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THE POLITICS OF LYRIC: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF SHELLEY'S FORMS

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*For my comrades in GSU:
Ye are many, they are few!*

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Abstract

The Politics of Lyric: A Social History of Shelley's Forms analyzes, from the standpoint of class politics, Percy Bysshe Shelley's central role in the Romantic shift in the hierarchy of genres, the development of theories of the lyric genre, and the effects of these developments on twentieth-century critical theory and poetics. Drawing on recent theoretical discussions of lyricization, I argue that Shelley is not simply another historical example of the lyricization of genre, but is rather the historical locus and origin of lyricization, and that the process was a cultural aspect of class struggle during the period designated by E. P. Thompson as that of *The Making of the English Working Class*. Finally, I argue that Shelley's late works provide a latent theory of historical poetics, at the dawn of historicism itself, through what I term Shelley's historical form, or form infused with history.

The first chapter, "*Queen Mab* and the Making of the English Working Class," tracks the remarkable publishing history of Shelley's first serious poetic work in what I call an experiment in the social history of the book. Drawing on works of social history (E. P. Thompson, Iorwerth Prothero) and plebeian studies (Iain McCalman) and informed by recent developments in the history of the book and materiality studies, I delve into what McCalman calls the "radical underworld" of literary piracy, subversive media, and revolutionary politics to follow the trajectory of *Queen Mab* from a privately printed and expensive edition, barely read when it was published in 1813, to a slew of pirated editions, which made it one of the most widely read books in the Romantic period, and a central piece in the working class literary canon. The chapter concludes with a reading of *Queen Mab* that shows how it advanced beyond the radicalism of Thomas Paine into a proto-socialism, and how the work was formally keyed for different audiences.

The second chapter, “Shelley, Inc.: Cultural Incorporation and Class Politics,” turns from the canonization of Shelley among the English working class to the canonization of Shelley for the bourgeois reading audience. This entailed the formation of what has been known as the Shelley Myth—perhaps best captured by Matthew Arnold’s characterization of Shelley as “an ineffectual angel”—but which I reconsider through the lens of lyricization, again maintaining the vantage of class politics, and what I call cultural incorporation. Taking inspiration from Andrew Elfenbein’s analysis of Byronism, I argue that Shelley’s cultural incorporation in the period after his death was a multifaceted and multimedia process required to make an excluded body of work digestible for general cultural consumption. This process likewise required that Shelley’s corpus be cleansed of diseased elements—his most radical political and religious writing—while Shelley’s physical body was posthumously transformed. Maintaining a focus on book history, I analyze the early editions of Shelley’s work after his death to complicate the traditional picture of Shelley’s reception while also challenging the account of Mary Shelley’s role as Shelley’s primary editor by establishing, for the first time, that she cooperated with the radical literary pirates in keeping Shelley’s work in print during the period that Shelley’s father banned his work from publication. The chapter concludes with an analysis of how aspects of Shelley’s biography were incorporated into the character Will Ladislaw in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* as an example of the ways in which multiple media and genres must be considered in the process of cultural incorporation.

The third chapter, “Lyrical Incorporation and Historical Poetics,” analyzes how one aspect of the process of Shelley’s cultural incorporation—literary criticism—had profound effects on the Romantic rearrangement of the traditional hierarchy of poetic genres, elevating lyric poetry as the purest form of poetic production. In the process, I claim that Shelley’s case is

not just an example of lyricization, but something closer to the historical origin and locus of lyricization. Virginia Jackson's influential account of lyricization, I contend, is itself built upon the lyrical incorporation of Shelley in the Victorian period. I argue that understanding the critical debate—between John Stuart Mill and the utilitarians, on the one hand, and the Cambridge Apostles, on the other—over the value of Shelley's work in the liminal period from 1824–1840, which Richard Cronin has called that of the “Romantic-Victorians, requires close attention to now-discarded psychological and physiological theories, as well as the historical poetics of early Victorian critical theory, and the socio-political conditions informing these discourses. I conclude by placing the debate in the broader political context of the 1832 Reform Bill and renewed radical struggle to claim that the lyricization of his body was an ideological maneuver against the body of thought that most fully presented in these years a leftist challenge to the liberal ideology of utilitarian reform.

The fourth chapter, “‘The Mask of Anarchy’ as Historically Real Prophecy,” remains situated around the 1832 Reform Bill, when Leigh Hunt first published the poem, but keeps a dual focus on 1819–20, the culmination of Thompson's “heroic age of popular radicalism,” in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre, when Shelley composed the poem. I offer a new reading of the poem through Erich Auerbach's essay “Figura” to claim that Shelley presents a contemporary, secular version of what was known in the Judeo-Christian hermeneutic tradition as “historically real prophecy.” The reading responds both to Hunt's preface, which presents the poem as a prophecy fulfilled by the passage of the Reform Bill, in effect depoliticizing the poem by reducing its politics to the liberal-utilitarian strain that triumphed over the radicalism of the workers and artisans, as well as to questions about the problems of agency, political action, and nonviolence that have been raised by various critics. But I also follow Anne Janowitz in reading

“The Mask of Anarchy” in the context of the ultra-radicalism of the period, identifying shared political concerns, tropes, ideas, and forms. To this end, the chapter begins with George Cannon’s defense of the freedom of conscience, the fascinating pamphlet *A Few Hints Relative to the Texture of Mind, and the Manufacture of Conscience*, written when his comrade and collaborator Robert Wedderburn, a Jamaican ex-slave, was imprisoned for blasphemous libel during the crackdown after Peterloo. The chapter ends with another fascinating pamphlet, William Benbow’s 1832 *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes*, generally accepted as the origin of the concept of the general strike in England, which I suggest shares certain fundamental conceptual structures with Shelley’s “Mask,” and represents a flashpoint in the development of class consciousness.

The fifth chapter, “The Politics of Historical Form: Shelley’s Late Lyrics,” presents an extended reading of Shelley’s most famous lyric poem, the “Ode to the West Wind,” in the context of his late work in general, meant to establish Shelley’s own revolutionary historical poetics, exemplified in the poem by the constellation of poetic forms from different historical eras, brought into productive tension, and by the juxtaposition of two metaphorical models of historical change: the cycle and the event. I establish the affinity between Shelley’s historical poetics and the philosophy of history of Walter Benjamin, as well as T. W. Adorno’s negative dialectics. In the process, I take up the arguments of the modernists and New Criticism that meant to demote Shelley in the literary canon, if not to eliminate him entirely. In conclusion, I turn to the book again, this time Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), in which the Ode was first published, to argue that the book itself is a form relevant to any close reading of the lyrics published in the volume following the titular lyrical drama. This reading as whole, I argue,

presents a counter to the New Critical dictum to focus only on the “text” of the poem, while hoping to preserve a model for close reading.

In a brief coda, “Toward 1848,” I turn outward to consider the horizons I hope to have made visible by this work. I argue, telegraphically, that the dramatic monologue, the novel lyric form of the Victorian period, must be understood in dialectical relation to Romanticism, and to Shelley in particular. 1840 also marks the waning of the Chartist Movement and the retrenchment of working-class radicalism, but also the beginning of the period of the development of the key early works of Marx and Engels leading up to the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. I argue that there is still much work to be done to establish how the radicalism and early socialist movements in England from 1789–1840, deeply influenced by Shelley, created the context of working-class radicalism and praxis in which Marx and Engels developed communist theory in the 1840s and beyond.

Introduction

In the preface to the second edition of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, published in 1947, William Empson owns up to a mistake. He notes that his “method of verbal analysis is of course the main point of the book,” but that he also had subsidiary aims that had to do with the critical climate at the time that the first edition was published in 1930:

At that time Mr. T. S. Eliot’s criticism in particular, and the *Zeitgeist* in general, were calling for a reconsideration of the claims of the nineteenth-century poets so as to get them into perspective with the newly discovered merits of Donne, Marvell, and Dryden. It seemed that one could only enjoy both groups by approaching them with different and incompatible presuppositions, and that this was one of the great problems which a critic ought to tackle. My feeling now is not so much that what I wrote about the nineteenth century was wrong as that I was wrong in tackling it with so much effort and preparation. There is no need to be so puzzled about Shelley.¹

This is no mere change of heart. Between 1930 and 1947, the New Criticism, in its heyday, waged an all-out war on Shelley. Irving Babbitt, Eliot’s teacher at Harvard, sounded the alarm already in *Rousseau and Romanticism* in 1919, seeing Shelley’s high position in the canon by the end of the nineteenth century as “a veritable danger signal, an indication of some grave spiritual bewilderment in the present age.”² Eliot, rejecting his youthful enthusiasm for Shelley, came to see the problem posed by Shelley’s work as one of belief: he was a gifted poet, but the ideas and beliefs in his work were unacceptable.³ F. R. Leavis then responded to Eliot by arguing that the poetry itself was rotten, not just the system of ideas, beliefs, and values. The New Critics piled

¹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. viii.

² Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), p. 359.

³ See T.S. Eliot, “Shelley and Keats,” *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. Jason Harding and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

on: Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom—they all took the opportunity to disparage Shelley, not just as a confused and idealistic revolutionary, but simply as a bad poet.

Responding to the situation in 1939, C. S. Lewis summed up Shelley's fall from Parnassus: "Few poets have suffered more than Shelley from the modern dislike of the Romantics. It is natural that this should be so. His poetry is, to an unusual degree, entangled in political thought, and in a kind of political thought now generally unpopular."⁴ Empson's admission, then, can be taken as an index of a broader critical shift that occurred between the wars, coextensive with the rise of New Criticism (and of Nazism and Fascism). Part of what I hope this work shows is that Empson was correct in 1930: there was, and still is, good reason to be puzzled about Shelley.

The postwar critical rehabilitation of Shelley began with Frederick Pottle's 1950 essay "The Case of Shelley," an essay that despaired of the very rehabilitation it attempted. "I do not expect to reverse the decline in Shelley's reputation," Pottle wrote, "though I confidently predict that that decline will one day be reversed."⁵ The work then fell to Pottle's student Harold Bloom who, in his book *Shelley's Mythmaking*, carried forward Pottle's counterintuitive claim that "Shelley is a passionately religious poet" (*ERP*, 290).⁶ This swinging of the critical pendulum in assessing Shelley's poetic value is not unique to the twentieth century. Shelley has been from the start a distinctive problem for criticism. The problem of that problem is part of what this work

⁴ C. S. Lewis, "Shelley, Dryden, and Mr. Eliot," in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 247. Volume hereafter abbreviated as *ERP*.

⁵ Frederick A. Pottle, "The Case of Shelley," in *ERP*, p. 305.

⁶ See Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

attempts to address by returning to the production, circulation, and cultural incorporation of “Shelley”—seen as a multimedia cultural phenomenon—in the period immediately after his death from 1824–1840.

This incorporation of Shelley as a cultural product—not just his body of work, but the totality of his material-cultural presence in images, other works of literature, biographical accounts, anecdotes, and so on—I call “Shelley, Inc.” Shelley’s cultural incorporation into Victorian England and the literary canon, I argue, was a “literary event” that initiated a reorganization of the field of literary criticism. It required the lyricization of his body of poetic work and a diagnosis of his physical body, drawing on the latest psychological theories of the time. This process resulted in a severing of Shelley’s lyric poems from the larger body of his work in order to save them from a diseased and dangerous body of thought. Shelley, the most despised figure of Robert Southey’s “Satanic School,” had to be transformed into an angel of light by rendering his poetry ineffectual.⁷ Shelley’s lyricization, I argue, must be understood as one aspect of class struggle in the period designated by E. P. Thompson as that of *The Making of the English Working Class*, and continuing into the liminal years 1824–40, which Richard

⁷ On the “Satanic School,” see Kim Wheatley, *Shelley and His Readers: Beyond Paranoid Politics* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1999), p. 32. On Matthew Arnold’s famous depiction of Shelley as an “ineffectual angel,” see Clement Dunbar, *Bibliography of Shelley Studies* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976), p. xli: “Mary had made Shelley an angel, Leigh Hunt seconded, and Medwin confirmed; Hogg had shown Shelley ineffectual; any number had insisted he was airy and ethereal. The remark distills sixty years of opinion epigrammatically; it is rhetorical flourish, not prejudiced attack. The words have a different cast if we note how they echo a comment by Joubert that Arnold himself had earlier translated as: ‘Plato loses himself in the void...but one sees the play of his wings, one hears their rustle’. Who would mind beating his luminous wings in the same void with Plato? Surely not Shelley.”

Cronin has called the neglected period of the Romantic Victorians.⁸ Those were also the years of the Chartist struggle in Britain.

Pace Matthew Arnold, few works of literature have been more effectual in their time than Shelley's first major work in verse, *Queen Mab*. In my first chapter, "*Queen Mab* and the Making of the English Working Class," I track the remarkable material-cultural history of the poem, first published in a private edition of 250 copies in 1813 and barely circulated, but which became through piracy one of the most widely circulated books in history up to that point.⁹ In what I call an experiment in the "social history of the book," I attempt to explain how *Queen Mab* became, as Karl Marx supposedly claimed, "the Bible of the Chartists" and, in Thomas Medwin's words, "the gospel" of the Owenites.¹⁰ In this effort I hope to bring together recent

⁸ See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *MEWC*. See also Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

⁹ See William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, chapter 16, "Preparatory schools for the brothel and the gallows" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 307–38, esp. pp. 318–22.

¹⁰ On Shelley and the Chartists, see G. B. Shaw, "Shaming the Devil About Shelley," in *Pen Portraits and Reviews*, (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1963 [1892]), pp. 244–45, and cf. Roland A. Duerksen, "Shelley and Shaw," *PMLA*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (March, 1963), 114–15. "Some time ago Mr H. S. Salt," Shaw writes, "in the course of a lecture on Shelley, mentioned on the authority of Mrs Marx Aveling, who had it from her father, Karl Marx, that Shelley had inspired a good deal of that huge but badly managed popular effort called the Chartist movement. An old Chartist who was present, and who seemed at first much surprised by this statement, rose to confess that, "now he came to think of it" (apparently for the first time), it was through reading Shelley that he got the ideas that led him to join the Chartists. A little further inquiry elicited that *Queen Mab* was known as The Chartists' Bible; and Mr Buxton Forman's collection of small, cheap copies, blackened with the finger-marks of many heavy-handed trades, are the proofs that Shelley became a power—a power that is still growing." H. S. Salt quotes Karl Marx: "The real difference between Byron and Shelley is this: Those who understand them and love them rejoice that Byron died at thirty-six, because if he had lived he would have become a reactionary bourgeois; they grieve that Shelley died at twenty-nine, because he was essentially a revolutionist, and he would always have been one of the advanced guard of socialism," *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Poet and Pioneer*, (London: Arthur C. Fifield, no publication date), p. 169.

developments in materiality studies, textual materialism, print culture, and the history of the book with social history's focus on class struggle, the emergence of class consciousness, and the perspective attained through "history from below."¹¹ *Queen Mab* was, as William Wickwar aptly put it, "poetry as cannon shot" in the working-class war for freedom of the press—that is to say, it was a material artifact that had profound material and cultural effects, including vast legal ramifications—but it was also, I argue, a major work in the history of socialist thought, advancing far beyond the Painean radicalism that dominated the period from the French Revolution in 1789 to Peterloo in 1819.¹² The status that the work attained, I show, was not in spite of, but because of the fact that it was a work of significant poetic power.

This requires countering the "enormous condescension of posterity" in regard to the literary pirates, many of whom faced imprisonment and crippling fines in order to keep *Queen Mab* in circulation in the face of a massive repressive apparatus that attempted to stifle religious and political dissent.¹³ Such condescension becomes clearly visible through taking a much closer look at *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, an anthology first published in 1830. Stephen

Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. 1 (London: Thomas Cautley Newby, 1847), p. 100.

¹¹ E. P. Thompson, "History from Below," *The Essential E. P. Thompson*, ed. Dorothy Thompson (New York: The New Press, 2001), pp. 481–89. On textual materialism and materiality studies, see Bill Brown, "Introduction: Textual Materialism," *PMLA*, Vol. 125, No. 1 (2010): 24–28; Bill Brown, "[Concept / Object] [Text / Event]," *ELH*, Vol. 81, No. 2, (Summer 2014): 521–52. On the history of the book, see *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (New York: Blackwell, 2009), and James Raven, *What Is the History of the Book* (New York: Wiley, 2018). Recent books on print culture in the Romantic period include: Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Andrew Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹² William H. Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press, 1819–1832* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1928), p. 259. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SFP*.

¹³ It is E. P. Thompson's famous phrase. *MEWC*, p. 12.

Behrendt's brief history of Shelley editions in English provides a good summary of the literary-historical consensus about this volume, which he claims was "designed to capitalize upon" a growing "general readership" for Shelley's poems, concluding:

Collections of this sort always afford their enterprising editors (and their publishers) opportunities to characterize author and poetry alike through selections whose editing, arrangement, and annotation or biographical commentary reflect the editors' particular sympathies and intentions or the niche of the commercial market at which the editions are aimed. In this respect, the early 'anthologizing' of Shelley for public consumption was entirely typical.¹⁴

In fact, as I show in my second chapter, *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley* was a product of the literary wing of the co-operative movement in the 1820s and 1830s, championed in the co-operative press, along with the works of Robert Owen, as embodying "the most glowing descriptions of social perfections, and in the most persuasive appeals to the finest feelings of the heart in favour of social equality, and a just division of the rights, duties, and enjoyments of life."¹⁵ The working-class pirates, often seen in the past as motivated purely by economic interests, in fact had literary as well as ideological motivations: they were developing their own literary canon. The major literary pirates I examine here—Richard Carlile, George Cannon, William Benbow, James Watson, and Henry Hetherington—were at the very core of the growing working-class resistance to emergent industrial capitalism. They kept Shelley's work in print in the period from 1824–40 as part of a larger literary and political project.

As I show in my second chapter, "Shelley, Inc.," this project was aided by Mary Shelley, who assisted the pirates to keep Shelley's work alive after Sir Timothy Shelley conditioned her

¹⁴ Stephen C. Behrendt, "The History of Shelley Editions in English," in *The Reception of P. B. Shelley in Europe*, ed. Susanne Schmid and Michael Rossington (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 18–19.

¹⁵ *The London Co-operative Magazine*, vol. 4, no. 2, (1830): 32.

livelihood on never bringing Shelley's name before the public. Mary Shelley began the painstaking process of editing Shelley's remaining work soon after his death—a work of mourning—and released *The Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1824, containing most of his previously unpublished poems, including many of the lyrics for which Shelley would come to be best known. The volume was quickly suppressed by Sir Timothy Shelley, and it wasn't until 1839 that Mary Shelley was finally able to publish her complete edition of Shelley's poems, *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, scattering his life throughout the notes to the poems because she was unable to publish a biography. But strong evidence suggests that Mary Shelley almost immediately began collaborating with George Cannon and William Benbow on their pirated editions. The literary-historical significance of these piracies cannot be overstated: it is known, for example, that Robert Browning first came to Shelley through Benbow piracies, as did many other young Victorian poets.¹⁶ This was only one part of Mary Shelley's editorial labor, however, with her open efforts strategically aimed at recuperating Shelley for the literary establishment and the bourgeois reading public.

In this endeavor, Mary Shelley's primary collaborator was Leigh Hunt, whose portrait of Shelley in his 1828 *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* would forever influence literary and biographical depictions of Shelley. This “public relations” work of Hunt and Mary Shelley can be seen as the first efforts toward what has been seen, in the words of Neil Fraistat, as the “etherealizing and disembodiment” of Shelley in the Victorian period—a process that I

¹⁶ See Frederick A. Pottle, *Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts* (Chicago: The Pembroke Press, 1923).

argue should be understood as an ideological maneuver of lyricization.¹⁷ But lyricization was only one part of the cultural incorporation of Shelley, which, following Andrew Elfenbein's analysis of "Byronism," I argue is a multimedia and "multifaceted cultural phenomenon," comprising not just the author's body of work, but "likenesses"—in particular, engraved frontispieces—biographies and biographical accounts in journals, and depictions in novels and dramatic works.¹⁸ My second chapter closes with one particular and prominent example of this: George Eliot's incorporation of Shelley's eccentric behavior from T. J. Hogg's biography into the character Will Ladislaw in *Middlemarch*.

If lyricization was the result of the Victorian cultural incorporation of Shelley's body of work, his actual, physical body came in for a very different kind of treatment—and here a corrective to the literary historical consensus is needed. For what one finds in the early critical accounts from William Hazlitt on to the Cambridge Apostles and John Stuart Mill is in fact the diagnosis and construction of a very particular kind of body, a *hypersomatic* constitution that Mill calls the poetic temperament. I turn to this critical process in my third chapter, "The Poetic Temperament and Historical Poetics," analyzing a dual critique of Shelley's textual and physical bodies, often blending into one another in complicated ways, from Hazlitt to Mill.

"The final test of reading," de Man wrote in "Shelley Disfigured," "in *The Triumph of Life*, depends on how one reads the textuality of this event, how one disposes of Shelley's

¹⁷ Neil Fraistat, "Illegitimate Shelley: Radical Piracy and the Textual Edition as Cultural Performance," *PMLA*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (May, 1994): 409–10. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "IS."

¹⁸ Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 8–9.

body.”¹⁹ Close attention to the critical discussion in the period after Shelley’s death shows how central his (absent) body was to the evaluation of his body of work. To contemporary critics and readers, trained to focus on the text, this attention to the mind and body of the poet necessarily seems strange; and yet, theories of the mind and the nervous system were at the very center of the critical discourse about Shelley’s work in this period. Rooted in the then cutting edge associationist philosophy of mind, the critical debate over Shelley’s work resurrected his body in a diagnosis of the poetic temperament—a hypersomatic body at the mercy of the senses and deficient in thought. This was central to a reassessment of poetic genres in the period, which reached a culmination with Mill’s essays on poetry, pitting Shelley against Wordsworth. Shelley was the poet of nature, “perhaps the most striking example ever known of the poetic temperament,” whereas Wordsworth was the poet of culture. The distinction is rooted in the relative prominence of thought and emotion as the guiding force of the chain of association of ideas: emotion predominates over the poet of nature, and thought predominates over the poet of culture.²⁰ The poetic temperament is key to what M. H. Abrams called a “reorientation of criticism,” that includes an inversion of the traditional hierarchy of poetic genres, making lyric poetry “more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other: it is the poetry most natural to a really poetic temperament, and least capable of being successfully imitated by one not so

¹⁹ Paul de Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 121.

²⁰ J. S. Mill, “The Two Kinds of Poetry,” in *Essays on Poetry*, ed. by F. Parvin Sharpless (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), pp. 33–34. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *EP*. The essay first appeared in the *Monthly Repository* in October, 1833.

endowed by nature” (“TP,” 359).²¹ Shelley becomes the lyric poet *par excellence*, but not through any merit of his own: he was simply born that way.

This critical reassessment was part of a larger debate between the Utilitarians and the Cambridge Apostles, who Mill calls “Coleridgeans,” but I argue would more accurately be described as Shelleyans (at least in the late 1820s).²² F. D. Maurice, John Sterling, Arthur Hallam, and Alfred Tennyson were practically religious converts. Hallam would later write to Hunt of “the enthusiasm,” while at Cambridge “which animated many of my contemporaries, & indeed formed us into a sort of sect, in behalf of [Shelley’s] character & genius.”²³ Mill himself fell under the influence of Wordsworth, adopting his basic philosophical premises in his essays on poetry from Wordsworth’s criticism, chiefly the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Returning the debate about the relative value of Wordsworth and Shelley to the political and cultural context in the late 1820s and early 1830s reveals that Mill’s analysis had deeper motivations than arriving at a logical understanding of poetry.

Lyric poetry was now elevated as the purest form of poetry, and connected with subjective expression, speech overheard. Shelley would become the natural genius of lyric poetry, but deficient in thought and misguided in his beliefs. While Mill had to come to terms with Shelley in his essays of the early 1830s, and in his relations with the Apostles, by the 1870s when he published his autobiography, Shelley had been redacted. The two towering thinkers of the Romantic period were Bentham and Coleridge: “there is hardly to be found in England,” Mill

²¹ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1971 [1953]), p. 23. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ML*.

²² John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1870), p. 152.

²³ *The Letters of Arthur Henry Hallam*, ed. Jack Kolb (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981), p. 682.

would write “an individual of any importance in the world of mind, who (whatever opinions he may have afterwards adopted) did not first learn to think from one of these two...”²⁴ It reduces the thought of the period to two channels: liberal and conservative/reactionary. This is the classical move of liberalism, to claim that there is no alternative to itself other than unfreedom. In contrast, I argue that Shelley’s work presented the fullest articulation of a leftist alternative in the period, and one that was actively influencing the politics of the period through the Chartist movement, Owenite co-operation, and the National Union of the Working Classes: that is, the seed-bed of socialism in the UK.

Mill’s essay has been taken as an inflection point in recent studies of lyric theory and historical poetics, seen as a key text in the rise of the modern understanding of what poetry is and how it should be taught and read. It figures prominently in Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins’s introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader* and in Jonathan Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric*, to cite the two most prominent recent examples. It is also a key part of Jackson’s theory of lyricization, most fully articulated in her book *Dickinson’s Misery*.²⁵ The “historical process of lyricization,” as Jackson defines it, is “the gradual collapse of various verse genres that had specific social functions into an idea of poetry as a genre.”²⁶ I both adopt and supplement Jackson’s theory of lyricization, arguing that the case of Shelley represents the historical locus of lyricization as a form of class politics. Jackson’s account of lyricization in *Dickinson’s Misery*, I argue, is itself founded upon the lyricization of Shelley, and of Romanticism itself, which emerged out of the

²⁴ *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*, ed. F. R. Leavis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), pp. 39–40.

²⁵ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Virginia Jackson, “Please Don’t Call It History,” *nonsite.org*, September 22, 2011, accessed online: <http://nonsite.org/the-tank/being-numerous>.

critical debates between the Apostles and the Utilitarians in the late 1820s and early 1830s, culminating in Mill's essays, which are fundamentally indebted to Wordsworth's critical theory and poetics.

The fourth chapter, "Prophets of Revolution: 'The Mask of Anarchy' as Historically Real Prophecy," remains situated around the 1832 Reform Bill, when Leigh Hunt first published *The Masque of Anarchy*, but keeps a dual focus on 1819–20, the culmination of Thompson's "heroic age of popular radicalism," in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre, when Shelley composed the poem (*MEWC*, p. 603). I read the poem through Erich Auerbach's essay on "Figura" to claim that Shelley presents a contemporary, secular version of what was known in the Judeo-Christian hermeneutic tradition as "historically real prophecy."²⁷ The reading responds both to Hunt's preface, which presents the poem as a prophecy fulfilled by the passage of the Reform Bill, in effect depoliticizing the poem by reducing its politics to the liberal-utilitarian strain that triumphed over the radicalism of the workers, as well as to questions about the problems of agency, political action, and nonviolence that have been raised by various critics.

But I also follow Anne Janowitz in reading "The Mask of Anarchy" in the context of the ultra-radicalism of the period, a set of shared political concerns, tropes, ideas, and forms.²⁸ To this end, the chapter begins with George Cannon's defense of the freedom of conscience, the fascinating pamphlet *A Few Hints Relative to the Texture of Mind, and the Manufacture of Conscience*, written when his comrade and collaborator Robert Wedderburn, a Jamaican ex-slave

²⁷ Erich Auerbach, *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. James I. Porter, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 69–70. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "F."

²⁸ Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LL*.

and dissenting minister, was imprisoned for blasphemous libel during the government crackdown following on Peterloo. The chapter ends with another pamphlet, William Benbow's 1832 *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes*, generally accepted as the origin of the concept of the general strike in England, which I suggest shares certain fundamental conceptual structures with Shelley's "Mask," and represents a flashpoint in the development of class consciousness. As Hunt was attempting to depoliticize Shelley's poem by assimilating it to the liberal mainstream represented by the Reform Bill, Benbow was carrying the spirit of the poem directly to the workers in advocating for a revolutionary form of nonviolent resistance in a general labor strike.

The fifth and final chapter, "The Politics of Historical Form: Shelley's Late Lyrics," turns to consider what I call Shelley's historical form as part of his own historical poetics as worked out in his late works both in poetry and prose. Through a close reading of the "Ode to the West Wind," Shelley's most famous lyric poem, I argue that Shelley was creating hybrid forms infused with history, constellations of different lyric forms from different historical eras. In the process, I confront both the New Critical critique of Shelley, an attempt to banish him from the canon, as well as the New Critical method of close reading; I attempt to demonstrate that any close reading of the Ode must extend beyond the poem on the page, not least because the book itself—*Prometheus Unbound*—must be considered one of the essential forms of the Ode.

The Ode, I argue, presents two competing models of political change: the cycle and the event, present metaphorically in the poem as the cycle of seasonal change and the storm. These can be seen as the liberal-progressive model of change that came out of the Enlightenment, exemplified by Kant and Godwin, for example, and the revolutionary model of change of the socialist and Marxist-Leninist tradition. These two models of change are not merely presented

allegorically, or metaphorically, or conceptually in the poem but are at the very core of the *form* of the poem. Shelley draws together four forms: the ode, Dante's *terza rima*, the sonnet, and the Greater Romantic Lyric, which correspond to the four major historical eras as understood at the time—ancient Greece and Rome, the medieval period, the Renaissance, and the contemporary moment, which Shelley would most fundamentally associate with the French Revolution. The core problem posed by the French Revolution, and one that Shelley was consistently preoccupied with, could be posed as a question: Can there be a revolution, an event, that doesn't relapse into the older forms it was meant to throw off? Can there be a French Revolution without a Napoleon? It is, I would argue, the same basic question that animates Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. And it is a question that remains unanswered by the revolutionary left today.

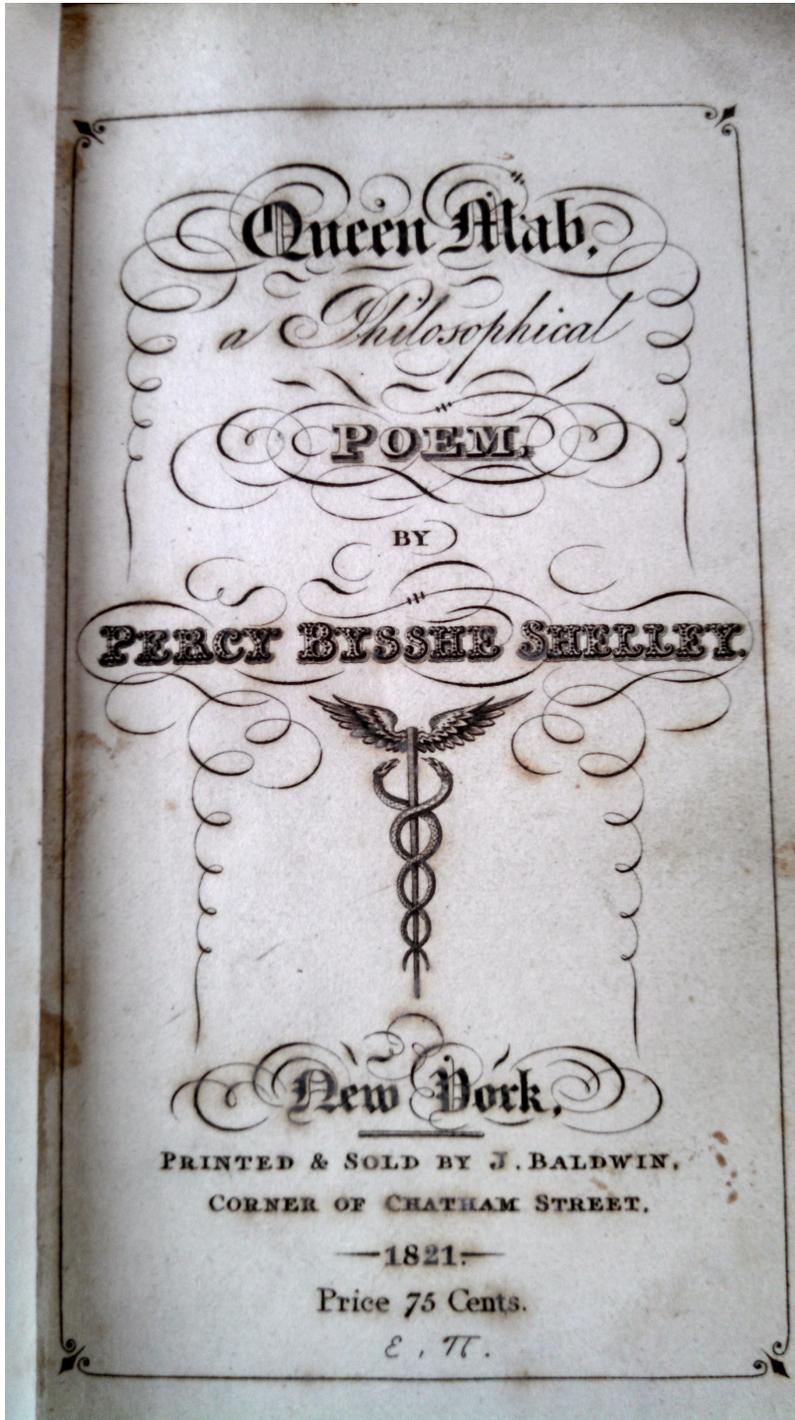


Figure 1: Engraved title page of George Cannon and William Benbow's 1821 piracy of *Queen Mab*. With the false imprint of New York.

Chapter 1

Queen Mab and the Making of the English Working Class

“Mankind are not now to be told they shall not think, or they shall not read” – Paine, *Rights of Man*, 1792

“The philosophic *Plato* reason’d well,
Who stamp’d the soul with immortality,
For, though in prime of manhood Shelley fell,
His *soul* still lives,—‘Queen Mab’ can never die!” – Allen Davenport¹

Consider two historical documents, separated by almost exactly twenty years. The first is an engraved title page to an edition of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Queen Mab*, purportedly published in New York in 1821 (see Figure 1). For well over a hundred years this was thought to be the first American edition of *Queen Mab*.² In 1939 the real publisher was finally identified as William Benbow, who in the 1820s ran a bookshop called “The Byron’s Head,” which Robert Southey denounced in an attack on the noble Lord: “It might have been thought that Lord Byron had attained the last degree of disgrace when his head was set up for a sign at one of those preparatory schools for the brothel and the gallows; where obscenity, sedition, and blasphemy are retailed in drams for the vulgar.”³ Benbow was a notorious literary pirate and ultra-radical

¹ Allen Davenport, “Remarks on the Genius and Writings of the Late Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley,” *The Republican*, ed. by Richard Carlile, vol. 14 (London: R. Carlile, 1826): 718. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *REP*.

² H. Buxton Forman, the Shelley scholar and editor, had expressed his doubts about the “*bona fides*” of the edition in 1886. H. Buxton Forman, *The Shelley Library: An Essay in Bibliography* (London: Published for the Shelley Society by Reeves and Turner, 1886), p. 51. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SL*.

³ See George T. Goodspeed, “The ‘First American’ *Queen Mab*,” *The Colophon: A Book Collectors’ Quarterly*, vol. 1 (1939): 25–32. Southey is quoted in William Benbow, *A Scourge for the Laureate, in Reply to His Infamous Letter of the 13th of December, 1824, Meanly Abusive of the Deceased Lord Byron, &c. &c.* (London: Benbow, Byron’s Head, n.d. [1826]), p. iv.

who in addition to publishing cheap editions of Byron and Shelley traded in bawdy and seditious prints and boutique porn for the rich.

The second document is from the trial of the publisher and bookseller Edward Moxon on June 23, 1841:

The jurors of our Lady the Queen upon their oath present that Edward Moxon, late of the parish of St. James, Westminster, in the county of Middlesex, bookseller, being an evil-disposed and wicked person disregarding the laws and religion of the realm, and wickedly and profanely devising and intending to bring the holy Scriptures and the Christian religion into disbelief and contempt among all the liege subjects of our Lady the Queen, did heretofore (to wit) on the thirteenth day of May...unlawfully and wickedly did falsely and maliciously publish and cause to be published a scandalous, impious, blasphemous, profane, and malicious libel of an concerning the Christian religion and of and concerning the holy Scriptures and of and concerning Almighty God...⁴

What follows is a series of quotations from Shelley's *Queen Mab*, which Moxon had just published in his one-volume edition of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. It is odd to find Moxon in this position, because he was at the time "the most respectable publisher in London," responsible, for example, for issuing the works of the regenerate William Wordsworth, soon to take over the Poet Laureateship after the death of Southey in 1843.⁵ The government would never have prosecuted Moxon. The case made by the prosecution was also odd; the solicitor, Thomas Holt,

read the passages set out in the indictment, and several others of a similar character, from "Queen Mab." He eulogised *Shelley's* genius, admitted the respectability of the defendant, and concluded by expressing the satisfaction he would feel if the result of this trial were to establish that no publication on religion should be a subject for prosecution in future. *Thomas Holt* proved purchasing the complete edition of *Shelley's* works for

⁴ "The Queen against Moxon," in *Reports of State Trials. New Series*, ed. by John E. P. Wallis, vol. 4, 1839–1843 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1892), pp. 693–94. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "QAM."

⁵ David Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain: 1789 to the Present* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1999), p. 92. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BMB*. See also Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 90–109. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *WC*.

twelve shillings at the defendant's shop. In cross-examination he stated that he made the purchase by the direction of Mr. *Hetherington*, whom he understood to be the prosecutor in this and the succeeding cases. This closed the case for the prosecution. ["QAM," p. 695]

This Mr. Hetherington who brought the charge of blasphemy against Moxon was Henry Hetherington, one of the principle drafters of the People's Charter, the document that gave its name to the Chartist movement.⁶ To complicate matters further, Hetherington had himself just published a cheap edition of *Queen Mab* in 1839, and he had been convicted of blasphemous libel for another work in December, 1840. Moreover, one of Hetherington's closest friends and comrades, James Watson, a fellow leader in the Chartist movement, had years before stereotyped *Queen Mab*, which he continued to sell and distribute to other booksellers in one-shilling editions for at least two decades, including during this trial.⁷

In 1831 Benbow, Hetherington, and Watson were all founding members of and leaders within the National Union of Working Classes (NUWC), a formative precursor to the Chartist movement. The "weekly debates" of the NUWC, writes E. P. Thompson

were reported in Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian*—undoubtedly the finest working-class weekly which had (until that time) been published in Britain. The debates were attended by Hetherington himself (when not in prison), William Lovett, James Watson, John Gast, the brilliant and ill-fated Julian Hibbert, and old William Benbow...now pressing his proposal for a "Grand National Holiday", or month's general strike, in the course of which the productive classes would assume control of the nation's government and resources.⁸

⁶ On Hetherington, see W. J. Linton, *James Watson: A Memoir of the Days of the Fight for a Free Press in England and of the Agitation for the People's Charter* (Manchester: Abel Heywood and Son, 1880). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *JW*. See also George Jacob Holyoake, *The Life and Character of Henry Hetherington* (London: J. Waton, 1849) and Edward Royle, *Chartism*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁷ See below on the plaster-of-Paris method of stereotyping; basically, a cast was made of each page that produced metal plates, saving time and money by making type-setting for each printing of a work unnecessary.

