclamation that poets are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world," which is at the same time the highest claim for Shelley's aesthetic program. The recent reception of the effect of Shelley's politics among literary critics, which might be characterized by an unbridled celebration of its ostensible radicalism, skepticism, and revolutionism, is still colored by a tendency to defend charges of rhetorical bluster and

[154] Pyle, Forest. *Art's Undoing: In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014. p. 39.

aesthetic embellishment. Such is the conclusion Maureen McLane draws, yet she offers her own defense also.

> Certainly the claims Shelley made for poetry and poets tended toward the histrionic, unacknowledged legislators and all. There is something pathetic, something almost already obsolete, in Shelley's declaration. Perhaps he was, as he himself suspected, whistling in the dark. […] Shelley whistles through the dark toward yet another dark. Transvaluing the obliterating dark of history such that it becomes the potentially welcoming dark of futurity: this is, in one instance, what poetry has to do with history. (147)[155]

It might go without saying that "transvaluing" is also what poetry has to do with politics, in one instance. If, as McLane says, "history commits itself to what happened," then politics regards what is happening; poetry, then, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, regards what might happen when we commit ourselves differently to what is happening (147). However, it is light rather than dark, no matter how welcomingly dark beckons from the future, which reigns and restores in *Prometheus*. The tension in the fourth act lies in the contest between "the powers of a world of perfect light" and "a mighty Power, which is as darkness" (4.168 and 510), the attempt to reconcile simultaneously Promethean transgressions and transcendences with the lapses and limits that Necessity (Fate and Causation) impose. What is felt is the awakening from self-idolatry and contempt into a new consciousness that has yet to discover its meaning. To wrest freedom from the given world, where both positive—"a marble form / A rite, a law, a

[155] *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

custom"—and natural—"and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave"—forces moil against human efforts to reconstitute imaginative consciousness might seem utopian and politically evasive (*Cenci* 5.4.4-5 and *Defence* 530). Yet *Prometheus Unbound* envisions and tries to present the reader a perspective from which to wrest hope from the despair of the reality of the human condition, the "sad realities" of chance, mutability, and suffering. It is in a way a political "negative capability," the psycho-ethico condition Keats outlined in the 21 December 1817 letter to George and Thomas Keats, the moments "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (109).[156] In fact, as I demonstrated in my discussion of self-anatomy, "reaching after fact & reason" can be more destructive than healthy.

Prometheus Unbound is thus not about human perfection or the end of history, or even universal equality and peace—Shelley would hardly need to drudge up and revitalize an ancient myth with several thousand lines of poetry to do that—; it is about a new way of looking at and responding to the "sad realities" of the actual world, which, like death and change, never disappear. This new way, as I have argued, entails the Promethean moment of reconciliation to the past, as well as the overcoming of a restrictive mode of self-obsession. Hugh Roberts makes the point that the "reconciliation of being and becoming" (2) reveals "a thoroughly new understanding of political process […], one that allows us to comprehend and accept, without excuses for 'poetic license,' Shelley's claim that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" (3).[157] Though many have charged that *Prometheus Unbound* is too divorced from realism, too

[156] *Keats's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Jeffrey N. Cox. New York: Norton, 2009.
[157] *Shelley and the Chaos of History*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997.

beautiful and ideal, Roberts's claim for a political process that must necessarily be married to this very ideality, or "poetic license," is substantiated and laid out by Shelley quite clearly in the preface. To acknowledge the legislation is also to risk attributing a power to it that could stultify into tyranny. In their "unacknowledged" role, Shelley suggests that poets pass on to the world the very power of which they are unconscious.

Less cited and remarked on than Shelley's insistence in the preface that "it is a mistake to suppose that I dedicate my poetical compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform, or that I consider them in any degree as containing a reasoning system on the theory of human life. Didactic poetry is my abhorrence" are the following political outcomes he insists are effected by great literature (*Norton* 209):

> We owe the great writers of the golden age of our literature to that fervid awakening of the public mind which shook to dust the oldest and most oppressive form of the Christian Religion. We owe Milton to the progress and development of the same spirit; the sacred Milton was, let it ever be remembered, a Republican and a bold enquirer into morals and religion. The great writers of our own age are, we have reason to suppose, the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it. The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lighting, and the equilibrium between institutions and opinions is now restoring, or is about to be restored. (*Norton* 208)

Shelley's diction and imagery within this prophetic genealogy of literary greatness demonstrates the dual demands of Act 4: to be and become, the individual's recognition of a present self absorbed in a future community, which , paradoxically, imparts to the

present self the imaginative possibility of an unknown yet shared community. The otherness of the "dark" future as it presents itself to the single individual is ethically transferred to the others of the human community in the imaginative sensation and reconstitution of the fragment, the "shook dust," which is not only shook from oppressive institutions and forms but from the "public mind" itself. The cycle of "dust" and "cement" is the same as the cycle of "institutions" and "opinions"; each pair might inform and dissolve one another, each is composed and determined by one another. "Companions" and "forerunners" are the bolts of lightning "now restoring" and "about to be restored." Yet the curious feature of Shelley's language in this passage is that the direction, prospective or retrospective, the "unimagined social change" will take is ambiguous; it is cloudy, so to speak. Likewise, does "cloud of mind" entail a direct comparison of mind to a cloud, or does it mean that the mind is cloudy, unclear, and therefore what must be "discharged" is the lightning, as in Jovian "lightning bolts"? Even "discharging" is ambiguous. Does it signal freedom from an untenable or unstable condition or does it mark the dispossession and deprivation from a condition of freedom? Finally, is "equilibrium" here a positive state, a privileged value?

In reading this passage, we almost uncritically take for granted a creative and "restorative" revolutionary spirit and future, but the language does not assure us of this, only that an "equilibrium between institutions and opinions" will be restored, not paradise or progress. The ambiguity is indicative of the spell cast by the poem, which can only be understood as a spell simultaneously broken, the words with which Demogorgon closes the curtain—themselves necessary because of Demogorgon's previously spoken words in Act 2:

—If the Abysm

Could vomit forth its secrets:—but a voice

Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;

For what would it avail to bid thee to gaze

On the revolving world? what to bid speak

Fate, Time, Chance, Occasion and Change?—To these

All things are subject but eternal Love. (2.4.114-20)

In *Queen Mab* Shelley gazed on the revolving world and witnessed the fundamental axis of the universe, yet by 1819 the deep truth is silent and unrepresentable, and love alone allows him to imagine the imageless and silent truth. In these, perhaps the most meaningful and revealing lines of poetry (which of course refer to the impossibility of final meaning and revelation) in *Prometheus Unbound*, a practical moral lesson can be gleaned, which the final lines of the poem determine. It is because the "deep truth is imageless" that Love "makes all it gazes on paradise" (4.128). Love might turn even the imageless deep truth into an image of paradise. Love fills Act 4, "from beneath, around, within, above, / Filling thy [Moon] void annihilation, Love / Bursts in like light on caves cloven by the thunderball" (353-55). "Tis Love, all Love!" shouts the Moon, to which the Earth replies, "It interpenetrates my granite mass" (369-70). "Familiar acts are beautiful through love" (403), says the Earth, and Demogorgon more mysteriously unleashes "Love from its awful throne of patient power" until it "springs / And folds over the world its healing wings" (557 and 560-61).

It is easy to dismiss the almost superhuman power Shelley attributes to love (and to the imagination), the way in which it operates as a panacea and placeholder for, some

might insist, the complicated and perhaps irremediable social, moral and psychological impasses that have always obstructed human progress.[158] But when Demogorgon locates Love in "its awful throne of patient power," he comes close to identifying directly with it. Love gives life to Necessity, the law of which knows neither good nor evil, progress nor collapse. For Shelley Love alone stands as the wreck of hope, because it alone can wreck the prison of the Self and through its gaze reimagine and create the "thing it contemplates," which is its own absence, what it is not.

Panthea's long Act 4 speech of the creation and annihilation of past histories and anterior futures, of ancient cities and the broken relics and bones of their inhabitants, of primordial Earth and its skeletons, reads as a discordant mistake of composition compared with the passages of joy and mad exuberance that precede and follow. Yet Shelley's meaning in showing "the melancholy ruins / Of cancelled cycles," and then finally imagining the erasure of Earth itself, is to insist on a kind of creative harmony in chaos and even suffering.