⁸ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 811–12. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *MEWC*.

These weekly debates were held at an auditorium called the Rotunda, founded by the freethinker Richard Carlile in 1830, which quickly became “the center of working-class radicalism in London.”⁹ In 1822, while imprisoned in Dorchester jail for blasphemous libel, Carlile had released his own piracy of Shelley’s *Queen Mab*.

A number of puzzles and questions emerge from these materials. Why did Benbow, Carlile, Hetherington and Watson publish, despite the legal risks, piracies of *Queen Mab*, a book that had been privately printed in 1813 and barely distributed at all, written by a virtually unknown poet living in exile in Italy? How did these working-class publishers and activists obtain copies of *Queen Mab*, which had been published with the express instructions that it be printed “on fine paper & so as to catch the aristocrats”?¹⁰ Why did Benbow publish *Queen Mab* with a false imprint? What is the meaning of the Greek letters ε. π. on the engraved title page of his edition? Why did Hetherington prosecute Moxon for publishing *Queen Mab*? And what did these men at the center of working-class struggle in the 1820s and 1830s find in *Queen Mab* that made them want to keep it in print? Answering these questions brings to light the extent to which *Queen Mab* was a formative text for the early working class in England, and how and why the radical press used the book in their struggle.

By the end of the nineteenth-century, Shelley’s *Queen Mab* was firmly established in the working-class canon. Karl Marx himself is supposed to have said that *Queen Mab* was the bible

⁹ Joel H. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Life of Richard Carlile* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 165. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LRC*.

¹⁰ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 361. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LPBS*.

of Chartist movement.¹¹ Similarly, *Queen Mab* was said to be the gospel of the Owenites.¹² This evidence has been often repeated, but only recently have scholars begun to assess in any detail the actual impact that Shelley's verse had on working-class readers and political movements.¹³ Is there evidence to suggest that *Queen Mab* was as politically galvanizing as the anecdotes suggest? In short, the answer to the question is yes; I will be exploring that evidence in what follows. The question then arises: How and why did *Queen Mab* achieve the effect it did? I will attempt to provide a preliminary answer to that question as well.

Queen Mab is a revolutionary poem, designed to inspire political change. Shelley's conception of how *Queen Mab* would do so was that of unacknowledged legislation; it would find its way to the chosen few, change them, and through them change the world. In fact, it is one of the few works of literature to have had a major impact on *actual* legislation. The Moxon case of 1841 would virtually bring an end to prosecutions for blasphemous libel in England—the law that had for more than twenty years been used to assault the radical press and gag political dissidents. And far from achieving change through the chosen few, *Queen Mab* would be one of

¹¹ On Shelley and the Chartists, see George Bernard Shaw, "Shaming the Devil About Shelley," in *Pen Portraits and Reviews* (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1963 [1892]), pp. 244–45, and Roland A. Duerksen, "Shelley and Shaw," *PMLA*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (March, 1963): 117.

¹² See Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 1 (London: Thomas Cautley Newby, 1847), pp. 98–103. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ML*. The only full study of Shelley's influence on the Owenites is M. Siddiq Kalim, *The Social Orpheus: Shelley and the Owenites* (Lahore: A Research Council Publication, 1973), which is, alas, a very bad book, but it contains much useful information. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SO*.

¹³ See, for example, Bouthaina Shaaban, "Shelley in the Chartist Press," *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, 34 (1983): 41–60; hereafter cited parenthetically as "SCP"; Michael Demson, "Let a great Assembly be': Percy Shelley's 'The Mask of Anarchy' and the Organization of Labor in New York City, 1910–30," *European Romantic Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (October 2011): 641–665; and Paul Thomas Murphy, *Toward a Working-Class Canon: Literary Criticism in British Working-Class Periodicals, 1816–1858* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *TWC*.

the few literary works of nineteenth-century England to reach and profoundly influence a newly emergent, mass working-class readership. Ironically, this was only possible because of a loophole in the law of libel itself that afforded the proliferation of pirated editions of *Queen Mab*, and other works, in cheap formats tailored to a new working-class readership. Telling this story requires a shift of focus from the writer to the reader, to those on the margins of literary history. Such a shift entails, in turn, a materialist and historical focus on the production and circulation of texts—an experiment in what might be called the social history of the book.

Finally, for those interested generally in poetry and politics, and more particularly in assessing the role that poetry might play in radical or revolutionary politics, *Queen Mab* offers a rare historical case study. It is a poem that didn't merely interpret the world (though it does that too), but in fact changed it; some of the ways in which it changed the world are clearly identifiable and analyzable, while others require more interpretation and speculation. I will argue that any explanation of why *Queen Mab* became a formative text for the English working class requires an examination of the poem itself, and the distinctive powers of poetry to galvanize the *poiesis* of class consciousness.

1. The Existing State of Things: Libel and Surveillance

“Regency literature begins and ends with libel,” writes Charles Mahoney.¹⁴ The same can be said of the career of Shelley, in both poetry and politics. The importance of the legal and political context of libel for the early work of Shelley is crucial for understanding his work and its reception. Indeed, it is responsible for the very *form* of his first major poem. Every time that

¹⁴ Charles Mahoney, “Regency Literature? Regency Libel,” *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 61 (2012): 103.

Shelley mentions *Queen Mab* in one of his letters during the period of its composition in 1811–12 he accompanies his remarks with some reflection on the legal consequences that might attend its publication.¹⁵ By August of 1812 he had completed a significant portion of the poem, and sent it to the printer Thomas Hookham, with a plan to avoid prosecution:

I enclose also by way of specimen all that I have written of a little poem.... You will perceive that I have not attempted to temper my constitutional enthusiasm.... a Poem is safe, the iron-souled Attorney general would scarcely dare to attack ‘genus irritabile vatum’ The Past, the Present, & the Future are the grand & comprehensive topics of this Poem. I have not yet half exhausted the second of them. [*LPBS*, 1:324]

In fact, Shelley had by this point already been under government surveillance for some time, only escaping prosecution for his political pamphlets because he was a minor.¹⁶

On January 26, 1813, after a period of political activism in Ireland and Wales, culminating in a narrowly escaped attempt on his life at Tremadoc,¹⁷ Shelley wrote to update Hookham on his progress with ‘the Poem’: “The notes to Q.M. will be long & philosophical. I shall take that opportunity which I judge to be a safe one of propagating my principles, which I decline to do syllogistically in a poem” (*LPBS*, 1:350). Shelley’s strategic thinking is clear at this point: the government won’t prosecute a poem, hence he can propagate his principles in that

¹⁵ See *LPBS* 1:202, 214–18, 221–22.

¹⁶ See Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (New York: New York Review Books, 1994 [1974]), pp. 119–20, 136–37. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SP*. Home Office Papers (HO), State Record Office, British National Archives, 42/127/428–29. See also W. M. Rossetti’s, “Shelley in 1812–13: An Unpublished Poem, and Other Particulars,” *The Fortnightly Review*, no. 49, January (1871): 67–85.

¹⁷ This assassination attempt was long regarded as either a hallucination or an elaborate lie (*Pursuit*, p. 187). Even Kenneth Neill Cameron, normally so diligent in seeing through the mythologizing and falsifications of previous biographers, can’t bring himself to accept the truth of Shelley’s story. Holmes finally set the story straight, with the help of research by H. M. Dowling, who had the perspicacity to look into “the social and political conditions of the Tremadoc area.” What happened at Tanyrallt was a result of Shelley’s radical politics and of what we would now call labor organizing. H. M. Dowling, “The Attack at Tanyrallt,” *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin Rome*, no. 12 (1961): 30.

form, and elaborate them through argumentative prose in the notes. He had a particular audience in mind: he wrote to his friend T. J. Hogg on February 7 saying he had “finished a rough sketch,” adding: “As I have not abated an iota in the infidelity or cosmopolity of it, sufficient will remain, excludi{ve of} innumerable faults invisible to partial eyes to make {it} very unpopular.” He hopes nonetheless that it will reach “the chosen few who can think & feel” (*LPBS*, 1:352–53). In mid-March Shelley wrote to Hookham from Dublin, sending him the manuscript of the poem:

I send you my Poem.... If you do not dread the arm of the law, or any exasperation of public opinion against yourself, I wish that it should be printed & published immediately.... The notes will be long philosophical, & Anti Christian.—this will be unnoticed in a Note.... I expect no success.—Let only 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. [*LPBS*, 1:361]

This is one of the great ironies of literary history, for *Queen Mab*, as mentioned, would go on to have a mass circulation and become one of the most influential literary works for the early working class in England. I turn now to how it achieved its wide currency, despite the fact that in the end Shelley decided (wisely) to have it privately printed and not published or put on sale. The astonishing fact is that he only circulated some seventy copies.

Why was Shelley so concerned about evading “the iron-souled Attorney general”? Consideration of the political context surrounding the law of libel in 1811–13 reveals just how legitimate his concern was. The radical Irish journalist Peter Finnerty was convicted of seditious libel on February 7, 1811, for an article that was critical of Lord Castlereagh.¹⁸ Finnerty became something of a cause célèbre for those oriented toward Reform, including Shelley, an eccentric 18-year-old Oxford undergraduate. Sir Francis Burdett, the hero of the Reform movement at the

¹⁸ Peter Finnerty, “Lord Castlereagh and Peter Finnerty,” *Morning Chronicle*, no. 2700, February 7 (1811).

time, and himself recently released from imprisonment in the Tower for libel, had presided over a meeting at the Crown and Anchor Tavern on February 20th, at which a subscription was begun for Finnerty's benefit.¹⁹ Soon *The Oxford University and City Herald* took up the subscription, and on March 2 appeared "Mr. P. B. Shelley" subscribing for one pound, one shilling. Shelley went beyond the subscription, however, in his support for Finnerty. It is announced on the title page of Shelley's *Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things* of 1811 that the poem was published "For assisting to maintain in prison Mr. Peter Finnerty, imprisoned for a libel."²⁰

On March 28, 1811, the House of Commons took up the question of ex-officio informations for libel, upon a motion from Lord Folkestone, and Burdett delivered a powerful speech denouncing the repressive use of the law of libel to stifle the freedom of the press (*FB*, vol. 1, pp. 313–14).²¹ Burdett notes at the outset of his speech, after condemning "the very lame, defective, and impotent defence of the learned Attorney-General," that "the Freedom of the Press, so essential to the Freedom of the Country" is "intimately connected" with the law of libel (*SFB*, pp. 1–2). Burdett argues that the ex-officio informations are "not merely the abuse of a power which might or might not be unconstitutional, but... an illegal assumption of power by the

¹⁹ "Subscription for Mr. Finnerty," *The Examiner*, no. 165 (Sunday, Feb. 24, 1811). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *EX*. It was at the Crown and Tavern in 1809 that Burdett gave his famous speech on Reform. See M. W. Patterson, *Sir Francis Burdett and His Times (1770–1844)* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1931), vol. 1, pp. 230–31. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *FB*.

²⁰ [Percy Bysshe Shelley], *Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things* (London: Sold by B. Crosby and Co., 1811). The poem was lost for almost 200 years. A copy turned up in 2006 and was put on sale by Quaritch in London for half a million pounds. It disappeared for several years, apparently purchased by some rich individual, until the Bodleian acquired it and made it available digitally in 2015: <https://poeticalessay.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>

²¹ *Speech of Sir Francis Burdett, Bt. Delivered in the House of Commons On the 28th March, 1811, Upon a Motion of Lord Folkestone, to Examine into the Practice of Ex-officio Informations Filed by the Attorney-General, in Cases of Libel* (London: Printed and Published by J. Morton, 1811). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SFB*.

Attorney-General: the evils of which had been aggravated by the length to which it had recently been carried, and the gross partiality with which it had been exercised.” Expanding upon the partiality of the exercise of the law, Burdett claims that “those writers hostile to [the] administration” had “been visited with a most vindictive rigour, unparalleled in the history of the country since the Revolution.” On the question of legality, Burdett argues that the law of libel is an unconstitutional invention, concluding that “whilst this continues, it is a farce to talk of the Liberty of the Press” (ibid., pp. 4–9). Burdett recognized that the law of libel amounted to the arbitrary power of the government to suppress any critique.

The scope of libel law was remarkably broad, covering the “*publication* of anything with a *malicious intention* of causing a *breach of the peace*.” Publication included any form of circulation, including handing something written to someone else; malicious intention was simply a “foreseeable tendency” of a work to cause harm and didn’t require proof of any malicious motive on the part of the author.²² There were four main types of libel: defamatory, obscene, blasphemous, and seditious. Seditious and blasphemous libel, which were by far the most widely used in suppression of the freedom of the press and political dissent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, are my chief concern here.

The power of the law of libel was bolstered by the Two Acts of 1795, passed in response to the first period of popular agitation ignited by the French Revolution. The first of the Two Acts made it “a treasonable offence to incite the people by speech or writing to hatred or contempt of King, Constitution or Government.” The second made any meetings of more than fifty people illegal “without notifying a magistrate, who had wide powers to stop speeches, arrest

²² William H. Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press, 1819–1832* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1928), pp. 19–21. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SFP*.

speakers, and disperse the meetings” (*MEWC*, p.145). The Two Acts were accompanied by the formation of a vast network of spies, informers, and secret services which Kenneth Johnston notes were put “on a more efficient, professional, modern basis” in 1795 and thereafter, and Thompson claims existed “on a scale unknown in any other period” (*MEWC*, p. 485).²³

Formerly a rarely applied law, the law of libel was invoked constantly during Pitt’s Reign of Alarm: “There were at least seventy prosecutions for *public* libel during the first thirty years of George III’s reign. At all times of crisis there was an outburst of Press-prosecution....during the three years 1819, 1820, 1821 there were over one hundred and twenty prosecutions on charges of seditious and blasphemous libel” (*SFP*, p. 17). This explains why the law of libel had become the main focus of reformers such as Leigh Hunt and Sir Francis Burdett in 1810–11. It was the chief weapon of the repressive governmental regime. The struggle for the freedom of the press was therefore absolutely at the center of the developing class-struggle in early nineteenth-century Britain; after the Six Acts were passed in the wake of the Peterloo massacre in 1819 it became *the* central site where the advanced guard carried forward the struggle.²⁴ Shelley’s *Queen Mab* has a remarkable place in this history.

²³ Kenneth R. Johnston, *Unusual Suspects: Pitt’s Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 7. Cf. John Bugg, *Five Long Winters: The Trials of British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). Both of these books, inter alia, show an increased interest in the legal and political contexts of Romanticism in the 1790s; part of my concern here is to show that the same increased attention to legal and political contexts needs to be brought to the works of the second-generation Romantics, and the second period of intense government repression from the Luddite uprisings in 1811 to Peterloo Massacre in 1819 and the Queen Caroline Affair in 1820.

²⁴ Thompson writes that “There is perhaps no country in the world in which the contest for the rights of the press was so sharp, so emphatically victorious, and so peculiarly identified with the cause of the artisans and labourers.” *MEWC*, p. 720.

2. “Poetry as Cannon Shot”: *Queen Mab* and the Pirates

When *Queen Mab* was first published in 1821 in an unauthorized edition, the publisher, William Clark, was convicted of blasphemous libel and imprisoned for four months in the dreaded Cold Bath Fields prison. The Chief Justice stated explicitly that the goal of the government was “the entire suppression of the work.”²⁵ What actually happened is that no less than nine separate editions of *Queen Mab* were published between 1821 and 1840, including cheap “pocket” editions, and it sold far more than all the rest of Shelley’s published works combined. How did the government fail so dramatically in their goal of suppressing *Queen Mab*?

The period from the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 until the Queen Caroline Affair in 1820, which E. P. Thompson called the “heroic age of popular radicalism” in England, coincided with a genuine revolution in the reading public—the emergence of a mass readership, and the development of print technology that allowed a supply of reading material cheap enough to feed it (*MEWC*, p. 603). The two phenomena are not unrelated. William St Clair, in *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, summarizes the revolution in reading:

The romantic period marked the start of a continuing, self-sustaining, expansion, a take-off in the nation's reading equivalent to the take-off in manufacturing production which accelerated at about the same time. By the turn of the nineteenth century, virtually everyone read books, magazines, and newspapers on a regular basis. In a single century, Great Britain became a reading nation, one of only a handful to do so at that time.²⁶

The abolition of perpetual copyright law in 1774 began a process that would eventually break the monopoly on printed texts, opening up the field to the forces of competition, resulting in much

²⁵ *The Monthly Repository*, Vol. 17, No. 203 (November, 1822): 717. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *MR*.

²⁶ William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 13. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *RN*. See also Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ECR*.

cheaper books. St Clair calls this "the most decisive event in the history of reading in England since the arrival of printing 300 years before" (*RN*, p. 109). Right around the turn of the century, the plaster-of-Paris method of stereotyping texts was perfected, which would also eventually greatly reduce the cost of printing books (*RN*, pp. 182–185; *ECR*, p. 379). This is important in the case of *Queen Mab*, which, due to stereotyping, and the perseverance of publishers, probably never went out of print after the first piracies in 1821. Printing equipment was relatively cheap, making start-up costs reasonable even for working-class printers like Richard Carlile and William Benbow (see *RN*, p. 312). The result of all of this was the emergence, for the first time in history, of a mass working-class readership.

This did not come without reaction from the government and the ruling class. The response was repressive measures: stamp taxes on periodicals, the use of criminal libel law, draconian fines for violating the law, which required the name and address of the printer on every publication, and the formation of Societies, most notably the "Society for the Suppression of Vice [SSV] and the encouragement of religion and virtue, throughout the United Kingdom, to consist of members of the Established Church," founded in 1802, to assist the government in sniffing out publications for prosecution (*SFP*, pp. 13–48, esp. p. 36). The stamp tax, before 1776 only one penny, was raised in 1789, 1797, and again in 1815, bringing it to 4d. (*ECR*, p. 379). St Clair points out that this tax was "not so much a means of raising revenue" as a targeted attack "on the reading matter which the state most feared" (*RN*, p. 309). "In the days when the cost of a single letter," wrote W. J. Linton, "put it beyond the reach of the day-labourer (nine shillings a week 'good wages' for a man with a family of nine) this tax was equivalent to a prohibition" (*JW*, p. 8).

In the wake of the Peterloo Massacre in August 1819, the government passed the Six Acts, known as the Gagging Acts, deliberately designed to destroy the radical press. The charge was led by Lords Castlereagh, Eldon, and Sidmouth: Murder, Fraud, and Hypocrisy in Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy." There was the *Act for the more effectual prevention and punishment of Blasphemous and Seditious Libels*, which empowered magistrates to confiscate libelous materials, even if not in the possession of the person convicted of libel, and to enter premises, even by force, to search for libelous materials. It also allowed those convicted of a second offense to be banished from the British Empire. The *Publications Act* "enacted that all pamphlets and papers should be deemed and taken to be newspapers within the true intent and meaning of Pitt's Newspaper Act and the various Stamp Duties Acts" (*SFP*, pp. 136–39). The "twopenny trash" periodicals had flooded the country after William Cobbett realized that by selling his *Register* as a pamphlet he could avoid the Stamp tax. The new act closed the loophole, meaning that all the periodicals would now have to be sold for six pence, at minimum.

In response to these repressive measures, Carlile led the charge in the struggle for the freedom of the press and freedom of thought. Thompson's summary is picturesque:

Carlile (a tinsmith who had nevertheless received a year or two of grammar school education at Ashburton in Devon) rightly saw that the repression of 1819 made the rights of the press the fulcrum of the Radical movement. But unlike Cobbett and [Thomas] Wooler, who modified their tone to meet the Six Acts in the hope of living to fight another day (and who lost circulation accordingly), Carlile hoisted the black ensign of unqualified defiance and, like a pirate cock-boat, sailed straight into the middle of the combined fleets of State and Church. [*MEWC*, p. 720]

The pirate simile is apposite and no doubt intentional on Thompson's part, for literary piracy now enters the story in dramatic fashion.

"The most decisive single event," writes St Clair, "in shaping the reading of the romantic period occurred in 1817" (*RN*, p. 316). This event was the illegal pirated publication of Southey's

radical poetic drama *Wat Tyler*, written but not published in 1794. Southey had been a radical in the 1790s, but had since become a reactionary Tory, a mouthpiece of Church and State. His apostasy landed him in the Poet Laureateship—and earned him the contempt of Shelley and Byron, who in *Don Juan* immortalized him as "shuffling Southey—that incarnate lie—" a turncoat who "Would scarcely join again the 'reformadoes' / Whom he forsook to fill the laureate's sty."²⁷ The illegal publication of *Wat Tyler* was, of course, a great embarrassment to Southey; he immediately filed for an injunction to have it suppressed. He wrote to William Wilberforce, the lynchpin of the SSV, on March 23, lamenting his position: "My youth has no worse follies with which to reproach me. I was then a republican and a leveller, and stated such principles broadly in the dialogues.... Upon seeing the work announced, I lost no time in making oath to the circumstances, and applying for an injunction."²⁸ But this is precisely where things get interesting, and the result of this legal case is what makes the event of this piracy so decisive in transforming the shape of the reading of the Romantic period.

Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor, denied Southey the injunction, claiming that Southey would first have to establish his property in the work by pursuing a claim for damages. However, it had already been established in previous cases that works of a criminal nature—i.e. seditious or blasphemous works—were not protected under copyright.²⁹ Southey, knowing well the criminal nature of *Wat Tyler*, of course refused to pursue such a claim. By a strange loophole in legal logic, then, Southey and Lord Eldon, both of whom would have loved to have stopped the

²⁷ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in *Byron's Works* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1847), p. 715.

²⁸ *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, ed. by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1846), p. 191.

²⁹ See James R. Alexander, "Evil Angel Eulogy: Reflections on the Passing of the Obscenity Defense in Copyright," *Journal of Intellectual Property Law*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Spring 2013). Hereafter cited parenthetically as "EA."

sale of *Wat Tyler*, found themselves with their hands tied. As a legal scholar, James R.

Alexander, has pointed out:

Eldon was aware that by refusing the requested injunction, he was likely guaranteeing the proliferation of pirated copies and the spread of a work that could, by its distribution, injure the public. . . . In effect, the court faced the dilemma of either protecting works of questionable tendency, thereby becoming associated with the inequitable treatment of the plaintiff, or denying injunctive relief to the plaintiff, which would cause broader harm to public morality when an influx of pirated copies reached those of weaker education and moral constitution. ["EA," p. 249]

Which is precisely what happened: the radical press fell on this like manna, and soon cheap editions of *Wat Tyler* were being sold everywhere. Carlile started his career by hawking them in the countryside, along with *Sherwin's Political Register* and *The Black Dwarf* (LRC, p. 17–18). The glee and deviousness with which the radicals greeted this return of the repressed republican Southey is infectious. Wooler wrote an article in his *Black Dwarf* proclaiming that Southey

is a *friend* to *liberty*; and has merely gone over to the enemies' camp, to *feed* upon them, and report progress as a *spy*! no wonder that his *birth-day* odes should be so infamously weak. No wonder that his muse flaps her drunken wings, and sighs in vain for flight:—no wonder that he can neither *find out* the [Prince] Regent's virtues, nor *make any* for him! He is a jacobin! wonderful to say, the laureat is a *jacobin*, a *leveller*, and a *republican*.³⁰

Wooler goes on to quote some of the choicest passages from the poem, commenting that Southey isn't merely a reformer, but is in fact a revolutionary.

Having developed a taste for the poetry of young revolutionaries, the pirates turned next to Shelley and *Queen Mab*. Two piracies of *Queen Mab* emerged in quick succession in 1821. The first was, as mentioned, that of Clark, one of Carlile's former shopmen.³¹ The second was

³⁰ *The Black Dwarf: A London Weekly Publication*, ed. by T. J. Wooler, vol. 1 (London: Printed and Published by T. J. Wooler, 1817): 139. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BD*.

³¹ Reiman and Fraistat write that "Clark apparently approached Leigh Hunt and other of PBS's friends for a copy of [the 1813 edition] to prepare his piracy." *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, vol. 2 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 509. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CP*.

the “first American edition” already introduced, in fact a collaboration between three Spencean ultra-radicals: Benbow, George Cannon, and Robert Charles Fair.³² Soon *Queen Mab*, like *Wat Tyler*, was widely available in multiple cheap editions.

The war between the radical press and the State and Church was in full swing by 1821 after the Six Acts shifted the scene of battle to the repression of the radical publishers. *Queen Mab* was a weapon in this war—poetry as cannon shot, as Wickwar aptly puts it (*SFP*, p. 259). Clark's edition was released sometime between January and March 1821, in octavo, and put on sale for 12s 6d, a higher price than was the norm for such a book (10s 6d). The notes in foreign languages in the original edition are translated in footnotes. The SSV jumped on Clark immediately, bringing a prosecution for blasphemous libel. What ensued is worthy of close attention. Carlile later wrote that after Clark was indicted

he offered to compromise the matter with the Society, and to give up the copies he had by him for their destruction; pleading ignorance of its being objectionable. This hypocrisy weighed nothing with Pritchard, the Secretary of the Society, he reminded Mr. Clark that he needed not to plead ignorance of the quality of the publication, after having so long served as shopman in Carlile's shop in Fleet Street. “Six Acts” proved too much for Mr. Clark: he bound himself down to good behaviour, as they call it, and found that he could not move in the sale of the work, as a second arrest took place because some other person had sold a copy in his shop.... “Queen Mab” was suppressed without going to a Jury, without even a struggle on the part of its publisher. Here then it was certainly fair game for any person to take up, particularly for the present publisher, who has suffered from the redoubled violence of the prosecuting gangs occasioned by the scandalous compromises which have been made with them by others. [*REP*, vol. 5, pp. 145–46]

Carlile did take up the sale of *Queen Mab*, of course, but there is good reason to suspect that his account isn't wholly honest. We know that not only did Clark work in Carlile's shop, but that

³² The Spenceans were adherents of Thomas Spence, veteran of the LCS and early agrarian socialist. See Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *RU*. See also Malcolm Chase, *‘The People's Farm’: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775–1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

they had both worked previously with Sherwin for the *Register*, and that in 1820 Clark was in America "picking up every scrap of the writing of Thomas Paine that he could discover," which Carlile subsequently published (*REP*, vol. 5, p. 90).³³ The account of Clark's trial further complicates Carlile's narrative. Clark claimed in court that he had published *Queen Mab* merely as "a literary or poetical curiosity" with the sole intention of making money. The Chief Justice then asked Clark if he would give up all the copies of the work; but Clark responded that he only had two copies, because the rest were being held by the printer because Clark owed him fifty pounds. When the Chief Justice asked him to "give up the name of the printer" Clark refused, saying that he "would rather suffer any punishment himself than be guilty of such a breach of faith." Clark was then released, with the understanding that he would return to court shortly and "in the interim have such communication with the Solicitor of the prosecution as might lead to the object which the Court was desirous of effecting—namely, the entire suppression of the work" (*MR*, p. 717). Who was the printer?

The Clark edition has a T. M. in gothic next to the colophon on the final page of the edition, which were a mystery for a long time. As St Clair points out, they "are the initials of Thomas Moses, the printer to Richard Carlile who is known to have provided Carlile with credit and helped Carlile's wife to run the business while her husband was in prison."³⁴ When Clark was brought up for sentence, he "put in an affidavit purporting that only 25 copies of *Queen Mab* remained unsold in the hands of the printer; and that these were now brought into Court" (*MR*, p. 717). He claimed that all the rest had already sold "because *in his experience as a bookseller, he*

³³ Cobbett and Benbow were also in the US around this time, where they dug up the bones of Paine to repatriate them.

³⁴ St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelley: A Biography of a Family* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 515. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *GS*.

always found that the circumstance of a book's being the subject of prosecution produced a very rapid sale of such a book" (MR, p. 718). He was again asked to give up the name of the printer, which he refused to do, and was sentenced to the relatively lenient term of four months imprisonment.

The evidence suggests that this was all an elaborate ruse prepared by the Carliles, Clark, and Moses—and perhaps even Benbow, Cannon, and Fair—to get *Queen Mab* into the open for the pirates with the least possible damage done to Clark. This is an important point, and hasn't been realized previously. It shows how smart and organized the radicals were; the war for the freedom of the press was not carried out haphazardly, but with strategy and verve.³⁵ Now that the book had been declared blasphemous it was free game, because of the legal loophole noted previously.

Looking at Clark's advertisements and his catalogues in the period suggest that he was no coward, but was boldly selling just the kinds of works that Carlile's shop was: David Hume, *The Philosophical Dictionary* of Voltaire, Condorcet, *Killing no Murder*, and so on. In June 1821 there is the following in one of his advertisements: "Queen Mab is prosecuted, but NOT suppressed, as a Gentleman has taken the remaining copies off Mr. Clark's hands."³⁶ This

³⁵ Another remarkable example of this is Carlile's blasphemy trial for Paine's *Age of Reason*. He came into the trial with copies of *The Age of Reason*, which he proceeded to hand out to all the members of the jury. He then, for the next twelve hours, read almost the entirety of the book aloud in the courtroom to all assembled, with digressions against blasphemy. Knowing very well that it was a matter of course for the reports and transcripts of trials to be published, Carlile thereby insured the continued circulation of *The Age of Reason* in that format. Carlile's shop was being run by his wife Jane while he was in prison, and the report of the *Mock Trial* was published in twopenny numbers: "ten thousand copies were sold of each of these twopenny numbers; these contained the first cheap edition of the *Age of Reason*" (SFP, p. 95).

³⁶ *The London Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.*, No. 231 (Saturday, June 23, 1821): 400.

gentleman was clearly Richard Carlile—or rather, Thomas Moses and Jane Carlile. The 1822 Carlile edition is in fact simply the Clark edition with a new title page put in, and the colophon pasted over, with the original visible beneath it (see Figure 2). Carlile's blustering against Clark in *The Republican*, over the top as it is, would seem to be all part of the cover up. The high price put on Clark's edition must have been premeditated as well, for the cheaper the publication the more damage it was considered to be able to do, and the more likely it was to be prosecuted. As it was, Clark could claim he had no intention of the work falling into the hands of the poor.

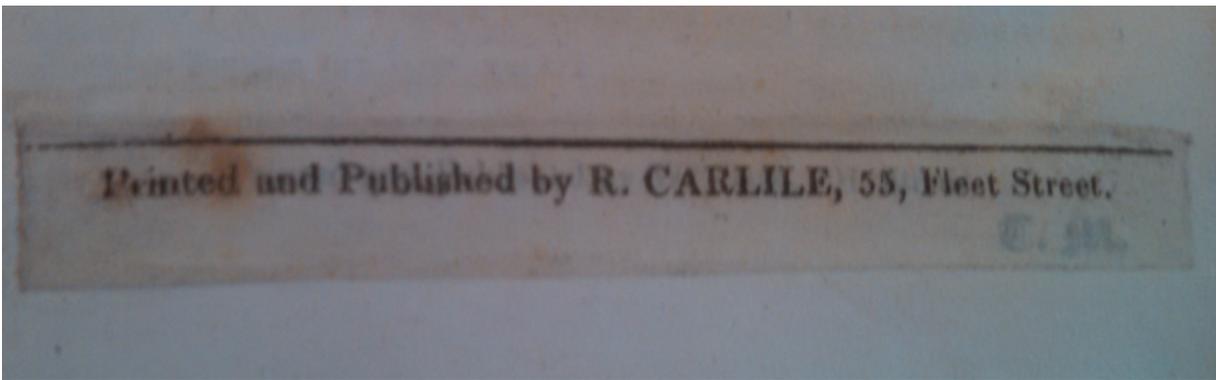


Figure 2: Pasted Over Colophon in Carlile's Edition of *Queen Mab*.

When the Carliles took over the Clark edition, they reduced the price to 7s 6d. By this time, however, there was already an edition for sale that was no doubt much cheaper—that of Benbow, Cannon, and Fair. As mentioned, they used a different strategy of evasion than that of Clarke and Carlile, who at any rate was happy to have the notoriety that trials brought because they always increased sales dramatically. The sleight of hand of the false New York imprint seems to have worked, for Benbow was never prosecuted for *Queen Mab*. It is unclear how much

the edition was being sold for (perhaps 3s 6d or less), but the preface claims that it was deliberately produced for wide circulation, especially amongst the working class:

The object of the projectors of this edition, was cheapness and portability, in order that it might come into the hands of *all* classes of society; consequently it was thought that translations of those passages in the notes, quoted from Greek, Latin, and French authors, would be acceptable. This has been done with the greatest fidelity...the translation is substituted for the French and Greek, with a view to render the book less expensive.³⁷

The book is a neat little duodecimo, unlike the expensive octavo printed by Clark. They go on to say that the edition has been “got up merely with a view to give extensive circulation to the principles contained both in the poem and the notes.” They conclude with a promise no doubt intended to horrify the SSV: “Should the present Edition meet the approbation of the Public, it will be stereotyped for the benefit of the rising generation.”

The preface makes it clear that Benbow, Cannon, and Fair were also engaged in the war for the freedom of the press, and were using poetry as cannon shot:

The press of England was never free, even in her best days, but now that she is rapidly declining in the scale of empire and prosperity, and bending her neck to the yoke of despotism, it is completely enslaved. No one who valued his liberty could think of publishing such a work, and it remained in obscurity until a bookseller, of the name of Clarke, had the temerity to print and sell publicly in London, an elegant octavo edition, early in the present year. A prosecution was speedily commenced against him, by an infamous junta of canting hypocrites, assuming the title of ‘A Society for the Suppression of Vice,’ and he has, most probably, ere this been tried, condemned, and consigned to a dungeon.

The Preface is signed “A Pantheist” with an odd symbol next to the signature (see Figure 3). This symbol is one of Cannon’s calling cards, as is the E. P. in lowercase Greek letters on the engraved title page, short for Erasmus Perkins, Cannon’s early pen name. Finally, it is claimed that the “Editor of this edition of ‘Queen Mab,’ was in England in the Spring of 1815, and

³⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab; a Philosophical Poem* (New York: William Baldwin and Co., 1821). The following citations are all from the preface of this edition, which is unpaginated.

received a copy of the Poem from the Author, who was then in his twenty-second year.” William Godwin’s diary shows that Cannon visited him in January 1815, and he had called on the Shelleys at the beginning of the year as well, for he shows up in Mary’s journal.³⁸ He clearly obtained a copy of the 1813 edition of *Queen Mab* from Shelley himself, to be used in his short-lived periodical, the *Theological Inquirer*.³⁹ Fair’s “Ode to the Author of ‘Queen Mab’” and the summary of *Queen Mab* signed by Erasmus Perkins are reprinted from the *Theological Inquirer* following the preface.

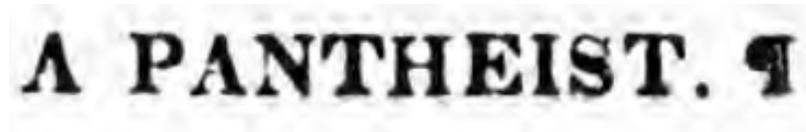


Figure 3: Signature from the Preface of the Benbow edition of *Queen Mab*

When Carlile published his first edition of *Queen Mab*, he issued it, characteristically, with a challenge to the SSV: “If they please, they shall make it as common as they have made the ‘Age of Reason’” (*REP*, vol. 5, p. 145). This is precisely what happened: just as with *Wat Tyler*, the prosecution increased sales and opened the field for piracies, dropping the price significantly. Already by the end of 1822, Carlile announced that “no less than four editions” were for sale;

³⁸ *The Journals of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 62. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *JMWS*.

³⁹ *The Theological Inquirer; or, Polemical Magazine; Being a General Medium of Communication on Religion, Metaphysics, & Moral Philosophy. Open to all Parties. Containing Free Discussion.—Criticism.—Original Poetry.—Selections and Reprints of Scarce and Curious Works Connected with Theology, Ontology, and Ethics.* Conducted by Erasmus Perkins, Assisted by Several Eminent Literary Characters. From March to September, (London: Printed and Published by M. Jones, 1815). This copy is in the British Library. The only other existing copy is at Columbia University. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *TI*.

soon after that he claimed he had purchased the remaining stock of the original 1813 edition, some 180 copies, and was putting them on sale for the same price as his edition, for “those friends of Mr. Shelley, or others, who may prize an original copy” (*REP*, vol. 5, p. 979). He went on to print two thousand copies of a pocket edition in 1826, and would soon announce that it was his best-selling work (*REP*, vol. 14, p. 96). “Mrs. Carlile and Sons” released another edition in 1832. Benbow, doing his part, published almost all of Shelley’s previously published poetry in numbers in the mid-1820s (he did the same with Byron). The Owenite publisher John Brooks released a nice edition of *Queen Mab* in 1829, from the original 1813 edition—a copy of which he might have obtained from Shelley himself (*SL*, pp. 35–42). The number of editions available, and at such cheap prices, makes it no wonder that Buxton-Forman, cataloguing them in 1886, would find copies that were apparently owned by “the radical mechanic” and “extremely dirty, regularly used up by some person or persons whose way of life did not admit of much nicety” (*SL*, p. 56).

The battle for the freedom of the press, waged preeminently by Carlile, but with the assistance of many others, such as Benbow, Cannon, Fair, Wooler, Hone, and Cobbett, was ultimately victorious. As Thompson writes, when Carlile

finally emerged, after years of imprisonment, the combined fleets were scattered beyond the horizon in disarray. He had exhausted the ammunition of the Government, and turned its *ex officio* informations and special juries into laughing-stocks. He had plainly sunk the private prosecuting societies, the Constitutional Association (or ‘Bridge-Street Gang’) and the Vice Society, which were supported by the patronage and the subscriptions of the nobility, bishops and Wilberforce. [*MEWC*, p. 720]

What remained was the stamp tax, primarily, but also the persistence of prosecutions for blasphemous libel. The second generation of radical pirates—chiefly James Watson and Henry

Hetherington—would pick up where Carlile left off, killing the stamp taxes and eventually putting an end to prosecutions for blasphemy. The latter they achieved with *Queen Mab*.

In the 1830s, Watson stereotyped *Queen Mab* and many other works in the radical canon, producing cheap but well-made editions. His *Queen Mab* was being sold for one shilling in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Nottingham, and all the way to Dublin. There are editions from the same plates being published by Watson as late as 1857. As with Benbow and Carlile, Watson was concerned not with making money from publishing radical literature, but rather with keeping it in print, and at prices affordable to workers. As Linton put it:

Most of [Watson's] works were unprofitable; he but asked if a book ought to be read instead of prohibited, would it be useful to his class; then he calculated how cheaply it could be brought out, content if all his business returns were sufficient for the simplest necessaries of life and to enable him to publish more. [*JW*, p. 26]

Along with Hetherington, Watson deliberately sold penny papers to the working class in defiance of the stamp taxes. In early 1833 both were imprisoned for selling unstamped copies of Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian*. From prison Watson petitioned the government pointing out a score of other periodicals being sold unstamped, which weren't prosecuted because they were ideologically in line with the Church and the State.

Thompson notes that in the early years of the 1830s it was Hetherington “who led the frontal attack” against continued repression of the radical press through the stamp taxes and blasphemy prosecutions (*MEWC*, p. 728). When he commenced the *Poor Man's Guardian* in 1831, he threw it forward deliberately in defiance of the law as

a weekly paper for the People, established contrary to ‘Law’ to try the power of Might against Right: which will contain *news, intelligence, and occurrences, and remarks and observations thereon, and on matters in Church and State, tending decidedly to excite hatred and contempt of the Government and Constitution of the tyranny of this Country as by Law established and also to vilify the ABUSES of religion; and will be printed in the United Kingdom for sale, and published periodically (every Saturday) at intervals not*

exceeding twenty-six days; and will not exceed two sheets; and will be published for a less sum than six-pence (to wit, the sum of ONE PENNY); exclusive of the duty imposed by the 38 Geo. III cap 78 and 60 Geo. II c. 9, or any other acts whatsoever, and despite the 'laws,' or the will and pleasure, of any tyrant or body of tyrants whatsoever, any thing herein-before or anywhere else contained to the contrary notwithstanding. [JW, pp. 31–32]

The material in italics came directly from the laws cited at the end, which Hetherington, Caliban-like, turns against the government. The battle was won by 1836, when the stamp duty was again reduced to one penny.

It remained to continue the fight against libel. Sedition had for all practical purposes been rendered toothless by Hone and Wooler in 1817, which is when the government turned to blasphemy as its most powerful tool against the radicals. As mentioned, Hetherington was convicted of blasphemy in 1840. When Moxon brought out Mary Shelley's edition of the *Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1839, it contained a bowdlerized version of *Queen Mab* and omitted the notes altogether. Critics complained about the censorship of *Queen Mab* in the *Poetical Works*, and in response the full version was published in a single-volume edition of Shelley's *Works* in 1840. Hetherington then devised a brilliant but counterintuitive plan: he brought a prosecution for blasphemous libel against Moxon for selling the poem that had already resulted in the conviction of so many radicals.

The intended and actual effect of this trial was to expose the use of blasphemous libel for what it was: a repressive cudgel wielded selectively by the government against political and religious opponents such as Benbow, Carlile, Hetherington, and Watson. Thomas Noon Talfourd was solicitor in defense of Moxon, and gave an eloquent defense in which he claimed that if *Queen Mab* was blasphemous, so were Milton's *Paradise Lost* and other classics. He extolled Shelley as a poet of genius. Moxon was found guilty, but never called up for punishment. "We

had gained enough,” Linton later wrote. “Prosecutions for blasphemy were stopped” (*JW*, p. 64). They weren’t entirely stopped, but the government had been blatantly exposed in its hypocrisy, and cases of blasphemous libel, as with sedition previously, became increasingly rarer and less effective. As Joss Marsh put it, “the safe publication of ‘serious’ heretical works was henceforth assured” (*WC*, p. 98).⁴⁰ “Percy Bysshe Shelley,” as Newman Ivey White wrote, “who knew himself to be in danger of this same law and took surprising precautions against it, could hardly have been anything but pleased that he was to be used as an instrument for its mitigation.”⁴¹ The law of blasphemous libel, which haunted Shelley’s poetical work from the beginning, and was in large part responsible for the form of *Queen Mab* itself, was ultimately reduced to desuetude through the poem. That’s poetic justice.

3. *Queen Mab* and the Working-Class Canon

Queen Mab came to have a place next to the works of Paine and Volney’s *Ruins* as one of the essential texts in the working-class canon. How and why did this happen? The question has been answered in part already: it could not have taken on this canonical status were it not for the labors and perseverance of the radical publishers, while the revolution in printing and the ironic contingencies of the law of libel made books available to working-class readers for the first time in history. These, however, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the status that *Queen Mab* attained. Other books of poetry—Southey’s *Wat Tyler*, Byron’s *Don Juan* and *Cain*,

⁴⁰ Marsh argues that this trial had further legal implications, by ensuring the passage of the Copyright Act of 1842: “Henry Hetherington not only exposed the classist partiality of the law against blasphemy but also ironically started a historical chain reaction that may yet end in the utter contraction of common domain” (*WC*, p. 109).

⁴¹ Newman I. White, “Literature and the Law of Libel: Shelley and the Radicals of 1840-1842,” *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (January, 1925), p. 47.

Moore's *Irish Melodies*—were also pirated and sold widely, some of them much more than *Queen Mab*, and yet they didn't become the gospel of the Owenites or the bible of the Chartists.⁴² So, while material conditions necessarily form an indispensable part of the answer, to fully account for the status of *Queen Mab* for the working class requires some thinking about the text itself, some consideration of ideological and literary factors.

Before turning to the poem, I will present the evidence that suggests that the verse itself was the main attraction, and that readers, even working-class readers, were drawn to it. This evidence can be sorted into three categories: 1) the frequent quotation of verse from *Queen Mab* in radical periodicals and at public meetings; 2) the poetry of working-class radicals that was clearly influenced by Shelley, and *Queen Mab* in particular; and 3) evaluative statements about the work in radical periodicals and other publications.⁴³ An early example of both the first and second is the contributions of Fair to the *Theological Inquirer*, in which extracts from *Queen Mab* were first published. Fair's article on *Queen Mab*, which is serialized, focuses on the poetry, quoting nearly a third of it by the end. In his introduction Fair notes that he will "extract such passages as will serve to give a faint idea of the whole, though, I am sorry to say, I shall be, under the necessity of omitting some of its greatest beauties." Focusing in on *Queen Mab* as a

⁴² Murphy writes that Shelley, Byron, and Burns were the most important and most widely quoted poets in the working-class press, and claims that "Arguing that Shelley was more 'important' than Byron to working-class journalists during this period, or vice versa, would be sheer folly" (*TWC*, p. 138). I agree with Murphy, and am not arguing that Byron wasn't a part of the working-class canon; but there wasn't an individual work by Byron that achieved the kind of status that *Queen Mab* did. The closest would be *Cain*, but it wasn't anywhere near as pervasive, or as ideologically important as *Queen Mab*. I also think that Murphy fails to consider the importance of Byron's fame and Shelley's relative obscurity.

⁴³ A fourth source of evidence is marginalia in the pirated editions of Shelley, which I haven't made any systematic study of. But if the example of the various piracies held by the Bodleian Library at Oxford and by the British Library is can be taken as representative, it is clear that the poetry was being read avidly and carefully.

“philosophical poem” as Shelley calls it, Fair claims that “the delightful creations of fancy and the realities of truth unite to produce an indelible impression on the mind” (*TI*, p. 34). Fair’s running commentary between the excerpts is intelligent, and shows a keen appreciation of Shelley’s poetical skill. Also serialized in the *TI* is a long poem by Fair, clearly influenced by Shelley, called “The Ruined City.”⁴⁴

Shaaban has catalogued the extensive quotation of Shelley in the Chartist press, and Kalim notes that the “Owenite journals, particularly *The New Moral World*, are full of quotations from Shelley” (“SCP,” *SO*, p. 11). Murphy, who has made the fullest study yet of the presence of the Romantic poets in the radical and working-class press, writes that *Queen Mab* was “often excerpted, reviewed, and mentioned” (*TWC*, p. 141). I will take here as a key example Carlile’s *Republican*, because it was one of the most important and widely read of the radical periodicals and because the appearances of *Queen Mab* in it haven’t been previously catalogued. Between 1822 and 1826, there are nine separate letters or articles in *The Republican*, by a variety of different writers (not just Carlile, that is), that excerpt from *Queen Mab*, sometimes extensively (*REP*, vol. 6, p. 907, vol. 8, pp. 57–60, 311–20, 520, vol. 9, pp. 524–39, vol. 10, pp. 382–83, vol. 12, p. 18, vol. 14, pp. 545–53, 715–18). In the same issues, there are only two quotations from the notes to *Queen Mab*. There is also a transcript of a discourse by the Reverend Robert Taylor—who became one of the most popular blasphemous preachers and orators in the 1820s and 1830s, drawing huge crowds at the Rotunda—“Delivered before the Society of Universal Benevolence, in their Chapel, Lothbury,” in which he quotes from *Queen Mab*. Carlile writes in

⁴⁴ Janowitz suggests that “exchange, rather than influence, might be the appropriate term for thinking about Fair in relation to Shelley” and goes as far as to suggest that “The Ruined City” might have influenced Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (*LL*, pp. 105–7).

a note that “his delivery of the quotation from Shelley’s *Queen Mab* was fine beyond description” (*REP*, vol. 14, p. 553; *LRC*, p. 164–70). A poem by James Henry Simson, a Glasgow radical, “To the Memory of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Author of ‘*Queen Mab*,’ ‘*Prometheus Unbound*,’ &c. &c.,” is printed, which was read aloud at the “Commemoration of the anniversary of the Glasgow Zetetic Society” (*REP*, pp. 590–94). Carlile, Painean to the core, printed annual transcripts of the celebrations of Paine’s birthday at various cities; almost invariably there is a toast to “The Immortal memory of P. B. Shelly [sic], the author of *Queen Mab*” (*REP*, vol. 9, p. 183; this one is from Huddersfield). This last example is important: to the radicals (and to almost everyone until the 1840s), Shelley was the author of *Queen Mab*. Devotees like Simson and Allen Davenport mentioned other works, such as *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Revolt of Islam*; but Shelley was first and foremost known and celebrated because, to quote again Davenport’s stanza that stands as an epigraph, “‘*Queen Mab*’ can never die!””

We cannot know the full extent to which *Queen Mab* penetrated into working-class culture and consciousness via oral transmission at various working-class gatherings, whether at the blasphemous chapels that McCalman brings to life, or at tavern meetings such as the Paine birthday celebrations. But these examples from *The Republican* suggest that circulation of the poetry and ideas of *Queen Mab* cannot be adequately accounted for if we consider only print. Perhaps Wickwar’s factor of ten, applied to readers of the radical press, must be applied also to works like *Queen Mab*, Volney’s *Ruins*, and Paine’s *Age of Reason* and *Rights of Man*.

When one considers the verse of working-class poets such as the aforementioned Fair, Simson, and Davenport, and others such as Ebenezer Jones, Thomas Cooper, and Thomas Wade, the influence of Shelley is profound and pervasive. While Shelley’s early influence on the

Cambridge Apostles and Robert Browning has been thoroughly analyzed, the depth and extent of his influence on working-class poets in the same period still needs a full account. Here I will only briefly consider the example of Simson's ode to Shelley. It is a telling example, because not only is it a poem extolling Shelley, both as a poet and a radical, but it also formally mimics *Queen Mab* with a mixture of unrhymed iambic lines of varying lengths and blank verse.⁴⁵ That Simson admires Shelley preeminently as a poet is clear: "Yet there was one whose soul / Was melody itself, / Who sang more sweet than the celestial choirs, / Renown'd in fabled tales of holy lore." This—and other examples could be cited—troubles the notion, put forward by Fraistat, for example, that the etherealizing of Shelley was merely a middle-class effort to recover him from the radical image of the Satanic School put forward by Southey. For the working-class, too, he was a celestial visitant, an angel of song—but a revolutionary angel. "Percy, bard of philosophic truth," Simson goes on, "In the bright orbit of the lyric train / He shone transcendently, / Diffusing far a strong, almost / Unsufferable blaze of light." The appreciation was simultaneously of the beauty of the poetry and of the powers of a rare mind: "Science and art seem'd open to the glance / Of his far piercing eye. / Even nature's self proved little to the grasp / Of his vast genius, and / His mighty mind / Soar'd in the chariot of the fairy queen / To visioned regions, and / To scenes sublime / Among the half-seen, glimmering star of night" (*REP*, vol. 9, pp. 590–91). Shelley was admired by the working class simultaneously as a poet of genius, and as a prophet of truth, bringing his deep learning in scientific and philosophical texts into his verse to create "scenes sublime." A key difference in audiences emerges here: the bourgeois Shelley Myth would progressively hollow Shelley's poetry of content, resulting finally

⁴⁵ I discern the influence of Shelley's *Poetical Essay* as well, a connection which, if correct, is of historical interest.

in Matthew Arnold's evocative image of Shelley as ineffectual angel, "beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."⁴⁶ For the working class, Shelley was always both a political prophet and a great poet.

The final major source of evidence that the working class read *Queen Mab* primarily for the poetry can be found in the many critical evaluations of Shelley's work in periodicals, pamphlets, and books. This aspect of the working-class reception of the Romantics is particularly and rightly stressed by Murphy, who writes "the working class had much to do with the making of their own *literary* values, values clearly distinct from those of other classes," indicating that working-class readers and critics "had a far greater literary sophistication than they have heretofore been accorded" (*TWC*, pp. 2, 137). This shows in the appreciation and evaluation of *Queen Mab*. I will consider a couple of representative examples here: Allen Davenport's essay "Remarks on the Genius and Writings of the Late Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley" and a letter to *The Republican* by one Elijah Ridings. Davenport, like Simson, admires Shelley both for his verse and for his mind: "Mr. Shelley's Pegasus was a real winged horse, a fiery courser, who, scorning the beaten tract, bore him with ardour and rapidity through scenes awfully grand and fearfully sublime, to the very verge of Nature's empire, and plunged him into the mysterious ultimity of existing matter." Portraying Shelley as a prophet, Davenport writes that Shelley was "more the poet of 1900 than one of the present age." But if Shelley was "born posthumously" (as Nietzsche wrote of himself), wouldn't his works be beyond the comprehension of the working class? One of the remarkable aspects of this article by Davenport is that he addresses this directly:

So rapid...has the "march of intellect" among the common people of this country been, that a great portion of them are not only capable of reading and understanding works of

⁴⁶ Matthew Arnold, "Shelley," in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by A. Dwight Culler, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 380.

judgment, but works of genius also; and the time is not far distant when public writers will feel the necessity of paying due respect to the judgment of that class of people who have been denominated—*the swinish multitude*. There needs no stronger proof of [their] intellectual improvement... than a cheap edition of “Queen Mab,” the price of which is reduced from half-a-guinea to half-a-crown! (*REP*, vol. 14, p. 717)

The letter of Elijah Ridings is remarkable in its own right. Published in 1822, just after Shelley’s death, and just over a year after the death of Keats, it shows a keen literary judgment: “The productions of Shelley, Byron, Moore, Keates [sic], Campbell, Leigh Hunt, Lady Morgan, &c., have created a new age in the literary world, and notwithstanding the heavy load of calumny and detraction which hath been heaped upon them by the base tools of the hireling press, they will glide gently down the stream of time and be read with delight, and admired with rapture by succeeding ages.” (It is notable, because so rare at this time, to see Keats included with Byron, Shelley, Moore, and Leigh Hunt as one of the major poets of the time.) Shelley, again, is admired foremost for *Queen Mab*, and again both for the quality of the poetry and for the depth of thought: “his hallowed fame will live for ever, and his ‘Queen Mab,’ that master-piece of poetic genius, which displays the awful greatness of the mind that produced it, will be read with the warmest admiration” (*REP*, vol. 6, p. 907). Such examples of evaluative criticism in the working-class press show that they were, as Murphy claims, forming their own canon with their own distinctive values; they also show that working-class readers read Shelley primarily for his poetry.

It will not do, then, to simply point to the notes of *Queen Mab*, which might seem the easiest way to explain its popularity, as they are, in fact, a kind of compendium or anthology of radical and Enlightenment thought. It is part of the condescension of posterity to assume that working-class and artisan readers were coming to *Queen Mab* only for the notes. Finally, it is also insufficient to generalize vaguely about the power of poetry, or song, to express things in

such a way that they are particularly beautiful, or memorable, or witty. There is this *particular* poem, that did these particular things in the world, and that is what must be dealt with in detail if any understanding is to arise. We have no account of *Queen Mab*'s distinctive appeal, in short, that effectively combines both historical and textual analysis.⁴⁷

“We can almost say,” Thompson wrote, “that Paine established a new framework within which Radicalism was confined for nearly 100 years, as clear and as well defined as the constitutionalism which it replaced” (*MEWC*, p. 94). A reading of *Queen Mab* with Paine as a backdrop shows just how far Shelley passed beyond liberal radicalism. To claim that *Queen Mab* is a proto-socialist text is not to participate in a denatured history of ideas meant to glorify an individual intellect and bask in its prescient genius; on the contrary, *Queen Mab* was active in the making of socialist thinking. I will focus in on four aspects of the poem in what follows. First, I

⁴⁷ McCalman suggests that “the *Ruins* and *Queen Mab* went on to become formative popular radical texts” due to “their shared Gothic-Romantic sensibility” (*RU*, p. 81). E. P. Thompson doesn't grant *Queen Mab* the canonical status that it clearly deserves; I suspect that he had an aversion to Shelley for some reason. He does note, however, that “Godwin's philosophical anarchism reached a working-class public only after the Wars; and then mainly through the Notes to Shelley's *Queen Mab*” (*MEWC*, p. 98fn). John Pollard Guinn notes that *Queen Mab* was “by far the best known of [Shelley's] works prior to his emergence as one of the major romantic poets. How to account for this phenomenon remains to some extent a matter of speculation.” He suggests that *Queen Mab* “uniquely purveyed the spirit of the time” and that radicals found in it “not an echo but an intensification” of existing radical thought. Guinn, *Shelley's Political Thought* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 101. Aside from being vague, the problem with this position is that *Queen Mab* was written in 1811–13, during the Luddite movement, pirated and made popular in the 1820s, and continued to be a key radical text in the 1830s and 40s: it would be difficult to maintain that there was a single “spirit” presiding over these very different times. Neil Fraistat claims that there was a “failure to appropriate Shelley successfully for radical discourse,” which I think is untrue (“Illegitimate Shelley,” p. 409). He bases his argument on a single article by Derwent Coleridge in 1826, which is obviously problematic because of the ideological motivations that are clearly behind Coleridge's piece. One can read any volume of Carlile's *The Republican* between 1822 and 1826 and find that Shelley was being successfully “appropriated”—if that is even the right term for works that were themselves examples of “radical discourse”—by the radicals.

suggest that the narrative frame of *Queen Mab*, substantially adopted from Volney's *Ruins*, is essential to the power that both works had, because it is a narratological tool particularly honed to break down false consciousness. Second, Shelley's critique of commerce—at the center of *Queen Mab*, both structurally and ideologically—is, I argue, his key contribution to the development of radical thought, and is where he most emphatically moves beyond Paine and toward a socialist critique. Connected with Shelley's critique of commerce is his critique of the marriage system, and his advocacy of free love, which would become a major aspect of socialist thought, passing from Shelley through the Owenites to the Communists. The millenarian utopianism of *Queen Mab* must have connected with a major strain of ultra-radicalism that had its roots in Protestant Dissent, and was a key component of the Spencean underground and of Owenite socialism. I will also argue that reading *Queen Mab* from this angle allows us to draw important conclusions about the work itself, about Shelley, and about Romanticism.

Shelley himself invites juxtaposition with Paine by the inclusion on the original title page of an epigraph from Archimedes. The epigraph would have been immediately recognizable to contemporaries, featuring as it did in the first sentence of the introduction to part two of Paine's *Rights of Man*, which, of course, had gone viral in the 1790s: "What Archimedes said of the mechanical powers, may be applied to Reason and Liberty: '*Had we,*' said he, '*a place to stand upon, we might raise the world.*'"⁴⁸ The American revolution, Paine goes on to say, had provided that place. Shelley's place to stand upon, or revolutionary perspective, is very different, however—in an attempt to radically displace commonsense understandings of time and space,

⁴⁸ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense and Other Writings*, ed. by Gordon S. Wood (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), p. 135.

Shelley begins by taking the reader on a sci-fi flight into outer space, freezing time to view a spatialized vista of human history.

The main function of the narrative frame provided by the fairy Queen, a familiar figure from English folklore, becomes quite clear by the end of the first canto. The soul of Ianthe, chosen as one of “the good and the sincere” that has “burst the chains, / The icy chains of custom” has arisen from her body and ascended into the carriage of Queen Mab, who carries her from the earth into outer space.

The magic car moved on.
Earth's distant orb appeared
The smallest light that twinkles in the heaven;
Whilst round the chariot's way
Innumerable systems rolled,
And countless spheres diffused
An every-varying glory.
It was a sight of wonder: some
Were horned like the crescent moon;
Some shed a mild and silver beam
Like Hesperus o'er the western sea;
Some dash'd athwart with trains of flame,
Like worlds to death and ruin driven;
Some shone like suns, and as the chariot passed,
Eclipsed all other light.

Spirit of Nature! here!
In this interminable wilderness
Of worlds, at whose immensity
Even soaring fancy staggers,
Here is thy fitting temple.

[*CP*, pp. 172–73, canto 1, ll. 249–68]

The philosophical point of these lines is clear enough: not only is the earth not the center of the universe, it is in fact an insignificant speck in the “interminable wilderness / Of worlds,” a brilliant Shelleyan metaphor that takes effect after a quintessentially Shelleyan use of enjambment. The point is still a mainstay in the repertoire of arguments against design.

Shelley's fairytale narrative allows him to bring the thought to life, and bring it home, by describing the motion into the cosmos in vivid detail ("Some dash'd athwart with trains of flame / Like worlds to death and ruin driven"). The effect on many readers must have been as sublime as it was for Simson (quoted above).

There's a science-fiction element to this, which must have contributed to the appeal of the poem to working-class and artisan readers who likely had scant familiarity with contemporary scientific theories. In the notes Shelley marshals the latest scientific evidence in support of the verse: "Beyond our atmosphere the sun would appear a rayless orb of fire in the midst of a black concave. The equal diffusion of its light on earth is owing to the refraction of the rays by the atmosphere, and their reflection from other bodies." He notes the wave/particle forms of light, and its incredible velocity: "observations on the eclipses of Jupiter's satellites have demonstrated that light takes up no more than 8 minutes and 7 seconds in passing from the sun to the earth, a distance of 95,000,000 miles." The sheer size of the universe is one of the key points: "Some idea may be gained of the immense distance of the fixed stars, when it is computed that many years would elapse before light could reach this earth from the nearest of them; yet in one year light travels 5,422,400,000,000 miles, which is a distance 5,707,600 times greater than that of the sun from the earth" (Note 1, p. 239).⁴⁹ This is popular science, drawing on the most contemporary scientific theories about the nature of the universe. The next note draws out the atheist-materialist conclusions:

The plurality of worlds,—the indefinite immensity of the universe is a most awful subject of contemplation. He who rightly feels its mystery and grandeur, is in no danger of seduction from the falsehoods of religious systems, or of deifying the principle of the universe. It is impossible to believe that the Spirit that pervades this infinite machine, begat a son upon the body of a Jewish woman; or is angered at the consequences of that

⁴⁹ This note was written by Shelley (i.e., it has no 'significant hand' next to it).

necessity, which is a synonyme of itself. All that miserable tale of the Devil, and Eve, and an Intercessor, with the childish mummeries of the God of the Jews, is irreconcilable with the knowledge of the stars.⁵⁰ [*CP*, note 2, pp. 239–40]

Neil deGrasse Tyson, a gifted popularizer of science in our own time, calls this “the cosmic perspective”—how an understanding of the cosmos transforms our understanding in general.⁵¹ Here it is interesting to recall an odd word that Shelley used in his letter to Hogg quoted earlier: “I have not abated an iota in the infidelity or *cosmopolity* of it” (*LPBS*, 1:352, my italics). The word is in the *OED*, but without a definition, because the only use of it they record is precisely this letter of Shelley’s. They link to “cosmopolitism,” but I don’t think that Shelley means the same thing; in fact, I would argue *cosmopolity* means something similar to what Tyson means by the cosmic perspective, but with a political edge. *Queen Mab* is a politics of the cosmos, a perspective that provides a potentially revolutionary standpoint.

Shelley’s cosmopolitics, however, places as much importance on the micro as it does on the macro. There is an abrupt dialectical turn in scale immediately following upon the lines quoted above: “Yet not the lightest leaf / That quivers to the passing breeze / Is less instinct with thee: / Yet not the meanest worm / That lurks in graves and fattens on the dead / Less shares thy eternal breath” (*CP*, p. 173, canto 1, ll. 269–77). These lines show the subtlety of Shelley’s materialism. There had been a degrading and deflating element to previous materialism—man being reduced to a mere machine, no different in essence than a worm or a stone. Shelley rather turns this on its head, elevating the ‘lowest’ and smallest forms of matter to spiritual participation

⁵⁰ This is Shelley’s note.

⁵¹ See, for example, Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Space Chronicles: Facing the Ultimate Frontier*, ed. by Avis Lang (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2012).

in the grandeur and beauty of eternal Nature. This theme is carried forward and elaborated upon in the next canto, which, like the first, ends with heady stuff:

There's not one atom of yon earth
But once was living man;
Nor the minutest drop of rain,
That hangeth in its thinnest cloud,
But flowed in human veins...

How strange is human pride!
I tell thee that those living things,
To whom the fragile blade of grass,
That springeth in the morn
And perisheth ere noon,
Is an unbounded world;
I tell thee that those viewless beings,
Whose mansion is the smallest particle
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.

[*CP*, pp. 180–81, canto 2, ll. 211–43]

There is in these lines a dialectical synthesis of materialism and idealism, a simultaneous spiritualizing of matter and materializing of spirit. (This new form of materialism—not to be confused with pantheism—finds its fullest and most beautiful expression, I would argue, in the poetry of Walt Whitman, especially the final nine sections of “Song of Myself.”) It is not just the dizzying shifts in scale from the telescopic to the microscopic that are remarkable here, but the extension of thought and feeling deep into the ‘lowest’ links in the great chain of being—a framework for thought rendered inadequate by this verse.

Shelley has assaulted commonsense perception of space through dramatic shifts in scale; in canto two he also assaults commonsense perception of time. The reward of the virtuous Ianthe is what Shelley called the grand theme of the poem: “the past shall rise; / Thou shalt behold the present; I will teach / The secrets of the future” (2.65–8, p. 175). The keyword here is *ruin*, reiterated like a pedal point in the first two cantos:

Behold, the Fairy cried,
Palmyra’s ruined palaces!...

Monarchs and conquerors there
Proud o’er prostrate millions trod—
The earthquakes of the human race;
Like them, forgotten when the ruin
That marks their shock is past.

[*CP*, p 177, canto 2, ll. 109–25]

Nature is eternal, the works of mankind are transient; the pyramids of Egypt will fall, but the Nile “shall pursue his changeless way” (*ibid.*, l. 128). The great empires have passed away:

Where Athens, Rome, and Sparta stood,
There is a moral desert now:
The mean and miserable huts,
The yet more wretched palaces,
Contrasted with those antient fanes,
Now crumbling to oblivion;
The long and lonely colonnades,
Through which the ghost of Freedom stalks,
Seem like a well-known tune,
Which, in some dear scene we have loved to hear,
Remembered now in sadness.

[*CP*, pp. 178–79, canto 2, ll. 162–72]

The point of this catalogue of ruin is to drive a stake through the heart of ideology—the belief that the current social order is natural and immutable. The philosophical thrust is the same as that of Marx’s critical philosophy, which, as Georg Lukacs puts it, “dissolves the rigid, unhistorical,

natural appearance of social institutions; it reveals their historical origins and shows therefore that they are subject to history in every respect including historical decline.”⁵²

This comes through clearly and forcefully near the end of the second canto, where all that remains of “a stately city, / Metropolis of the western continent” is a “mossy column-stone, / Indented by time’s unrelaxing grasp”:

There the wide forest scene,
Rude in the uncultivated loveliness
Of gardens long run wild,
Seems, to the unwilling sojourner, whose steps
Chance in that desert has delayed,
Thus to have stood since the earth was what it is.
Yet once it was the busiest haunt,
Whither, as to a common centre, flocked
Strangers, and ships, and merchandize

[*CP*, pp. 179–80, canto 2, ll. 182–210]

This vision of history is reminiscent of a now famous angel—Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, as read by Walter Benjamin: “This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.”⁵³ Shelley, as Benjamin suggests in another of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” also appropriates religious imagery and thought for revolutionary purposes.

In cantos three and four, shifting from the past to the present, Shelley offers a critique of monarchy and aristocracy which is firmly within the tradition of Painean republicanism. The shift to commerce in canto five, however, takes Shelley far beyond the laissez-faire liberalism of

⁵² Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. By Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), p. 47. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *HCC*.

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 257.

Paine into proto-socialist territory, well in advance of the main current of radicalism at the time. Commerce for Shelley is rooted ultimately in the “Twin-sister of religion, selfishness!” The transmogrification of all value into exchange-value is unsparingly critiqued as “the venal interchange / Of all that human art or nature yield / Which wealth should purchase not, but want demand, / And natural kindness hasten to supply / From the full fountain of its boundless love, / For ever stifled, drained, and tainted now” (*CP*, p. 199, canto 5, ll. 38–43). Instead of money, need and kindness should be the natural basis of exchange. This passage captures, in essence, that famous dictum of socialism: from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs. There is also the recognition that human relations are poisoned, sickened by commerce; it is not yet a theory of alienation, but it is moving in that direction. The people are “by force or famine driven,

Beneath a vulgar master, to perform
A task of cold and brutal drudgery;—
Hardened to hope, insensible to fear,
Scarce living pullies of a dead machine,
Mere wheels of work and articles of trade,
That grace the proud and noisy pomp of wealth!

[*CP*, p. 200, canto 5, ll. 72–78]

This characterization of the poor workers is not merely an imaginative exercise on Shelley’s part, but comes from his own experience as an organizer and political activist in Ireland and Wales. “I had no conception of the depth of human misery until now,” he wrote to Godwin from Dublin in March, 1812. “The poor of Dublin are assuredly the meanest & most miserable of all.—In their narrow streets thousands seem huddled together—one mass of animated filth!” The rich, he writes “grind their fellow beings into worse than annihilation” (*LPBS*, 1:268). Soon after, he writes to Elizabeth Hitchener telling her of his efforts to help the poor, reiterating what he wrote to Godwin: “The rich *grind* the poor into abjectness & then complain that they are abject.—They

goad them to famine and hang them if they steal a loaf” (*LPBS*, 1:271). The visceral insistence on the verb *grind* blossoms into the lines quoted above, in which workers are figured as “Scarce living pullies of a dead machine,” a metaphor resonant to this day. It was these direct encounters with miserable poverty that allowed Shelley to write so eloquently as he does of “the poor man,

Whose life is misery, and fear, and care;
Whom the morn wakens but to fruitless toil;
Who ever hears his famished offsprings scream,
Whom their pale mother’s uncomplaining gaze
For ever meets, and the proud rich man’s eye
Flashing command, and the heart-breaking scene
Of thousands like himself...

[*CP*, p. 201, canto 5, ll. 113–20]

To working-class readers, lines like these no doubt expressed powerfully their own struggle, reflecting their class position back to them with the clarity of a mirror image.

Pushing the critique beyond the degrading effects of industry on the poor, Shelley aims at the core of liberal laissez-faire economics:

The harmony and happiness of man
Yields to the wealth of nations; that which lifts
His nature to the heaven of its pride,
Is bartered for the poison of his soul;
The weight that drags to earth his towering hopes,
Blighting all prospect but of selfish gain,
Withering all passion but of slavish fear,
Extinguishing all free and generous love
Of enterprize and daring, even the pulse
That fancy kindles in the beating heart
To mingle with sensation, it destroys,—
Leaves nothing but the sordid lust of self,
The groveling hope of interest and gold,
Unqualified, unmingled, unredeemed
Even by hypocrisy.

[*CP*, p. 200, canto 5, ll. 79–93]

The nod to Adam Smith is surely not accidental.⁵⁴ It is worth pausing for a moment on the striking proximity here between the words *free* and *enterprize*, the effect made more striking by another example of Shelleyan enjambment, which here provides a semantic jolt. It would seem that the notion, as we know it today, was being born around the time of *Queen Mab*. The phrase doesn't exist in Adam Smith, where one finds "free competition" and "free trade," which are similar but not exactly the same thing. In the period from 1811–13, however, a lively debate centered around the monopoly of foreign trade by the East-India Company. In this debate one watches the words *free* and *enterprize* being drawn together almost as if by a magnetic force, within the burgeoning discourse of capitalism and empire. The following is typical: "the East-India monopoly prevents the free export of our manufactures to one of the largest and richest regions of the world...which the unfettered enterprize and skill of individuals might soon explore, and render of the utmost importance."⁵⁵ In an anonymous pamphlet from 1813, being sold for one shilling, there is the same basic argument: "if the trade were fairly laid open to the free exertions of individual enterprize...we should soon see the export of the manufactures of a single hive of British industry equal the whole exports of this monstrous monopolizing Company."⁵⁶ The language was, so to speak, in the air. "The unbounded spirit of commercial

⁵⁴ It is known that Shelley read *Wealth of Nations*.

⁵⁵ John Bruce, *Report on the Negotiation, between the Honorable East-India Company and the Public, Respecting the Renewal of the Company's Exclusive Privileges of Trade, for Twenty Years from March, 1794* (London: Black, Parry and Kingsbury, Booksellers to the Honorable East-India Company, 1811), p. iii.

⁵⁶ *A Short Conversation on the Present Crisis of the Important Trade with the East Indies*, (London: Black, Parry, and Co.), 1813.

enterprize by which the merchants of Bristol are actuated, has lately rendered itself singularly conspicuous,” one finds in *The Beauties of England and Wales*.⁵⁷

But for Shelley *laissez faire* does not result in enterprise and innovation, inquiry and impact: the forces of commerce result, rather, in the extinguishing of “all free and generous love / Of enterprize and daring” replacing them with pure self-interest, what Thomas Carlyle would soon call the “cash-nexus.” There is in this formulation the germ of a theory of alienated labor. The nonsensical notion that the poor are poor from lack of virtue, or ability, or intelligence, or enterprise is rejected outright: “How many a rustic Milton has past by, / Stifling the speechless longings of his heart, / In unremitting drudgery and care!” (*CP*, p. 202, canto 5, ll. 137–39).

The all-consuming power of commerce, dominating the earth as well as human life, is expressed forcefully, in lines that seem now, in the midst of the capitalist-driven Anthropocene, particularly prophetic:

All things are sold: the very light of heaven
Is venal; earth’s unsparing gifts of love,
The smallest and most despicable things
That lurk in the abysses of the deep,
All objects of our life, even life itself,
And the poor pittance which the laws allow
Of liberty, the fellowship of man,
Those duties which his heart of human love
Should urge him to perform instinctively,
Are bought and sold as in a public mart
Of undisguising selfishness, that sets
On each its price, the stamp-mark of her reign.

Shelley seems to have recognized that imperialism, and the utter domination of the earth, are inherent to the capitalist system of commerce. It is an imperialism that invades every last corner

⁵⁷ Rev. J. Nightingale, *The Beauties of England and Wales: or, Original Delineations, Topographical, Historical, and Descriptive, of Each County*, Vol. XIII, Part I (London: J. Harris; Longman and Co.; etc., 1813), p. 690.

of the earth, transforming its gifts, which should be the common property of all, into money for the few. Just as every last recess of nature is invaded, so every form of human relation is invaded, including sex and love:

Even love is sold; the solace of all woe
Is turned to deadliest agony, old age
Shivers in selfish beauty's loathing arms,
And youth's corrupted impulses prepare
A life of horror from the blighting bane
Of commerce; whilst the pestilence that springs
From unenjoying sensualism, has filled
All human life with hydra-headed woes.

[*CP*, p. 203, canto 5, ll. 177–96]

The ninth note in *Queen Mab* elaborates the doctrine of free love, calling for the abolition of marriage. “Not even the intercourse of the sexes is exempt from the despotism of positive institution,” it begins, going on to argue that sexual relations should last only so long as love lasts. “Love is free: to promise for ever to love the same woman, is not less absurd than to promise to believe the same creed: such a vow, in both cases, excludes us from all enquiry.” The argument that marriage is in fact a dual system of prostitution is laid out forcefully, with particular attention to its misogyny:

Prostitution is the legitimate offspring of marriage and its accompanying errors. Women, for no other crime than having followed the dictates of a natural appetite, are driven with fury from the comforts and sympathies of society.... Has a woman obeyed the impulse of unerring nature;—society declares war against her, pityless and eternal war: she must be the tame slave, she must make no reprisals; theirs is the right of persecution, hers the duty of endurance. (*CP*, p. 254)

Shelley wrote in August, 1812, to James Henry Lawrence, author of a free love treatise in the form of a novel called *The Empire of the Nairs*: “Your ‘Empire of the Nairs,’ which I read this Spring, succeeded in making me a perfect convert to its doctrines. I then retained no doubts of the evils of marriage,—Mrs. Wollstonecraft reasons too well for that; but I had been dull enough

not to perceive the greatest argument against it, until developed in the ‘Nairs,’ viz., prostitution both *legal* and *illegal*” (*LPBS*, 1:323). Compare that with the following:

Bourgeois marriage is in reality a system of wives in common and thus, at the most, what the Communists might possibly be reproached with, is that they desire to introduce, in substitution for a hypocritically concealed, an openly legalized, community of women. For the rest, it is self-evident that the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e., of prostitution both public and private.⁵⁸

That, of course, is from *The Communist Manifesto*. There is evidence from Thomas Medwin that Robert Owen himself adopted free love through the direct influence of *Queen Mab*. Medwin recalls a visit to

the Owenite chapel, in Charlotte-street. In the ante-room, I observed a man at a table, on which were laid for sale, among many works on a small scale, this History of the Nairs, and Queen Mab, and after the discourse by Owen...we had an interview with the lecturer and reformer.... On finding that I was connected with Shelley, he made a long panegyric on him, and taking up one of the Queen Mabs from the table, read, premising that it was the basis of one of his chief tenets, the following passage: “How long ought the sexual connection to last? What law ought to specify the extent of the grievance that should limit its duration? A husband and wife ought to continue so long united as they love one another. Any law that should bind them to cohabitation for one moment after the decay of their affection, would be a most intolerable tyranny, and most unworthy of toleration.” [*ML*, pp. 98–99]

The case can be made that Shelley, and *Queen Mab* in particular, is responsible for the adoption of free love as one of the core tenets of socialism; more research needs to be done here, but it would seem that many of the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin entered into working-class politics only through the wide circulation of *Queen Mab*.⁵⁹ Shelley’s argument for

⁵⁸ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 260.