> And weed-overgrown continents of Earth
> Increased and multiplied like summer worms
> On an abandoned corpse, till the blue globe
> Wrapt Deluge round it like a cloak, and they
> Yelled, gaspt and were abolished; or some God
> Whose throne was in a comet, past, and cried—
> "Be Not!"—and like my words they were no more. (4.312-18)

[158] I do not disagree with those critics who would dismiss Shelley on the grounds that he prescribes Love and Imagination like a doctor who would prescribe antibiotics to fight an infection. But I do not think that this is what he does. Love and Imagination as Shelley conceives them are not fanciful schemes, and still less are they items to be bought at the store. Each must be earned, and by one who is worthy of them. The worth and value of each is caught up in the suffering and earnestness that brings each into being.

The irony of these lines is that the powerful speech act "Be Not!" validates rather than parodies genesis. The destructive imperative orders a passage riven with heaped images of chaos and death. The self-reflexivity of "no more" connects the natural world with the language that simultaneously ends and generates it. This is the antithesis of the function of Act 4 in relation to the previous three acts. Panthea describes a wreck from which hope creates the thing it contemplates, the dance between the Earth and Moon. It is an instance of a mind that suffers suffering, which makes suffering suffer, a Promethean victory. Attesting to the difficult prospect of Promethean change and the Promethean future, this ruinous scene mitigates the emotions it elicits in the same self-reflexive way Prometheus remains king over himself—by turning away from the rancor of history and his curse, and "like [his] words they were no more."

CHAPTER FOUR
As Yet to Come: Beginning Again at *The Triumph of Life*

Is not all history but the coming of that conscious art which first makes articulate and then destroys the old wild energy?

—Yeats

Shelley's final poem *The Triumph of Life* (1822) is at once a radical departure from and clearer formulation of the political and aesthetic ideals he professed throughout his life and career. For many readers and critics, it is difficult to distinguish the inescapable note of bleakness and suffering the poem sounds from the innovative approach of representing through the poet-speaker's vision the weal and woe of prominent figures in Western culture from Classical Greece through the Enlightenment.[159] The result is that the poem is often read as a rebuke of the very Enlightenment ideals of progress to which Shelley had so long been committed. At times this sound of fury is so great that both poetry and love seem guilty of participating in and causing the mad pageantry the poem depicts, that the greatest sin of the artist is to suffer the objects of art's creation and "temper" one's spirit to the material forces that shape it. For Shelley, whom we consider Romantic poet *par excellence*, this is a surprisingly anti-Romantic position to hold, one nearer Classical notions of ideal aesthetic experience. So the poem's overall feeling of despair, heavily contributed to and expressed by the confusion, ignorance, restlessness and helplessness of its voices, the poet-speaker and Rousseau, overpowers the moral lessons it tries to communicate. [160] Because the poem is about life in the most general sense, the tragedy of being born into an alien world and

[159] The poem employs and evokes, however, thematic and formal analogues to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Petrarch's *Trionfi*, among many others.
[160] Shelley drowned on 8 July, 1822.

unsure about which light illuminates and which blinds, such ambiguities among the competing claims of the poem's voices are inevitable.

Compounding this separation of the poem's emotional residue from its intellectual argument is Shelley's death at the time of *The Triumph of Life's* composition, which hangs over the poem like an inexhaustible ironic veil. [161] The "triumph of life" thus conquered Shelley, and therefore we shore up the fragmentary remains of *The Triumph of Life* as both suicide note and the spells with which to resurrect him. Attributing such auras of mystery to the poem has its critical charms, yet the reality is that *The Triumph of Life* is as finished and complete a work as any Shelley published while living.[162] Rather than offering us a key to Shelley's life and work, one that would reveal and somehow reconcile the many "what ifs" for which we mourn and grieve a great poet's truncated life and untimely end, *The Triumph of Life* appears to caution against the natural human tendency toward all-encompassing perspectives or ultimate answers.[163] The compelling and impenetrable blank caesura on which the poem ends, and beyond which swims the infinite openness of what it has to say about Shelley's own moment and our own, both frustrates and satisfies our desire to read it as a moral parable that teaches the sane health of adopting a skeptical stance toward the "Conqueror Life." It frustrates because its unfinishedness solicits our completion of it. It satisfies because we recognize in the reality of leaving things unfinished our own approaching death. The poem suggests that any answer to the final question "Then, what is Life?" (544) must remain incomplete until the moment when our own lives are complete and life achieves its final victory.

[161] Shelley drowned on 8 July, 1822.
[162] The poem was first edited and published by Mary Shelley in the 1824 *Posthumous Poems*.
[163] Such is Hugh Roberts convincingly argued thesis in *Shelley and the Chaos of History*, where he calls this totalizing perspective the view of Apollo from the citadel.

In this concluding chapter I want to argue that *The Triumph of Life* is a poem full of self-contradictions and unmanageable scissions from Shelley's previously more unified principle of the self. The Promethean injunction of being king over what is identified in *The Triumph* as the "mutiny within" seems now to resist both urgency and possibility. The very relationship of Love to self-knowledge expresses itself in the poem as an impasse to self-understanding: "And Life […] / Conquered that heart by love which gold or pain / Or age or sloth or slavery could subdue not" (257-59). Shelley's conception of "self-anatomy" has evolved from a form of self-analysis that might motivate the dangerous justification of unjust acts into the possibility that poetry (understood in the general Shelleyan sense) might constitute "self-anatomy" on a collective historical scale—Shelley's Rousseau admits, "I / have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!— / And so my words were the seeds of misery" (278-80). Through his uniquely personal art, Rousseau infected others with the suffering that it expressed, Shelley included, of course. In this last poem of Shelley's, I suggest that what accounts for the self-contradictions and irreconcilable oppositions is the intensity with which Shelley interrogates and blurs the relationship of the principle of Self to the principle of Poetry.

In so doing Shelley begs from us his readers the question of whether *The Triumph of Life* is an ironic metaphor for the triumph of Life. Is the poem an exemplary thought and action of one who refuses to kneel before the conqueror Life, or is it the languid letter of resignation from one who fought well but now realizes the battle was rigged from the beginning? I think that neither question will do well to advance a better understanding of Shelley's commitment to moral and political progress. *The Triumph* is certainly emblematic of a strong rebuke but not one that dismisses, much less denigrates, all that

Shelley previously believed. Rather in the poem Shelley attempts to reshuffle the deck he had been playing with for some time. He asks very old questions through the more expansive horizon of futurity. If the answers are unsettling in their resistance to be revealed, then that was characteristic of the moment in which he wrote the poem, and the one in which we read it.

Stuart Curran has surmised that *The Triumph of Life* can "be construed as a cynical trap […] to see if we as its readers will convert the living metaphor into the static ideological counter and enact the very triumph of life whose enactment we are vicariously witnessing."[164] This is worth considering, though it might say as much about our own current reading practices as about Shelley's intentions. I think it is more accurate to say that Shelley's work shows that we as its readers have no choice in this conversion process, that such is the end of all aesthetic experience that is measured against our consciousness of eternity. This is not unique to *The Triumph of Life*, however; it is emblematic of Shelley's lifelong concern of how language and poetry can help humanity achieve its Promethean birthright. Apart from the view that the poem is Shelley's palinode made more critically suggestive because of its "in the midst of life we are in death" ironies, the unique status conferred upon *The Triumph of Life* in recent decades can be attributed to the emphasis the poem places on the relation of the past to the present, which is a fundamental relation of both Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* and our own interpretation of Romanticism.

[164] "Shelley and the End(s) of Ideology. 1996. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2002. p. 606.

Whether we accept that the poem allegorizes, as Paul de Man insisted, that "nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence" (122), the desire to construct, impose, reveal, and direct this relation is the poem's hope and despair. [165] What cannot be surmised but must be acknowledged is that the self-reflexivity of *The Triumph of Life* reveals the insufficiency of Romanticism to account for the historical forces that drive it. In the same way, the poet-narrator at the beginning of the poem is kept awake by "thoughts which must remain untold"; and Rousseau, whose thoughts are "blotted" by gazing on the "shape all light" (21 and 383). Thought as a mental faculty becomes insufficient to account for its unintended impacts and consequences in the world and poem, and it is thought as a mental process and figure of the imagination that most dominants poem's structure. As singularly focused as the work is on the collective multitude, and representative men, *The Triumph of Life* is obsessed with the individual "mutiny within," which ought, according to Rousseau, be "repress[ed]." (213). Once again self-analysis is represented as a possible perversion of the poetic process and inhibitor of imaginative love. A repression of both thought and emotion, or thoughts and emotions that are driven by social forces, occupies a great deal of the poem's critique of ideology. Our modern connotations of repression, shadowed by Freudian psychoanalysis, suggest the potential for neurosis and pathology. Repression creates problems and should be avoided. And it is surprising that Shelley names the object of repression "mutiny," or an open rebellion of authority, since a fevered overhauling of the power centers of the world would seem a welcome development to a

[165] "Shelley Disfigured." 1979. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. Columbia UP, 1984.

committed political radical. The closed circuit of corruption between will and power begins within the individual, the poem suggests. Its interruption begins when individuals identify not with their own free thinking but with thoughts as such.

Custom, religion, inequality, all such institutions which privilege obedience, duty, and subservience, are less likely to lay waste to conscience and free thinking than the inevitability of thought's reification. As Kenneth Neil Cameron succinctly addresses this issue in his intellectual biography of Shelley, "[p]eople have innate noble characteristics that they can develop, or they can substitute for them evil ones supplied by society" (459).[166] Simply put, the individual must stand "Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man" (*PU*; 3.4.194). In *The Triumph of Life*, "but man" is the problem, since the best of them fall victim to "the mutiny within." Curran asserts that

> Even if those strictures [of ideology] may here be acknowledged not as the snares of tyrants and priests, but as the potentiality in all of us to become tyrants and priests, first imposing on ourselves the temptations by which we would betray others, still the poem resolutely refuses the despair that haunts its margins. (607)

Pure thought becomes subsumed into a larger social discourse of power, where it functions as a substitute for thought and imagination. In earlier works, notably in *Queen Mab*, liberation seemed a matter of coherence between human desire and the inner necessity that determines natural law. Following the "benignant power" brings the self into contact with benignant will. In Shelley's final vision, however, there is an unbridgeable distance between the very notion of possible coherence between inner

[166] *Shelley: The Golden Years*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974.

necessity and individual will. Coherence itself is read as a trick of language, desire, and thought. The poem articulates this great impasse for human destiny, according to Shelley:

> And much I grieved to think how power & will
> In opposition rule our mortal day—
>
> And why God made irreconcilable
> Good and the means of good; (228-31)

The antagonism between the selfless humanitarian ideal and the forces that draw the self toward power is forecasted both in *Prometheus Unbound* and *A Defence of Poetry*. In the former work a Fury declares that

> [The Loftiest] dare not devise good for man's estate
> And yet they know not that they do not dare.
> The good want power, but to weep barren tears.
> The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.
> The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;
> And all best things are thus confined to ill. (1.623-28)

In the latter Shelley laments that

> There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, or at least, what is wiser and better than what men now practice and endure. But we let "*I dare not* wait upon *I would*, like the poor cat i' the adage." We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have

> outrun our conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. (*Norton* 530)

In the passages from both *Prometheus Unbound* and *Defence*, individuals and society suffer from the stultifying moral effects of "wanting." One must wonder whether the true monster of the human psyche the Fury describes is human desire, not the relative necessity or merit of its objects. The obstacles nature imposes on human potential combines with the seductive enticements of society, which promises to eliminate or ameliorate them, to present a world of contradictory promises and chaotic pleasures. Shelley suggests that we already know the best answers to life's questions. If we do not have access to the existential purpose of life itself, then our moral knowledge makes us well-equipped for being alive in this world.

We possess an excess of knowledge, technology, and science to successfully combat and overcome nature and broaden the bounds of our human finitude. It is not knowledge of the "Good" that is wanting but the method and "means" of achieving it. Life gets in the way of our living it well and purposefully, yet even the greatest individuals cannot but help accommodate life's "getting." In no uncertain terms, Shelley drives the point home in the *Defence*: "and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave" (*Norton* 530). And so the very desire to create beauty or live virtuously becomes the gap into which competing desires pour ugliness, suffering, and evil. Prometheus avoids this entanglement of desire through an act of Christ-like forgiveness, when he remembers the curse he uttered against Jupiter. Rousseau, though identified by Shelley in *Essay on Christianity* as the closest inheritor of Christ's influence on human potential, is given no such chance, because in *The Triumph of Life* the Promethean ideal

is shattered. [167] The poem ends where *Prometheus Unbound* begins, with a forgetting. If there is a restoration in *The Triumph of Life*, and I argue that there is, the rebirth and regeneration starts with Rousseau's encounter with the "shape all light," which I later analyze in greater detail.

Whether the poem is a fitting end to Shelley's career as an increasingly disillusioned artist or a mysterious, promising new beginning (as T. S. Eliot speculated), the poem's subject—the individual's ceaseless struggle to distinguish life's substance from its shadows and to "repress the mutiny within" (213) that renders shadows indistinguishable from substance—is caught up in its central question: What is life? The obviousness of asking, and then trying to answer, so comprehensive and existential a question receives little attention by commentators and readers of the poem. The question seems to betray the fundamental lesson of the poem, not to seek after or desire "delusive flames" or false suns that illuminate each and every hidden corner of human consciousness and natural law. [168] It is as if in reading the poem the very question to life's extraordinary riddle is answered (albeit answered with the unequivocal capaciousness of a question mark), so great is the moiling of Shelley's art with the world it tries to make sense of. In other words, the poem becomes yet another "delusive flame," another spell which enchants those who blindly participate in its pageantry and dance.

But this experience of experience, which constitutes the gift that the poet-narrator receives from his encounter with the figure of Rousseau ("But follow thou, & from spectator turn / Actor or victim in this wretchedness / And what thou woudst be taught I

[167] Shelley writes that Rousseau "is, perhaps, the philosopher among the moderns who, in the structure of his feelings and understanding, resembles most nearly the mysterious sage of Judea" (23). *The Necessity of Atheism and Other Essays*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1993.
[168] "Lines written in the Bay of Lerici" (1822).

then may learn from thee"), and that constitutes the curse Rousseau recounts of his life as an artist ("I have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!"), remains a irrepressible and also unending concern of our inheritance of Romantic poetry (305-8 and 278-9). The persistent narrative of Romantic poetry and Romantic poets, indelibly inscribed into critiques and defenses of Romanticism by Jerome McGann,[169] tells a story of an inward and idealized turn toward the self, an escape from the world and its primary and pragmatic political concerns and pressures. Language, or rather figurative language, is the principle feature of this interiorized psychological landscape which Romantic poetry is assumed to inhabit and cultivate. Recursive and elusive, self-referential and specular in both semantic and grammatical terms, the poetry of *The Triumph of Life* represents Romanticism at its most comfortable and disturbing mode. It is a work that aims outside the scope of itself as poetry; for which reason it maintains the obstinate narrative of Romanticism and further reveals its commitments as ideal rather than material.

Shelley's ideality, however, is never very far from his rigorous and prophetic moral sentiments. The two cannot exist without each other. And these moral sentiments are grounded in the basest material conditions of society: poverty, hunger, blood, gold, and inequality, generally. Behind each model of moral perfection he describes in his political writings is an image of ideal perfection he represents in his poetry. And toward the end of his life, Shelley made the decision to alter his reform efforts. Nine days before his death, in a letter to Horace Smith, he writes:

> It seems to me that things have now arrived at such a crisis as requires every man plainly to utter his sentiments on the inefficacy of the existing religions no less than political systems for restraining & guiding mankind.

[169] *The Romantic Ideology* (1983).

> Let us see the truth whatever that may be.—The destiny of man can scarcely be so degraded that he was born only to die: and if such should be the case, delusions, especially gross & preposterous ones of the existing religion, can scarcely be supposed to exalt it.—if every man said what he thought, it could not subsist a day. […] I once thought to study these affairs [England's "desperate condition"] & write or act in them—I'm glad that my good genius said *refrain*. (*Letters* II; 442)

Shelley describes the state of England and the destiny of the human race in apocalyptic and ideal terms. Things are at their very limits and he describes them as such: birth and death, delusions and truth, stability and collapse. He is ready for an answer, any answer, to the question, "Then, what is Life?" Significantly, he chooses to "refrain" from acting in life's triumphal pageant. He chooses otherwise than the poet-speaker whom Rousseau advises, "But follow thou, & from spectator turn / Actor or victim in this wretchedness / And what thou woudst be taught I then may learn from thee" (305-8).