⁵⁹ See Thompson’s statement, quoted above, that the ideas of *Political Justice* only made their way into radical thought through *Queen Mab*. Kalim argues that Owen’s views of love and marriage were derived from Shelley, corroborating Medwin’s account (*SO*, pp. i, 6–8). In later life, when the elderly Owen was into spirit-rapping and séances, he was often “visited” by the spirit of Shelley.

the abolition of marriage and for free love is an explicitly feminist one: it is meant to liberate women from a despotic patriarchal system, linking the father structurally with masculinist gods and monarchs.

With canto eight begins the final movement of the poem, the utopian vision of the future. It is easy for us now to scoff at such utopian visions as those offered by Shelley in *Queen Mab*; it is easy for us to feel like good Marxists, or hardened students of realpolitik, while doing so. But Marx himself wrote that “utopianism...before the era of materialistically critical socialism concealed the latter within itself in embryo.”⁶⁰ It would also be a critical failure in analysis to not recognize the ways in which *Queen Mab* is keyed to an audience familiar with Christian eschatology, which Shelley appropriates for his own political ends. The millenarian vision that concludes *Queen Mab* is no more absurd than religious notions of eternal happiness; but Shelley’s heaven is, as he wrote to Hitchener when he first began the poem, a vision of the “delights of a perfect state of society; tho still earthly” (*LPBS*, 1:201). Shelley’s this-worldly, rather than back-worldly, eschatology is expressed at the opening of the ninth canto:

O happy Earth! reality of Heaven!
To which those restless souls that ceaselessly
Throng through the human universe, aspire;
Thou consummation of all moral hope! [...]

Where care and sorrow, impotence and crime,
Languor, disease, and ignorance dare not come:
O happy Earth, reality of Heaven!

[*CP*, p. 230, canto 9, ll. 1–11]

This utopianism is designed to serve a particular purpose: “let the sight” of futurity, the Fairy Queen says to Ianthe, “Renew and strengthen all thy failing hope” (*CP*, p. 224, canto 8, ll. 50–

⁶⁰ Karl Marx to Sorge, 19 Oct. 1877, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 638.

52). Recognizing how deeply the belief in “some sweet place of bliss” haunts “the human heart,” Shelley creates the myth of an earthly heaven, appropriating Christian imagery, to serve as an ultimate object for the cathexis of political passion (*CP*, p. 230, canto 9, ll. 12–16).

There are absurdities, yes. But there are also moments of moving beauty, condensing into well-turned lines of blank verse the core of Shelley’s philosophy. On the equality of the sexes and free love:

Woman and man, in confidence and love,
Equal and free and pure together trod
The mountain-paths of virtue, which no more
Were stained with blood from many a pilgrim’s feet.

[*CP*, pp. 232–33, canto 9, ll. 89–92]

And on the death of the church and the prison, for Shelley key symbols of tyranny:

Low through the lone cathedral’s roofless aisles
The melancholy winds a death-dirge sung:
It were a sight of awfulness to see
The works of faith and slavery, so vast,
So sumptuous, yet so perishing withal! [...]

Within the massy prison’s mouldering courts,
Fearless and free the ruddy children played,
Weaving gay chaplets for their innocent brows
With the green ivy and the red wall-flower,
That mock the dungeon’s unavailing gloom;
The ponderous chains, and gratings of strong iron,
There rusted amid heaps of broken stone
That mingled slowly with their native earth

[*CP*, p. 233, canto 9, ll. 103–21]

To the burgeoning working class, constantly threatened with imprisonment for trying to gather in solidarity, share ideas and texts, form trade unions, and criticize those in power, this vision of life without such tyranny must have been moving. The possibility of life without institutions such as the church and the prison must have been, to some, revelatory.

This recognition leads me to a final point about *Queen Mab* and the importance of verse. At his best in *Queen Mab*, Shelley achieves an epigrammatic clarity of statement—that condensed clarity, aided rather than hindered by meter and syntax, that often renders the expression of an idea in verse the inevitable expression of the idea:

Nature rejects the monarch, not the man;
The subject, not the citizen: for kings
And subjects, mutual foes, for ever play
A losing game into each other's hands,
Whose stakes are vice and misery. The man
Of virtuous soul commands not, nor obeys.
Power, like a desolating pestilence,
Pollutes whate'er it touches; and obedience,
Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,
Makes slaves of men, and, of the human frame
A mechanized automaton.

[*CP*, p. 187, canto 3, ll. 170–180]

That these lines had the kind of power that is being suggested here is evidenced by the fact that they were excerpted and reprinted in periodicals. The concluding lines (beginning with “The man / Of virtuous soul”), for example, were reprinted with the title “Power” in the *Free Enquirer*, the freethought and Owenite socialist organ of Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen in America.⁶¹ These same lines are one of the very few passages marked in one of the copies of the Benbow edition of *Queen Mab* in the British Library, as well as one of the copies of the *Beauties*.⁶² It is not just the inevitability of expression, but the condensation of *thought* that lends these lines their life and strength. The thinking can be found in Godwin's *Political Justice*, but over the span of fifty pages or so of argumentative prose. Randall Jarrell expressed this power admirably when he

⁶¹ *The Free Enquirer*, vol. 1, no. 18 (Feb. 1829): 144. Walt Whitman Sr. was a subscriber, and his son certainly read the journal, where he probably first became acquainted with the poetry of Shelley.

⁶² The copy of *Queen Mab* bears the signature of “George Blyth Butler. March 16. 1825. Newcastle-on-Tyne.” But it's not clear that the marginalia is his.

said of William Blake's line "*Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by Incapacity*" that it "has a story inside it, waiting to flower in a glass of water."⁶³ This is, I think, still a power distinctive to thinking through verse—and is thus perhaps the one distinctive political power that poetry retains even today.

A few final observations are in order. *Queen Mab* was uniquely adapted to speak to the various strains of radical thought of the 1820s and 30s, despite Shelley's stated audience. McCalman identifies three distinct strains within the Spencean underground, which can be generalized: Jacobin artisans, freethinkers, and millenarian enthusiasts. Spence had developed the political thought of Paine into his own early form of agrarian socialism; in *Queen Mab* Shelley developed a form of utopian socialism that meshed easily with Spencean thought. The "old Jacks" found in Shelley as unsparing an opponent of monarchy and aristocracy, and as forceful a proponent of republicanism, as Tom Paine. The freethinkers, like Cannon and Carlile, found in *Queen Mab* the most trenchant atheism outside of the works of Holbach. As mentioned, the millenarian enthusiasts could find in the vision of futurity in the final two cantos of *Queen Mab* a recognizable form of Christian eschatology, but with immediate political coordinates. Physical force revolutionaries such as Benbow could locate in *Queen Mab* a revolutionary program for the violent overthrow of the Monarchy and the Church. In short, *Queen Mab* had something for everybody to the left of the Tories.

The attunement of *Queen Mab* to different readerships is not haphazard, but is a structural element of the work itself. I believe that Shelley adopted this structure from Plato's *Republic*. In laying out his vision of Reform in the preface to the *Poetical Essay*, Shelley had

⁶³ *Randall Jarrell's Book of Stories*, ed. Randall Jarrell (New York: New York Review Books, 2002 [1958]), p. xii.

made use of the allegory of the cave from the *Republic*: “gradual, yet decided intellectual exertions must diffuse light, as human eyes are rendered capable of bearing it” (*PE*, p. 6). The ten books of the *Republic*, as has been pointed out by Plato scholars, are structured like a series of concentric circles, creating a microcosm of the Pythagorean spheres, along with a chiasmic mirroring. This structure incorporates different rhetorical strategies and increasing levels of difficulty and abstraction as one proceeds through the work—a fact thematized by Plato in the work itself by characters gradually dropping out of the dialogue. By books five and six, only Glaucon is still with Socrates (Adeimantos reenters in book seven). *Queen Mab* has a very similar structure, with cantos one and two dealing with the past, cantos three through seven analyzing the present, and cantos eight and nine focused on futurity. The present can be further broken down into three parts: cantos three and four, which critique monarchy, aristocracy, and war; canto five on commerce; and cantos six and seven which focus the critique on religion. It is interesting to note in this regard, that Shelley’s original plan was to write ten cantos: perhaps he realized that canto five on commerce really should stand alone as the center of the work (*LPBS*, 1:350). If so, it is a sign of keen judgment about where his greatest contribution to political thought lay, as well as a prescient analytical insight into the existing state of things.

Over recent decades, scholars of Romanticism have rightly given increased attention to the importance of reading publics in the period, not just in terms of the circulation of texts and ideas, but also in shaping the works of Romantic writers. Shelley has, not coincidentally, featured prominently in such studies. Jon P. Klancher’s *The Making of English Reading Audiences* made an important intervention by recognizing the extent to which Shelley was

navigating distinct middle-class and radical reading audiences.⁶⁴ But his overemphasis on a politics of the sign (a sign of the times) leads to a reductive reading of the politics of Shelley's work. When Shelley was agitating in Ireland, Godwin wrote and rebuked him, saying "Shelley, you are preparing a scene of blood!" (*LPBS*, 1:270). This argument is telling: Godwin was uninterested in any form of political organization, firmly convinced, like Kant, that Enlightenment was and should be strictly a war of ideas. Shelley was from first to last thinking about political *action*. His calls to action in the *Poetical Essay*, *Queen Mab*, and "The Mask of Anarchy" are couched in reflexive forms, but they cannot be reduced to semiotic skirmishes.

Finally, I want to suggest that one of the important implications of the account I've given of *Queen Mab* and the working class is that this "shadowy stretch of time" from the early 1820s to 1840 "sandwiched between two far more colourful periods," as Richard Cronin puts it in *Romantic Victorians*, deserves to have more light thrown upon it.⁶⁵ Cronin's book is an important step in this direction, but there is much still to be done. Here I will make only one point about Shelley. The extent to which Shelley's early reception after his death was dominated by his association with unsavoury radicals such as Carlile, Cannon, and Benbow as a result of the piracy and widespread availability of *Queen Mab* hasn't fully been appreciated, much less systematically analyzed. The effects of the struggle to recover Shelley for the middle class, I would argue, persist to the present, in particular in relation to discussions of the lyric. Shelley the lyric angel of pure song could only be brought into being by killing the Shelley of *Queen Mab*

⁶⁴ Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987). See also Andrew Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶⁵ Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824–1840* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 1.

and *The Revolt of Islam*. The socialists thankfully wouldn't let that happen, keeping always their revolutionary angel of pure song.

Class consciousness is one of the most urgent political problems facing us today. I believe, as Thompson argued, that class is “an *historical* phenomenon,” not a structure or a thing, a phenomenon that “must always be embodied in real people and a real context” (*MEWC*, pp. 9–10). The same is true of class-consciousness, which, as should be obvious by now if it wasn't before, is not a result of a structural position within the mode of production, but must be *made*. If, as I have argued, *Queen Mab* is to be considered a formative text in the making of the English working class and the development of socialist thought, then it can perhaps tell us something about the role that poetry played in the formation of class consciousness in early nineteenth-century England. This particular historical case can then perhaps give us important insight into class consciousness in general. I hope that I have made some initial steps toward such an analysis.

Chapter 2

Shelley, Inc.: Cultural Incorporation as Class Struggle

But, see!

There, on the brink of yonder precipice,
Strays my friend Percy. In his step is sadness:
His slender form seems drooping 'neath the weight
Of his vast mind; e'en as the delicate flower
Bends with the load of its luxuriant bloom.
How pale his features! and his large full eyes,
That wont to flash with an unearthly force,
How deeply shadowed!

The epigraph above is drawn from an odd verse play called *Harold de Burun: A Semi-Dramatic Poem*, written by the now-forgotten poet Henry Austen Driver and published in 1835.¹ Harold de Burun is Lord Byron, the speaker of the quoted lines, which provide a vivid portrait of Shelley. One might justly wonder how Driver, who apparently earned his bread as a stationer,²

¹ Henry Austen Driver, *Harold de Burun: A Semi-Dramatic Poem* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1835). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *HdB*.

² On Driver (b. 1790), see *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, VI, *The Later Years*, Part III: 1835–1839, 2nd Edition, ed. by Alan G. Hill, from the first edition ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, letter 1294, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 661–62: “A native of Cambridge, [Driver] moved later to Islington, where he gave lectures; but his last years are shrouded in obscurity. In 1838 Driver published *Byron and ‘The Abbey’*, ‘a few remarks upon the poet, elicited by the rejection of his statue by the Dean of Westminster, with suggestions for the erection of a national edifice to contain the monuments of our great men’. He drew attention to the double rebuff Byron had suffered at the hands of the Abbey authorities, first when his body was refused burial there when it was brought back from Missolonghi, and later when Thorwaldsen’s statue was rejected; and he proposed that a national pantheon should be erected, in which Byron should occupy the first place. ‘What have such men as Southey and Wordsworth to fear? Byron and *they* are too secure of their fame to be prejudiced by each other. They, also, are too high-minded, too generous, not to assist in raising a memorial to that genius, whose lustre, mingling with their own, has helped to characterize an era as one of peculiar splendour.’” A bankruptcy listing from 1853 notes him as a “stationer, dealer and chapman,” on Moorgate Street in London (*The Jurist*, vol. XVII, part II, [London: S. Sweet, et. al, 1854], p. 263).

could have given such a portrait of the poet who had spent most of his adult life living outside of England and died at the age of twenty-nine in 1822. Byron, of course, was a celebrity, and a variety of sexy and sensational portraits of him could be purchased relatively cheaply; descriptions of him and stories of his life were in abundance.³ There were only a few “likenesses” based on Amelia Curran’s portrait of Shelley, who at this time was still mostly execrated as the atheistic author of *Queen Mab*.⁴ Driver likely derived the main elements of his portrait from the chapter on Shelley in Leigh Hunt’s *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (1828), which begins with the following description:

His figure was tall and slight, and his constitution consumptive.... Though well-turned, his shoulders were bent a little, owing to premature thought and trouble. The same causes had touched his hair with grey; and though his habits of temperance and exercise gave him a remarkable degree of strength, it is not supposed that he could have lived many years. He used to say, that he had lived three times as long as the calendar gave out; which he would prove, between jest and earnest, by some remarks on Time, ‘That would have puzzled that stout Stagyrite.’ Like the Stagyrite’s, his voice was high and weak. His eyes were large and animated, with a dash of wildness in them; his face small, but well-shaped, particularly the mouth and chin, the turn of which was very sensitive and graceful. His complexion was naturally fair and delicate, with a colour in the cheeks. He had brown hair, which, though tinged with grey, surmounted his face well, being in considerable quantity, and tending to a curl. His side-face upon the whole was deficient in strength, and his features would not have told well in a bust; but when fronting and looking at you attentively, his aspect had a certain seraphical character that would have suited a portrait of John the Baptist, or the angel whom Milton describes as holding a reed ‘tipt with fire.’⁵

³ See Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. ch. 2, “The Creation of Byronism,” pp. 47–89. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BV*.

⁴ Of these likenesses, more later. The first engraving, based on Amelia Curran’s portrait of Shelley, was probably published by William Benbow in 1826. Another appeared on the engraved frontispiece to the Galignani edition (a French piracy) of *The Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats: Complete in One Volume* (Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1829). On the Galignani edition, and the image, see Charles H. Taylor, Jr., *The Early Collected Editions of Shelley’s Poems: A Study in the History and Transmission of the Printed Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 17–22. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ECE*.

⁵ Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries; with Recollections of the Author’s Life, and of His Visit to Italy*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), 294–96. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LBSC*.

The similarities between Hunt's description and Driver's verse-portrait are beyond coincidence: the slim body, the drooping of the head and shoulders—in both instances ascribed to the weight of a full mind—the pale skin, the large, striking eyes. Driver enhances Hunt's image of Shelley's peculiar figure with vivid metaphor, the drooping head likened to “the delicate flower” bent “with the load of its luxuriant bloom.” The metaphor condenses Shelley's fragility and transience—his uncanniness and untimeliness—which are spelled out by Hunt, who claims that he couldn't have “lived many years,” because he had already lived to three times his age.

Driver wasn't the only one to make use of Hunt's description of Shelley. Indeed, most readers in the 1830s who knew something about Shelley's life probably encountered it through a particular pirated volume, first published in 1830, with the innocuous-sounding title *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley*.⁶ The volume—the first “selected” edition of Shelley's verse—begins with “A Biographical Memoir.” The author of the memoir remains anonymous; a note, however, at the head of the text claims: “The compiler of this Memoir acknowledges himself indebted to Mrs. Shelley and Mr. Leigh Hunt for its chief and best portion” (*BPBS*, p. v). Indeed, the “author” of the memoir is in fact more of a collagist, rearranging text taken substantively from Hunt and from Mary Shelley's preface to *The Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*.⁷ But *The Beauties of Shelley* went through four editions between 1830 and 1832, each of which sold for the relatively affordable price of 3s 6d (see *ECE*, p. 23). Only three hundred copies of Mary

⁶ *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley, consisting of Miscellaneous Selections from his Poetical Works. The Entire Poems of Adonais and Alastor, and a Revised Edition of Queen Mab Free from All the Objectionable Passages. With a Biographical Preface.* (London: Stephen Hunt, 1830), xiv–xv. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BPBS*.

⁷ *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, [ed. Mary Shelley] (London: John and Henry L. Hunt, 1824). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *PP*.

Shelley's edition of the *Posthumous Poems* sold before Timothy Shelley had the volume suppressed; *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* was a large quarto in two volumes, and was hence beyond the reach of all but the wealthiest readers. It was likely the collagist of the memoir of *The Beauties of Shelley* who brought the poet to life for most early Victorian readers.

Whether Driver drew his details from *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* or from *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley* doesn't matter much. The primary point here is that a certain figuration of Shelley was already being incorporated into pre-Victorian culture by the time that Driver made him the character "Percy"—the brilliant but ill-fated friend of Byron, tormented by his own intelligence—in *Harold de Burun*. Much attention has been given over the decades to this "Shelley Myth."⁸ What has been missed, however, is the extent to which the cultural incorporation of Shelley in the early Victorian period is a story of class struggle.⁹

The history of the critical literature on Shelley stands out due to the persistence and the vehemence of the battle over "the truth" about Shelley. There are distinct periods in this struggle: the early 1830s, when the first biographical accounts were surfacing; the 1850s, when there was a struggle between Thomas Jefferson Hogg and Lady Shelley, who had her own camp of elected scholars; the 1880s, leading up to the centenary in 1892, in the middle of which John Cordy Jeaffreson published his damning biography *The Real Shelley*, Mark Twain bitterly attacked Edward Dowden's biography (the one that made Matthew Arnold so very glum), and George Bernard Shaw denounced the hypocrisy of the literary establishment with his incendiary

⁸ On the "Shelley Myth," see Karsten Klejs Engelberg, *The Making of the Shelley Myth: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism of Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1822-1860* (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1988). Cf., Neil Fraistat, "Illegitimate Shelley: Radical Piracy and the Textual Edition as Cultural Performance," *PMLA*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (May, 1994). Hereafter cited parenthetically as "IS".

⁹ The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Byron, though it would require its own examination.

“Shaming the Devil About Shelley”; the 1940s, when an interesting and oddly forensic book called *The Shelley Legend* drew the combined firepower of Kenneth Neill Cameron, Frederick Jones, and Newman Ivey White, the foremost Shelley scholars of the day; the 1960s, when critics such as Harold Bloom, following his teacher Frederick Pottle, tried to recuperate Shelley from the oblivion that many of the Modernists and New Critics attempted to cast him into, while Richard Holmes wrote and published his pioneering new biography of the poet; the 1980s, when Deconstruction and Marxist criticism were latching onto Shelley while other scholars, such as Donald Reiman, were trying to expose him as a reactionary.¹⁰

What follows is not, strictly speaking, a reception history, though I will consider many texts and ideas that are important to the study of Shelley's reception in the nineteenth century. Like Andrew Elfenbein's analysis of Byronism in the Victorian period, I want to insist that the influence of Shelley's poetry “depends on the apparatus whereby that work is produced, disseminated, reviewed, consecrated, or forgotten.”¹¹ The problem with traditional reception theory, as well as with theories of influence, is that they remain at the superstructural level, without considering basal conditions of the possibility of production, circulation, and evaluation. Elfenbein stresses that Byronism is a “multifaceted cultural phenomenon” that transcends whatever limits might apply to the author George Gordon; as a cultural phenomenon, Byronism

¹⁰ On the “real” Shelley, see George Bernard Shaw, “Shaming the Devil About Shelley,” in *Pen Portraits and Reviews*, (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1963 [1892]), and John Cordy Jeaffreson, *The Real Shelley: New Views of the Poet's Life*, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1885). On the “Shelley Legend” see Robert M. Smith, *The Shelley Legend* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945) and the response by Newman I. White, Frederick L. Jones, and Kenneth N. Cameron, *An Examination of the Shelley Legend* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951).

¹¹ Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BV*.

is a composite of “Byron's poems, biographies of Byron, and adaptations of and responses to both” (*BV*, pp. 8-9, 47). What I am referring to as “Shelley, Inc.” is likewise a cultural phenomenon that encompasses not just Shelley's work and its reception, but also biographies, critical essays, and visual, novelistic, and dramatic depictions of Shelley. Instead of trying to debunk or dismiss the cultural myth that Percy Bysshe Shelley became, then, I try to consider what conditions, imperatives, and contradictions subtend these rhetorics, what political and literary stakes were involved, and what they have to do with the prospects of “reading Shelley” today.

There are two concepts that I think are useful to understand the cultural incorporation of Shelley in the Victorian era: the Lacanian notion of *extimacy* (*l'extimité*) and Alain Badiou's concept of the *event*.¹² Extimacy, a portmanteau of external and intimacy, helps to explain the complicated dialectic of inclusion and exclusion that characterizes the process of the cultural incorporation of Shelley, and of Byron, that occurred in the nineteenth century. As aristocrats, at the intimate center of the social order, Shelley and Byron ended as alien elements, in opposition to that social order, and physically expelled from it. But they remained objects of desire and fascination, precisely because of their status as outsiders. When it became clear, due to piracy and the mass circulation of *Don Juan*, *Queen Mab*, and *Cain*, that this desire could not be repressed—see the failure of attempts to censor Carlile analyzed in the previous chapter—they had to be reincorporated into the social order. But this could not be done without a cleansing, a

¹² On Lacanian extimacy, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), ch. 4, p. 131ff, and Jacques-Alain Miller, “Extimacy,” *The Symptom*, no. 9 (Fall 2008): <https://www.lacan.com/symptom/extimacy.html>. On the event, see Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2007 [1988]); *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009 [2006]); and *Philosophy and the Event*, with Fabien Tarby, trans. Louise Burchill (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013).

surgical removal of the dangerous elements in their work. This process, in the case of Shelley, is what I'm calling "Shelley, Inc.," and the chief product by the end was a lyricized corpus.¹³

Badiou's concept of the event can, I believe, be usefully applied to particular fields of knowledge, rather than the limited to the fastidious application to society as a whole in which Badiou uses it. In this sense, Shelley was an event in poetry and as such produced a complete reorganization of the field of literary criticism and poetics. It is perhaps more accurate to say that Shelley and Wordsworth, in tandem and in contradiction, produced this event, for that is what one finds in the literary critical debate in the crucial period after Shelley's death. I take this process up in detail in Chapter 3.

I showed in my first chapter how Shelley's poetry, *Queen Mab* in particular, became through piracy a part of the working-class literary canon in the 1820s and 30s. By the end of the 1820s, Shelley was thoroughly associated with the unsavory underworld of popular radicalism—"those preparatory schools for the brothel and the gallows"—and anathema figures such as Benbow and Carlile.¹⁴ The incorporation of Shelley into Victorian culture is, I will argue, a process that must, finally, be read from the standpoint of class struggle; there was a concerted bourgeois attempt to recuperate Shelley for the emergent middle class. This process, to put it perhaps too bluntly, was at first a public relations strategy spearheaded by Mary Shelley and Leigh Hunt, which is where I will start. But, as I will show, Mary Shelley's editorial activities went far beyond her public relations work—a fact that has not been fully recognized as yet.

¹³ Byron, arguably, has always remained in a relation of extimacy to the Romantic canon: see the career of Jerome McGann on this point.

¹⁴ Benbow, *A Scourge for the Laureate*, p. iv.

1. Ithuriel's Spear

“And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.”

– 1 Corinthians 11:14

“...him there they found
Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve,
Assaying by his devilish art to reach
The organs of her fancy, and with them forge
Illusions as he list, phantasms, and dreams;
Or if, inspiring venom, he might taint
The animal spirits, that from pure blood arise
Like gentle breaths from rivers pure; thence raise
At least distemper'd, discontented thoughts,
Vain thoughts, vain aims, inordinate desires,
Blown up with high conceits engendering pride.
Him thus intent Ithuriel with his spear
Touch'd lightly; for no falsehood can endure
Touch of celestial temper, but returns
Of force to its own likeness: up he starts
Discover'd and surprised.”

– Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, ll. 799–814

History hasn't always looked kindly on Mary Shelley's labors as an editor, biographer, and publicist of Shelley in the years after his death.¹⁵ These criticisms, however, along with their often problematic gender politics, rely on a partial picture of Mary Shelley's activities. In particular, no one has realized hitherto the extent to which she aided in the production of the literary piracies that kept Shelley's work in circulation between *The Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1824 and the *Poetical Works* of 1839. And while it is certainly true that Mary Shelley acted as a kind of public relations agent for Shelley, selling a particular image of him,

¹⁵ For a good recent summary, see the late Michael O'Neill, “Trying to make it as good as I can’: Mary Shelley's Editing of P. B. Shelley's Poetry and Prose,” in *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 185–197.

this activity must be considered from the perspective of different audiences—consideration of which always informed Shelley’s work itself—of various forms of censorship, and of Victorian class politics. Mary Shelley’s most important work as an editor, as she clearly recognized, was to bring Shelley’s body (of work) before the public—to keep him, his thoughts, his words, alive.

Mary Shelley’s edition of *The Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, in which most of Shelley’s previously unpublished poetry—in particular, his mostly occasional lyric poetry—was brought for the first time to the public, would never have come to be without the financial assistance of two other poets, motivated by their enthusiasm for Shelley’s verse: Barry Cornwall (Bryan Waller Procter) and Thomas Lovell Beddoes.¹⁶ Such was the state of Shelley as an author after his death that only through such philanthropic support from enthusiasts was the book printed in an edition of 500 copies, and published by June of 1824.

¹⁶ Procter (1787–1874) was a friend of Hunt’s and had the same publisher as Shelley, Charles Ollier; in 1819 he had a copy of his book *Dramatic Scenes* sent to Shelley. See *LPBS*, vol. 2, letter 539, p. 162, and fn. 1. Shelley didn’t return Procter’s love; he wrote to Peacock in 1821: “Procter’s [sic] verses enrage me far more than those of Codrus did Juvenal” (*LPBS*, vol. 2, letter 615, p. 276). Beddoes (1803–1849) discovered Shelley early in his life, and the influence would remain pervasive throughout his career. See the memoir of Thomas Forbes Kelsall, prefatory to *Poems by the Late Thomas Lovell Beddoes: Author of Death’s Jest-Book or the Fool’s Tragedy: With a Memoir* (London: William Pickering, 1851), p. xxiii: “The admiration and delight of Beddoes however fully rested in Shelley alone; in the imaginative force and richly varied harmonies of all his wonderful verse; and more especially in *The Cenci*, in style so unlike its author’s other writings, but which for its sustained power, its nobility of beauty, its grand simplicity of manner and its consummate mastery throughout, Beddoes then and at all times pronounced to be the great poetical achievement of the age, and indeed the very culminating point in the ascension of our literature since the death of Milton: and it was jealousy of the unfounded pre-eminence over Shelley, popularly awarded to Byron, that probably exasperated his criticism on the latter poet, and indeed every other of rival reputation.” Cf. H. W. Donner, *Thomas Lovell Beddoes: The Making of a Poet* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1935), p. 124: “Although [Beddoes] admired Wordsworth and Keats, Shelley was the only one who shared a place in his heart beside Shakespeare and the other great Elizabethans.” On the relationship between Procter and Beddoes, see *TLB*, p. 118, and Richard Willard Armour, *Barry Cornwall: A Biography of Bryan Waller Procter, with a Selected Collection of Hitherto Unpublished Letters* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1935), pp. 79ff.

Mary Shelley had requested “a biographical notice” from Leigh Hunt, saying “write what we (you and I) would wish to be written” (*LMWS*, 1:384). Despite delaying publication for him, Hunt never came through with the biographical preface (see *ECE*, pp. 5–6, and Appendix, pp. 102–3).¹⁷ In fact, Hunt had begun writing about Shelley not long after Shelley had drowned, the article being “intended for another work” (*ibid.*, p. 102). The material, after several revisions, finally found its way into the chapter on Shelley in *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*. Without the biographical notice from Hunt, Mary Shelley had to write the preface herself.

That she was concerned with recuperating Shelley’s public image is clear from a letter to Hunt prior to the publication of the *Posthumous Poems*: “I am yet undecided,” she wrote “whether to print a Vol. of unpublished ones {or} of the whole together—I encline to the former—as it wd be a specimen of how he could write without shocking any one—and afterwards an edition of the whole might be got up inserting any thing too shocking for this Vol. but I shd be very glad of your opinion” (*LMWS*, 1:396–97). It was Shelley’s overtly political verse that was apparently “too shocking” to be included, in particular what Shelley had planned as “a little volume of *popular songs* wholly political, & destined to awaken & direct the

¹⁷ Mary Shelley wrote the following to Marianne Hunt, June 13th (June 18th) [1824]: “I cannot I own conjecture why Hunt refused to join his name to mine in my publication—I have been too little accustomed to be treated with suspicion, and am far too secure that I do not deserve it, to know how to conduct myself when treated thus unjustly—that is to say, if suspicion has been the cause of his refusal—I hope that you will soon receive a copy; and I hope that the preface will at least not displease him;—and yet it may—although I have done my best that it should not. During the dreary winter I passed at Genoa, in the midst of coldness & aversion I preserved my affection for Hunt, suspicion is deadly poison to friendship, but I will give mine patience as an antidote, and my naughty Very (Patient no longer) is & must [ever b]e dear to me:—even though he disdains me—as he does” (*LMWS*, vol. 1, p. 426).

imagination of the reformers,” a series of poems, including “The Mask of Anarchy,” written in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre (*LPBS*, 2:191). Mary Shelley chose not to shock anyone with this volume. The historical importance of the volume is summed up well by Taylor:

Posthumous Poems, in the variety and importance of its contents, is foremost among the first editions of Shelley’s verse.... almost all of the lyrics which contributed so much to the steady growth of Shelley’s reputation in the nineteenth century...were first published in this volume. [*ECE*, p. 8]

By the end of the nineteenth century, Shelley would come to represent the ideality of lyric and of song.¹⁸ It is this lyricized Shelley—Arnold’s “ineffectual angel”—that was inherited by the modernists, and, I will argue, still informs critical debates about Shelley’s work, affecting interpretation and assessments of literary value, as well as critical debates about the lyric genre.¹⁹ Given the importance of *Posthumous Poems* in this historical process, it is worthy of close attention.

The preface to *Posthumous Poems* is of considerable interest as a frame that situates the horizon of the reader’s expectations. It also introduces several themes that would become

¹⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, for example, wrote in the *Fortnightly Review* that Shelley is “the master-singer of our modern race and age,” “Notes on the Text of Shelley,” *Fortnightly Review*, New Series V, No. xxix, (May 1, 1869). Joseph Skipsey, a working-class poet, edited a selection of Shelley in 1884, and claims that each of Shelley’s lyrics “has a melody of its own, and that melody in each case is a perfect reflex in sound of the feeling and sentiment which lies at the root of the lyric. Not so much as a metrical harmonist, however, as a metrical melodist, as Mr. Devey finely suggests, doth Shelley’s rare excellence as a singer rest. In metrical harmonies he has been equalled and surpassed, but in pure melody—when we consider the number, the originality, the vast variety and utter perfection of his word-tunes, we are forced to place him at the head of all the verse-melodists who have left any specimens of their gift on record. Shelley is, in verity, the king of verse melodists.” *The Lyrics and Minor Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley. With a Prefatory Notice, Biographical and Critical*, ed. by Joseph Skipsey (London: Walter Scott, 1884), 29.

¹⁹ Matthew Arnold, “Shelley,” in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by A. Dwight Culler, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 380. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *PCMA*.

essential to the Victorian cultural incorporation of Shelley. After lamenting that Hunt didn't contribute a biographical notice to the volume, Mary Shelley writes:

The comparative solitude in which Mr. Shelley lived, was the occasion that he was personally known to few; and his fearless enthusiasm in the cause, which he considered the most sacred upon earth, the improvement of the moral and physical state of mankind, was the chief reason why he, like other illustrious reformers, was pursued by hatred and calumny.... Hereafter men will lament that his transcendent powers of intellect were extinguished before they had bestowed on them their choicest treasures. To his friends his loss is irremediable: the wise, the brave, the gentle, is gone for ever! He is to them as a bright vision, whose radiant track, left behind in the memory, is worth all the realities that society can afford. Before the critics contradict me, let them appeal to any one who had ever known him: to see him was to love him; and his presence, like Ithuriel's spear, was alone sufficient to disclose the falsehood of the tale, which his enemies whispered in the ear of the ignorant world. [*PP*, pp. iii-iv]

A remarkable fact about the history of this text is that it was influenced by the first review written of the book to which it was prefaced, a review that was in fact never published. The review was written by Hunt and offered to the *Westminster Review*, but was refused due to the interference of Thomas Love Peacock (*LMWS*, 1:478, fn. 1).²⁰ The extent to which Mary Shelley's text is indebted to Hunt's has gone unnoticed. Examination of Hunt's manuscript, however, reveals the extent of the influence.²¹ Comparison of the two texts brings to light a shared set of tropes and themes, that seem to show a concerted strategy on the part of Hunt and Mary Shelley.

²⁰ That Mary Shelley had seen Hunt's review prior to writing the preface to *Posthumous Poems* is clear from a letter to Hunt of December 11, 1823, in the postscript to which she writes: "Do you think that as the notice that you have written for our S. is now to be prefixed to a volume of his works that it will require much alteration—& his lordship's [Byron] note be at least left out—he need only be alluded to—yet not disagreeably either—I wd not that the notice on such a subject shd excite inimical feelings in any persons mind—" (*LMWS*, vol. 1, p. 409).

²¹ Leigh Hunt, "Review of the Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley," unpaginated. The Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection at the State University of Iowa, fMs H94po. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "RPP."

Hunt begins by describing Shelley as “one who was anxious for the good of mankind, and who underwent more than the ordinary calumnies attendant upon that provoking superiority.” He goes on to say that Shelley had an “enthusiastic nature,” and that his temperament “and early circumstances conspired to make him a reformer” impelled by “love and zeal.” Then comes perhaps the most famous part of Hunt’s account of Shelley:

He was like a spirit that had darted out of its orb, and found itself in another planet. This was the idea we entertained of him during his life. When we heard of his death, it seemed as if this spirit, not sufficiently constituted like the rest of the world to obtain their sympathy, yet gifted with a double portion of love for all living things, had been found dead on a solitary shore of the earth, its wings stiffened, its warm heart cold; the relics of a misunderstood nature, slain by the ungenial elements.

This is the classic statement of what Neil Fraistat has called a process of “etherealizing and disembodiment” Shelley (“IS,” p. 410). But Fraistat’s account—and the critical account more generally—needs to be complicated somewhat. For what one finds in the early accounts is no simple disembodiment of Shelley, but rather the complicated construction of a *particular kind of body*—both textual and, post mortem, physiological. As I will show in my next chapter, this is true not just of Hunt and the early biographers, but also of Shelley’s keenest early critics, such as William Hazlitt, F. D. Maurice, Arthur Hallam, and John Stuart Mill.

There is in common between Mary Shelley’s preface and Hunt’s review what might be called a *celestializing* of Shelley, a tendency to portray him as unearthly, which also has a long life in the Victorian period. So, for Mary Shelley, he was “a bright vision, whose radiant track” remains in the memory, like the afterimage of a flame in the eyes. Now, it should be noted that those who were close to Shelley described him in these terms privately amongst themselves.²²

²² Mary Shelley writes in her journal, for example, still deeply mourning Shelley’s death, on October 7, 1822, echoing Shelley’s own “Epipsychidion”: “you, my only one, were a spirit caged, an elemental being enshrined in a frail image now shattered. Do they not all with one

When, however, these sentiments were turned toward the public, they were invested with a clear political purpose. Not to rehabilitate Shelley for all, which would be impossible, but to rehabilitate him for the reform-minded middle class.

Hunt made reference, like Mary Shelley, to Milton: “When sitting upright and looking at you attentively, his aspect had a certain seraphical character that would have suited for a portrait of the Baptist, or for one of the angels whom Milton describes as holding a reed ‘tipt with fire’” (“RPP,” p. 17). It’s not clear whether or not this was in the draft that Mary Shelley read in 1823. But it seems to me likely that it was and that it sparked her use of Milton in her preface, because what she does with Ithuriel’s spear is ingenious, and much more fully developed than Hunt’s reference. Robert Southey, as mentioned in the previous chapter, with an undeniable talent for branding, had called Byron, Shelley, and their circle “the Satanic school”: “for though their productions breath the spirit of Belial in their lascivious parts, and the spirit of Moloch in those loathsome images of atrocities and horrors which they delight to represent, they are more especially characterized by a Satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety, which still betrays the wretched feeling of hopelessness wherewith it is allied.”²³ This can be taken as the official Tory position on Byron and Shelley. The feud between Southey and Byron, slowly heating up for years previously, boiled over into a very public altercation when Byron responded to this text of

voice assert the same? Charles [Clairmont], [Edward John] Trelawny, Hunt & many others—& so at last you quitted this painful prison, & you are free, my Shelley” (*JMS*, pp. 437-38, and fn. 2, p. 437). She wrote in similar terms to Jane Williams on September 18, 1822: “I was never the Eve of any Paradise, but a human creature blessed by an elemental spirit’s company & love—an angel who imprisoned in flesh could not adapt himself to his clay shrine & so has flown & left it—and I feel as poets have described those loved by superhuman creatures & then deserted by them” (*LMWS*, 1:264).