At the very moment when Shelley seems intent to disengage from actively addressing and redressing the problems of the world, he is composing a poem that makes a strong case not only for the impossibility of doing so untouched by the world but also for the impossibility of doing so, period. His "*refrain*," then, read as a musical piece, allows for a greater future engagement with the world's suffering and progress, as a poem intended for the as yet to come, when his words will spark a "thousand beacons" (207). Timothy Morton remarks that

> The meaning of a poem is its future: it will have been read five minutes from now, next week, and more than this, its meaning is futurality, or as

> Shelley puts it, 'the gigantic shadows that futurity casts upon the present.' The past of the poem, its letters, its paper, its ink, its authors, its readers, its readings, is the appearance of the poem, the poem's form. A poem, a hyperobject, is a message in a bottle from the future. An augury, a writing in entrails or in the sky, without a stable or consistent system of meaning to underwrite it. (235)[170]

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Shelley was fond of messages in bottles, the messages they contained always a futurality, as Morton says, usually a political one. These early "time machines" carried by the waves of the sea represented the immense temporal horizon Shelley wanted to write across, as well as posthumously cross into the future. And as sentimentally Romantic as sending out a message in a bottle might seem to us, as wishy-washy, so to speak, the method of communication it contains, Shelley conceived the act in absolute earnestness and saw it as a means of escaping not the world but the prison-house of intention and context. He wished to give his writings about the need for moral and political change a new chance, a new destiny, or as Morton says, "An augury […] without a stable or consistent system of meaning to underwrite it." So the supposed Romantic escape into ideality is here, as it is above in regards to Shelley's letter and the *Triumph* read as musical refrain, a turn from spectator to actor.

What is striking about *The Triumph of Life*'s progression from the poet-speaker's trance to Rousseau's trials is its acceptance of the absence of moral perfection. The two figures who might rescue the poem from its moral ruins, "they of Athens & Jerusalem," Socrates and Christ, are missing in action from the field of battle (134). Socrates and Christ, memorably named by one commentator on the poem as "mere fictions in the

[170] Morton, Timothy. "Ecology without the Present." *Oxford Literary Review* 34.2 (2012): 229-38.

writings of others,"[171] are Shelley's embodiments of the Promethean man. A depth of moral feeling echoes within each the very immaterial attributes that make the material suffering of the world so difficult to bear and turn away from. "Know thyself" and "Love thy neighbor as thyself" are the two moral pillars on which Enlightenment ethics are built. They also represent for Shelley the highest aim that aesthetic endeavors can achieve, closing the vast gap between one individual and another:

> But there is a circle which comprehends, as well as one which mutually excludes, all things which feel. And, with respect to man, his public and his private happiness consist in diminishing the circumference which includes those resembling himself, until they become one with him, and he has with them. (304).[172]

Another way of announcing Romanticism's preoccupation with merging form and content, object and subject, making transparent the line between appearance and substance, this passage is unsurprising from a poet who believed that moral perfection would eradicate all bodily disease. But the idea of oneness that cuts across Shelley's diminished circumference is nowhere present in *The Triumph of Life*, at least nowhere positively presented. There does exist the provocative encounter with the "shape all light" (352), understood and described as an extreme negation and forgetting. But I will speak to this later.

Of importance here is that this same oneness inheres in the maxims of Socrates and Christ, "know thyself" and "love thy neighbor as thyself," or know thyself first, then love thy neighbor as that knowledge. This opposition between interiorized will and

[171] de Man, Paul . "Shelley Disfigured." 1979. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. Columbia UP, 1984. p. 97
[172] Ingpen, Roger, and Walter E. Peck, eds. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Julian Edition. Volume *VI*. New York: Gordian Press, 1965.

externalized power (power directed toward the good, Christian charity) finds reconciliation in the figures of Socrates and Christ, a reconciliation that *The Triumph of Life* resists and both poet-speaker and Rousseau are desperate to realize. These two figures, or "mere fictions in the writings of others," become mere absent idealizations in Shelley's material and mechanized depiction of the human pageantry. Socrates and Christ helm

> […] the sacred few who could not tame
> Their spirits to the Conqueror, but as soon
> As they had touched the world with living flame
>
> Fled back like eagles to their native noon […]. (128-131)

The allusion to Prometheus is clear. Socrates and Christ give fire, freedom, to humanity and then exit to the radiant source of all freedom, significantly not the sun, which Yeats remarked is the "source of all tyrannies"[173] in Shelley's final work, but rather its position in the sky at noon, when no delusive shadows are cast. Socrates and Christ do not participate in the "fierce song and maniac dance" (110) of Shelley's jubilee because they are harbingers and suzerains of the Promethean deep and imageless truth.[174] Their presence would be an inviolable incursion into an unholy stronghold of transparent quicksands and shifting perspectives.

Although each figure acts materially and "touches" the earthly realm of the poem with "living flame," the "deep truth" which they embody prevents them from taking part in life's pageant. Furthermore, Socrates and Christ are martyrs, and their "native noon" is

[173] "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry." 1900. *Selected Criticism*. Macmillan & CO. 1964. p. 78.
[174] "the deep truth is imageless" (2.4.116). *Prometheus Unbound*.

a realm driven not only by transcendence but also thanatos; as Shelley commands—longingly –in *Adonais* (1821), "Die, / If thou woudst be with that which thou dost seek! / Follow where all is fled!" (52.464-66). *The Triumph of Life* does not expose the otherworldly idealism of Shelley and Romanticism. Neither does it expose, as McGann concludes, an ideology that is "time and place specific."[175] It takes the attempt to enact and represent any kind of exposure, whether aesthetic or ideological, a step beyond *Prometheus Unbound*, where the deep truth is a reality, though invisible and inaccessible. *The Triumph of Life* cannot produce a clear image of life or reveal the depths of life's truth because Shelley is no longer interested in offering up or chasing after truth-content. The veil does not drop to reveal the essence of reality but drapes itself over the journey to drop it; vision of the truth is conceived not as an integration of collective history into individual memory but as the erasure of a memory suffering from the weight and influence of collective history.

The relation of past to present, in other words, dictates the fate of the future. But the cliché is made more profound and complicated by the dramatic perspective of *The Triumph of Life*. There is now no gospel of truth, no spell to break the conqueror's imprisoning veil, and the poem "works" by forgetting to answer its question, "Then, what is Life?" (544). The question becomes the placeholder for the content that is left outside of it, never to be inscribed within it. It excludes the possibility of exclusion. For all its manic dance and mad yearnings, *The Triumph of Life* exhales an ataraxic breath which Shelley described in an 1821 letter to Thomas Medwin: "My mind is at peace respecting nothing so much as the constitution & mysteries of the great system of things—my curiosity on this point never amounts to solicitude" (*Letters* II; 341). It seems as if

[175] *The Romantic Ideology*. p. 123.

Shelley is trying to join his "sacred few," for poetry so fraught with the experience of life's contagion cannot be composed by its sufferer. The sad irony is that Shelley keeps them company only by never completing the poem.

Enacting and representing the chaos of what appears to the consciousness of its captives and participants, the poem celebrates a phenomenology that we as readers, and, as the poem suggests, life's captives, cannot pass beyond. By including itself in its own devastating critique of thought, language, and art, the work is a central text in the history of Romanticism. Rousseau, whom Shelley credits and blames for the revolutionary upheaval of his historical epoch, is described by the poet-speaker as "one [who] with the weight / Of his own words is staggered" (196-97). Following this description of self-generating suffering, of a closed system that is open only to the energy that ensures its continued immurement, Rousseau directs the poet-speaker's attention to the great figures of the Enlightenment and diagnoses not only their failure but also the Enlightenment's and his own. Surprisingly, and what revealed to Shelley the degree of rot to which Enlightenment progress had arrived, thought itself is presented as cancerous. Whereas in *Hellas* (1821), the prophetic lyrical drama describing Greek independence, "Thought / Alone, and its quick elements, Will, Passion, / Reason, Imagination, cannot die" (795-97), Shelley's last poem regards as the greatest threat to thought, thought itself:

> 'If I have been extinguished, yet there rise
> A thousand beacons from the spark I bore.'—
> 'And who are those chained to the car?' 'The Wise,
>
> 'The Great, the unforgotten: they who wore

Mitres and helms and crowns, or wreaths of light,
Signs of thought's empire over thought; their lore

'Taught them not this—to know themselves; their might
Could not repress the mutiny within,
And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night

'Caught them ere evening.' (206-215)

If Rousseau did not fully live according to the Socratic injunction, know thyself, then at least he wrote from a source within himself of free consciousness and intention. Hence, the "thousand beacons from the spark [he] bore." As Paul de Man sees it, "Rousseau has overcome the discrepancy of action and intention that tears apart the historical world, and he has done so because his words have acquired the power of actions as well as of the will" (103).[176] The sparks that follow from Rousseau's admission, "If I have been extinguished […]" are more clearly explained in Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*. There, Dante's words lie paradoxically cold and extinguished: "His very words are instinct with spirit: each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought: and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lighting which has yet found no conductor" (*Norton* 528). But Rousseau's use of "bore" is problematic and suggests that he too is enslaved to "thought's empire over thought." He gives birth to these sparks, he penetrates the darkness of custom and ideology, but he also bores, as in he puts to sleep (the effect his *Confessions* had on Shelley), or, more relevant still to *The Triumph of Life*, he "consigns to perpetual slavery," generating his own

[176] "Shelley Disfigured."

ideology (*OED*). The accompanying Robert South quotation the OED provides for this definition reads, "Can any man, that would be faithful to his Reason, yield his Ear to be bored through by his domineering appetites." In other words, who can escape the captive multitude that cannot first "repress the mutiny within?"

Whereas in *Prometheus Unbound* the dropping of the veil is the clear historical and cultural telos, the moment when lion lays down with lamb, in Shelley's final work the apocalypse is quickly discarded in favor of a distinct individual vision, yet veiled twice over by two dramatic personas, the poet-narrator and Rousseau; Shelley "lifts not the painted veil" but embraces it.[177] And although the first line of the poem reveals a "spirit," a sign of the immaterial Romantic aesthetic, the spirit is "hastening to its *task*," a word that suggests exhaustion, boredom, and material duty (1; my emphasis). That the task is one "Of glory & of good" makes the light at the beginning of the poem only more ironic, since later the sun's radiance is outshone by a light stronger than reason, the blinding lights of desire and the passions which corrupt justice and prevent virtue. Looking further back into the history of poetry, Rousseau identifies the antidote to the "mutiny within," these passions and desires. It is made up of a decidedly non-Romantic aesthetic, what Schiller called naive poetry, where the poet *is* nature rather than seeking after it.[178]

> See the great bards of old who inly quelled
>
> 'The passions which they sung, as by their strain
>
> May well be known: their living melody

[177] "Sonnet (Lift not the painted veil)." 1820.
[178] *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*. 1795.

Tempers its own contagion to the vein

‘Of those who are infected with it—I

Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!— (274-79)

It is Rousseau’s suffering that lights the “thousand beacons” into the future. The profound shift in the relation of artist to art which Shelley refers to here entails a larger claim for an equally profound shift in the relation of aesthetics to history. In the Defence when Shelley argues that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (*Norton* 535) he has in mind the “living melody [that] / Tempers its own contagion to the vein / Of those who are infected with it.” “[T]he trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire” are the “great bards of old / who inly quelled / The passions which they sung.”

The analogy to Schiller’s distinction between sentimental and naïve poets could not be clearer. The aesthetic revolution that constitutes Rousseau’s writings, and which were a contributing cause of The French Revolution, is the distance between living from history and living at history. The “mutiny within” escapes the interior passions of the individual and becomes the very political and ethical system which tries to quell the same passions of which they are comprised. The “living melody” of the “great bards of old,” though able to set the foundation for the possibility of *The Triumph of Life*, will not be heard or heeded there, and is in direct opposition to the “vital alchemy” (402) that initiates Rousseau’s new vision upon encountering the “shape all light.” History, along with the aesthetic articulations that represent it and are produced by it, is now alchemical from the perspective of the poem’s historical consciousness, yet there is no philosopher’s

stone which will turn it into gold. In fact, the effect is quite the opposite, demonstrated when Rousseau's "brain became as sand" (405). The alchemical structure defines also the "thousand beacons" born from Rousseau's single spark, and in the poem their light moves entropically. The spirit of the age from which Shelley tries to compose a poem that constitutes its "living melody," almost certainly not to change it but rather hear and understand it, demands change. The reform efforts that Shelley has in mind at this point in his life are more internalized and personal than social. Trying to put back the pieces of broken social justice or shattered equalities between different classes of people is a fight against a particular form of entropy, one that the poem attempts to turn into an aesthetic program. If the world will not change, or cannot change, if it remains a purgatory, then perhaps the solution is to undergo a purgation of perception on the individual level.

William Hazlitt, who understood the spirit of the age just as well as Shelley, wrote of Shelley's poetry, "Where we see the dazzling beacon-lights streaming over the darkness of the abyss, we dread the quicksands and the rocks below."[179] His charge against Shelley's writings—he called *The Triumph of Life* Shelley's "dance of death"—was that it was too preoccupied with its author's own scheme, that there was an overabundance of individual "fancy" and a dearth of natural, universal experience. Hazlitt's commentary on Shelley is remarkable for its accuracy. If history has disabused many literary critics from some of the biographical clichés and aesthetic judgments the piece indulges, then the force and clarity of Hazlitt's views on Shelley and his thought remain relevant and instructive to this day. Ironically, and what might have surprised Hazlitt had he been able to read more of Shelley's political and moral prose, his

[179] "Review of Shelley, Posthumous Poems." *Edinburgh Review* 40 (1824).

commentary on Shelley offers its audience many of the same moral principles that form the dizzying tensions in *The Triumph of Life*.

> To be convinced of the existence of wrong, we should read history rather than poetry: the levers with which we must work out our regeneration are not the cobwebs of the brain, but the warm, palpitating fibres of the human heart. It is the collision of passions and interests, the petulance of party-spirit, and the perversities of self-will and self-opinion that have been the great obstacles to social improvement — not stupidity or ignorance; and the caricaturing one side of the question and shocking the most pardonable prejudices on the other, is not the way to allay heats or produce unanimity. By flying to the extremes of skepticism, we make others shrink back, and shut themselves up in the strongholds of bigotry and superstition — by mixing up doubtful or offensive matters with salutary and demonstrable truths, we bring the whole into question, flyblow the cause, risk the principle, and give a handle and a pretext to the enemy to treat all philosophy and all reform as a compost of crude, chaotic, and monstrous absurdities.

To an extent both relentless and historical, Shelley's poem explores the "levers with which we must work out our regeneration." He concludes, like Hazlitt, that "the cobwebs of the brain," prone to enslavement by "thought's empire over thought" (*TL*; 211) produce unreliable, and often insidious consequences; yet unlike Hazlitt, Shelley is more skeptical of the regenerative effects of the "palpitating fibres of the human heart." He seeks first to understand the nature and motivations of those "fibres," their vulnerabilities

and strengths. He next wants to settle whether the human heart can overcome the "cobwebs of the brain," since *The Triumph of Life* manifests his suspicion that these same cobwebs dust the heart also. Shelley understands in *The Triumph of Life*, in a way that Hazlitt does not when writing about Shelley's poetry, how even the best human heart quickly succumbs to the "mutiny within" (213). The "collision of passions and interests" might as well be Shelley's opposition between "power & will" (228). When Hazlitt argues that by "flying to the extremes skepticism, we make others shrink back, and shut themselves up in the extremes of bigotry and superstition," he does not know that Shelley has already agreed with him. In what reads as a recantation of Shelley's early philosophical commitments, he writes in *On Life* that

> The shocking absurdities of the popular philosophy of mind and matter, and its fatal consequences in morals, their violent dogmatism concerning the source of all things, had early conducted me to materialism. This materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds. It allows its disciples to talk and dispenses them from thinking (*Norton* 506).

Hazlitt's "crude, chaotic, and monstrous absurdities" are no different from Shelley's "shocking" ones; each is the outcome of, and each can be attributed to, the idea that the future is progressing along the visible and determinable laws of nature. There is an implicit agreement that the world within and the world without cohere. But in his last years, and in this last work, such an agreement is put to a test of both history and poetry. The outcome shows that history is veiled and poetry veils it. Another veil, one which must rise rather than drop is required to undermine the shocking absurdities of the "popular philosophy of mind and matter." Revealing not the meaning of suffering, but

how suffering and meaning are the ingredients of a history that suffers what it means. Each new spark that gives rise to new beacons of light are potential "delusive flames" that will blind those who worship or derive inspiration from them. To see each flame as delusive is to indulge a paralyzing skepticism, which the poem resists. Not the ignition of the sparks of history but their extinguishment is the intention of *The Triumph of Life*.