²³ Robert Southey, *A Vision of Judgment* (London: Longman, et. al., 1821), pp. xx–xxi. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *VJ*.

Southey's, first with a note affixed to *The Two Foscari* (1821), and then with his own *Vision of Judgment*, first published in *The Liberal*.²⁴ The spat between the Poet Laureate and the foremost literary celebrity of the day was fodder for the periodicals; Byron's *Vision of Judgment* was immediately seized upon by the pirates, as were *Don Juan* and *Cain*.²⁵

"The Satanic School" seems to have become a part of the cultural consciousness; Southey later bragged about the success of the epithet: "Many persons, and parents especially, have expressed their gratitude to me for having applied the branding-iron where it was so richly deserved," going on to refer to the school as "enemies to the religion, the institutions, and the domestic morals of their country."²⁶ The appellation does seem to have stuck; one finds it often in periodicals in the 1820s, and there is even an entry for "Satanic School" in an 1872 *Dictionary of the Noted Names of Fiction*.²⁷

Another, more obscure but perhaps more interesting, example of Shelley's notoriety in this period can be cited. A piracy of the third canto of *Don Juan* was published in 1819, along with *A Biographical Account of Lord Byron and His Family; Anecdotes of His Lordship's Travels and Residence in Greece, at Geneva, &c. Including, Also, a Sketch of the Vampyre Family*.²⁸ The "vampyre family" is the Shelleys, possessed by "the phrenzy" of Rousseau,

²⁴ See Lord Byron, *Sardanapalus, a Tragedy. The Two Foscari, a Tragedy. Cain, a Mystery* (London: John Murray, 1821), 325–29, and *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*, vol. 1, no. 1 (London: John Hunt, 1822): 3–39.

²⁵ There are piracies by Carlile, William Dugdale, John Cleave, and one with a New York imprint (Wm. Borradaile) that I think is probably William Benbow, as I can find no other books by that publisher.

²⁶ Quoted in *The Saturday Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 15, April 13, (1822): 528. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "SB."

²⁷ William A. Wheeler, *An Explanatory and Pronouncing Dictionary of the Noted Names of Fiction* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1872), p. 331.

²⁸ Lord Byron, *Don Juan: With a Biographical Account of Lord Byron and His Family; Anecdotes of His Lordship's Travels and Residence in Greece, at Geneva, &c., Including, Also, a*

the monster-making coterie that have lately established themselves on the ground where Gibbon, Voltaire, and Rousseau wrote and resided: we mean the *Vampyre family*—or that knot of scribblers, male and female, with weak nerves, and disordered brains, from whom have sprung those disgusting compounds of unnatural conception, bad taste, and absurdity, entitled ‘Frankenstein, or the modern Prometheus,’ the ‘Vampyre,’ &c. &c. (*VF*, pp. 141–42)

The anonymous author of the notes goes on to denounce the Vampyre Family as degrading “their species into imaginary forms of disgust and hideousness,” and augmenting “the source of mental miseries to themselves and to mankind” (*ibid.*, 142). The anecdote provided by John Polidori in the preface to his novel *The Vampyre*, in which Shelley is said to have “started up” and run out of the room while Byron was in the middle of reading Coleridge’s “Christabel,” because he had a vision of a woman with eyes in place of nipples, is cited in the notes as well, presumably an example of Shelley’s “weak nerves” and “disordered brain” (*ibid.*, pp. 149–50).

In 1824 when *Posthumous Poems* came out, in other words, Shelley was thoroughly identified with Byron’s infamy, and with the Satanic School of which Byron was the “Coryphaeus” (“SB,” p. 329). But Shelley’s infamy exceeded even Byron’s, as Shelley’s atheism was seen to be rubbing off on Byron, particularly in the form of *Cain*. To the Tories, Shelley was anathema. John Murray, the publisher of the Tory *Quarterly Review* (and also Byron’s publisher for most of his career), wrote to one of the *Quarterly*’s most regular contributors, John Wilson Croker, sending him a copy of Shelley’s *Laon and Cythna* with the following note: “I send you a most extraordinary Poem by Godwins now Son-in-Law – pray keep it under Lock & Key – it is an avowed defence of Incest – the author is the vilest wretch in existence – living with Leigh

Sketch of the Vampyre Family (London: William Wright, 1819). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *VF*.

Hunt.”²⁹ Croker apparently passed the book along to John Taylor Coleridge, S. T. Coleridge’s nephew, who brutally attacked Shelley in *The Quarterly Review*.³⁰

It was this Satanic perception of Shelley, with Southey’s reference to *Paradise Lost* likely at the fore of the mind, that Hunt and Mary Shelley were aiming to dispel by wielding Ithuriel’s spear. There are curious transformations and transferences involved in Mary Shelley’s allusion, however. For the passage from *Paradise Lost*, quoted above—one of the most unforgettable passages of the book—in which Satan sits “squat like a toad” at the ear of Eve using his “devilish art” to corrupt her, could be the exact passage that Southey had in mind when forging his brand. Whereas in Milton, Satan is revealed in his true form by the touch of Ithuriel’s spear, in Mary Shelley’s turning of it, the Satanic Shelley transforms *himself*, by his mere bodily presence, into an angel of light in the mind of the perceiver. And it is Shelley’s calumniators, the Southneys and

²⁹ John Murray to John Wilson Croker, n. d. (1817), The John Murray Letters, in The Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, MsL M9826c.

³⁰ Review of *Laon and Cythna* and *The Revolt of Islam*, in *The Quarterly Review* 21, (London: John Murray, 1819): 460–71. See White, *The Unextinguished Hearth*, pp. 133–42. Coleridge wrote that Shelley “has loosened the hold of our protecting laws, and sapped the principles of our venerable polity; he has invaded the purity and chilled the unsuspecting ardour of our fireside intimacies; he has slandered, ridiculed and blasphemed our holy religion” and went on to attack him personally, writing that from his childhood “he has carried about with him a soured and discontented spirit—unteachable in boyhood, unamiable in youth, querulous and unmanly in manhood,—singularly unhappy in all three.” Shelley was convinced that Southey wrote the article, and his feelings about it are communicated in a letter he wrote to Southey confronting him about the matter: “That an unprincipled hireling, in default of what to answer in a published composition, should, without provocation, insult the domestic calamities of a writer of the adverse party—to which perhaps their victim dares scarcely advert in thought—that he should make those calamities the theme of the foulest and falsest slander—that all this should be done by a calumniator without a name—with the cowardice, no less than the malignity, of an assassin—is too common a piece of charity among Christians (Christ would have taught them better), too common a violation of what is due from man to man among the pretended friends of social order, to have drawn one remark from me, but that I would have you observe the arts practised by that party for which you have abandoned the cause to which your early writings were devoted” (*LPBS*, 2:204).

the Crokers of the world, that are turned into toads—toadies to the Tories—whispering “in the ear of the ignorant world.”³¹ It’s a brilliant twist on the Miltonic theme exploited, and with such egotistic éclat, by Southey.

But, of course, Shelley wasn’t around anymore to transform the public perception with his presence. And here we’ve arrived back at one of the persistent critical problems in dealing with Shelley’s corpus, which was identified perhaps most stringently, if not most clearly, by Paul de Man: the problem of Shelley’s body. “The final test of reading,” de Man writes in “Shelley Disfigured,”

in *The Triumph of Life*, depends on how one reads the textuality of this event, how one disposes of Shelley’s body. The challenge that is in fact present in all texts and that *The Triumph of Life* identifies, thematizes, and thus tries to avoid in the most effective way possible, is here actually carried out as the sequence of symbolic interruptions is in its turn interrupted by an event that is no longer simply imaginary or symbolic. The apparent ease with which readers of *The Triumph of Life* have been able to dispose of this challenge demonstrates the inadequacy of our understanding of Shelley and, beyond him, of romanticism in general.³²

For de Man, the interruption in the text of “The Triumph of Life,” which inescapably indexes Shelley’s physical death by drowning, leaving “The Triumph of Life” fragmentary, opens new horizons for literary criticism, horizons that he thinks should transform our understanding of Shelley and of Romanticism. With de Man the problem of Shelley’s body becomes explicit; this, however, is just one of the most recent moments in a history of literary critical attempts to dispose, by various means, of Shelley’s body.

³¹ It is interesting to note that Hunt had written the following in response to Coleridge’s article: “The *Quarterly Review* itself...ought to be ashamed of the [article] it has written upon Mr. Shelley. Heavy, and swelling, and soft with venom, it creeps through the middle of it like a skulking toad.”

³² Paul de Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 121. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “SD.”

Mary Shelley and Leigh Hunt had to dispose of Shelley's *actual* body, washed up on the shore in Italy. The very texts by Mary Shelley and Hunt that I have been examining are filled with—constituted by—the absence of Percy Bysshe Shelley, and thus amount to works of mourning, though no one ever comments on this fact.³³ Mary Shelley's journal in the months after Shelley died is both devastating and beautiful. She states explicitly that the work she undertook as the primary editor of Shelley's posthumous body of work was in fact a work of mourning: "I shall write his life—& thus occupy myself in the only manner from which I can derive consolation. That will be a task that may carry some balm. What though I weep?—What though each letter costs a tear?—All this is better than inaction & not forgetfulness—that never is—but an inactivity of remembrance" (*JMWS*, p. 444).³⁴ Here Freud's account of the work of mourning is apposite:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition—it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position.... Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.³⁵

³³ Irving Massey hints at this when he writes: "Mary's faith in Shelley's literary reputation has been vindicated; still, it may be doubted that she undertook the labour of editing his posthumous poems primarily with the intention of propagating her husband's fame. In studying both her personal papers and her editorial work during the period immediately following Shelley's death, one gains the impression that Mary drew an intimate pleasure from dealing with his notebooks."

³⁴ Mary Shelley did in fact begin to write a life of Shelley, but Sir Timothy Shelley's injunction prevented her from pursuing it. Instead, she was forced to reconstitute Shelley in the form of fictional characters in her novels and stories, which I will consider later.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Standard Edition*, pp. 244–45.

Bit by bit, like the labor of Dr. Frankenstein, Mary Shelley took up the scattered fragments and relics left by Shelley's death and, with great expense of time and energy, constituted them into a body of work. But it would be nearly twenty years after his death before she could finally consummate this work with the publication of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1839. And she would never write her planned biography of Shelley, instead stowing away what she could in the notes to *The Poetical Works*.

The editorial project was not only a work of mourning, but also one of revitalization and metamorphosis. Shelley's poetry—his assembled corpus—had to stand in the place of his physical presence and work the magic of Ithuriel's spear, transforming him in the eyes of the public.³⁶ This is why Mary Shelley was so careful to excise anything “too shocking” for the bourgeois reading public. But after Sir Timothy Shelley successfully suppressed the *Posthumous Poems*, Mary Shelley was happy to cooperate in bringing Shelley before the world in a very different garb.

2. Unholy Alliances

This, this it is—Religion, made,
'Twixt Church and State, a truck, a trade—
This most ill-match'd, unholy *Co.*,
From whence the ills we witness flow;
The war of many creeds with one—
Th' extremes of *too* much faith, and none—
Till, betwixt ancient trash and new,
'Twixt Cant and Blasphemy—the two
Rank ills with which this age is curst—
We can no more tell *which* is worst,
Than erst could Egypt, when so rich

³⁶ *OED*, s.v. “corpus” reveals that by the eighteenth century the work was being used to refer to “a body or complete collection of writings,” citing the following: “Corpus, is also in Matters of Learning, for several Works of the same Nature, collected, join'd, and bound together.”

In various plagues, determine which
She thought most pestilent and vile,
Her frogs, like Benbow and Carlisle,
Croaking their native mud-notes loud,
Or her fat locusts, like a cloud
Of pluralists, obesely low'ring
At once benighting and devouring!

– Thomas Moore, “Fables for the Holy Alliance”³⁷

Even before Southey branded Shelley and his circle with Satanism, Byron had done so himself, an inside joke. Shelley wrote to Byron in 1821: “the design which certainly had been in contemplation of burning my fellow serpent has been abandoned” (*LPBS*, 2:368). In a note to Thomas Moore, Byron explains Shelley’s enigmatic phrase, “my fellow serpent”: “I send you two notes [Taaffe’s and Shelley’s] which will tell you the story I allude to of the Auto da Fe.—Shelley’s allusion to his ‘fellow Serpent’ is a buffoonery of mine—Goethe’s Mephistopheles calls the Serpent who tempted Eve ‘*my Aunt the renowned Snake*’ and I always insist that Shelley is nothing but one of her Nephews walking about on the tip of his tail” (*ibid.*, 2:368–69, fn.).³⁸ Moore, however, wasn’t laughing. When he heard that Byron had joined Shelley and Hunt in plans for *The Liberal* he wrote in the strongest terms to try to dissuade him from such an “unholy alliance”:

I cannot believe this,—and deprecate such a plan with all my might. *Alone* you may do any thing; but partnerships in fame, like those in trade, make the strongest party answerable for the deficiencies or delinquencies of the rest, and I tremble even for *you* with such a bankrupt Co.—****. They are both clever fellows, and Shelley I look upon

³⁷ Thomas Brown, the Younger [pseud. Thomas Moore], *Fables for the Holy Alliance, Rhymes on the Road, &c. &c.* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1823), pp. 32–3. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *FHA*.

³⁸ Byron and Shelley are referring to a man that was going to be burned at the stake “for stealing the wafer box from a church.” Shelley wanted the circle there in Pisa to “enter the town and rescue the man by force.” See *LPBS*, 2:369, fn. 2, and C. L. Cline, *Byron, Shelley, and their Pisan Circle* (London: John Murray, 1952), ch. 6.

as a man of real genius; but I must again say, that you could not give your enemies (the ***'s, 'et hoc genus omne') a greater triumph than by forming such an unequal and unholy alliance.³⁹

Then, to compound Moore's fears, *Cain* came out and "made a sensation"; and though Moore recognized the work as "grand," he expressed his regret, "for many reasons," that Byron "ever wrote it" (*LTM*, p. 503). In particular, he deprecated what he saw as a very pernicious influence, which he would not name—as if doing so would invoke the satanic presence itself:

Boldness, and even licence, in politics, does good,—actual present good; but, in religion, it profits neither here nor hereafter; and, for myself, such a horror have I of both extremes on this subject, that I know not *which* I hate most, the bold, damning bigot, or the bold, annihilating infidel.... You will easily guess that, in all this, I am thinking not so much of you, as of a friend and, at present, companion of yours, whose influence over your mind...I own I dread and deprecate most earnestly. (*ibid.*, pp. 503–4)

Byron showed these letters to Shelley, and Shelley responded via Horace Smith, to whom he wrote on April 11, 1822:

I think you know Moore.—Pray assure him that I have not the smallest influence over Lord Byron in this particular; if I had I certainly should employ it to eradicate from his great mind the delusions of Christianity.... *Cain* was *conceived* many years ago, & begun before I saw him last year at Ravenna; how happy should I not be to attribute to myself, however indirectly, any participation in that immortal work!—I differ with Moore in thinking Xtianity useful to the world: no man of sense can think it true; and the alliance of the monstrous superstitions of the popular worship with the pure doctrines of the Theism of such men as Moore, turns to the profit of the former, & makes the latter the fountain of its own pollution.—I agree with him that the doctrines of the French & material philosophy are as false as they are pernicious; but still they are better than Christianity, inasmuch as anarchy is better than despotism—for this reason,—that the former is for a season & that the latter is eternal. [*LPBS*, 2:412]⁴⁰

³⁹ *The Letters of Thomas Moore*, ed. by Wilfred S. Dowden, vol. 2 (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 502. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LTM*.

⁴⁰ This letter, written only a month and half before Shelley drowned, explodes any notion that he altered his religious views before his death. Browning and others would later try to claim that Shelley had converted to Christianity. The notion is somehow still out there: Peter Robinson of the Hoover Institution, for example, on an episode of *Uncommon Knowledge* tried to catch out Christopher Hitchens by claiming that Shelley believed in God.

Byron also shrugged off Moore's fears, writing that it was an error to suppose that he shared the opinions of characters in his drama, and that "*they* are nothing to the expressions in Goethe's Faust (which are ten times hardier), and not a whit more bold than those of Milton's Satan."⁴¹ He defended Shelley in no uncertain terms, pointing out that this infidel had more real charity, and other virtues of the beatitudes, than any Christian he knew: "As to poor Shelley, who is another bugbear to you and the world, he is, to my knowledge, the *least* selfish and the mildest of men—a man who has made more sacrifices of his fortune and feelings for others than any I ever heard of. With his speculative opinions I have nothing in common, nor desire to have" (*BLJ*, p. 406). He closed by suggesting that Moore was merely echoing "the 'monde'," and saying "I can only regret that you should ever repeat any thing to which I cannot pay attention" (*ibid.*, p. 407).

The political subtleties in these exchanges between Byron, Moore, and Shelley are worth teasing out so as to bring into focus the question of class in this time of volatility—and possibility. Unholy alliances are perceived on both sides, and Byron is in the middle of them. Moore, in "the *stove* of society," as Byron put it, and "unavoidably influenced by its heat and its vapours," saw very clearly that the public, not merely private, alliance with Shelley and Hunt in the form of *The Liberal* represented a major threat to Byron's reputation—and in this he proved correct. The furor over *The Liberal* was intense, and it had as much—or perhaps more—to do with the Lord teaming up with the lowly journalist of a mixed-race heritage who had to use his quill for a living as it had to with the political and religious views of Shelley and Hunt.⁴²

⁴¹ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie Marchand (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1973), p. 406. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BLJ*.

⁴² On Leigh Hunt's heritage, see Nicholas Roe, *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt* (London: Pimlico, 2005).

No one expressed this more pungently than William Hazlitt, who, being a longtime friend of Hunt, was one of the earliest contributors to *The Liberal*, and, unlike Hunt and Byron, was in the stove like Moore, though not of it. In his essay “On the Jealousy and the Spleen of Party,” Hazlitt set his sights on the hypocrisy of Moore and other “progressive” Whigs:

The reputation of Whiggism, like that of women, is a delicate thing, and will bear neither to be blown upon or handled. It has an ill odour, which requires the aid of fashionable essences and court-powders to carry it off. It labours under the frown of the Sovereign: and swoons at the shout and pressure of the People. Even in its present forlorn and abject state, it relapses into convulsions if any low fellow offers to lend it a helping hand: those who would have their overtures of service accepted must be bedizened and sparkling all over with titles, wealth, place, connections, fashion (in lieu of zeal and talent), as a set-off to the imputation of low designs and radical origin; for there is nothing that the patrons of the People dread so much as being identified with them, and of all things the patriotic party abhor (even in their dreams) a *misalliance* with the rabble!⁴³

Hazlitt expresses here with satirical flair the Janus-faced Whigs’ ineffectual opposition, caught as they were, lukewarm, between allegiance to the Monarchy and lip service to the People. He goes on to demonstrate his point by describing the response of the Whig establishment—even the most “liberal” wing—to *The Liberal*:

Let one example serve for all. At the time that Lord Byron thought proper to join with Mr. Leigh Hunt and Mr. Shelley in the publication called the *Liberal*, Blackwood’s Magazine overflowed, as might be expected, with tenfold gall and bitterness; the John Bull was outrageous; and Mr. Jerdan black in the face at this unheard-of and disgraceful union. But who would have supposed that Mr. Thomas Moore and Mr. Hobhouse, those staunch friends and partisans of the people, should also be thrown into almost hysterical agonies of well-bred horror at the coalition between their noble and ignoble acquaintance, between the Patrician and “the Newspaper-Man?” Mr. Moore darted backwards and forwards from Cold-Bath-Fields’ Prison to the Examiner-Office, from Mr. Longman’s to Mr. Murray’s shop, in a state of ridiculous trepidation, to see what was to be done to prevent this degradation of the aristocracy of letters, this indecent encroachment of plebeian pretensions, this undue extension of patronage and compromise of privilege. [“JSP,” pp. 437–38]

⁴³ William Hazlitt, “On the Jealousy and the Spleen of Party,” *The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men, and Things*, vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), pp. 436–37. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “JSP.” Hazlitt seems to refer with the phrase “radical origin” to the fact that Hunt’s heritage was racially mixed.

The hypocrisy of Moore and Hobhouse in their response to *The Liberal*, so scathingly vilified by Hazlitt, already prefigures the political lines that would emerge clearly in the struggle over the 1832 Reform Bill. It separates out those who believed, in Shelley's words, that the "system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms" from those who just wanted to reach a detente by extending the franchise (slightly) and ameliorating rampant boroughmongering (*LPBS*, 2:191). Despite the fact that "Mr. Shelley's father...was an older Baronet than Mr. Hobhouse's" and that "Mr. Leigh Hunt was 'to the full as genteel a man' as Mr. Moore in birth, appearance, and education," and despite having in common the pursuits of poetry and Reform, Moore and Hobhouse were nonetheless shocked that Byron "should share his confidence and counsels with any one who did not unite the double recommendations of birth and genius—but themselves!" ("JSP," p. 439). Hazlitt, suffering the social and economic effects of his radicalism, damns the actions of the likes of Moore and Hobhouse as "sheer cowardice and want of heart" ("JSP," p. 441).⁴⁴ Of course, Moore and Hobhouse no doubt saw the situation differently.

They were thinking tactically, if also selfishly, in attempting to dissuade Byron from the venture. The fear was surely that Byron would hurt not just himself, but the entire cause of the

⁴⁴ On Hazlitt's radical views, see Bryan Waller Procter (*Barry Cornwall*): *An Autobiographical Fragment and Biographical Notes, with Personal Sketches of Contemporaries, Unpublished Lyric, and Letters of Literary Friends*, ed. Coventry Patmore (London: George Bell and Sons, 1877), p. 168: "Hazlitt held those extreme radical opinions which, fifty years since, were upheld by many others; and the warmth of his temper led him to denounce things and systems to which he had a strong aversion." There was a seemingly intense political debate at Hunt's place in Hampstead Heath in February, 1817, in which Hazlitt and Shelley argued together for republicanism against monarchy. See P. P. Howe, *The Life of William Hazlitt* (London: Martin Secker, 1928), p. 229. Cf. *JMWS*, 1:163 and note: "Several of Hunt's acquaintances come in the evening—Music—after Supper a discussion until 3 in the morning with Hazlitt concerning monarchy & republicanism."

Whigs and the Reformers by bringing them into such disrepute as came with the names of Leigh Hunt and Percy Bysshe Shelley. The situation reflects in micro the general position of the moderate middle class in revolutionary moments, a “dramatic dialectical dance,” the shape of which was expressed so clearly by Eric Hobsbawm:

Time and again we shall see moderate middle class reformers mobilizing the masses against die-hard resistance or counter-revolution. We shall see the masses pushing beyond the moderates’ aims to their own social revolutions, and the moderates in turn splitting into a conservative group henceforth making common cause with the reactionaries, and a left wing group determined to pursue the rest of the as yet unachieved moderate aims with the help of the masses, even at the risk of losing control over them.⁴⁵

Marx himself perceived this difference between Byron and Shelley, according to his daughter Eleanor Marx-Aveling claiming that Byron “would have become a reactionary bourgeois” had he lived, while Shelley “was essentially a revolutionist, and he would always have been one of the advanced guard of socialism.”⁴⁶ The pattern, of course, had already occurred with the previous generation, Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge famously, or infamously, turning reactionary in precisely the manner described by Hobsbawm, while others such as William Blake and Godwin continued to pursue radical change. The dance would repeat itself again during the agitation leading up to and surrounding the Reform Bill of 1832, during which revolutionaries like William Benbow and Henry Hetherington pushed beyond the bounds acceptable to more moderate reformers, who responded in a reactionary manner. The problem with *The Liberal* for Moore, Hobhouse, and the Whigs, as Hazlitt saw with such perspicacity, was that Hunt and Shelley had too much the taint of the swinish multitude on them.

⁴⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996 [1962]), p. 62.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Henry S. Salt, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Poet and Pioneer* (London: Arthur C. Fifield, n.d.), p. 169.

Shelley sees a very different unholy alliance in the situation, however. In his view, Theism, no matter how “pure,” and Deism represent a dangerous compromise, because they prop up “monstrous superstitions.” Hence, the enlightened religious moderate—like Moore—becomes “the fountain” of their “own pollution.” Shelley had by this time moved away from the hardcore materialism and determinism of Holbach and others of “the French & material philosophy,” which he had embraced in his youth, but he still finds materialism preferable to Christianity. His argument at this point is interesting, both because of his analogy to political systems, and because of its philosophical subtlety. Materialism is “better than Christianity, inasmuch as anarchy is better than despotism—for this reason,—that the former is for a season & that the latter is eternal.” The author of *Queen Mab* and “Ozymandias” can’t be assumed to believe that Christianity and political despotism are *in actuality* eternal, for one of the core tenets of Shelley’s work is that constant revolution is inherent to the natural order and that all empires and despots eventually fall. The point, then, must be about the internal logic of these respective systems: Christianity and despotism (not unrelated, of course, in Shelley’s mind), aspire toward an eternal and unchanging order, a totalizing system, whereas materialism and anarchy do not. Materialism was always rooted in empiricism, and one of the central features of empiricism is that the system changes in response to the phenomena. Anarchy—in the sense in which Shelley uses it—is inherently unstable and hence must eventually give way to some other kind of order. For Shelley, then—and in this he anticipates the later standpoint of Marxism toward liberals—the real unholy alliance is between the moderates and the conservative reactionaries.

The working class was forming its own unholy alliance in the 1820s—far more dangerous than that of *The Liberal*—and doing so in a way that matters to the *Posthumous Poems* and the radical pirates, those “frogs” “most pestilent and vile...like Benbow and Carlisle”

(*FHA*, p. 33). Sir Timothy Shelley, as mentioned, succeeded in suppressing *Posthumous Poems*; indeed, by threatening Mary Shelley with loss of the small stipend he was providing for her and her son, Percy Florence, he enforced a dictate to never bring his son's name before the public in any fashion. This is undoubtedly why Peacock, worldly-wise, looking out for Mary Shelley's best interests, prevented Hunt's review from being published. The work of censorship previously carried out by the "iron-souled Attorney General" and the Society for the Suppression of Vice—by the government and the Church—was now being carried out by Shelley's own father.

But his attempt to bury his son in oblivion failed spectacularly, just as the attempts of the government and the Church had, chiefly because of the radical pirates. By 1826, William Benbow, ensconced in his shop The Byron's Head in Holborn, was selling *The Miscellaneous and Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, which, in addition to everything that Mary Shelley had published in *Posthumous Poems*, included much of Shelley's previously published work.⁴⁷ He was also selling what must have been a near complete edition of Shelley's published work under the title of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in numbers for one shilling each (Figure 4).⁴⁸ In 1827, he reprinted *The Cenci* as a separate volume, selling it for 1s. 6d.

William Benbow has typically been passed over by Shelley scholars with dismissive epithets.⁴⁹ In fact, he was a remarkable man, who provides a link between the ultra-radicalism of

⁴⁷ For a detailed, but incomplete, examination of the Benbow editions, see *ECE*, pp. 11–17.

⁴⁸ The first part of the first volume, a copy of which is in the British Library, contained "Rosalind and Helen" and "Alastor." This is the only copy extant of the pamphlet form sold by Benbow; these of course are far more ephemeral than bound books, and were likely passed from hand to hand among working-class and artisan readers. The fact that there is only one existing copy, therefore, doesn't mean that we should conclude that Benbow didn't continue these pamphlets.

⁴⁹ Taylor, for example, simply refers to him as "a notorious piratical publisher," which is accurate enough, though Benbow was much more than that (*ECE*, p. 11).

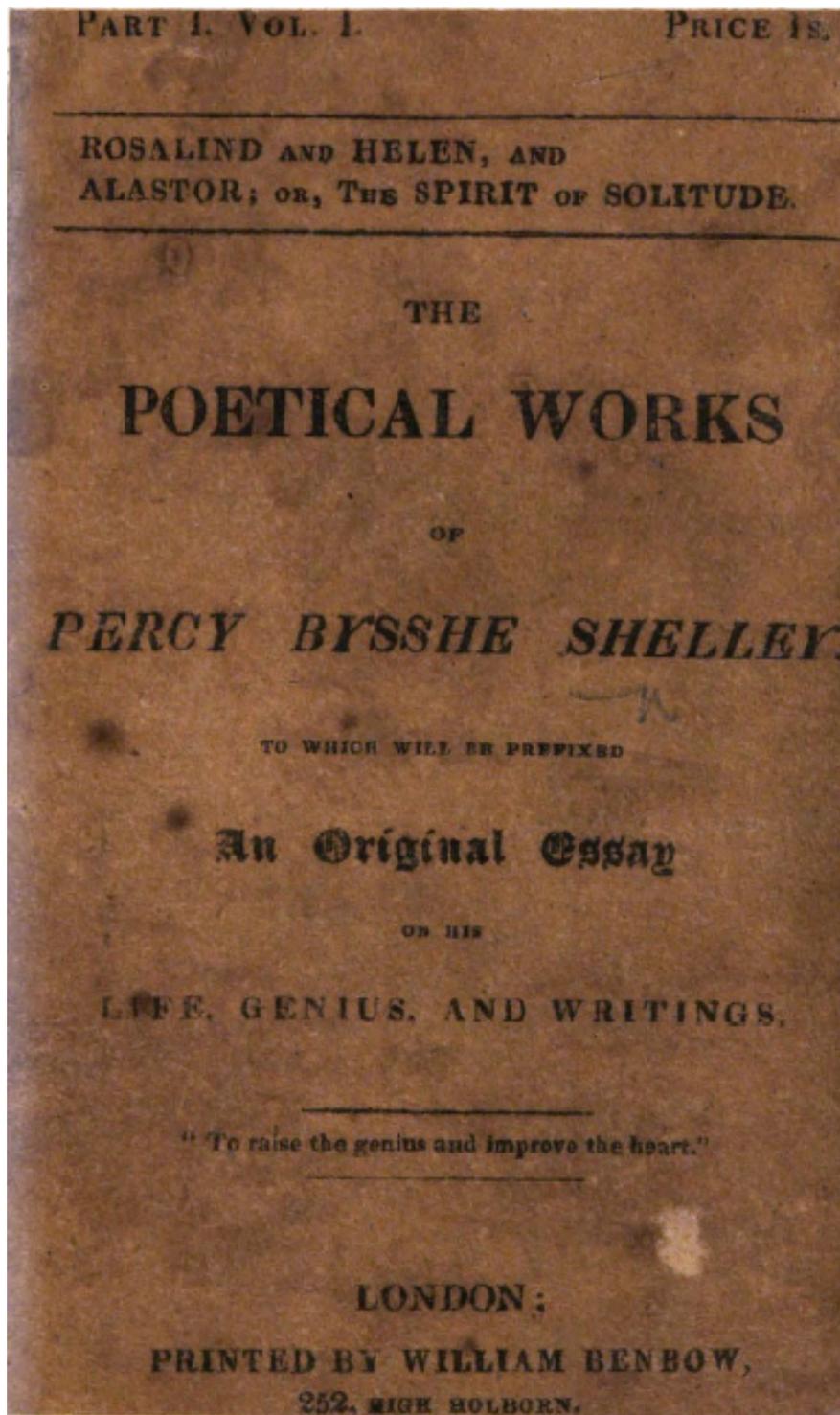


Figure 4: The first number of Benbow's unauthorized serialized edition of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1826.

the late 1810s and the Chartist Movement in the 1830s and 40s.⁵⁰ He was a fixture on the far left in London for two decades, a leader of the wing of physical force revolutionaries. He is credited by labor historians as the originator of the concept of the general strike, giving him a truly profound importance in the history of working-class and trade union thought and struggle.⁵¹ He was, like Carlile, a courageous publisher, at the forefront of the fight for the freedom of the press. He was, unlike Carlile, a pornographer as well as a pirate, using the porn sales (probably mostly to the wealthy), Robin Hood-like, to finance his cheap publications for the working class.

It must be stressed that radicals such as Benbow had literary motivations and ambitions; as with other editors and publishers (and authors), their labor was overdetermined, at once economic, cultural, and ideological. Benbow, from his very first, raw pamphlet *Censorship Exposed*, published in 1818 after his first imprisonment for six months in 1817, consistently quotes poetry in his work.⁵² A particularly interesting example is the following, a sort of détournement of lines from Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad*: "Oh where, ye Britons! is the strength ye boast, / Your former fame and ancient virtue lost? / Unite, and soon the base

⁵⁰ See Donald Macrauld, "William Benbow," in *Biographical Dictionary of European Labor Leaders*, ed. A. Thomas Lane, vol. 1 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), pp. 76–77; I. J. Prothero, "William Benbow," in *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, ed. Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville, vol. 6 (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 29–36; Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and His Times* (London: Methuen, 1979).

⁵¹ See Niles Carpenter, "William Benbow and the Origin of the General Strike," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 35, no. 3 (May 21, 1921): 491–99, and Prothero, "William Benbow and the Concept of the 'General Strike'," *Past & Present* 63 (May, 1974): 132–71.

⁵² William Benbow, *Censorship Exposed; or, Letters Addressed To the R. H. V. Sidmouth, and To Mrs. Benbow, In which the the [sic] Business of the Cowardly Oligarchy is brought to Light, and Exposed to the Execration of all who admire The cause of FREE and EQUAL REPRESENTATION, By W. Benbow, Lately confined by Virtue of a Lettre de Cachet in the Bastille, But who eventually defeated the whole Posse of Borough Mongering Tyrants* (Manchester: Printed for the Author, by W. Ogden, 1818). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CE*.

oligarchy shall fall, / The force of powerful union conquers all” (*CE*, pp. 4–5).⁵³ Benbow’s several periodicals, like working-class periodicals generally in the 1820s and 30s, always included poetry, both original and excerpted.

Benbow’s edition of the *Miscellaneous and Posthumous Poems* is of historical importance for a number of reasons. In addition to correcting errors from previous editions, Benbow’s edition was central in popularizing Shelley’s work, and at precisely the moment that the majority of it would have disappeared from circulation because of Sir Timothy Shelley’s injunction. We know, for example, that Robert Browning owned a copy, given to him by his cousin James Silverthorne, almost certainly his first introduction to Shelley.⁵⁴ The “little thick duodecimo edition of Shelley’s Poems” that had “a magical effect upon” the young Ebenezer Jones, poet and Chartist, was probably Benbow’s edition.⁵⁵ The Cambridge Apostles—F. D. Maurice, Arthur Hallam, Alfred Tennyson, Richard Monckton Milnes, inter alia—very likely read Shelley, and came deeply under his influence, through piracies as well.⁵⁶ Benbow was very likely also the first to publish an image of Shelley, the implications of which, if true, are far-reaching.

Benbow’s engraving is advertised on the back cover of his edition of the *Miscellaneous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*:

⁵³ The emphasis on the “powerful union” of the working classes would be a refrain of Benbow’s for more than two decades as an ultra-radical labor organizer.

⁵⁴ See Frederick A. Pottle, *Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1965).

⁵⁵ Ebenezer Jones, *Studies of Sensation and Event: Poems*, ed. Richard Herne Shepherd, with Memorial Notices of the Author by Sumner Jones and William James Linton (London: Pickering and Co., 1879), p. xxxix. It could have been Ascham’s or Daly’s edition, but it was certainly a piracy.

⁵⁶ On Shelley and the Apostles, see Richard Cronin, “Shelley and the Apostles, 1828–1832,” *Keats-Shelley Review* 5 (1990): 14–40. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “SA.”

Just Published, Price 5s. 6d. A very neat Edition on fine paper, Mr. Shelley's, Posthumous and Miscellaneous Poems. / In a few days will be Published, The Cenci a Tragedy. Price 1s 6d. / The whole of the Poetical Works of P. B. Shelley will follow in quick succession. / NB. The admirers of the late Mr. Shelley, are informed that an engraving is now being executed from a Portrait taken by an Italian Artist during Mr. Shelley's stay in Italy. The Publisher entertains hopes that it will be ready in about a month, and will be given to bind with the Poems. / A very few Proof impressions of the Portrait will be published at 1s. 6d. and on India Paper at 2s. 6d. each.⁵⁷

It is hard to imagine that Benbow could have obtained access to the portrait otherwise than with the consent of Mary Shelley. It must have been based, as stated, on the one portrait made of Shelley during his lifetime, by Amelia Curran in Rome in 1819, now in the National Portrait Gallery in London.⁵⁸ Mary Shelley wrote to Curran soon after Shelley's death requesting the portrait; Curran responded saying that she thought the portrait "was not to be inquired for; it was so ill done, and I was on the point of burning it with others before I left Italy. I luckily saved it just as the fire was scorching it, and it is packed up with my other pictures at Rome" (*LMWS*, 1:240–41). As it turned out, it wasn't until September of 1825 that Mary Shelley finally received the portrait in London—a very short time before Benbow started selling the engraving. It seems to me that the most likely scenario is that George Cannon was still working with Benbow on these editions, and that it was Cannon that got in touch with Mary Shelley to gain access to the portrait to be used for the engraving.

It's known that Mary Shelley assisted Cyrus Redding, who was involved in the production of a French piracy of *The Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats*,

⁵⁷ The advertisement is on the back of the original printed boards of Benbow's edition of the *Miscellaneous Poems*; it can be found in the copy in the Oxford School of English Library, which has been digitized and is available via Google Books.

⁵⁸ See *SP*, p. 512 and note, where Holmes notes that Curran thought it very "ill done."

published by A. and W. Galignani in 1829. “The Galignanis,” Taylor writes, “and they alone among the publishers of Shelley’s poems between 1824 and 1839 so far as I can ascertain, received aid directly from Mrs. Shelley, presumably because she did not feel that her arrangement with Whitton and Sir Timothy need apply to a volume published abroad and not supposed to be imported into England” (*ECE*, p. 19). Redding later claimed that at the time that he was working on the Galignani edition there was no extant engraving of Shelley.⁵⁹ Mary Shelley wrote to Redding in 1829, saying “the portrait of Mr. Shelley, to which you allude, is by no means a good one:—it is the size of life in oil, but unfortunately very unfinished.” She goes on:

There are, however, several very striking points of resemblance, and I indulge a hope that when I can afford it, a first-rate engraver might succeed in making a good print of it. I do not know anything so disagreeable or unjust, as the too frequent custom of prefixing prints unworthy of the persons represented, and in this case there would be great danger that even Mr. [Charles] Heath would not succeed. I should therefore be averse to having it done, unless by him, and unless it were in my power to cancel it altogether if I did not approve of it. [*LMWS*, 2:74]

It seems from this letter that Mary Shelley had no knowledge of the Benbow engraving; but it is likely that she was carefully concealing any involvement in the English piracies, which, if knowledge thereof got back to Sir Timothy Shelley, would ruin her.