Giving rise to a "thousand beacons" from a single spark is Shelley's hope and fear too, and *The Triumph of Life* articulates how that hope stultifies into fear. As many recent commentators on the poem mention, the poem's "signs of thought's empire over thought" names ideology, the way in which the imagination can turn against itself, the way in which external power conditions consciousness under the guise of individual freedom and will. Shelley's poetry suggests that when the creative mind imagines only according to the processes and structures of a collective and social light, such as the Enlightenment, then light itself becomes blinding. "Their might / Could not repress the mutiny within, / And for the morn of truth they feigned" is both difficult poetry to parse and yet intuitively clear, much like the whole thematic effect of *The Triumph of Life*. The "mutiny within" produced and corrupted the Enlightenment, according to Shelley, and the linguistic and thematic forces of *The Triumph of Life* reflect this double bind. The "morn of truth" appears in the poem's opening as the sun, "the birth / Of light" (6-7). It is Enlightenment hope, the spirit of reason, science, and progress. But soon enough its light becomes an imposition and tyranny to the world that must "toil" (19) under its radiance:

> And in succession due, did Continent,
>
> Isle, ocean, and all things that in them wear

The form and character of mortal mold

Rise as the Sun their father rose, to bear

Their portion of the toil which he of old

Took as his own and then imposed on them; (15-20)

"And in succession due, did […]" echoes the dullness and dreariness of the earlier "task." The hierarchical system into which Continent, Isle, and ocean are placed also reveals the presence of an external force driving their purpose. Even the sun must "take," or bear, the very work he imposed on others. The power of an immense inner necessity darkens the poem's opening stanzas even as the darkness gives way to a light. "[T]he mask / Of darkness [falls] from the awakened Earth" (3-4) at the beginning of the poem, yet the poet-narrator does not benefit from this perceived apocalypse; instead he falls into a "strange trance […] / which was not slumber," seeing things through a transparent shade that is like a "veil of light" (29-32).

It is this peculiar light that catches the attention of Forest Pyle, who understands it in terms of Walter Benjamin's conception of the "aura." Pyle argues that the "illusory phenomenon" of the poet-narrator's trance is the auratic lens through which the vision of the poem must be experienced (59).[180] "If from a genuinely historical perspective the aura of the work of art decays," Pyle says, emphasizing Benjamin's description of it in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility" (1936), "from the perspective of the auratic experience itself, its vanishing is registered with the shock of something shattered" (43). He continues, again according to Benjamin's evolving conception of the aura, "[t]he 'mystified experience of the aura' makes us believe that an object, namely the

[180] *Art's Undoing: In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014.

work of art, can return the gaze of the beholder" (43). What the reader of *The Triumph of Life* confronts is a shattering of Shelleyan Eros and the redemptive hope that *Prometheus Unbound* voiced. In its comprehensive presentation of figures of intellectual and philosophical history, the history of the Poets, as Shelley would have it, it becomes clear how difficult it is to construct a history that might become the basis for democratic hope and progress. Since "utopia," a word and idea frequently attributed to Shelley's project as an artist, means "no place," *The Triumph of Life* could rightly be called his most utopian work. Its landscape is both nonhuman and human, no place and the *only* place. The world the poem describes is filled with shadows, shades, skeletons, and many different competing lights that seem both to mock and affirm the limits of human knowledge and hope. In order to enter this realm of disturbing defeat, where neither Shelleyan Love nor imaginative participation in the eternal seems possible, the poet-narrator undergoes an apocalyptic reversal in which his perception is veiled. Bryan Shelley observes that the "promotion of self-knowledge[181] indicates a general movement in the opposite direction of biblical apocalyptic, for to know the self in the Shelleyan sense is to know the self as divine" (390).[182] Whereas in *Prometheus Unbound* Shelleyan divinity is present, described, and positively directed, *The Triumph of Life* brings the self into the harsh world of the historical present with veiled yet open eyes, not into a world transformed or into a world beyond the need of transformation.

It is the veiling effect the poem produces and cascades forward into a negative revelation with the "shape all light" that accounts for it as both historiography and living history. The poet-narrator experiences a rift in the prelusory moments of the poem that

[181] Bryan Shelley refers to "their lore / Taught them not this; to know themselves" (211-12).
[182] "The Interpreting Angel in 'The Triumph of Life.'" *The Review of English Studies* 39.155 (1988). 386-99.

grants him access to the reality of the poem's vision and also to a rift in how we access and understand reality itself. The poem's exploration of the realities of the world, the periods of conquest or liberty created by human pride or humility, is an exploration of how history demands a futural response, redemption of its failed promise. This begins with the peculiar nature of how and why the poet-narrator's perception is veiled.

Along with many other commentators on the poem, Pyle is right to put special emphasis on the "Vision on [the poet-narrator's] brain was rolled" (40): I can think of no better name for this illusory phenomenon than Benjamin's "aura"; and it is in this state that the triumphal "Vision" unfolds for the speaker. The auratic state or "spell," quite distinctly described as a veil produced from a trance, gives rise in the poem to a historical pageant that is, ironically, *the true image of history* as Benjamin calls it, "*das wahre Bild der Vergangeheit*," flashing up at this "moment of danger," a "Vision" that this speaker is singled out to behold. (59)

To think of *The Triumph of Life* as the "true" image of Shelley's conception of history, life, or language is to avoid the skepticism that the poem insists on. It is too reductive still if this idea is taken further, and understood as another version of Shelley's often-quoted "Nought may endure but Mutability"[183] or in this last work "How all things are transfigured, except Love," so that the poem's unanswered questions and opaque images become a monument or lament to the impossibility of earthly revelation or coherence between past, present, and future (476). Too reductive because I see a way in which the poem narrates a traceable connection between the past and the present. *The Triumph of Life* beholds its historical moment through this connection. Using Benjamin's aura to describe and explain it is one way to acknowledge it and achieve critical distance.

[183] "Mutability." 1814. 16.

But, like Benjamin's aura, Shelley's poem seems to have anticipated and overcome being reducible to a historical document. It has its own set of "eyes," in other words. We behold them each time we try to trace a coherent connection between the past and present. The veiling of the poet-narrator's perception before he experiences his vision anticipates our own experience reading the poem. And the poem reveals that this connection between past and present exists and is formed in the very way in which we choose to trace it.

Orrin Wang insists that "what remains impossible for *The Triumph of Life* to resolve is the final form of its narration; what remains—what, indeed, is poeticized—is the limit of its historical and critical consciousness" (64).[184] What I contend allows for this impossible resolve is the veiling effect produced by the actual vision. The "strange trance […] / which was not slumber" is actually history itself; the "veil of light" is the negative truth that all history, individual and collective, is narrated in a trance and experienced through a veil. *The Triumph of Life*, more so than other major works by Shelley, places and conditions us within this trance, since we witness, along with the poet-narrator, the pageantry of Enlightenment "progress," which marks a traceable lineage to our own present moment in history. The power of the poem is such that it does not exclude us from this pageantry, but, on the contrary, through its tragic hero, Rousseau, a figure whose beacons have yet to be extinguished, we suffer from our own version of auto-referentiality, the disturbing (or hopeful) thought that the future will take care of itself, that progress is assured either through a technological singularity, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, or any number of other cosmopolitan Frankensteins.

[184] *Fantastic Modernity: Dialectical Readings in Romanticism and Theory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996.

The fear Shelley's poem tries to elicit from its readers is whether history possesses intention, whether this mad pageantry is going anywhere in particular: "yet none seemed to know / Whither he went, or whence he came, or why / He made one of the multitude" (47-49). Rousseau's encounter with the "shape all light" intends an answer to the question of intention. It entails a promise which, according to the intentions of Rousseau's questions, is not kept:

> "To move, as one between desire and shame
> Suspended, I said—'If, as it doth seem,
> Thou comest from the realm without a name,
>
> "'Into this valley of perpetual dream,
> Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why—
> Pass not away upon the passing stream.' (394-99)

This "realm without a name" from which it seems the "shape all light" comes is similar to the "deep truth" of *Prometheus Unbound*. Indeed, Rousseau's encounter with the "fair shape" (412) and Asia's encounter with Demogorgon proceed along the same intentional lines, a coupling which to my knowledge has received no critical attention. Rousseau wrote in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, "In all the ills that befall us, we think more about the intention behind them than the effect of them" (87).[185] The consequence of this is that we blame fate or destiny when our misfortunes cannot be attributed to any other cause. Rousseau continues in the "Eighth Walk":

> In this way, a gambler, angered by his losses, flies into a fury, but he does not know against whom. He imagines a fate which is deliberately bent on

[185] *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. 1782. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.

> tormenting him, and finding something on which to feed his anger, he becomes incensed and enraged against the enemy he has created for himself. The wise man, who sees in all the misfortunes that befall him only the blows of blind necessity, has none of this mad agitation: he cries out in pain, but without losing his temper or getting angry; he feels only the physical effects of the evil to which he has fallen prey, and however much the blows may injure his body, not one of them can reach his heart. (87)

In light of Shelley's characterization of Rousseau in the poem as one who suffered what he wrote, the irony here of Rousseau's description of two models of victims, as he describes an individual who will not temper his soul to life's rigged game against him, reveals another realm without a name, "blind necessity." Seeing "only the blows of blind necessity" in life's suffering wheel of fortune is seeing their origin in the realm without a name, outside poetry, history, memory and, specifically, language. It is both the "no place" of utopia and the everywhere of how Shelley's poetry ultimate tends toward and refers to silence. The "adverting mind" of "Mont Blanc," which encounters a reality that might only be a "vacancy" to the silent and solitary individual who suffers his perception of it, returns in *The Triumph of Life* intending to gain reciprocity and acknowledgement from historical suffering. The "realm without a name," which excludes language, which is to say it includes and drives the impasse between a coincident relationship of word to thing, is the intercessor between "desire and shame," the cause and consequence of life's suffering in the poem.

That Shelley chooses to rhyme "shame" with "name" is essential for at least two reasons: first, the men whom he identifies by name in the poem are figures of shame in the larger discourse of Enlightenment history; and, second, the naming of things, human and nonhuman, immediately places them within a historical structure and lineage, chains them to the triumph of life. It eliminates the "vital alchemy" of Poetry, the way in which the "shape all light" answers Rousseau. Demogorgon, itself often identified as blind necessity, answers Asia's inquiry into "who made terror, madness, crime, remorse, / Which from the links of the great chain of things / To every thought within the mind of man / Sway and drag heavily" with "He [God] reigns" (2.4.19-22 and 28). To which Asia shouts back, "Utter his name—a world pining in pain / Asks but his name; curses shall drag him down" (29-30). Again, Demogorgon responds, "He reigns" (31). Rousseau does not ask the "shape all light" her name. He displays an acceptance and resignation, as all the other figures do in *The Triumph of Life*, of, if not the precise definition and name of the surrounding world, then that this is the world. It is not a question of curses or blessings, revolutions or unbindings, but of the personal relational ties to the present reality. Rousseau is not trying to escape; he is trying to understand. The "shape all light" responds to him:

> "'Arise and quench thy thirst,' was her reply.
> And as a shut lily, stricken by the wand
> Of dewy morning's vital alchemy,
>
> "I rose; and, bending at her sweet command,
> Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,

And suddenly my brain became as sand

"Where the first wave had more than half erased
The track of deer on desert Labrador,
Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed

"Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore
Until the second vision bursts—so on my sight
Burst a new Vision never seen before.— (400-11)

The Shape offers Rousseau satiety, a quenching not only of thirst but, more generally, desire. The result, however, is not, like in the before mentioned passages from *Prometheus Unbound* and the *Defence*, another endless string of "wants" but a rebirth and new vision, a "bursting" of his perception. Not a new reality, since the figures, shapes, and actions that Rousseau now comes to witness remain as grim and stultified as the poet-narrator's vision at the poem's beginning, but rather a new vision.

The new vision is a new way of seeing the world before his eyes, a world that thirsts for, as de Man put it, "origins," "directions," and "identity."[186] The effect of Asia's dialogue with Demogorgon was a guiding plenitude and teleological marking of what was inevitably to come. Demogorgon offered the keys to a kingdom that Shelley represented as a historical possibility. The future, unstable and open to reactionary turns, was nevertheless imagined, represented and sealed. *The Triumph of Life* goes a step further, or rather begins in an anterior realm within the seat of power itself, the human brain. "And suddenly my brain became as sand" names the moment when the "realm without a name"

[186] "Shelley Disfigured." p. 97.

approaches human sensory perception. It enjoins the buried body both to the dirt that covers it and the soul that desires liberation from it. Rousses guide in his journey through this hellish world, which is the world as Shelley understands it, purges ideology—for lack of a better word—from his brain. He is lifted from the suffering of what he wrote into the "thousand beacons" that arose from it. The regenerative and restorative center of the poem is here, when Rousseau witnesses a dance of "savage music, stunning music" (435). The experience is reminiscent of the imagery in Shelley's sonnet "England in 1819":

> ……..
> Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;
> A senate, Time's worst statute, unrepealed—
> Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may
> Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day. (11-14)

The bursting is not subjunctive in *The Triumph of Life* but known and actual. The glorious Phantoms are all around but it is their lights that are tempestuous. There is another instance of bursting and tempestuous life may help explain the effect Rousseau's drinking of the Shape's cup has on his perception. An earlier dance in the poem is described as

> Maidens and youths fling their wild arms in air
> As their feet twinkle; now recede and now
> Bending within each other's atmosphere

Kindle invisibly; and as they glow

Like moths by light attracted and repelled,

Oft to new bright destruction come and go; (149-54)

The "bright destruction" which marks both youth, the dance, history, and the aesthetic movements of the poem, is new destruction, growth. It is kept new by continually destroying itself in its brightness. It relates both to the light of "severe excess" (424) in which Rousseau attunes his vision after his brain becomes sand and also to "'The thickest billows of the living storm / [to which Rousseau] plunged, and bared [his] bosom to the clime / Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform.—(466-68).

By harnessing and reanimating this wild energy, which Yeats thought was destroyed by "conscious art," the poem prevents its overcoming by history. It "pass[es] not away upon the passing stream" (399) of time. The poem's contortions, deformations, distortions, ghastly masks, skeletons and shadows, as bleak and grim as they feel, are the relics of the cold glare of a historical awareness that understands history as progressing toward one light of progress after another. The hope of *The Triumph of Life* is that it knows what life looks like in the light, an implacable and indomitable conqueror. It emits its own "living melody" by escaping the extremes of a world that might be too much with us and one that might not be there at all. Its visionary figures anticipate the future in which we read them, by existing in the very threads of history itself, veiled in the light of ancient knowledge and progress. *The Triumph of Life* at once epitomizes Romanticism's obsession with the nonhuman, natural world and its indifference to thinking that does not respond or take into account the moral and aesthetic effects this world produces. Far from being an unfinished fragment on the meaninglessness of human existence, the work

showcases that human existence is always already an unfinished fragment. For this very reason, it should be read as both complete and, more importantly, a joyful expression of ceaseless questionings, of its incompleteness.

CONCLUSION
The Future of Shelley

This is the strife which stirs the liquid surface of man's life.
—*The Witch of Atlas*

The questions that I have tried to raise in this study resist clear-cut answers. Perhaps this is inevitable when interrogating subjects as capacious as history, the future, ethics, love, poetry and the self. As the pressing concerns of Shelley's poetry and thought, one would expect that such notions would clearly reveal themselves in his work—and they do, consistently and loudly. Yet Shelley's poetry possesses a quality that challenges the easily recognizable goals of his ethico-political rhetoric, his egalitarian and progressive commitments. His poetry, particularly the work written for a select audience, is veiled with the self-evidence of prophecy, which achieves the effect of both obscuring and enabling interpretation. One thinks of T. S. Eliot's famous remark that "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood," an observation he makes talking about Dante, a poet in whom he saw the future trajectory of Shelley's work.[187] Or Yeats comes to mind, when he reminisces that after reading *Prometheus Unbound* he "went to a learned scholar to ask about its deep meanings, which [he] felt more than understood."[188] Using a postmodern critical verbiage, the contemporary poet Michael Palmer describes a similar attribute of Shelley's poetry: "[He] represents a radical alterity […], a poetry that risks speaking to the central human and social occasions of its time, yet speaks from a

[187] "Dante: *The Inferno*." 1929. *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975. p. 206.
[188] "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry." 1900. *W. B. Yeats: Selected Criticism*. Ed. A. Norman Jeffares. London: Macmillan, 1964. p. 53-4.

decentered and largely invisible space. It exploits the margins to speak as it will, out of difference, rather than as it is always importuned and rewarded, out of sameness."[189]

In trying to account for the precise quality Shelley's poetry manifests, each author identifies a boundary that marks the relationship of the concealed to the visible.[190] This relationship has the effect of paradox, in that it makes the latent seem to speak in Shelley's poetry, while seeming to suppress a great deal of literal content under the shadow of myth and allegory. And so the reader begins to imagine the difference of the work (in both form and content) by way of a sustained disruption in the work itself and the social forms it critiques. The very ironic inarticulacy that accounts for this disruption enables the possibility of the orphic dance of language that conceals the deep truth that it sings. The poetry, then, addresses what is beneath, above, and ahead of us through the unjust realities of its present; like the epigraph to the *Prometheus Unbound* volume, "Do you hear this, Amphiarus, hidden away under the earth"?, Shelley's defiant summons against the ghosts of the past represents the embrace of, in Palmer's words, a radical future alterity. Thus, the force of his work, which is both hidden and visible, "more felt than understood," derives from its strong communicable bond with the future—that allegory of chance, possibility and hope that is so difficult to represent in words that will speak to and apprehend moments other than their own.