If Mary Shelley did in fact assist in the creation of the engraving for Benbow and crew, the question is then raised: Just how far was she involved in the Benbow piracies? Did she help to correct the text, as she did with the Galignani edition? It seems very possible that she provided the errata leaf that went out with only a portion of the edition of the *Posthumous Poems*, for, as

⁵⁹ See Cyrus Redding, *Fifty Years’ Recollections, Literary and Personal, with Observations on Men and Things*, vol. 2 (London: Charles J. Skeet, 1858), pp. 350–53.

Taylor points out, Benbow's edition was substantially corrected based on the errata.⁶⁰ Regardless of how far Mary Shelley assisted in the Benbow editions, it is clear that she welcomed the piracies as a way of undermining Sir Timothy Shelley's prohibition and of keeping Shelley's work in print. In doing so, she formed her own unholy alliance with the London underground, a fact that forces a complete reconsideration of her work as Shelley's first major editor.

Relevant here are the later piracies of John Ascham, which occupy an important position in the history of Shelley editions. St Clair sees Cannon's hand in the matter as well:

The next decisive step in the growth of Shelley's influence occurred in 1834 when a pirate publisher called John Ascham put on sale a full edition in two volumes of all Shelley's published poems.... The Ascham edition was a work of considerable care. It was reprinted from the original editions which by that time were hard to obtain and the text was so authoritative that Mary Shelley, in preparing her own edition shortly afterwards, used it as her copy text. But again the question arises: why should Ascham have undertaken such a work? He is known otherwise only as a minor pornographer. Was he too just a front man? It is remarkable that copies of the book sometimes contain two title pages, one printed and the other engraved, almost identical to those of the 1821 *Queen Mab*. Should we therefore be looking for possible indications that Erasmus Perkins was again involved, attempting once more to promote the work of the poet he so fervently admired? He was still active, although now mainly as a pornographer, and had been sent to prison for eighteen months in 1830. Godwin met him at Rickman's on 29 May 1833. The long informative Preface is written in the style typical of Erasmus Perkins, commending *Queen Mab* while appearing to condemn it. And there is another tell-tale sign. Although the engraving is executed with the perfection of a banknote, the first letter of the word 'Holborn' at the foot of the page is not an H but a capital of the Greek letter P [II]. [GS, p. 516]

⁶⁰ Taylor writes: "Not only was Benbow the first to restore the missing line of *Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples* to the text of the poem, but he also corrected his book substantially as directed by the errata leaf in fifteen of the remaining twenty-three places where the leaf notes errors, and in one other he makes a correction, though not the one ordered by the list. Except in this case, where either Benbow or his compositor evidently preferred 'thee' to the errata's 'you' for the incorrect 'thou' in line 30 of *To Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin*, Benbow's neglect of some corrections on the leaf does not indicate selectivity so much as oversight, for he fails to correct such an obvious misprint as 'flagrance' for 'fragrance' in line 8 of *To Emilia Viviani*." (ECE, p. 17)

St Clair's evidence here seems definitive. Recall that Cannon had signed off the engraved title page of the *Queen Mab* piracy with a lowercase Greek ε. π. I have only to add that "Ascham" breaks apart into "a sham" with the remainder being the letter "c," i.e., the first initial of Cannon.⁶¹ And is there a more generic first name than John? The final proof that Ascham is another pseudonym, or front man, for Cannon is that Ascham published in 1831 *An Address to the Right Honourable Lord Brougham and Vaux, Chancellor of Great Britain, by the Descendant of a Negro; Suggesting an Equitable Plan for the Emancipation of the Slaves* written by his long-time comrade, the former Jamaican slave and radical preacher Robert Wedderburn.⁶²

Ascham's *Works* contains a frontispiece engraving of Shelley, signed "T. Steeden sculpt.," which seems clearly based on the engraving done by William Finden from the Curran portrait and first published in 1833 in the second volume of *Finden's Illustrations of the Life and Works of Lord Byron*.⁶³ However, there is a very different frontispiece engraving to the 1836 Ascham edition of *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, basically the same book as Benbow's *Miscellaneous and Posthumous Poems*. The engraving, unsigned, is also clearly derived from the Curran portrait, but shows Shelley in a very different attitude: somewhat slouched in his chair rather than upright, a smirk on his face rather than a slight smile, his crotch and part of his legs visible, the papers on the table next to him in disarray, and no pen in his hand. There's something

⁶¹ The pursuit of Cannon induces paranoid reading, like Saussure working on anagrams in Latin poetry.

⁶² Worldcat records only three copies of this pamphlet, at Oxford, Brown, and Drew University. On Wedderburn, see McCalman, *RU*, esp. ch. 3. McCalman refers to Ascham briefly as "[Arthur] Thistlewood's former friend from the Kings Bench debtors' prison," (205) though it isn't entirely clear that this is the same Ascham. It could, however, be a similar arrangement as that Cannon had with Benbow: Cannon doing the editorial heavy-lifting, and Benbow taking the risks of the printing and publishing.

⁶³ W. Brockedon, *Finden's Illustrations of the Life and Works of Lord Byron*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1833), unpaginated.



Figure 5: Frontispiece engravings of Shelley from *Finden's Illustrations of the Life and Works of Lord Byron* and Ascham's edition of *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley*.

a bit lecherous about it. Now, this could be a new and sensationalized engraving, also based on the Finden, meant to increase sales and notoriety; but I would propose that it could also be, or be derived from, the Benbow engraving. It would fit Benbow's provocative style, readily apparent in the slew of bawdy and rowdy prints that he published during the Queen Caroline Affair.⁶⁴

After the Galignani edition came the aforementioned volume *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, published by one Stephen Hunt in 1830. There is some mystery and a great deal of confusion surrounding this volume and its publisher. Tayler notes that the two addresses given

⁶⁴ *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: John Ascham, 1836). For an example of Benbow's prints from the Queen Caroline Affair, see chapter 4.

on the two differing states of the title page—York Street, Covent Garden, and Tavistock Street, Covent Garden—corresponded to the movements of the firm Hunt and Clarke and the *Examiner* (*ECE*, pp. 23–4). But *that* Hunt is Henry Hunt, the son of John Hunt and the nephew of Leigh Hunt, and the Clarke is Charles Cowden Clarke, who became his partner after John retired from the firm. Taylor found no Stephen Hunt in the *Post-Office London Directory*, but speculates that there is some familial relationship: “Assuming a kindred connection to have existed, it is possible that Leigh Hunt actively helped the publisher to prepare this volume of Shelley’s verse. However, I do not find any positive evidence of this either in the memoir, as I have noted, or in the text itself, although the text was prepared more carefully, in certain respects, than one would expect of a minor piracy” (*ECE*, pp. 24–5). Taylor notes that one of Leigh Hunt’s older brothers was named Stephen, but that this can’t be the right Stephen Hunt. “The best conjecture I can make,” he concludes, “is that he was a nephew of Leigh Hunt (Leigh, though he had many sons, had none of this name) and a son of John Hunt or perhaps of Stephen the lawyer” (*ECE*, p. 24, fn. 5). No further progress on this question has been made.

Taylor’s progress was probably impeded because of his lack of curiosity about the literary pirates and their world. Stephen Hunt had published, just prior to the *Beauties*, an edition of *The Addresses of Robert Owen (As Published in the London Journals), Preparatory to the Development of a Practical Plan for the Relief of All Classes, Without Injury to Any*, from 4 York Street, Covent Garden. An advertisement follows the title page of this edition, announcing *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley* as “In the Press,” but also announcing the publication of “*The London Co-operative Magazine*, New Series, Nos. 1 & 2.” This is of considerable interest because *The London Co-operative Magazine* was the main organ of the Owenite co-operative movement in London, probably the first real attempt to implement a kind of socialism in

England. In fact, the word “Socialist” in the modern political sense apparently first appeared in print in the *Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald*, the precursor to *The London Co-operative Magazine*.⁶⁵ The *Co-operative Magazine* was first published by Knight and Lacey, and sold, among other places, at the Office of the London Co-operative Society at 36, Red-lion Square. But by the second number, in February, 1826, it was being published by Hunt and Clarke, Tavistock Street. Then, in vol. 4, no. 2 of *The London Co-operative Magazine*, under the header “Co-operative Literary Announcements,” is the following: “In the latter part of the month will appear a volume of the Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley; whose Poems abound in the most glowing descriptions of social perfections, and in the most persuasive appeals to the finest feelings of the heart in favour of social equality, and a just division of the rights, duties, and enjoyments of life” (vol. 4, no. 2, 1830, p. 32). It is clear, then, that Hunt and Clarke served, among their other roles, as the publishers of the Owenite co-operative movement in London, and that the publication of *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley* was conceived as part and parcel of this political movement—his works were seen to embody the ideals of co-operative socialism.

The plot thickens, because Benbow and Cannon—although no one has realized the fact—were almost certainly among the earliest members of the London Co-operative Society, and very probably were involved in *The London Co-operative Magazine* and other co-operative periodicals. We find at a meeting of the shareholders of the “London Co-operative Trading Fund Association,” in December 1827, “Mr. W. J. Baldwin,” the name that Benbow had used as a

⁶⁵ *Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald*, vol. 2, no. 11, Nov. 1827, editor’s note, p. 509: “The chief question on this point, however, between the modern, (or Mill and Malthus) Political Economists, and the Communions or Socialists, is, whether it is more beneficial that this capital should be individual or in common? We say it is much more beneficial that it should be in common.” See the *OED*, s.v. “socialist.”

false imprint for his edition of *Queen Mab*.⁶⁶ There are other likely pseudonyms as well—“Mr. C. F. Cheese” and “Mr. John Milton,” for example—one of whom might be the protean Cannon. Then, in May 1833, Benbow was in the Court for Relief of Insolvent Debtors and listed his residence as “No. 36, Red Lion-Square, Holborn, Middlesex”—that is, the office of the London Co-operative Society.⁶⁷ Cannon and Benbow had been associated at least since their edition of *Queen Mab* in 1821, going on to produce the semi-pornographic *Rambler’s Magazine* in 1822–23. There is no reason to assume that their collaboration ended there; and the first London Co-operative Society began in 1824, the organization’s early efforts coming from journeyman printers—precisely the type of radical artisans (like Thomas Davison, for example) that Benbow and Cannon were in association with.⁶⁸ Cannon’s centrality in the co-operative movement is revealed by a series of advertisements and articles in working-class periodicals beginning in 1828, just after the first co-operative stores began operation in London and elsewhere, and signed “G. C. Penn.”⁶⁹ Both the content and the signature suggest the pen of George Cannon, perhaps

⁶⁶ “London Co-operative Trading Fund Association.” n. d. [1827]. The meeting was held “at 36 Red Lion Square” on Tuesday, December 11, 1827. There are two different title pages of the Benbow edition of *Queen Mab*: one is engraved and the name of the publisher is “J. Baldwin”; the other is a normal title page and the publisher’s name is “William Baldwin.”

⁶⁷ See *The London Gazette*, Part 1, Thursday, May 2nd (1833): 702: “Benbow, William, formerly of No. 3, Fleet-Street, London, Coffee-Shop-Keeper and Dealer in Beer by Retail, and lastly of No. 36, Red Lion-Square, Holborn, Middlesex, at my private residence, and at the same time keeping a Coffee-Shop at No. 8, Theobald’s-Road, St. George the Martyr, Middlesex.”

⁶⁸ See W. Henry Brown, *A Century of London Co-operation* (London: The Education Committee of the London Co-operative Society Ltd., 1928), pp. 14–21. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CLC*.

⁶⁹ See, for example, *The Trades Free Press*, later *The Weekly Free Press*, in which G. C. Penn published a number of advertisements and letters on co-operation between 1827 and 1830.

his subtlest, while also most obvious, pen name to date, the pun on “Penn” paying homage to William Penn, one of Cannon’s idols.⁷⁰

G. C. Penn was the most persistent advocate of co-operation in the working-class periodicals.⁷¹ The plan was a relatively simple, but also quite ingenious, one meant to undercut the profit-system: workers would “commence shop-keeping upon a large and united system” by buying goods wholesale and keeping all profits from sales in a common fund for members of the co-operative.⁷² These co-operative workers’ stores would then undercut the other shops that would continue to sell at marked up prices. The plan didn’t stop merely at buying and selling, however, aiming right at the heart of capitalist production: workers will “have assistance in enabling them to work for themselves instead of their employers, and thus save those enormous profits which the manufacturers, wholesale and retail dealers, now gain by selling the produce of their labour” (*WFP*, p. 544). If the workers began working for themselves and only selling their goods to each other at co-operative stores, then all other shops would have to close and the capitalist system would gradually be replaced with socialism. It was no utopian scheme, but a call to action, offering goods at wholesale prices, and also offering a “retail shopkeeper to act as agent for them, and this agent shall give, to the Company, security for his integrity for 100l.” (ibid.). Already in 1827, co-operative stores were “formed at Brighton, Worthing, Findon, London, Greenwich, Belper, Birmingham, and Kingstanley” (ibid.). “By 1832,” writes E. P.

⁷⁰ His “Introductory Address” to the *Theological Inquirer* began with an epigraph from William Penn. It was Penn’s commitment to freedom of conscience in religious matters that made him a hero to Cannon.

⁷¹ See Iorwerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and His Times* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 240–42. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *APEN*.

⁷² G. C. Penn, “Trading and Working Unions,” *The Weekly Free Press of Trade, Manufactures, and Commerce*, vol. 4, no. 174 (London, November 8, 1828): 544. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *WFP*.

Thompson, “perhaps 500 co-operative societies were in existence in the whole country with at least 20,000 members” (*MEWC*, p. 793). The plan ultimately failed, but it was renewed again later in the 19th century, and again in the 20th, demonstrating its continued power and appeal to workers.

The most definitive evidence, however, of Cannon’s central involvement in the co-operative movement is a series of letters in *The Weekly Free Press* that are undoubtedly by Cannon, because they are signed with the reversed paragraph symbol that he had used at the end of his preface to the *Queen Mab* piracy (Figure 6). In a series of four letters “To the Spitalfields’ Weavers,” he advocates for the abolition of the Corn Laws as the remedy to the distress of the weavers, while slyly indicating that the ultimate cause of their misery is the monopoly of the aristocracy over both land and Parliament. He then published a letter “To the Friends of the Abolition of Slavery,” which comes very close to advocating for armed violence in order to secure abolition, as well as religious liberty (*WFP*, nos. 190–95, 1829).

What is to be made of all this? What are the implications of reading the *Beauties* of Shelley in the context of the co-operative movement? In what ways does such a reading complicate the typical story of Shelley’s reception in these formative years? What should we make of the fact that the first anthology of Shelley’s work was a product not of the literary middle-class but of the vanguard of the working class? For a start, the current critical consensus about the *Beauties* of Shelley needs to be reconsidered, and this in turn has larger implications for received ideas about the Shelley Myth.

This consensus can be represented by Stephen Behrendt’s brief history of Shelley editions in English, in which he writes that the volume was “designed to capitalize upon” a



Figure 6: George Cannon’s letter “To the Friends of the Abolition of Slavery,” published in *The Weekly Free Press*, and signed with the paragraph symbol that Cannon had used in the piracy of *Queen Mab* published by Benbow in 1821.

growing “general readership” for Shelley’s poems, and concludes: “Collections of this sort always afford their enterprising editors (and their publishers) opportunities to characterize author and poetry alike through selections whose editing, arrangement, and annotation or biographical commentary reflect the editors’ particular sympathies and intentions or the niche of the

commercial market at which the editions are aimed.”⁷³ It may be true that *Beauties* was designed to capitalize upon a growing audience for Shelley’s work, and it certainly seems like this volume—with its bowdlerized version of *Queen Mab* and its seeming aestheticizing of his oeuvre—is precisely the kind of bourgeois treatment of Shelley that one would expect of a volume seeking favor from an early-Victorian middle-class readership. It is nonetheless clear, however, that it poses a problem more complicated than these explanations. Behrendt, like almost all other commentators, is guilty of assuming purely economic motives on the part of the pirates; and, more importantly, he fails to recognize, as everyone before him had done, the ways in which the volume was tied to the co-operative movement and early British socialism.

The volume must be read, then, as a document of the co-operative movement, which was a big tent movement for the left at the time, encompassing veteran radicals and Spenceans such as Benbow, John Gast, and Cannon (many of whom looked askance at Owen), as well as more central Owenites such as William Thompson and William King. The early co-operative movement in London from 1824–34 is also a vital moment in that it brought together the older generation of radical pirates and the next generation—James Watson, Henry Hetherington, and John Cleave, primarily. It also represented the at least partial unification of the Owenites and the radical artisans—a truly unholy working-class alliance, which can arguably be considered the foundational moment of socialism in Britain. The very roots of the National Union of Working Classes and the Chartist movement lie in the co-operative movement. It’s a fascinating and understudied moment in working-class history and literary history, falling in between, on the one

⁷³ Stephen C. Behrendt, “The History of Shelley Editions in English,” in *The Reception of P. B. Shelley in Europe*, ed. Susanne Schmid and Michael Rossington (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 18–19.

hand, the “heroic age of popular radicalism” from 1815–20 and the Chartist and trade union movements, and, on the other, the Romantic and Victorian periods.

Shelley’s poetry—in general, not just *Queen Mab*—must therefore be seen as foundational to early British socialism, right next to the works of Robert Owen. The true extent to which Shelley’s ideas influenced the development of Owenite thought, and that of socialism and communism more broadly, still needs to be explored in more detail; I hope to have made some contribution to that project here by showing that the ties are much deeper than previously supposed. In my first chapter, I tried to complicate an oversimplified picture of Shelley’s middle-class and working-class audiences. That picture, still dominant, runs like this: the middle-class through a politicized process of lyricization attempted to purge the political from Shelley’s work, transforming him into a lyric angel, while the working class read Shelley’s work precisely *because* of its politics, attaching the most importance to works like *Queen Mab*, *The Revolt of Islam*, and “The Mask of Anarchy.” This aligns with the angelic/satanic formations of Shelley. While there is some truth in this story, it is, in the final analysis, too reductive and cannot hold. The younger middle-class poets of the next generation—Browning, Tennyson, Hallam—came to Shelley through piracies, and became converts, if only for a time, to Shelley’s most radical views. Meanwhile, the working class was preserving, circulating, and reading *all* of Shelley’s work, the lyrics included. *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, which would seem to be the epitome of bourgeois lyricization, was in fact a working-class product, meant to offer “the most glowing descriptions of social perfections” and “the most persuasive appeals to the finest feelings of the heart in favour of social equality.” Shelley was always already both devil and angel (as Satan was), it depended on who was wielding the spear and to what end. Mary Shelley knew this, and adroitly played both sides in the game to keep Shelley’s body of work alive.

3. Multimedia Shelley

By the time Leigh Hunt published *The Masque of Anarchy* in 1832, the reviewer for the *The British Critic, Quarterly and Theological Review* could begin by commenting: “The public has been favoured of late with abundant information respecting Mr. Shelley and his works.”⁷⁴ Not only had Hunt published his account of Shelley in *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, but T. J. Hogg had published his memoirs of Shelley at Oxford, and Thomas Medwin his own memoirs of Shelley. Hogg and Medwin, of course, would go on to publish biographies, but pieces of these accounts first circulated in periodicals. I began this chapter by showing how particularly striking aspects of Hunt’s portrait of Shelley were taken up by a very different portrait, sketched in a different genre, by Driver in *Harold de Burun*. I now want to conclude by considering this process of transgeneric and multimedial cultural incorporation in another format: the novel.

Arguably the first portrait of Shelley in a novel is Victor Frankenstein, and Frankenstein’s monster, in Mary Shelley’s first novel. Mary Shelley would go on to use aspects of Shelley for characters in later novels as well, most prominently Adrian in *The Last Man*.⁷⁵ Peacock’s novel *Nightmare Abbey*, as Holmes points out, is a “picture of the bustling madcap household...of Albion House,” where the Shelleys were staying at Marlow in 1817,

⁷⁴ [Anon.], review of *The Masque of Anarchy*, *The British Critic, Quarterly Theological Review, and Ecclesiastical Record*, vol. 13 (January 1833): 176.

⁷⁵ H. Buxton Forman points to a letter of Mary’s in which she writes that “I have endeavoured, but how inadequately, to give some idea of him in my last published book...” Forman notes that the “letter is dated the 25th of February 1826; and the latest book published by Shelley’s widow at that time was the weird and terrible romance of *The Last Man*. It has long been a familiar thought to me that Adrian Earl of Windsor in *The Last Man* was meant to represent Shelley in point of character: but a confession of that intention was needed to give the literary portrait solid value.” *Shelley, “Peterloo” and “The Mask of Anarchy”* (London: Printed for Private Circulation, 1887), pp. 22–23.

and for the sake of fiction [Peacock] turned its gothic battlements into a mystic tower, 'ruined and full of owls', and imported not only Byron but also Coleridge into the household. Mary clearly recognized Shelley in the character of Scythrop with his mysterious mannerism, half comic and half grotesque, his secret and divided love-life, and his obsession with conspiratorial plans for revolutionary reform movements. This portrait-parody was a free, affectionate and nostalgic play of satire around Shelley during the period he was writing *Laon and Cythna*, and the political pamphlets. [*STP*, pp. 374–75]

The character of St. Elmo, or Calmoldel, in William Godwin's novel *Cloudesley: A Tale* is another novelized portrait of Shelley.⁷⁶ Benjamin Disraeli's *Venetia* provides fictionalized portraits of both Byron and Shelley. Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* models the central portrait, or relic, on Amelia Curran's portrait of Shelley.⁷⁷ Other examples could be cited, and there are probably more that haven't been discovered yet.

But I want to consider one particular example of the novelization of Shelley here: George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Will Ladislaw is—at least in part—a Shelleyan figure.⁷⁸ This is hinted at a couple of times. Mr Brooke says to Casaubon of Ladislaw: "He seems to me a kind of Shelley, you know," Mr Brooke took an opportunity of saying, for the gratification of Mr Casaubon. 'I don't mean as to anything objectionable—laxities or atheism, or anything of that kind, you know—Ladislaw's sentiments in every way I am sure are good...But he has the same sort of enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, emancipation—a fine thing under guidance—under guidance, you know.'⁷⁹ Mr. Brooke saying this "for the gratification of Mr Casaubon" is, of course, ironic,

⁷⁶ See Clement Dunbar, *A Bibliography of Shelley Studies: 1823–1950* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), p. 19. Cf. Engelberg, *The Making of the Shelley Myth*, p. 178.

⁷⁷ See Diane Long Hoeveler, "The Literal and Literary Circulation of Amelia Curran's portrait of Percy Shelley," *Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 39, nos. 1–2 (Winter-Spring 2008): link.gale.com/apps/doc/A183050535/LitRC?u=chic_rbw&sid=LitRC&xid=b3c5cf2a.

⁷⁸ See Roland A. Duerksen, "Shelley in *Middlemarch*," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 14 (Winter, 1965): 23–31.

⁷⁹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by Bert G. Hornback (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 248. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *MM*.

and a prime example of Mr Brooke's remarkable (though charming) obtuseness in social interactions; it could only be a source of gratification to Mr Casaubon to have Ladislav compared to Shelley insofar as he could take pleasure in someone slandering Ladislav. Casaubon is exactly the kind of pious gentleman of the 1830s who would have found Shelley to be completely satanic. Later on, after Ladislav and Mr Brooke get involved in politics together, we are told that “Mr Brooke always ended by agreeing with Ladislav, who still appeared to him a sort of Burke with a leaven of Shelley” (*MM*, p. 346).

Those are the explicit comparisons of Ladislav to Shelley. But there are, I argue, several moments of implicit alignment of Ladislav and Shelley. Consider, for example, the reader's first introduction to Ladislav:

“Do you know, Dorothea, I saw some one quite young coming up one of the walks.”

“Is that astonishing, Celia?”

“There may be a young gardener, you know—why not?” said Mr. Brooke. “I told Casaubon he should change his gardener.”

“No, not a gardener,” said Celia; “a gentleman with a sketch-book. He had light-brown curls. I only saw his back. But he was quite young.”

“The curate's son, perhaps,” said Mr. Brooke. “Ah, there is Casaubon again, and Tucker with him. He is going to introduce Tucker. You don't know Tucker yet.”

Mr. Tucker was the middle-aged curate, one of the 'inferior clergy,' who are usually not wanting in sons. But after the introduction, the conversation did not lead to any question about his family, and the *startling apparition of youthfulness* was forgotten by every one but Celia. She inwardly declined to believe that the light-brown curls and slim figure could have any relationship to Mr Tucker, who was just as old and musty-looking as she would have expected Mr Casaubon's curate to be... [*MM*, p. 51, my emphasis]

Not long after this first, glancing introduction to the apparition of Will Ladislav, we are properly introduced to him as Casaubon and the Brookes approach him:

The young man had laid down his sketch-book and risen. His bushy light-brown curls, as well as his youthfulness, identified him at once with Celia's apparition.

“Dorothea, let me introduce you to my cousin, Mr. Ladislav. Will, this is Miss Brooke.”

The cousin was so close now, that, when he lifted his hat, Dorothea could see a pair of grey eyes rather near together, a delicate irregular nose with a little ripple in it, and hair falling backward; but there was a mouth and chin of a more prominent, threatening aspect

than belonged to the type of the grandmother's miniature. Young Ladislaw did not feel it necessary to smile, as if he were charmed with introduction to his future second cousin and her relatives; but wore rather a pouting air of discontent.

"You are an artist, I see," said Mr. Brooke, taking up the sketch-book and turning it over in his unceremonious fashion.

"No, I only sketch a little. There is nothing fit to be seen there," said young Ladislaw, colouring, perhaps with temper rather than modesty. [*MM*, pp. 52–53]

The slim figure, the bushy light-brown curls, the grey-blue eyes, and the marked youthfulness are all features shared with the descriptions of Shelley that would have been available to Eliot. In *Shelley at Oxford*, for example, Hogg wrote that Shelley's "figure was slight and his aspect remarkably youthful," that "his hair was long and bushy."⁸⁰ Compare Thomas Medwin's description in his *Life of Shelley* first published in 1847:

Shelley was at this time tall for his age, slightly and delicately built, and rather narrow chested, with a complexion fair and ruddy, a face rather long than oval. His features, not regularly handsome, were set off by a profusion of silky brown hair, that curled naturally. The expression of countenance was one of exceeding sweetness and innocence. His blue eyes were very large and prominent, considered by phrenologists to indicate a great aptitude for verbal memory. [*ML*, p. 19]

As anyone who has looked at Shelley manuscripts knows, he was very fond of making sketches. Lady Jane Shelley remarks in *The Shelley Memorials* on this lifelong habit of making sketches, commenting on his time at day-school at Middlesex: "during school hours, he would gaze abstractedly at the passing clouds, or would scrawl in his school-books (a habit which he never lost) rude drawings of pines and cedars, in memory of those standing on the lawn of his native home."⁸¹ After their initial meeting, Ladislaw is sizing up Dorothy Brooke, unfavorably at this point, but he is struck by her voice: "But what a voice! It was like the voice of a soul that had

⁸⁰ Hogg, *Shelley at Oxford*, pp. 6, 10.

⁸¹ *Shelley Memorials: From Authentic Sources*, ed. by Lady Shelley (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1859), p. 2.

once lived in an Aeolian harp” (*MM*, p. 53). This is, of course, one of Shelley's favorite images and metaphors for the poet.

In a conversation between Casaubon and Mr Brooke not long after the first meeting with Ladislav, Casaubon talks disparagingly about Will's refusal “to choose a profession,” and his desire to go abroad to develop “culture” (*MM*, p. 54). Mr Brooke, upbeat and willing to put a good face on everything as usual, suggests that he might become an eminent explorer. Casaubon demures, claiming that Will has no such noble intention for his travels: “so far is he from having any desire for a more accurate knowledge of the earth's surface, that he said he should prefer not to know the sources of the Nile, and there should be some unknown regions preserved as hunting-grounds for the poetic imagination.” Mr Brooke persists in his optimism, however, suggesting that Will “‘may turn out a Byron, a Chatterton, a Churchill—that sort of thing—there's no telling,’ said Mr Brooke. ‘Shall you let him go to Italy, or wherever else he wants to go?’” (*MM*, pp. 54–55). We soon learn that Ladislav does in fact go to Italy, as both Byron and Shelley did.

Will Ladislav, also like Shelley, has a fine sensibility; his body is painfully at the mercy of his senses: “Will...was made of very impressible stuff. The bow of a violin drawn near him cleverly, would at one stroke change the aspect of the world for him, and his point of view shifted as easily as his mood” (*MM*, p. 268). Eliot uses the same kind of language to describe Ladislav's sensitivity as was used by Mary Shelley, Hogg and Medwin to describe Shelley's body: we are told that he has a “susceptible temperament,” an “active fancy,” and an overactive “imagination” (*MM*, pp. 553–54). This too echoes the biographical material: Mary Shelley writes that “nature had formed” Shelley’s nerves to be “sensitive to an unexampled degree” and that they “were rendered still more susceptible by the state of his health”; Hogg writes of “the

sensitive, the susceptible, the fastidious Shelley, whose lively fancy was easily wound up to a degree of excitement incomprehensible to calmer and more phlegmatic temperaments” and notes his “warm imagination”; Medwin wrote that he was a “very fine and susceptible genius.”⁸²

Finally, there are peculiarities in Ladislav's behavior, habits that we are told “became a matter of remark,” that seem to have their root in biographical accounts of Shelley. One is that he “had a fondness, half artistic, half affectionate, for little children—the smaller they were on tolerably active legs, and the funnier their clothing, the better Will liked to surprise and please them.” Another of his idiosyncrasies is that “in houses where he got friendly, he was given to stretch himself at full length on the rug while he talked, and was apt to be discovered in this attitude by occasional callers for whom such an irregularity was likely to confirm the notions of his dangerously mixed blood and general laxity” (*MM*, p. 320). The source of these strange behaviors seems to be two of the more striking anecdotes in Hogg's *Life of Shelley*:

His passionate fondness of the Platonic philosophy seemed to sharpen his natural affection for children, and his sympathy with their innocence. Every true Platonist, he used to say, must be a lover of children, for they are our masters and instructors in philosophy....

One Sunday we had been reading Plato together so diligently, that the usual hour of exercise passed away unperceived: we sallied forth hastily to take the air for half an hour before dinner. In the middle of Magdalen Bridge we met a woman with a child in her arms. Shelley was more attentive at that instant to our conduct in a life that was past, or to come, than to a decorous regulation of the present, according to the established usages of society, in that fleeting moment of eternal duration, styled the nineteenth century. With abrupt dexterity he caught hold of the child. The mother, who might well fear that it was about to be thrown over the parapet of the bridge into the sedgy waters below, held it fast by its long train.

“Will your baby tell us anything about pre-existence, Madam?” he asked, in a piercing voice, and with a wistful look.

⁸² Shelley, *The Poetical Works*, p. 140; Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. 1 (London: Edward Moxon, 1858), p. 211. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *HL*. *ML*, p. 18.

The mother made no answer, but perceiving that Shelley's object was not murderous, but altogether harmless, she dismissed her apprehension, and relaxed her hold.

“Will your baby tell us anything about pre-existence, Madam?” he repeated, with unabated earnestness.

“He cannot speak, Sir,” said the mother seriously.

“Worse and worse,” cried Shelley, with an air of deep disappointment... [HL, pp. 238–40]

So much for fondness for children. Now consider this second charming anecdote. Hogg is recounting their Oxford days, when they would often spend a great deal of time together:

I never visited his rooms until one o'clock... My young and energetic friend was then overcome by extreme drowsiness, which speedily and completely vanquished him; he would sleep from two to four hours, often so soundly that his slumbers resembled a deep lethargy; he lay occasionally upon the sofa, but more commonly stretched upon the rug before a large fire, like a cat; and his little round head was exposed to such a fierce heat, that I used to wonder how he was able to bear it. Sometimes I have interposed some shelter, but rarely with any permanent effect; for the sleeper usually contrived to turn himself, and to roll again into the spot where the fire glowed the brightest. His torpor was generally profound, but he would sometimes discourse incoherently for a long while in his sleep. At six he would suddenly compose himself, even in the midst of a most animated narrative or of earnest discussion; and he would lie buried in entire forgetfulness, in a sweet and mighty oblivion, until ten, when he would suddenly start up, and rubbing his eyes with great violence, and passing his fingers swiftly through his long hair, would enter at once into a vehement argument, or begin to recite verses, either of his own composition or from the works of others, with a rapidity and an energy that were often quite painful. [HL, pp. 76–77]

It is telling in this regard to consider the mimetic passage in *Middlemarch* that immediately follows the diegetic account of Ladislaw's strange habits. He has by this point become very friendly with the Lydgates, and we are told that “the house where he visited oftenest and lay most on the rug was Lydgate's.” We then enter into a particular such scene, one “evening in March,” with Lydgate perusing the newspaper in a bad mood, Rosamond sitting at the tea-table, and Will “stretched on the rug contemplating the curtain-pole abstractedly, and humming very low the notes of 'When first I saw thy face;' while the house spaniel, also stretched out with small choice of room, looked from between his paws at the usurper of the rug with silent but strong

objection.” Rosamond brings Lydgate a cup of tea, and then Lydgate engages Ladislav in conversation about politics; Ladislav in the meantime “had started up and gone to the table” (*MM*, pp. 320–21). In response to Lydgate, who has criticized his writing in the newspaper, Ladislav quotes verse from Shakespeare.

Richard Ellmann has made a strong case that Ladislav is a composite of George Eliot's two husbands, George Henry Lewes and John Walter Cross.⁸³ He doesn't mention Shelley, but it makes perfect sense that Eliot would turn to Shelley as a model; Lewes, after all, was a devoted Shelleyan. He published an article on Shelley in the *Westminster Review*, which Eliot edited, and even at one point had plans to write a biography of Shelley.⁸⁴ Given this fact, there is no doubt that Lewes and Eliot would have eagerly consumed the biographical accounts of Shelley as they came out. I want to go a bit further, however, and suggest that Shelley is not merely a means of connecting Ladislav and Lewes, though he is that. Shelley, I argue, is as much a primary prototype for Ladislav as is either Lewes or Cross. It is striking and odd that Ellmann, writing about a hundred years after Eliot, describes Ladislav with some of the same language that the angelic Shelley was characterized for the Victorians. “The two husbands of Dorothea,” Ellmann notes, “have different functions in *Middlemarch*. The one is all labyrinth and darkness, the other all candour and light” (“DH,” p. 38). Interestingly, he claims that Ladislav constitutes “a new departure in George Eliot's novels,” and that only “Ladislav is treated with utter indulgence” of all the characters in her oeuvre (“DH,” pp. 31, 38). His conclusion: “She allows herself to

⁸³ Richard Ellmann, “Dorothea's Husbands,” in *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973). Ellmann writes that “[p]rototype hunters have left Ladislav alone, on the assumption that George Eliot was too happily fixed in her life with Lewes to have anyone else in mind,” p. 29. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “DH.”

⁸⁴ See Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), esp. pp. 137–140. Hughes writes that Lewes “worshipped the poet,” p. 137.

idealize him, his only imperfection being what is also his chief perfection—youth. He remains a surrogate sun, lacking in energy and heat, no fiction but a figment executed in pastel colours” (“DH,” p. 38). The overlap with the Shelley Myth is striking here: the “eternal child,” the ineffectual luminosity, the unearthliness. The point requires broader and deeper treatment, but what I hope to show from the example of *Middlemarch* is that the lyricization of Shelley is a matter not just of poetic genre, not just of criticism and biography, but a broader process of multimedia cultural incorporation.

A fuller account of the various media involved in Shelley’s multifaceted incorporation into Victorian culture would include the portraits and frontispieces, which show Shelley’s face growing ever more feminine, his hair and eyes getting wilder and wilder, his general appearance somehow ghostlier, or more angelic, as the case may be. It would also have to include the remarkable history of *Frankenstein* on the stage—and, of course, in the twentieth century, the transmediation of the stage version into film. It would of necessity have to draw Byronism into the story as well, for the two were indissociably linked. The point to stress here, however, is that “Shelley” was a result of various materials and media, the material conditions of print, the book, periodicals, a variety of sources that have historically fallen outside of the purview of the literary critic and literary historian, but which are indispensable to understanding of “Shelley” considered as a total cultural phenomenon: Shelley, Inc.

Chapter 3

The Poetic Temperament and Historical Poetics

The standard account of Shelley's fate in the Victorian period could be said to have Matthew Arnold's "beautiful *and ineffectual* angel" as its terminus. It was a process, in the words of Neil Fraistat, of "etherealizing and disembodiment" Shelley that began in the years after his death, "a project fostered by most of the Shelley circle and by John Stuart Mill, F. D. Maurice, and the Cambridge Apostles—in particular, Arthur Henry Hallam and Tennyson."¹ Frederick Pottle, in his classic essay "The Case of Shelley," adeptly summarizes this transformation:

To the earliest critics Shelley was a monster of immorality and impiety; to the later (even to many who did not care much for his poetry) he was an angel, a pure unearthly spirit. And a remarkable paradox emerges: though respected critics continually reiterate their lack of full satisfaction with the subject-matter of Shelley's poems, it is conceded as a matter of course everywhere in England and America, long before the end of the century, that he is one of the greatest English poets.²

Adopting the terms of contemporary historical poetics, this standard account of the Shelley Myth can be productively reconsidered through the lens of lyricization, for by the early twentieth century F. R. Leavis could write that "it is...universally agreed that...Shelley's genius was 'essentially lyrical'."³

¹ Neil Fraistat, "Illegitimate Shelley: Radical Piracy and the Textual Edition as Cultural Performance," *PMLA*, vol. 109, no. 3 (May, 1994): 410. Cf. the introduction to Karsten Klejs Engelberg, *The Making of the Shelley Myth: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism of Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1822–60* (Meckler: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1988), pp. ix–xxii.

² Frederick Pottle, "The Case of Shelley," in *Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 290.

³ F. R. Leavis, "Shelley," in *Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Abrams, 270. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "SH."

Leavis is quoting John Stuart Mill here, whose theory of poetry, developed in the early 1830s, and deeply indebted to Wordsworth, inverted the traditional hierarchy of poetic genres, accepted since Aristotle, by making lyric poetry more essentially poetry than epic or dramatic poetry. However, close attention to the critical debate about Shelley in the period of the “Romantic Victorians,” from 1824 to 1840, reveals that the story is more complicated than the standard account lets on.⁴ My claim here will be twofold: 1) that understanding these complications requires close attention to now-discarded psychological and physiological theories, as well as the historical poetics of early Victorian critical theory, and the socio-political conditions informing these discourses; and 2) that understanding these complications has important implications for contemporary debates about historical poetics and lyric theory, as well as for our understanding of Shelley and of Romanticism.

In attending closely to the early critical debate about Shelley, focusing on the bodies of knowledge that were brought to bear, it becomes clear that, rather than a “disembodying” of Shelley, what one finds is the construction of a very unique body, what Mill calls the “poetic temperament.”⁵ Far from being made “ethereal” or “spiritual,” Shelley is seen as *hypersomatic*, almost diseased: a body that is at the mercy of the senses, much like the Aeolian harp is at the mercy of the winds, and produces poetry almost mechanically. The effect of this critical construction of Shelley’s physical body on his *textual* body was to sever his lyrics from his main corpus to preserve them as the only part that was culturally valuable, much as John Edward

⁴ See Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824–1840* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

⁵ J. S. Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 358. Hereafter cited parenthetically as TP.

Trelawny was said to have snatched Shelley's heart from the flames of the pyre to preserve it for Mary Shelley. In this sense, Shelley poetic corpus serves as a fascinating case study for Virginia Jackson's powerful notion of lyricization.

In fact, I argue that Shelley's case is not just an example of lyricization, but something closer to the historical *origin and locus* of lyricization. Jackson's account, I contend, is itself built upon the lyricizing of Shelley in the Victorian period. This process, I argue, must be considered from the standpoint of class struggle in the years leading up to the Reform Bill of 1832. In the previous chapters I attempted to show that Shelley's thought was a core element in the development of early socialism in England; by the late 1820s and early 1830s, the chief antagonist of socialist thought was utilitarian liberalism, and the most important figure in this tradition in nineteenth century England was John Stuart Mill. Part of what I hope to show here is that Mill's own incorporation of poetry into utilitarian thought, central to his transformation of Benthamism, was a result of his confrontation with Shelleyan radicalism, mediated through the early Cambridge Apostles: primarily F. D. Maurice and John Sterling. The momentous "reorientation of criticism" in this period, famously delineated by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, culminating in Mill's two essays of 1833, "What Is Poetry?" and "The Two Kinds of Poetry," is the result of a critical impasse that centered on Wordsworth and Shelley, "the two English authors of our own day," as Mill put it "who have produced the greatest quantity of true and enduring poetry."⁶ Mill's solution to the problem was rooted in Wordsworth's understanding of poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," coupled with contemporary

⁶ J. S. Mill, "The Two Kinds of Poetry," in *Essays on Poetry*, ed. by F. Parvin Sharpless (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), pp. 33–34. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *EP*. The essay first appeared in the *Monthly Repository* in October, 1833.

associationist psychological theories of the mind, of which his father, James Mill, was the leading contemporary proponent. Drawing on this new mind science, Mill argues that Shelley was a poet of nature, while Wordsworth was a poet of culture. This argument, coupled with Mill's theory of the lyric as "overheard," would have important and lasting effects both for the theory and practice of poetry in the Victorian period on into the twentieth century.

Mill's essays, however, no matter how much they seem to be products of pure analytical thought, didn't arise in a vacuum; they were the culmination of a critical debate over Shelley's poetry, and, centrally, its cultural value, that raged in that strange, liminal period from the publication of Shelley's *Posthumous Poems* in 1824—the year of Byron's death and, some would say, the death of British Romanticism—until the Reform Bill in 1832, often seen now as the beginning of the Victorian period.⁷ There are a number of reasons that could be offered for the critical neglect of these years, not least among them the heuristically necessary and valuable, but ultimately arbitrary, distinction of literary-historical periods. And yet, these were formative years for the major Victorian poets and critics: Mill had his mental crisis and found Wordsworth (as others find Jesus) in 1826, the same year that a young Robert Browning got his hands on Benbow's piracy of Shelley's works, the profound effects of which are well-known; reading Shelley in these years had a similarly transformative effect on the young Cambridge Apostles, prominently Arthur Henry Hallam and Alfred Tennyson. A critical debate arose that pitted the Shelleyan Apostles against the utilitarians, most prominently W. J. Fox and Mill, and their chief organ, *The Westminster Review*. It is the underlying politics and the broader historical stakes of

⁷ See Joseph Bristow, "Reforming Victorian Poetry: Poetics After 1832," in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1, where he claims "There are good reasons to justify why 1832, rather than 1837, should open the Victorian age."

this debate that I hope to track in what follows. William Hazlitt's earlier criticism of Shelley is the necessary point of departure, however, for it introduces the dominant themes of all Victorian criticism of Shelley.

1. The Diseased Body Poetic: Hazlitt's Critique of Shelley

"The love of paradox, an affectation of singularity, or the pride of reason, has seduced you to the barren and gloomy paths of infidelity." – Shelley, *A Refutation of Deism*⁸

On April 20, 1821, Leigh Hunt wrote an outraged letter to his friend and fellow reformer, William Hazlitt:

I think, Mr. Hazlitt, you might have found a better time, and place too, for assaulting me and my friends in this bitter manner.... the sight of acquaintances and brother-reformers cutting and carbonadoing one another in public is, I conceive no advancement to the cause of Liberal opinion, however you may think they injure it in other respects. In God's name, why could you not tell Mr. Shelley in a pleasant manner of what you dislike in him?⁹

After Hazlitt's phlegmatic response—"as to Shelley, I do not hold myself responsible to him"—Hunt reiterated his anger, saying that Hazlitt's piece was "most outrageous, unnecessary, and even, for its proffered purposes, impolitic" (*MWH*, p. 311). The essay under dispute was "On Paradox and Common-Place," published in Hazlitt's 1821 *Table Talk*.¹⁰ What were Hazlitt's "proffered purposes," and what did Hunt find so "outrageous" about Hazlitt's attack on Shelley?

⁸ *PWPBS*, 1:95.

⁹ W. Carew Hazlitt, *Memoirs of William Hazlitt*, vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley, 1867), p. 305. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *MWH*.

¹⁰ William Hazlitt, *Table-Talk; or, Original Essays* (London: John Warren, 1821). Hereafter cited parenthetically as "PC."

The core of Hazlitt's argument in the essay is expressed at the very outset, where he claims: "I do not indeed swear by an opinion, because it is old: but neither do I fall in love with every extravagance at first sight, because it is new" ("PC," p. 349). These two tendencies, which Hazlitt labels common-place and paradox, he finds pernicious because both represent an affront to sober reason, which he thinks should be the sole arbiter of ideas whether ancient and venerated or brand new and sexy. His example of the latter tendency—novelty for novelty's sake we might call it—is Shelley. Hazlitt proceeds by way of a distinction between originality and singularity: "Originality implies independence of opinion; but differs as widely from mere singularity as from the tritest truism. It consists in seeing and thinking for one's-self: whereas singularity is only the affectation of saying something to contradict other people, without having any real opinion of one's own upon the matter" ("PC," p. 350). The distinction is an important one, because the consistent crux of Hazlitt's criticism of Shelley's poetry was that he lacked originality. In his 1829 essay "Poetry," for example, he argues: "Mr. Shelley, who felt the want of originality without the power to supply it, distorted every thing from what it was, and his pen produced only abortions."¹¹ A close analysis of Hazlitt's critique of Shelley is valuable here, because Hazlitt would set the terms of the Shelley debate, certainly for nineteenth-century criticism, and arguably for the entire history of Shelleyan criticism. It also shows that criticism of Shelley's poetry is ab initio constituted by notions of Shelley's body, an entire diagnostics of his corpus.

While it seems that Hazlitt's essay is focused with sober and unbiased reason on the problems of the two tendencies of common-place and paradox, with Shelley coming in merely as

¹¹ *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, vol. 20 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons LTD, 1934), p. 211. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CWWH*.

an illustrative case, it becomes clear in retrospect that Hazlitt is from the start winding up for his attack on Shelley, the *raison d'être* of the essay, and that the impetus for writing it was his reading of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, which had just been published. After a virtuosic prelude exhaustively delineating the characteristics of his two types, Hazlitt arrives at his target:

The author of the *Prometheus Unbound*...has a fire in his eye, a fever in his blood, a maggot in his brain, a hectic flutter in his speech, which mark out the philosophic fanatic. He is sanguine-complexioned, and shrill-voiced. As is often observable in the case of religious enthusiasts, there is a slenderness of constitutional *stamina*, which renders the flesh no match for the spirit. His bending, flexible form appears to take no strong hold of things, does not grapple with the world about him, but slides from it like a river... ["PC," p. 355]

The nucleus of the Shelley Myth is here—Shelley's *unearthliness*—but it is attached to a diseased body. Many of the core features of accounts of Shelley's physical appearance are also present here: the sanguine complexion, the shrill voice, the bent-over body, the gleam in the eye. It was very likely this attack on Shelley's *person* that Hunt found so outrageous. But it is unclear whether this diagnosis of a diseased body is meant to be taken as a literal description or as a kind of allegory for the body of Shelley's text. This blurring of textual and physical bodies is central to nineteenth-century criticism of Shelley's poetry, and is likely part of what Paul de Man identified as the problem of "how one disposes of Shelley's body."¹²

Hazlitt and Shelley had in fact met one another on at least one occasion at Hunt's cottage in the Vale of Heath—and they had been on the same side in a lively argument about monarchy and republicanism. In the small-town atmosphere of English letters, it would have been well-known that both Hazlitt and Shelley were a part of Hunt's circle, and that they were familiar with one another. And, indeed, Hazlitt will turn aspects of Shelley's past against him, such as his

¹² De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," p. 121.

scientific experiments at Eton and Oxford, later made famous in T. J. Hogg's biography: "He tampers," Hazlitt writes,

with all sorts of obnoxious subjects, but it is less because he is gratified with the rankness of the taint, than captivated with the intellectual phosphoric light they emit. It would seem that he wished not so much to convince or inform as to shock the public by the tenor of his productions, but I suspect he is more intent upon startling himself with his electrical experiments in morals and philosophy; and though they may scorch other people, they are to him harmless amusements, the coruscations of an Aurora Borealis, that 'play round the head, but do not reach the heart.' Still I could wish that he would put a stop to the incessant, alarming whirl of his Voltaic battery. ["PC," pp. 356–57]

Especially to those such as Hunt who knew Shelley intimately, the ad hominem nature of Hazlitt's attack would have been very obvious. The viciousness and personal nature of Hazlitt's essay left Hunt searching for an ulterior motive.¹³

The ambiguity between an account of Shelley's physical body and poetical corpus pervades Hazlitt's essay. He goes on to criticize Shelley for being untethered from reality, a consistent feature of virtually all Shelleyan criticism, whether positively or negatively charged:

He is clogged by no dull system of realities, no earth-bound feelings, no rooted prejudices, by nothing that belongs to the mighty trunk and hard husk of nature and habit, but is drawn up by irresistible levity to the regions of mere speculation and fancy, to the sphere of air and fire, where his delighted spirit floats in 'seas of pearl and clouds of amber.' There is no *caput mortuum* of worn-out, thread-bare experience to serve as ballast to his mind; it is all volatile intellectual salt of tartar, that refuses to combine its evanescent, inflammable essence with any thing solid or any thing lasting. ("PC," pp. 355–56)

This critique would later be at the core of the modernist onslaught (not an exaggeration, I think) against Shelley. Leavis and T. S. Eliot led the charge and the New Critics then piled on. Leavis,

¹³ In his letters to the Shelleys about it, Hunt questioned whether Shelley had done something in particular to draw out such venom from Hazlitt: "Did Shelley ever cut him up at Godwin's table?" Hunt asks. "Somebody says so, and that this is the reason of Hazlitt's attack. I know that Hazlitt does *pocket* up wrongs in this way, to draw them out again some day or other" (*LPBS*, 2:382–83, fn. 8).

following Hazlitt, charged Shelley with a “weak grasp upon the actual,” which he referred to as an “essential trait of Shelley’s.”¹⁴ As the Victorians did before him, Leavis juxtaposes Shelley and Wordsworth. Wordsworth, Leavis argues, “seems always to be presenting an object...and the emotion seem to derive from what is presented,” whereas “Shelley, at his best and worst, offers the emotion in itself, unattached, in the void” (*ERP*, p. 275). Detachment from reality—a kind of otherworldliness or unearthliness—is at the center of accounts both of Shelley himself, from his family and closest friends, and of the most strenuous critical objections to his poetry.

Hazlitt’s next extended treatment of Shelley was a review of Mary Shelley’s *Posthumous Poems*, published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1824, in which he has changed his tune—or at least his tone.¹⁵ Whether this is out of respect for the dead—or, more likely, respect for those that survived him—or that he felt that he had avenged fully enough the wrong that he had pocketed up after the supposed incident at Godwin’s table, is unclear. But the alteration is fairly dramatic.¹⁶ Many of the same core elements are there, but they are cast in a totally different light:

Mr Shelley was a remarkable man. His person was a type and shadow of his genius. His complexion, fair, golden, freckled, seemed transparent with an inward light, and his spirit within him

¹⁴ F. R. Leavis, “Shelley,” in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 268–69. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ERP*. The essay was first published in Leavis’s journal *Scrutiny* in 1935.

¹⁵ William Hazlitt, “Shelley’s Posthumous Poems,” *CWWH*, 16:265–84. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “SPP.”

¹⁶ Mary Shelley’s response to Hazlitt’s review is recorded by P. P. Howe, *The Life of William Hazlitt* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1922), p. 373: “Hazlitt is abroad; he will be in Italy in the winter; he wrote an article in the *Edin. Rev.* on the volume of poems I published. I do not know whether he meant it to be favourable or not; I do not like it at all; but when I saw him I could not be angry. I was never so shocked in my life, he has become so thin, his hair so scattered, his cheekbones projecting; but for his voice and smile, I should not have known him; his smile brought tears into my eyes, it was like a sunbeam illuminating the most melancholy of ruins, lightning that assured you on a dark night of the identity of a friend’s ruined and deserted abode.”

——‘so divinely wrought,
That you might almost say his body thought.’

He reminded those who saw him of some of Ovid’s fables. His form, graceful and slender, drooped like a flower in the breeze. But he was crushed beneath the weight of thought which he aspired to bear, and was withered in the lightning-glare of a ruthless philosophy! (“SPP,” p. 266)

The fire and fever that illuminated Shelley’s countenance in 1821 have been transmogrified here into a benevolent spiritual glow, a divine light of thought. Shelley’s physical form—his slenderness and his drooping shoulders—which were previously indexes of his weakness, unmanliness, and inability to grapple with the real world, are here vividly transformed into the innocuous and striking image of a flower that cannot bear itself up against the elements.¹⁷ It is appropriate that Hazlitt mentions Ovid, for between these two accounts of Shelley’s body an Ovidian metamorphosis has taken place from the beastly to the divine; it is microcosm to the macrocosm of Shelley’s magical transformation in the nineteenth century writ large.

Hazlitt rehearses the core critique of Shelley that he had made in *Table Talk*, but without the violence and ad hominem spleen. The keynotes are all there: the disconnection from reality—“Poetry, we grant, creates a world of its own; but it creates it out of existing materials. Mr Shelley is the maker of his own poetry—out of nothing”; the love of paradox and novelty—“Instead of giving a language to thought, or lending the heart a tongue, he utters dark sayings, and deals in allegories and riddles. His Muse offers her services to clothe shadowy doubts and inscrutable difficulties in a robe of glittering words, and to turn nature into a brilliant paradox”; the ethereal unrest—“Mr Shelley’s mind was of ‘too fiery a quality’ to repose (for any continuance) on the probable or the true—it soared ‘beyond the visible diurnal sphere,’ to the

¹⁷ An image striking enough, as I discussed previously, to be used by Henry Austin Driver in his drama *Harold de Burun*.

strange, the improbable, and the impossible”—“He was ‘all air,’ disdaining the bars and ties of mortal mould”; the essential superficiality of his verse—“the colours of his style, for their gaudy, changeful, startling effect, resemble the display of fire-works in the dark, and, like them, have neither durability, nor keeping, nor discriminate form” (“SPP,” pp. 265–66). Here, however, Hazlitt recognizes that Shelley “with all his faults, was a man of genius,” and—in a motif that would often be repeated by later critics—he “lament[s] that uncontrollable violence of temperament which gave it a forced and false direction.”¹⁸

The constituent ambiguity between physical and textual bodies evident in “On Paradox and Common-place” is present also in the review, but again in a kinder tone. It is no wonder that Mary Shelley was confused by the review, for one minute Hazlitt praises Shelley as “an honest man” without “selfishness or malice,” “a sincere lover of truth, of nature, and of human kind,” and the next minute claims that he had a “disease” and suffered from “madness.” “We wish to speak,” Hazlitt says, “of the errors of a man of genius with tenderness. His nature was kind, and his sentiments noble; but in him the rage of free inquiry and private judgment amounted to a species of madness” (“SPP,” pp. 266–68). Unlike his earlier dismissals of Shelley’s work, here Hazlitt quotes generously from the poetry and offers both praise and critique. The pedal point of the critique, which Hazlitt returns to again and again, is Shelley’s inability to hold the real in view: “Julian and Maddalo” is “rendered perplexing and unattractive by that veil of shadowy or of glittering obscurity, which distinguished Mr Shelley’s writings”; “The Triumph of Life” is

¹⁸ Eliot, over a hundred years later, even as he claims that he finds Shelley “almost unreadable,” admits that Shelley’s “poetic gifts...were certainly of the first order,” and regrets that Shelley didn’t live to put them “at the service of more tenable beliefs.” T.S. Eliot, “Shelley and Keats,” *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. Jason Harding and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), p. 647.

“filmy, enigmatical, discontinuous, unsubstantial,” if nonetheless “full of morbid genius and vivifying soul;” “The Witch of Atlas” is “the very height of wilful extravagance and mysticism;” the “Ode to Naples” is “a fair specimen of Mr Shelley’s highest powers—whose eager animation wanted only a greater sternness and solidity to be sublime” (“SPP,” pp. 270–78).

Hazlitt’s review also marks the beginning point of the lyricization of Shelley, that is, the elevation of Shelley’s short lyrics over his major works—the view that his “genius was ‘essentially lyrical.’” “He has single thoughts of great depth and force,” Hazlitt writes, “single images of rare beauty, detached passages of extreme tenderness; and, in his smaller pieces, where he has attempted little he has done most.” But Hazlitt’s argument against the longer works differs from those of later critics in that Hazlitt finds them to be too philosophical, too metaphysical, driven too much by thought rather than firm feeling and common sense: “If some casual and interesting idea touched his feelings or struck his fancy, he expressed it in pleasing and unaffected verse: but give him a larger subject, and time to reflect, and he was sure to get entangled in a system” (“SPP,” p. 266). Hazlitt concludes with a formula—we might call it the formula of Shelleyan lyricization: “The success of his writings is therefore in general in the inverse ratio of the extent of his undertakings; inasmuch as his desire to teach, his ambition to excel, as soon as it was brought into play, encroached upon, and outstripped his powers of execution” (“SPP,” p. 266). This judgment, I argue, would take on the force of a critical axiom, and would allow for the dismissal of the main body of Shelley’s work, a lyric reading of his corpus that helpfully detached his “lyrical” poems from his body of thought and verse as a whole, and the concomitant political, philosophical, and poetic difficulties contained therein.

Hazlitt’s critique of Shelley is, in the first instance in *Table-Talk*, part of a political critique of two opposite tendencies that paradoxically offer mutual support and reinforcement to

one another. The argument brings us back to the notion of unholy alliances, discussed in my previous chapter. At the outset, Hazlitt has his types of the man of common-place and the man of paradox at antipodes from one another; but all of a sudden he draws them together:

Is not this a pair of wiseacres well-matched? The one stickles through thick and thin for his own religion and government: the other scouts all religions and all governments with a smile of ineffable disdain. The one will not move for any consideration out of the broad and beaten path: the other is continually turning off at right angles, and losing himself in the labyrinths of his own ignorance and presumption. The one will not go along with any party; the other always joins the strongest side. The one will not conform to any common practice; the other will subscribe to any thriving system. The one is the slave of habit, the other is the sport of caprice. The first is like a man obstinately bed-ridden: the last is troubled with St. Vitus's dance. He cannot stand still, he cannot rest upon any conclusion. 'He never is—but always to be *right*.' ["PC," pp. 352–54]

The way that the order of the presentation of the two figures is rapidly altered at the close of this paragraph formally (and brilliantly) links Hazlitt's rhetoric to his argument: this "pair of wiseacres" are the yin and yang that offset one another in the maintenance of the status quo. Both are extremists in violation of the moderation of reason and good common sense. This is now a very familiar liberal argument, of course, Hazlitt sounding (to our twenty-first century ears) every bit here like, say, Isaiah Berlin. The idea is that with his outlandish and utopian views, Shelley hurts the cause of Reform because the enemies of Reform can point to the extremists in order to dismiss all Reform tout court. In this, Hazlitt is aligned with the argument made by Thomas Moore: there is an unholy alliance between these two extremes that prevents progressive change.

The political kernel of Hazlitt's earlier critique—the unholy alliance of, we might say, the far left and the far right—is carried into his 1824 review as well. "The worst of it however was," Hazlitt argues, that Shelley "gave great encouragement to those who believe in all received absurdities, and are wedded to all existing abuses: his extravagance seeming to sanction their

grossness and selfishness, as theirs were a full justification of his folly and eccentricity. The two extremes in this way often meet, jostle,—and confirm one another” (“SPP,” pp. 497–98). The early critical reception of Shelley’s work was from the beginning a matter of politics, and, as I hope to show, even where in the later criticism of the Apostles and Mill politics seem to be bracketed in favor of aesthetics or pure philosophical analysis, the politics of Shelley’s corpus are unavoidable. The lyricization of Shelley, I argue, constructed Shelley’s physical body in order to depoliticize his textual body.

2. Constructing the Body Poetic: Shelley and the Apostles

The early Cambridge Apostles—F. D. Maurice, John Sterling, Alfred Tennyson, Arthur Hallam, Monckton Milnes, and others—were apostles of Shelley and Wordsworth.¹⁹ Soon after Hallam arrived at Cambridge in 1828, he wrote a letter to his friend William Gladstone claiming that “at the present day *Shelley* is the idol before which we are to be short by the knees.”²⁰ He wasn’t yet a convert, but a few months later he was elected as a member of the Apostles, and a friend described him as “a furious Shelleyist.” Hallam’s letters from the period reveal that his fury for Shelley led to his spreading of the good word on every possible occasion: “I made a convert to Shelley on the Glasgow steamboat,” he writes to Milnes, “and presented him with a copy of *Adonais* as a badge of proselytism” (*LAHH*, p. 301). Hallam made a pilgrimage to Italy

¹⁹ The actual name of the society was the pretentious “Cambridge Conversazione Society.” When it was founded in 1820 it was “Tory in politics, Evangelical in religion,” but it was soon transformed by Maurice and Sterling into a group of “exceptionally gifted and promising young men,” whose “political and religious views were markedly avant-garde.” Peter Allen, *The Cambridge Apostles: The Early Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. vii, 1. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CA*.

²⁰ *The Letters of Arthur Henry Hallam*, ed. Jack Kolb (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1981), pp. 244–45. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LAHH*.

to find a copy of *Adonais*, which the Apostles proceeded to reprint—the first publication in England of the poem—in an edition of 500 copies. Peter Allen notes that Hallam “gave out copies to friends and whatever converts he could make to the new cause” (*CA*, p. 46).

It was a mission that was shared by the group as a whole; Hallam would later write to Leigh Hunt, who had sent him a copy of his recently published edition of *The Masque of Anarchy*, of “the enthusiasm,” while at Cambridge “which animated many of my contemporaries, & indeed formed us into a sort of sect, in behalf of [Shelley’s] character & genius” (*LAHH*, p. 682). The characterization is borne out by the letters of the Apostles. Francis Hastings Doyle wrote to Hallam just before the now famous Oxford debate over the relative greatness of Byron and Shelley, saying: “The cause of Shelley prospereth. I quoted a Stanza in a letter to my father.... A man to whom I had lent the Cenci told me the only thing he disliked was having been obliged to read it at two sittings and the Might of Gladstone is a convert” (*LAHH*, pp. 340–41). Joseph Williams Blakesley wrote to fellow Apostle William Bodham Donne and joked of their comrade Richard Chenevix Trench travelling in Africa “with a view probably of regenerating the Moors and opening them to the influence of Shelley and Wordsworth: or perhaps on setting himself up as a new prophet[,] for which he has a great hankering” (*CA*, pp. 94–5). There is of course some conscious self-mockery in this, but the dedication to the cause was real enough—it eventually became too real to be sustained—and the idealizing of Shelley comes across when Blakesley wrote to Milnes of his admiration for Trench: “I know no one who so completely realizes Shelley’s words ‘To fear himself and love all human kind’” (*CA*, p. 95). For these idealistic undergraduates, Shelley wasn’t just a model of poetic excellence, he was a model of humanity.

The spiritual leader of the young Apostles, who championed Shelley and Wordsworth as their literary lodestars, was Frederick Denison Maurice. A letter from Hallam to Gladstone in 1830 reveals Maurice's profound influence: "[The] effect which he has produced on the minds of man[y] at Cambridge by the single creation of that society, the Apostles, (for the spirit though not the form *was* created by him) is far greater than I can dare to calculate, and will be felt both directly and indirectly in the age that is before us" (*LAHH*, p. 56). Maurice, raised as a Unitarian, would go on to be a leader of the Christian Socialist movement, as well as a prominent Anglican theologian.²¹ In the 1820s, however, he was attempting a critical reevaluation of Romantic literature, one that would be imbibed and further expounded by the likes of Hallam and Tennyson. This reevaluation was delineated in a series of essays in *The Athenaeum* in 1828, a year that can be seen as the beginning of a major shift in critical assessment of the relative merits of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley, Byron, and Wordsworth.²²

Although Shelley was known at the time primarily as an infidel and as the author of *Queen Mab*—"a monster of immorality and impiety," as Pottle pungently put it—Maurice

²¹ See Torben Christensen, *Origin and History of Christian Socialism, 1848–54* (Denmark: Universitetsforlaget I Aarhus, 1962). On Maurice's Anglicanism, see Jeremy Morris, *F. D. Maurice and the Crisis of Christian Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²² Maurice was the editor of *The Athenaeum* in this period. As Peter Allen writes, "Maurice wrote two lengthy articles for the *Westminster Review* and, for the recently founded *Athenaeum*, a series of 'Sketches of Contemporary Authors' that constitutes the fullest expression we have of his personal beliefs at this stage of development. Sterling also wrote for the *Athenaeum* and in May 1828 joined Maurice and others in buying the *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*. Two months later, when the *Athenaeum* came up for sale, they acquired it and merged it with the *Literary Chronicle*. For about a year Maurice seems to have been the principal editor and, although circulation was poor and became even worse, the *Athenaeum* had enthusiastic support from many of the Apostles and some help from such sympathizers as J. C. Hare" (*CA*, pp. 75–76). [F. D. Maurice], "Sketches of Contemporary Authors: No. VIII—Percy Bysshe Shelley," *The Athenaeum: London Literary and Critical Journal*, no. 13 (London, March 7, 1828): 193–94. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "SCA."

addresses this problem head on, arguing that if Shelley didn't have religious feelings "he could not have been a great poet" ("SCA," p. 193).²³ Maurice's neo-Platonic theology understands God as "a pervading and ruling spirit of beauty, truth, and beneficence," and from this, coupled with his attraction to Shelley's radical politics, it is clear why Shelley's poetry represented an ideal of the Christian spirit for him: "those who are selfish and frivolous," Maurice argues,

though acknowledging God with their lips, or even with their intellects, are infinitely farther from him in their hearts, than the atheist himself, who is really earnest in struggling upwards, and zealous for the promotion of human welfare. But Shelley was not an atheist; at all events, not in the sense in which that word is commonly understood. He was, in spirit and habit of feeling, the most strongly opposed of all men to that philosophy, if philosophy it may be called, which spends itself among physical causes, and can find satisfaction in mere phenomena. He uniformly referred, for the reason and the truth of things, to invisible principles within us or without, of which natural appearances are merely the clothing and the shadow.... It would be absurd to allude to *Queen Mab*, written, we believe, at the age of eighteen, (the most extraordinary book that any boy ever produced,) and never published with the author's consent; in all his avowed productions that we have seen, there is no denial of the existence of a Supreme Perfection; but there is, on the other hand, a constant inculcation of the doctrine of an all-informing Power, an Essential Wisdom and Benevolence. ("SCA," p. 193)

This remarkable piece of casuistry transforms Shelley's atheism into the very spirit of Christianity, and his materialism into the most thoroughgoing Platonic idealism. But in order to do so, *Queen Mab* must be cut off from the body of his work, a practice that would become common, relegating the poem to "Juvenilia" in many editions of Shelley's works and in critical assessments. "And if thy right eye offend thee," reads Matthew 5:29, "pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." For Maurice, and many later Shelleyans, it was better to

²³ This paradoxical attempt to make Shelley into a religious poet has a long subsequent history among Shelley's defenders. It was prominent, for example, in the mid-twentieth century rehabilitation of Shelley by Pottle and his student Harold Bloom. See Pottle, "The Case of Shelley," and Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

cast out *Queen Mab* from Shelley's corpus in order that the entire body wouldn't be damned to the oblivion of literary history.

But Maurice's account is noteworthy for another reason. What for Hazlitt was the central weakness and vice of Shelley's verse—his inability to grapple with the real—is turned by Maurice into the central *strength* and *virtue* of his work. To Hazlitt's grounded Aristotelian criticism, rooted in Nature and good old English phlegm and commonsense, he counters a Platonic metaphysical vision in which the "invisible principles within us or without, of which natural appearances are merely the clothing and the shadow," are "the reason and truth of things." For Hazlitt, Leavis, and other prominent critics of Shelley, his inability to stick to the phenomena, to hold an object steadily in view, is a sign of his mental weakness and effeminate sentimentality; for Maurice, this same feature elevates Shelley as the most "poetical" of poets: "He did not first look at an object as it seems to other men, and then consider how it might be represented so as to please in poetry; but his very perceptions seem to have been modified and exalted by his genius, and even his senses were inspired. It is on this account that his poems have such perfect unity of feeling" ("SCA," p. 194). As with Hazlitt, then, there is a blurring of physical and textual bodies, but in the service of starkly opposed critical conclusions. Shelley's mind, Maurice writes

was more fundamentally and uniformly poetical, than that of any other poet, at least in our day. We do not say that he wrote better poetry than Coleridge or Wordsworth; but that more habitually than they, or indeed than any one else we can remember, he thought and felt poetically. He cannot be conceived as performing the most ordinary action, and not investing it with a wild gracefulness, or imaginative splendour. Other men put out their minds into the task of ideal creation with something of effort and preparation; they bare their arms for the wrestling, or gird their loins for the combat. But Shelley seems to have been always and all over poet. He did not delay to put on armour for the battle; but went forth in the naked beauty of that form, which was, in itself, invulnerable, and with a glory blazing on his brow" ["SCA," p. 193]

Unfortunate as that concluding image may be, what is worth stressing here is a fundamental agreement about the character of Shelley's work; what differs between Hazlitt and Maurice is the set of critical values that is brought to bear upon this character of the work in order to assess it. Hazlitt and Maurice are thus one in claiming that Shelley had a peculiarly poetic body, a poetic temperament, a notion that is the through-line of all the criticism under consideration in this chapter, from Hazlitt to the Apostles to Mill.

Hazlitt, in his own comments on Shelley, had transgressed some famous lines of John Donne's to apply them to Shelley:

She, of whose soul, if we may say, 'twas gold,
Her body was th' electrum, and did hold
Many degrees of that; we understood
Her by her sight; her pure, and eloquent blood
Spoke in her cheekes, and so distinctly wrought,
That one might almost say, her body thought...²⁴

In his first attack on Shelley, Hazlitt had said that he had "a fever in his blood," and was "sanguine-complexioned," both of which were features that revealed him to be a "philosophic fanatic." In his kinder but sly later treatment, this feature of Shelley's physiognomy is made a sign of his feminized, lyricized body. It could be considered Hazlitt's response to Mary Shelley's use of Milton in her preface to the *Posthumous Poems*: "to see him was to love him; and his presence, like Ithuriel's spear, was alone sufficient to disclose the falsehood of the tale, which his enemies whispered in the ear of the ignorant world" (*PP*, pp. iii-iv). Donne's passage, written after the death of Dame Elizabeth Drury, contains a reading of the body that, like Mary

²⁴ John Donne, "An Anatomy of the World," *Selected Poetry*, ed. John Carey (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 176, ll. 241-46.

Shelley's, says all that needs to be said: "we understood / Her by her sight." Compare Maurice's impassioned description of Shelley's "muse":

The muse of his poetry is neither the shadowy phantasm of Greek idolatry, nor a mere earthly 'damsel with a dulcimer;' but a fair and prophetic priestess, in whom the wild gestures, the fire-flushed cheek, and the electric quiverings of every vein and nerve, accompany the rapture of no feeble song, and the oracles of no mean inspiration. ("SCA," p. 194)

And as with Donne's Dame, Shelley, in Maurice's telling, "thought and felt poetically":

His whole being seems to have been absorbed and transfigured into poetry: and though the sphere of his writings is as different from 'this dim spot, which men call earth,' as are the clouds of sunset from the world, with whose horizon they mingle, yet it is not a region to which he was borne on the wings of a casual enthusiasm, but his father-land and accustomed home. ("SCA," pp. 193-94)

It is helpful to pause for a moment here—galvanized by Donne's "Electrum," Hazlitt's "electrical experiments in morals and philosophy," and Maurice's "electric quiverings of every vein and nerve"—to consider the early nineteenth century understanding of the nervous system, for it serves as an important element in the critical debate about Shelley's corpus.

One might have the impression, especially from Maurice's account, that an electrical theory of the nervous system had been worked out; but this is not the case. James Mill, in his 1825 *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, a development of Hartley's associationist psychology, is frank about the contemporary state of ignorance in regards to the operation of the nervous system:

Though it appears to be ascertained that the nerves are necessary to sensation, it is by no means ascertained in what way they become necessary. It is a mystery how the nerves, similar in all parts of the body, afford us, in one place, the sensation of sound; in another, the sensations of light and colours; in another, those of odours, in another those of flavours, and tastes, and so on.... As the nerves in every part of the body are covered, we know not how any external particles can reach them. We know not whether such particles

operate upon the nerves, by their own, or by any other influence; the galvanic, for example, or electrical, influence.²⁵

Galvanism, named after the Italian scientist Luigi Galvani, and electricity were both relatively new fields of scientific study: Benjamin Franklin had, of course, brought worldwide attention to the power of electricity with his experiments in 1752, while Galvani's discoveries about the role of electricity in the functioning of the muscles were published first in 1791. These new theories were of great interest to the Shelleys, their importance to the scientific grounding of *Frankenstein*, for example, being well-documented.

But many in the early nineteenth century still held to the old-fashioned notion that the nerves were little tubes through which the “animal spirits” passed, allowing the communication between the body and the mind (Descartes's *res extensa* and *res cogitans*). What was understood, however, was that it was the nervous system that was responsible for sensation, even if the exact nature of how this worked was a matter of speculation. Hartley's associationist psychological theory—so influential for the Romantics, including Wordsworth and Shelley himself—is now seen by historians of science as “the earliest example of a fully worked-out neurophysiology.”²⁶ In the empiricist-materialist tradition, Hartley accounts for all sensation, emotion, thought, and ideas through a theory linking Locke and Hume with Newtonian science. By deducing the basic laws of association between mental phenomena, all the mind's operations can be broken down into their basic elements and understood scientifically through cause and effect. James Mill would later summarize the goals of the theory:

²⁵ James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, ed. by John Stuart Mill, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), pp. 10–11. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *APM*.

²⁶ C. U. M. Smith, “David Hartley's Newtonian Neurophysiology,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 23 (April 1987): 124.

Not only is the order in which the more complex mental phenomena follow or accompany one another, reducible, by an analysis similar in kind to the Newtonian, to a comparatively small number of laws of succession among simple facts, connected as cause and effect; but the phenomena themselves can mostly be shown, by an analysis resembling those of chemistry, to be made up of simpler phenomena. [*APM*, p. viii]

The basic tenets of associationist psychology subtend and animate the critical debate under consideration here, and inform the notion of Shelley's "poetic temperament." (Interestingly, Shelley's *Defence* hadn't been published yet, with its line about the "electric life" of contemporary poetry.)

Maurice has other philosophical commitments, however, and his defense of Shelley must be read in light of his broader confrontation with utilitarianism and Enlightenment materialism, for his assessment of the value of Shelley's work is inseparable from his account of the "great moral peculiarity of [Shelley's] writings," which Maurice identifies as "his constant inculcation of man's capacity for a higher condition than the present" ("*SCA*," p. 194). As I pointed out in the previous chapter, utilitarianism had, according to E. P. Thompson, by the Reform Bill of 1832 emerged as the chief enemy of the working class. Maurice and the Apostles were fighting this same fight for a brief period in the late 1820s and early 1830s. In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill registers his surprise at his first encounter with Maurice and Sterling to discover that there was another form of radicalism other than the utilitarianism in which he was raised. The leaders of the Apostles attended Mill's London Debating Society in 1828–29:

the Coleridgians, in the persons of Maurice and Sterling, made their appearance in the Society as a second Liberal and even Radical party, on totally different grounds from Benthamism and vehemently opposed to it; bringing into these discussions the general doctrines and modes of thought of the European reaction against the philosophy of the eighteenth century; and adding a third and very important belligerent party to our

contests, which were now no bad exponent of the movement of opinion among the most cultivated part of the new generation.²⁷

Mill refers to them as Coleridgians—and Coleridge’s influence on them was no doubt profound (and would become even more so), grounding their idealism in the contemporary German philosophy of which Coleridge was the leading English proponent—but at the time it would have been just as accurate to refer to them as Shelleyans.²⁸ Richard Cronin has shown the failure of the Apostles in these years to synthesize a coherent poetics out of the dual influence of Wordsworth (and Coleridge) and Shelley.