It is likewise, as I have tried to demonstrate, with Shelley's understanding of moral agency. The threat of Wordsworthian self-isolation or Romantic self-dissolution begins when the mind makes other people mere instruments for its own desires, when

[189] "Some Notes on Shelley, Poetics and the Present." 1991. *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*. New York: New Directions, 2008. p. 204.
[190] I realize that Eliot's remark directly applies to Dante's, not Shelley's, poetry. I am arguing, of course, from the premise that Shelley's is "genuine" poetry.

there is no possibility for experiencing sympathy, beauty or love. But this gap between the idolatrous and Promethean self is more complex than the difference between narcissism and charity. The "sweet bondage" that characterizes a healthy moral will is distinguished from the delusive autonomy of someone who shares neither sympathy nor love with the larger social community. The difference entails, to use Shelley's word, a chasm of desire by which one is either enslaved or liberated. I have argued that Shelley's idea of imaginative love, the going out of ourselves, represents the transformative act of Shelley's moral order. It seems to me that so much of his poetry is eruptive and incantatory because the rhetoric parallels the moral aim of expanding what he imagines as the narrow circumference of self. In the *Defence* Francis Bacon is praised for his supreme poetry, which accomplishes multiple ends, according to Shelley:

> Lord Bacon was a poet. His language has a sweet and majestic rhythm, which satisfies the sense, no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect; it is a strain which distends, and then bursts the circumference of the hearer's mind, and pours itself forth together with it into the universal element with which it has perpetual sympathy.[191]

Here Shelley conceives the perfect admixture of self, other, and Poetry. Transforming the auditor into a participant of the eternally beautiful, good, and true, Bacon's words cast a wide moral net in their facilitation of sympathy. Such is the effect of poetry on the moral and social order. Because poetry is a moral as well as historical fact in the world, according to Shelley, it guides the progress of both individuals and cultures.

[191] *Norton*, p. 515.

As one reads deeper into the *Defence of Poetry*, which I think is best read as a poem that addresses the future ends of poetry, a horizon of hope comes to dominate the passages dedicated to imagination, morality, and love. Within the boundary of this horizon is where Shelley's concept of self fully emerges as future-oriented and chance-determined. I do not mean chance in the sense of accident or contingency, but rather with the idea in mind of the fantastic possibility of upending the bounds of the egotistic self. At the beginning of this study I remarked how Shelley conceives a poet's influence on the future, that poets have the power of making the futures out of which contemporary conditions arise by imagining appointments that can only be met by other poets. The claim that poets are the "mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present" is a specular metaphor not only for a certain kind of cultural progress but also for a kind of individual liberation.[192] The works of poets, and the workings of the poetic process, are telescopic lenses through which the individual sees himself at a distance. It is this distancing effect that inheres in Shelley's strongest poetry that allows the individual to ethically address both the future and the human collective. Whether confronting the cosmic awe that Mont Blanc inspires, addressing the West Wind that is everywhere and nowhere, or speaking in the voice of "what was once Rousseau" to a triumphal pageant of Enlightenment figures, the poetry makes available the difference between humanity at its superficial and humane level, the "difference between social and individual man."[193]

This difference equates to no less than the foundation of moral knowledge for Shelley. Palmer's remark that Shelley speaks out of difference rather than from sameness echoes the kind of differences that so consumed Shelley's moral attention, which are not

[192] *Norton*, p. 535.
[193] "Speculations on Morals," p. 82.

the visible and superficial differences that belong to groups and masses, but the internal differences that belong to individuals' hopes and desires, fears and repulsions. The more a person's actions directly influence the happiness or misery of another, the nearer those actions are to the essential character of the person: "these [actions] flow from a profounder source than the series of our habitual conduct, which […] derives its origin from without."[194] For Shelley individuals are most indistinguishable from one another when they fail to take into account their differences, fail to see beyond the present moment and those external circumstances that brought it into existence. This failure marks an obsession with the past and a blindness to the future, the beginning of vengeance and self-contempt.

In the *Defence* the two names that Shelley employs to describe his Manichean view of reality, Self and Poetry, which he further translates twice over into Mammon and God, Money and Love, have formed the basis for my examination of his theory of self. Self is the great problem for Shelleyan ethics, and love, as I have argued, is the great answer. The Promethean moment of escape from self-contempt, self-hatred, and self-obsession, recurs each time we make a decision that is selflessly future-oriented. Forgiveness becomes an act of both recollection and erasure in that it conjures up the demons of the past, the Phantasm of Jupiter, in order to slay them. But before assuming a perspective that can change the present by summoning the chance that feeds on the future, we must forgive ourselves, so to speak, since the Phantasm of Jupiter is the embodied self-hatred that Prometheus feels for himself. Shelley conceives love as the generative force that creates the chasm-vacancy from which the phantasms of self can either be sealed or called forth into redemption. Shelley forever wrestled with the fact

[194] Ibid.

that every person, himself especially, is marked with a Jupiter and a Prometheus, as well as Furies to torment each; this condition was the "mutiny within" he tried to quell, guide and transform. Poetry became the ethical instrument of change in a world not yet ready to hear it.

In a fragment consisting of three short observations on aesthetics posthumously entitled *Three Fragments on Beauty*, Shelley writes in the last that

> It is sweet to feel the beauties of nature in every pulsation, in every nerve—but it is far sweeter to be able to express this feeling to one who loves you. To feel all that is divine in the green-robed earth and the starry sky is a penetrating yet vivid pleasure which, when it is over, presses like the memory of misfortune; but if you can express those feelings—if, secure of sympathy (for without sympathy it is worse than the taste of those apples whose core is as bitter ashes), if thus secure you can pour forth into another's most attentive ear the feelings by which you are entranced, there is an exultation of spirit in the utterance—a glory of happiness which far transcends all human transports, and seems to invest the soul as the saints are with light, with a halo untainted, holy, and undying.[195]

This powerfully envisioned Edenic scene evokes as well as suppresses all the players: Adam, Eve, an apple, and even the illumined saints recall Lucifer.[196] Its subtle eroticism only adds to the sensuousness of the description, further reinforcing Shelley's likening of

[195] Ingpen & Peck *VII*, p. 154. Note on the text explains, "First published by Dr. Garnett in Relics o Shelley, 1862, where they are dated 1821. The title is H. Buxton Forman's." p. 359. Timothy Clark speculates that Mary and not Percy Shelley might be the actual author of this text. See note 28 in "Shelley's 'The Coliseum' and the Sublime." *Durham University Journal* 85.54 (1993): 225-235.
[196] The image of a substance being poured forth into another's ear also evokes the king's poison in *Hamlet*.

poetry to the oracular and enchanted. This brief account of the inspired effect of language pitched into poetry is remarkable for its suggestion that it makes the secular sacred. But what humanizes the familiar Shelleyan poetics here is a simple scene of love between two people. Their sympathetic relationship makes available each other's heart's desire. The poetry inspired by nature's beauty expands the circumference of their sense of self. The whole sublime "glory of happiness" seems limited only by imagination's power to breath fresh utterances, and the number of auditors to receive their inspired effect. And, like so much of Shelley's work, beneath the sublime hope and optimism lies something darker. The bitter apple's ash is always at the center of both the scene and the self, just as hope must "create from its own wreck the thing it contemplates."

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