In 1828, when Maurice was writing his series of articles for the *Athenaeum* on the Romantics, he was attempting to bring together Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and his neo-Platonic Christianity—carrying with it much of the tradition of Unitarian Dissent in which he was brought up—into an anti-utilitarian radical philosophy and aesthetics. Shelley’s role in this effort is made clear in Maurice’s article on him. Shelley, he writes,

does this mighty good, that he teaches us to look for our improvement, not to the outward circumstances over which our control must always be limited, and which can return to us no substantial happiness, but to those inward powers which are beyond the reach of change or chance, to the improvement of which there is no bound assigned, and which furnish us from within with ample means for our satisfaction. If he had done nothing more than this to oppose the philosophy of circumstances, he would have fulfilled the highest duty incumbent upon man, by proclaiming to his brethren that they are masters of their own destinies; and that it only depends upon themselves to be virtuous, and thereby happy.... [“SCA,” p. 194]

The “philosophy of circumstances” here is, of course, Benthamite utilitarianism and the empiricist philosophical tradition out of which it had grown. As Cronin puts it, “nothing is more

²⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1870), p. 128. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *AB*.

²⁸ As is typical, the Apostles would play down the importance of Shelley in their youthful enthusiasm once they reached the age of memorializing themselves through memoirs and such.

consistent throughout” Maurice’s *Athenaeum* articles “than their hostility to utilitarianism.”²⁹

Maurice, however, was unable to maintain this fragile coalition of Christian Dissent, Platonic-Romantic idealism, and Shelleyan radicalism; by 1831 he had become an Anglican, and, while this didn’t entail a complete repudiation of his youthful radicalism—as his later role in the Christian Socialist movement shows—it was nonetheless seen by his peers as reactionary.

Hallam and the rest of the Apostles would follow a similar trajectory as that of Maurice: intense youthful enthusiasm inspired by Shelley giving way by the early 1830s, after a flirtation with actual revolutionary politics, to reaction. In Cronin’s telling, the Apostles were doomed in an attempt to unite Wordsworth and Shelley as their joint model of poetic and moral excellence. “Having invented the chimerical poet, Wordsworth-Shelley,” Cronin writes “the Apostles delegated such of their number as were poets to supply this imaginary poet’s works. This is perhaps too colourful a representation of the matter, but it goes some way to explain the oddity of the group of poems written by Hallam, Tennyson and Trench between 1829 and 1830” (“STA,” p. 23). Colorful though it is, Cronin’s account points to an important fact: for the young generation of poets and critics in the 1820s and 30s, Wordsworth and Shelley posed a *problem*

²⁹ Richard Cronin, “Shelley, Tennyson, and the Apostles, 1828–1832,” *Keats-Shelley Review*, no. 5 (January 1990): 17. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “STA.” Cf. Christensen, *Origin and History of Christian Socialism*, p. 16: “With the utmost energy [Maurice] in the *Athenaeum* combated the Utilitarians as introducing a false view of man and the universe, by acknowledging only that faculty in man which dealt with the visible outer world. In contrast Maurice maintained that man also possessed a faculty which enabled him to come in direct contact with the invisible and eternal world. Only by virtue of this faculty was man able to contemplate truth and goodness and reach a true comprehension of the universe, the visible world being only symbols and manifestations of eternal laws and principles.” On first arriving at Cambridge, Hallam noted in a letter that “the ascendant politics are *Utilitarian*, seasoned with a plentiful sprinkling of heterogeneous Metaphysics,” *LAHH*, p. 244.

that it seemed urgent to resolve. This becomes very clear in looking at the critical writing of Hallam and Mill in this period.

Hallam's remarkable review essay "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson," published in Edward Moxon's periodical the *Englishman's Magazine* in 1831—when Hallam was only twenty years old—addresses the relative merits of Shelley and Wordsworth, and presents Tennyson as a way forward for poetry.³⁰ He begins by praising *Lyrical Ballads* for "awakening the minds of men, and giving a fresh impulse to art," but quickly goes on to identify what he thinks is the primary flaw of Wordsworth's work:

It is not true, as [Wordsworth's] exclusive admirers would have it, that the highest species of poetry is the reflective; it is a gross fallacy, that because certain opinions are acute or profound, the expression of them by the imagination must be eminently beautiful. Whenever the mind of the artist suffers itself to be occupied, during its periods of creation, by any other predominant motive than the desire of beauty, the result is false in art. ["OSC," 184]

He goes on to set up a dichotomy between poets of "reflection," such as Wordsworth, and poets of "sensation," of which his two examples are Shelley and Keats. Hallam's theory is complicated, comprising historical, poetic, physiological, and what we would now call neuropsychological elements. My focus here will be primarily on what Hallam calls the "poetic organization" of the "Poet of Sensation," and how this relates to what could be called Hallam's historical poetics.

Hallam provides a description of Shelley and Keats, exemplars of the poet of sensation, immediately after his introduction of the distinction between sensation and reflection as two

³⁰ Arthur Henry Hallam, "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson," *The Writings of Arthur Henry Hallam*, ed. T. H. Vail Motter (New York: Modern Language Association, 1943). Hereafter cited parenthetically as "OSC."

primary poetic modes. “Susceptible of the slightest impulse from external nature,” Hallam writes,

their fine organs trembled into emotion at colors, and sounds, and movements, unperceived or unregarded by duller temperaments. Rich and clear were their perceptions of visible forms; full and deep their feelings of music. So vivid was the delight attending the simple exertions of eye and ear, that it became mingled more and more with their trains of active thought, and tended to absorb their whole being into the energy of sense. Other poets *seek* for images to illustrate their conceptions; these men had no need to seek; they lived in a world of images; for the most important and extensive portion of their life consisted in those emotions which are immediately conversant with the sensation. [“OSC,” p. 186]

That Hallam is indebted to Maurice here is immediately clear, especially to Maurice’s view that Shelley’s “whole being seems to have been absorbed and transfigured into poetry.” But Hallam brings to his theory the strong influence of contemporary mind science, in particular the psychological associationism of Hartley. This interest was shared with the utilitarians but, as Michael Hansen has recently shown, for Hallam associationism was part of an idiosyncratic “materialist defense of Christianity.”³¹ Hansen reads Hallam’s review in the context of his other works, including his theodicy, to show how Hallam squared Enlightenment materialism with Christian morality. In particular, Hallam’s “description of God as a being who has evolved over time through actions compelled by pleasure” made it “unnecessary to justify the pursuit of pleasure as the basis of moral action. Pleasure is holy” (“PMS,” 900). Because the highest form of pleasure is aesthetic beauty, Hallam is able to unify the Good, the Beautiful, and the True.

In this context, Hallam’s defense of the poetry of sensation becomes legible not merely as aestheticist criticism, as it is typically understood, but also as a theory of poetic morality.

Because the experience of nature, whether in the form of the outside world or in the form of the

³¹ Michael Hansen, “Arthur Hallam’s ‘Characteristics’ and Pleasure’s Moral Sense,” *Modern Philology*, vol. 114, no. 4 (May 2017): 906. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “PMS.”

“regular law of association” of emotions, is the ultimate source of truth and beauty, the poet of sensation, ever at the mercy of their perceptions, has less chance of introducing error and falsehood into their work than the poet of reflection and intellect. Hallam’s account is thus in direct opposition Hazlitt’s claim (and that of much twentieth century criticism) that Shelley’s verse is disconnected from reality. For Hallam,

the heights and depths of art are most within the reach of those who have received from nature the “fearful and wonderful” constitution we have described, whose poetry is a sort of magic, producing a number of impressions, too multiplied, too minute, and too diversified to allow of our tracing them to their causes, because just such was the effect, even so boundless and so bewildering, produced on their imaginations by the real appearance of Nature. [“OSC,” p. 187]

The obscurity or difficulty that so many critics condemned in Shelley’s poetry is, for Hallam, a failure to follow the mechanical associations of emotions and images that were the natural result of the original sentiment from which they derived:

For since the emotions of the poet, during composition, follow a regular law of association, it follows that to accompany their progress up to the harmonious prospect of the whole, and to perceive the proper dependence of every step on that which preceded, it is absolutely necessary *to start from the same point*, i.e. clearly to apprehend that leading sentiment of the poet’s mind, by their conformity to which the host of suggestions are arranged. [“OSC,” p. 188]

Discovering this “leading sentiment” and following the poet’s train of associations, Hallam argues, requires a degree of exertion that most readers are either unable or unwilling to perform. This, then, is the source of the unpopularity of the poets of sensation. “For very many, therefore, it has become *morally* impossible to attain the author’s point of vision, on account of their habits, or their prejudices, or their circumstances; but it is never *physically* impossible, because nature has placed in every man the simple elements, of which art is the sublimation” (“OSC,” p. 188). The account bears a similarity to the modernist conception, associated with Eliot, that modern poetry must be difficult because modern reality is difficult. Indeed, Hallam’s account has an

intriguing historical dimension that also brings to mind Eliot's notion of the "dissociation of sensibility" that occurred in the seventeenth century.³²

Hallam considers Shakespeare and Milton to be the height of English literature, but also fortunate to have been "assigned by destiny to the most propitious era of a nation's literary development" ("OSC," p. 189). "Since that day," he goes on, "we have undergone a period of degradation," which he attributes to "the French contagion and the heresies of the Popian school" ("OSC," pp. 189–90). With Wordsworth and the rise of Romanticism, however,

came an era of reaction, an era of painful struggle to bring our over-civilised condition of thought into union with the fresh productive spirit that brightened the morning of our literature. But repentance is unlike innocence; the laborious endeavor to restore has more complicated methods of action than the freedom of untainted nature. Those different powers of poetic disposition, the energies of Sensitive, of Reflective, of Passionate Emotion, which in former times were intermingled, and derived from mutual support an extensive empire over the feelings of men, were now restrained within separate spheres of agency. The whole system no longer worked harmoniously, and by intrinsic harmony acquired several component functions, each for itself, all striving to reproduce the regular power which the whole had once enjoyed. ["OSC," p. 190]

This historical poetics isn't fully fleshed out, so a degree of interpretation is necessary. Hallam goes on to characterize contemporary poetry as melancholic, adding that it is marked by a "return of the mind upon itself and the habit of seeking relief in idiosyncrasies rather than community of interest" ("OSC," p. 190). This turning inward, or subjectivizing, of poetry is attributed to a disconnect between the poet and the nation: "In the old times the poetic impulse went along with the general impulse of the nation; in these it is a reaction against it, a check acting for

³² See T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926 and The Turnbull Lectures at the Johns Hopkins University, 1933*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993). Eliot discusses the "dissociation of sensibility" most thoroughly in Lecture VI on Crashaw, p. 161ff. It is noteworthy that his examples of the dissociation of sensibility from the nineteenth century are Shelley and Swinburne.

conservation against a propulsion towards change” (“OSC,” p. 190). This formulation suggests that contemporary poetry is for Hallam, *literally* reactionary; it’s a strange claim in a piece that is arguing for the supremacy of “the Cockneys” over “the Lakers.” How should this seeming contradiction be explained?

A clue is furnished once Hallam turns his attention to the main subject of his review, his fellow Apostle Tennyson. Tennyson, Hallam claims, “has...this advantage over [Keats] and his friend Shelley, that he comes before the public unconnected with any political party or peculiar system of opinions” (“OSC,” p. 191). This seems to lead to a position similar to that of Hazlitt discussed above, which identifies Shelley’s genius as “essentially lyrical.” It thus appears that Hallam’s criticism of Wordsworth and “reflective” poetry has a further consequence when extended and applied to the work of the poets of sensation: that their work is best and most characteristic of their strengths when it is farthest from their politics and their “peculiar system[s] of opinions.” That is to say, their strength is as lyric poets.

A further aspect of Hallam’s historical poetics is worth registering, for it introduces another distinction that will become increasingly important in the Victorian lyricization of Shelley, and in the development of Victorian verse itself. It responds to a peculiar argument:

We have indeed seen it urged in some of our fashionable publications, that the diffusion of poetry must be in the direct ratio of the diffusion of machinery, because a highly civilized people must have new objects of interest, and thus a new field will be open to description. But this notable argument forgets that against this *objective* amelioration may be set the decrease of *subjective* power, arising from a prevalence of social activity, and a continual absorption of the higher feelings into the palpable interests of ordinary life. [“OSC,” p. 190]

It helps to know at this point that Hallam’s review is in large part a response to a review of Tennyson’s book that had appeared in that “fashionable” publication (as Hallam derisively puts it) the *Westminster Review*—the main organ of the utilitarians. The review was published

anonymously, but it is known that the author was W. J. Fox. Isobel Armstrong notes that this was “the first review of Tennyson’s poems to appear in a major quarterly” and “is extraordinary in the way that it raises almost every theme of major importance” to the early debate about Tennyson’s work.³³ She goes on to point out that Fox “is also attempting to demonstrate that utilitarian theories actually liberate poets rather than restrict them” (*VS*, p. 15). Given the (friendly, if vociferous) opposition between the Apostles and the utilitarians, it makes sense that Hallam would seek to undermine Fox’s attempt to hail Tennyson as the harbinger of the utilitarian poetry to come. Indeed, Hallam’s historical poetics in his review is a direct response to Fox’s account.

True to his utilitarian commitments, Fox begins with an account of social progress that attempts to demystify poetry:

It would be a pity that poetry should be an exception to the great law of progression that obtains in human affairs; and it is not. The machinery of a poem is not less susceptible of improvement than the machinery of a cotton-mill; nor is there any better reason why the one should retrograde from the days of Milton, than the other from those of Arkwright. [*VS*, p. 71]

Armstrong finds this to be “a particularly unhelpful utilitarian starting point,” but surely this is a remarkable way to begin a review of a book of poems, and must have been intended to shock (*VS*, p. 15). At the very least, it inspired Hallam to mockery, taking up satirically the language of liberal political economy that was so important to the utilitarians. Fox in fact never argues that “the diffusion of poetry must be in the direct ratio of the diffusion of machinery” (though “direct ratio” is lifted right out of Fox’s review); his point is that “the philosophy of mind and of man,” by which he means utilitarian philosophy, “will secure a succession of creations out of the

³³ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830–1870* (London: The Athlone Press, 1972), p. 14. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *VS*.

unbounded and everlasting materials of poetry” (*VS*, p. 73). The new philosophy has opened a new landscape for the universal powers of poetry to work upon: Tennyson, as Fox with surrealistic absurdity puts it, “seems to obtain entrance into a mind as he would make his way into a landscape; he climbs the pineal gland as if it were a hill in the centre of the scene; looks around on all objects with their varieties of form, their movements, their shades of colour, and their mutual relations and influences” (*VS*, p. 76).³⁴ Tennyson, in Fox’s reckoning, is entering boldly into the new territory opened by the progress of utilitarian philosophy, bringing his poetic powers to bear on the mind, and thus represents a breakthrough in the progress of the “machinery” of poetry.

Tennyson is assimilated into a story of the progress of Romantic poetry in relation to the development of the “science of the mind”:

Metaphysics must be the stem of poetry for the plant to thrive; but if the stem flourishes we are not likely to be at a loss for leaves, flowers, and fruit. . . . the real science of mind advances with the progress of society like all other sciences. The poetry of the last forty years already shews symptoms of life in exact proportion as it is imbued with this science. There is least of it in the exotic legends of Southey, and the feudal romances of Scott. More of it, though in different ways, in Byron and Campbell. In Shelley there would have been more still, had he not devoted himself to unsound and mystical theories. Most of all in Coleridge and Wordsworth. [*VS*, pp. 74–75]

Tennyson is the culmination of this progress, or so Fox hopes from the evidence of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. It is clear that Hallam’s account of the “period of degradation” of poetry following after Milton is a rejoinder to Fox, as is his elevation of Shelley and Keats over Wordsworth and Coleridge. And Hallam develops his account on precisely the same ground as Fox: the new philosophy of the mind.

³⁴ The pineal gland, of course, is where Descartes had situated the “animal spirits” that were the source of the interaction of the body and the soul within the brain in his *Passions of the Soul* (1649).

Hallam's version of the "dissociation of sensibility," with its division of "poetic powers" into "Sensitive," "Reflective," and "Passionate Emotion," responds directly to Fox's argument. Fox sees an abundance of poetic resources merely waiting to be activated, just as the existing labor force would be employed by the diffusion of machinery if only Parliament would adopt free trade and repeal the Corn Laws: "The elements of poetry are universal," he claims. "The exercise of the organs of sight and sense stimulates man to some degree of descriptive poetry; wherever there is passion, there is dramatic poetry; wherever enthusiasm, there is lyric poetry; wherever reflection, there is metaphysical poetry. It is as widely diffused as the electric fluid. It may be seen flashing out by fits and starts all the world over" (*VS*, p. 72). To this progressive utilitarian argument, Hallam responds with a Wordsworthian pessimism about modernity. The French Revolution hasn't found its Homer because "the decrease of *subjective* power" of the modern poet "arising from a prevalence of social activity, and a continual absorption of the higher feelings into the palpable interests of ordinary life." This calls to mind Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he diagnoses the effect of contemporary media on the mind:

For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.

Wordsworth goes on to say that "reflecting upon the magnitude of the general evil, I should be oppressed with no dishonorable melancholy, had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and

permanent objects that act upon it which are equally inherent and indestructible.”³⁵ It is precisely melancholy that for Hallam characterizes contemporary poetry; where Fox sees progress in the application of poetic powers to the newly discovered continent of the mind, Hallam sees a subjective, melancholic turn inward, a divided nation producing a divided self.

In a sense, then, Hallam turns Wordsworth’s own critical theory against him to argue for the supremacy of the poetry of sensation at a historical moment in which poetry is alienated from society, and poetic powers are disunited. The ultimate source of poetic truth in nature—“permanent objects that act upon” the mind “which are equally inherent and indestructible”—requires poets whose bodies are most susceptible to the influence of the senses and who follow most closely the mechanical train of associations arising from them without the intellect interfering and introducing falsehood. J. S. Mill would also base his critical intervention in the debate over the relative value of the poetry of the Romantics, Shelley and Wordsworth in particular, in associationist philosophy of mind, but his conclusions would be very different from those of Hallam.

3. J. S. Mill and the Politics of Lyric Theory

Jeremy Bentham, as philosophers often do, had a notoriously low opinion of the utility of poetry, claiming that the children’s game “push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry.” This was rooted in a belief of a “natural opposition” between poetry and philosophy: “truth,” Bentham claimed, “exactitude of any kind, is fatal to poetry.”³⁶ Mill thought

³⁵ William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 1 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 128, 130.

³⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward* (London: John and H. L. Hunt, 1825), p. 206.

otherwise, however, and his major alteration of Benthamite utilitarianism—some would say his major contribution to the development of utilitarianism—had precisely to do with poetry and its role in the development of feeling. The story of Mill’s “crisis” in his “mental history” as told in his *Autobiography*, and the role of Wordsworth’s poetry in his recovery, is well known. Less remarked upon is that this is also the chapter that takes up most closely his relations with the Apostles—especially Maurice and Sterling—at precisely the moment that they were most forcefully attempting the critical revaluation of the Romantics discussed above. And, moreover, that the philosophical terms in which Mill understood his mental crisis, and developed his theory of poetry, were precisely those of the associationist psychological theory of the mind that was central to the debate about contemporary poetry in the late 1820s and early 1830s.

Mill remarks that the utilitarians acquired a reputation as “enemies of poetry,” and in hindsight agrees that a “neglect both in theory and in practice of the cultivation of feeling” led to “an undervaluing of poetry” in the utilitarian ranks (*AB*, p. 112). He notes that Benthamites were often seen as “mere reasoning machine[s],” and while he doesn’t think the description applied to most, it was “during two or three years of my life not altogether untrue of me” (*AB*, p. 109). “The desiccating rigours and narrownesses” of his education, as Leavis put it, which occupies the first third of the *Autobiography*, could be seen as having precisely the end goal of producing a utilitarian reasoning machine.³⁷ As a young man, he threw himself fully into the utilitarian cause in a period that he calls “Youthful Propagandism.” He wrote numerous articles for the *Westminster Review*, attended debates to argue for the utilitarian perspective (including debates

³⁷ *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*, ed. F. R. Leavis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), p. 9. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *MBC*.

with the Owenites), and occupied his spare time editing Bentham's work for him. Feeling was regarded as the enemy of progress:

Utility was denounced as cold calculation; political economy as hard-hearted; anti-population doctrines as repulsive to the natural feelings of mankind. We retorted by the word "sentimentality," which, along with "declamation" and "vague generalities," served us as common terms of opprobrium. Although we were generally in the right, as against those who were opposed to us, the effect was that the cultivation of feeling (except the feelings of public and private duty), was not in the thoughts of most of us, myself in particular. [AB, p. 111]

Of poetry at this time, he says that he was "theoretically indifferent to it," and that he was "wholly blind to its place in human culture, as a means of educating the feelings" (AB, pp. 112–13). But then the machine broke down.

He had devoted his young life to the cause of the social and political ends of utilitarianism, but, he says, "the time came when I awakened from this as from a dream.

It was in the autumn of 1826. I was in a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times, becomes insipid or indifferent.... In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: 'Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?' And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!' At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for. [AB, pp. 133–34]

In this state of dejection (Mill quotes Coleridge's poem as illustrative), Mill, simply out of curiosity he claims, began reading Wordsworth's *Poems, in Two Volumes*, and found them to be "a medicine" for his "state of mind": "They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of" (AB, 148). This experience led Mill to fundamentally reconsider the basic tenets of his education and of utilitarianism tout court. It also eventually led to a theory of poetry that, at its core, was indebted to Wordsworth, particularly to the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

Poetry and the arts came for Mill to fill a fundamental lack in the utilitarian system, a lack that was made painfully apparent to him through his own experience of depression. “My course of study had led me to believe,” he writes,

that all mental and moral feelings and qualities, whether of a good or of a bad kind, were the results of association; that we love one thing, and hate another, take pleasure in one sort of action or contemplation, and pain in another sort, through the clinging of pleasurable or painful ideas to those things, from the effect of education or of experience.... but it now seemed to me, on retrospect, that my teachers had occupied themselves but superficially with the means of forming and keeping up these salutary associations. They seemed to have trusted altogether to the old familiar instruments, praise and blame, reward and punishment. [AB, p. 136]

He goes on to claim that analysis, essential to philosophical thought, “has a tendency to wear away the feelings”—hence his sense that he had become a mere “reasoning machine”—and that poetry is important precisely as a supplement that puts the “salutary associations” necessary to the cultivation of moral feelings on firm ground (AB, p. 137). This power of rooting the moral feelings in nature itself Mill found in Wordsworth’s poems.

That Shelley is entirely absent from this episode in Mill’s *Autobiography* seems odd, for when he came to write his two essays on poetry in the early 1830s—“What Is Poetry?” and “The Two Kinds of Poetry”—Shelley figured just as prominently as Wordsworth; indeed, it is Shelley and Wordsworth who exemplify the “two kinds” of poetry. Mill mentions reading Byron before he turned to Wordsworth, and that Byron made his condition worse, because Byron seemed to be afflicted by just the kind of *taedium vitae* that Mill was experiencing. As I’ve shown, the contemporary debate among young intellectuals at this time was concerned with reassessing the relative merits of the Romantics, Byron, Wordsworth, and Shelley in particular. Tellingly, Mill moves directly from his account of regeneration through Wordsworth’s poetry to his relationship with Sterling and Maurice in the late 1820s. “I fell more and more,” Mill writes, “into friendly

intercourse with our Coleridgian adversaries in the [Debating] Society, Frederick Maurice and John Sterling” (*AB*, p. 152). Maurice he calls the “thinker” of the two, and says that “although my discussions with him were almost always disputes, I had carried away from them much that helped to build up my new fabric of thought, in the same way as I was deriving much from Coleridge, and from the writings of Goethe and other German authors which I read during these years” (*AB*, pp. 152–53). As discussed, however, the Apostles were champions of Shelley at this time, not Coleridge. Mill clearly—like Maurice, Hallam, and Fox—read Shelley carefully in these years, and found the two poets to be a problem that required philosophical attention.

As with the Apostles, Mill constructs an elaborate theory of Shelley’s body, a body that was organized by nature as what might be called a poetry machine. Reasoning machines could only be made by culture, whereas the “poetic temperament” is a natural phenomenon. As Hallam did, Mill distinguishes between two different kinds of poetry, and Shelley and Wordsworth are his exemplars: Shelley is the poet of nature, and Wordsworth the poet of culture. The distinction, as mentioned, is rooted in the associationist psychology that Mill was raised into, his father being the leading contemporary exponent of the new mind science. He begins by saying that the received wisdom in the phrase *nascitur poëta* must be questioned by modern psychological principles, but that it will be found, as received wisdom often is, “to contain some truth” (“TP,” p. 354). While poets require effort and culture to realize poetic excellence, Mill nonetheless claims that

it seems undeniable in point of fact, and consistent with the principles of sound metaphysics, that there are poetic *natures*. There is a mental and physical constitution or temperament, peculiarly fitted for poetry. This temperament will not of itself make a poet, no more than the soil will the fruit; and as good fruit may be raised by culture from indifferent soils, so may good poetry from naturally unpoetical minds. But the poetry of one who is a poet by nature, will be clearly and broadly distinguishable from the poetry of mere culture. [“TP,” p. 355]

Mill's whole theory of poetry begins with the assumption of a Wordsworthian axiom: "What is poetry," Mill asks "but the thoughts and words in which emotion spontaneously embodies itself?" ("TP," 356) Emotion and thought are the key terms that produce the distinction between poets of nature and those of culture.

The distinction is rooted in a kind of competition in the mind between thought and emotion for a central place in the chain of association. For the natural poet, emotion is always the central and guiding force:

Whom, then, shall we call poets? Those who are so constituted, that emotions are the links of association by which their ideas, both sensuous and spiritual, are connected together. This constitution belongs (within certain limits) to all in whom poetry is a pervading principle. In all others, poetry is something extraneous and superinduced.... Those only who have the peculiarity of association which we have mentioned, and which is a natural though not an universal consequence of intense sensibility, instead of seeming not themselves when they are uttering poetry, scarcely seem themselves when uttering anything to which poetry is foreign. Whatever be the thing which they are contemplating, if it be capable of connecting itself with their emotions, the aspect under which it first and most naturally paints itself to them, is its poetic aspect. The poet of culture sees his object in prose, and describes it in poetry; the poet of nature actually sees it in poetry. ["TP," p. 356]

In the mind of the poet of culture, by contrast, thought is dominant in the process of association.

In the case of "the poetry of a cultivated but not naturally poetic mind...the thought itself is always the conspicuous object; while the poetry of a poet is feeling itself, employing thought only as the medium of its expression. In the one, feeling waits upon thought; in the other, thought upon feeling." Mill then, as though they weren't his destination all along, presents Wordsworth and Shelley, "the two English authors of our own day who have produced the greatest quantity of true and enduring poetry," as illustrative examples of his two kinds of poetic practice ("TP," p. 357).

“Apter instances could not be wished for;” Mill claims, “the one might be cited as the type, the *exemplar*, of what the poetry of culture may accomplish; the other as perhaps the most striking example ever known of the poetic temperament” (“TP,” p. 358). In Wordsworth, thought is always the guiding force of the poem, and insofar as he is a poet, he had to achieve that status through sustained work and study, because he wasn’t endowed with the “poetic temperament”: “an affair of skill and study, in the most rigorous sense, it evidently was” (“TP,” p. 358).

“Shelley,” however, according to Mill,

is the very reverse of all this. Where Wordsworth is strong, he is weak; where Wordsworth is weak, he is strong. Culture, that culture by which Wordsworth has reared from his own inward nature the richest harvest ever brought forth by a soil of so little depth, is precisely what was wanting to Shelley: or let us rather say, he had not, at the period of his deplorably early death, reached sufficiently far in that intellectual progression of which he was capable, and which, if it has done so much for greatly inferior natures, might have made of him the most perfect, as he was already the most gifted, of our poets. For him, voluntary mental discipline had done little: the vividness of his emotions and of his sensations had done all.

This lack of mental discipline has generic implications, because a long poem requires

“consecutiveness of thought,” which Shelley had not “acquired.” Ideas and images haphazardly appear and disappear in his work:

He seldom follows up an idea; it starts into life, summons from the fairy-land of his inexhaustible fancy some three or four bold images, then vanishes, and straight he is off on the wings of some casual association into quite another sphere.... his more ambitious compositions too often resemble the scattered fragments of a mirror; colours brilliant as life, single images without end, but no picture.

This entails that Shelley, not in control of sensation and emotion, had to rely upon the emotion itself for the unity required of successful poems:

It is only when under the overruling influence of some one state of feeling, either actually experienced, or summoned up in the vividness of reality by a fervid imagination, that he writes as a great poet; unity of feeling being to him the harmonizing principle which a central idea is to minds of another class, and supplying the coherency and consistency which would else have been wanting. [“TP,” pp. 359–60]

The implication here is clear: Shelley can only succeed with short, “lyric” poems. It is worth pausing for a moment here to reflect on the remarkable reversal that has occurred in the critical development that this chapter has been tracing, and in a period of less than ten years.

For Hazlitt, Shelley’s longer works fail because “he was crushed beneath the weight of thought which he aspired to bear, and was withered in the lightning-glare of a ruthless philosophy.” There is *too much thought* in Shelley’s main corpus, and he was too apt to get mired in his metaphysical system. Hence, his lyric poems are his best work. For Mill, on the contrary, Shelley’s longer poems suffered from a *lack of thought* to sustain the work, a lack of philosophical culture, too little sound metaphysics. Maurice and Hallam are intermediate between these two extremes; Maurice had argued that Shelley “*thought* and felt poetically,” and, conspicuously among the criticism of these years, didn’t reject Shelley’s longer works, though he did treat *Queen Mab* as mere juvenilia. Hallam doesn’t explicitly reject Shelley’s longer works, though, as I’ve argued, an implication of his argument is that Shelley’s work is best when it isn’t caught up in politics and metaphysics. Constant in all of these critical accounts, however, is the notion of Shelley’s poetic temperament. Like his own favored image of the lyre, passively producing the music of the wind, Shelley is said to be at the mercy of his senses, producing poetry almost automatically from the vividness of his perceptions and emotions. It is, in other words, not a *disembodiment* of Shelley that occurs in these crucial years, but in fact the construction of a very peculiar kind of body, a myth of Shelley as *hypersomatic*.

With Mill, this myth becomes a cornerstone of Abrams’s “reorientation of criticism,” which includes an inversion of the traditional hierarchy of poetic genres, making lyric poetry “more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other: it is the poetry most natural to a really

poetic temperament, and least capable of being successfully imitated by one not so endowed by nature.”³⁸ The “genius” of the author of the *Lyrical Ballads* is, for Mill, “essentially unlyrical” (“TP,” p. 359). Shelley, the embodiment of the poetic temperament, is the lyric poet par excellence:

Thus it is in many of his smaller, and especially his lyrical poems. They are obviously written to exhale, perhaps to relieve, a state of feeling, or of conception of feeling, almost oppressive from its vividness. The thoughts and imagery are suggested by the feeling, and are such as it finds unsought. The state of feeling may be either of soul or of sense, or oftener (might we not say invariably?) of both: for the poetic temperament is usually, perhaps always, accompanied by exquisite senses. The exciting cause may be either an object or an idea. But whatever of sensation enters into the feeling, must not be local, or consciously organic; it is a condition of the whole frame, not of a part only. Like the state of sensation produced by a fine climate, or indeed like all strongly pleasurable or painful sensations in an impassioned nature, it pervades the entire nervous system. States of feeling, whether sensuous or spiritual, which thus possess the whole being, are the fountains of that which we have called the poetry of poets; and which is little else than a pouring forth of the thoughts and images that pass across the mind while some permanent state of feeling is occupying it. [“TP,” p. 360]

Here, we’ve come full circle, and as in Hazlitt, Shelley is almost diseased: his lyrics are meant to “relieve” him from an “oppressive” condition of feeling. It is not merely the dominance of emotion in the mind’s process of association, then, that characterizes the lyrical body, but “the entire nervous system”; to come back again to the words of Maurice, that Shelley’s “whole being seems to have been absorbed and transfigured into poetry.” That “seems” in Maurice goes a long way, however. It is worth asking: How is Mill arriving at this diagnosis of Shelley’s body? What is the evidence? Where are the symptoms?

Hazlitt knew Shelley, and was known to have known Shelley, and hence his description of Shelley’s person, as I’ve suggested, carries with it a constitutive ambiguity: Is it the poetry, or

³⁸ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1971 [1953]), p. 23.

is it Shelley being described? Or is it both? In the cases of Hallam and Mill, however, there is a circularity to the argument: a psychological theory of the poetry is deduced from the poetry itself and then posed as the explanation for the very poetry from which it was derived. To contemporary readers of poetry, raised on the intentional and biographical fallacies, it seems strange, indeed, to be faced with the *physiological* fallacy. Take Mill's description of Shelley's imagery, for example:

To the same original fineness of organization, Shelley was doubtless indebted for another of his rarest gifts, that exuberance of imagery, which when unrepressed, as in many of his poems it is, amounts to a fault. The susceptibility of his nervous system, which made his emotions intense, made also the impressions of his external senses deep and clear: and agreeably to the law of association by which, as already remarked, the strongest impressions are those which associate themselves the most easily and strongly, these vivid sensations were readily recalled to mind by all objects or thoughts which had coexisted with them, and by all feelings which in any degree resembled them. Never did a fancy so teem with sensuous imagery as Shelley's. Wordsworth economizes an image, and detains it until he has distilled all the poetry out of it, and it will not yield a drop more: Shelley lavishes his with a profusion which is unconscious because it is inexhaustible. ["TP," p. 360]

The imagery itself can be the only evidence for this argument. But if the poet of culture can through "skill and study" achieve the status of true poetry, could not a poet achieve the *appearance* of natural poetry through the same means? Or, more to the point, couldn't "exuberance of imagery" be a matter of a style cultivated for particular purposes and effects rather than a matter of the nervous system? Mill, it seems, didn't consider these possibilities; and the fact that he didn't do so reveals a gap in what otherwise seems a rigorous analytical argument, a gap through which we can glimpse the underlying socio-political tensions motivating his account.

This lacuna in Mill's otherwise seamless analysis brings us back to the larger debate in these years between the Apostles and the utilitarians, and, more broadly, to the stakes of this

argument for criticism and lyric theory. As mentioned, in his *Autobiography* Mill moves directly from the account of Wordsworth's role in his recovery from his mental crisis to his relationships with Maurice and Sterling. Maurice's influence over Mill in this period has been mentioned above, but it can be supplemented by a later letter to Sterling from 1831, in which Mill writes that "many things" had "dropped from" Maurice, the truth of which wasn't immediately apparent to him but which were "a source of endless reflexions" subsequently.³⁹ Of Sterling, Mill claims that he "was more attached to him than I have ever been to any other man" (*AB*, p. 154). In these years, however, both Maurice and Sterling were going through their own youthful mental crises. Maurice, as already mentioned, would ultimately convert to Anglicanism, which leads Mill to write in his *Autobiography* that "there was more intellectual power wasted in Maurice than in any other of my contemporaries" (*AB*, p. 153). Cronin offers an account of the alteration that Sterling underwent in these same years:

Sterling...had been a youthful radical. Monckton Milnes first encountered him at a Union debate on Catholic Emancipation. He recalled that 'a Mr. Sterling told us we were going to have a revolution, and he didn't care if his hand should be the first to lead the way'.... Almost as soon as he left Cambridge, in 1828, Sterling's opinions began to alter. He fell increasingly under the influence of Coleridge, whom he visited regularly. It was a time when, according to Carlyle, his 'democratic radicalism' co-existed uneasily with the pious transcendentalism he was imbibing at Highgate—what Carlyle characteristically calls 'transcendental moonshine'. ["STA," p. 19]

There is an account that provides some insight into what Coleridge might have said to Sterling about Shelley in this period, an account of a conversation with Coleridge from December 1830 by a young man similar to Sterling, John Hookham Frere. "Shelley was a man of great power as a poet," Coleridge is recorded as saying,

³⁹ *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812–1848*, ed. Francis E. Mineka, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 12 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 79. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CWJSM*.

and could he only have had some notion of order, could you only have given him some plane whereon to stand, and look down upon his own mind, he would have succeeded. There are flashes of true spirit to be met with in his works. Poor Shelley, it is a pity I often think that I never met with him. I could have done him good. He went to Keswick on purpose to see me and unfortunately fell in with Southey instead.... I should have laughed at his Atheism. I could have sympathised with him and shown him that I did so, and he would have felt that I did so. I could have shown him that I had been in the same state myself, and I could have guided him through it. I have often bitterly regretted in my heart that I did never meet with Shelley.⁴⁰

Coleridge seems to have had the desired effect on Sterling. As Allen puts it in his account of the Apostles:

in late 1829, when the younger Apostles at Cambridge wrote to Sterling about their efforts on behalf of Wordsworth at the Cambridge Union and asked him to take part in their plans to bear the news of Shelley's poetry to the heathen at Oxford, he astonished them with yet another change of mind. 'I am glad I had nothing to do with your debate on Wordsworth,' he informed Blakesley. 'Almost all oratory, and *all* that of young men is mere lying. I should be still more reluctant to say any thing about Shelley for though I deem as highly as ever of his genius his whole thinking seems to me to have been founded on a mistake, and I believe he has in his time done many of us a good deal of harm[.]' [CA, p. 90]

The similarity here to Mill's essay of 1833 is striking: as a poet, Shelley is a genius, but as a thinker he is fundamentally flawed. Wordsworth himself seems to have held to the same position, though in contrast with Coleridge he is characteristically understated. As Pottle put it in "The Case of Shelley," "the classic statement" of the view that Shelley "was a poet of great but misguided powers" was "perhaps that of Wordsworth, made only five years after Shelley's death: 'Shelley is one of the best *artists* of us all: I mean in workmanship of style'" ("CS," p. 289). Pottle teases out the subtle implication: "Shelley, he is saying, was a very able craftsman but he chose to write about the wrong things" ("CS," p. 289). This alteration in Sterling's evaluation of Shelley coincided with precisely the period of his growing friendship with Mill.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Howard Mills, *Peacock: His Circle and His Age* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 71.

Mill at this time was a young man—twenty years old in 1826 when he had his mental crisis—and that he had just begun to read poetry seriously. It should go without saying that he would have been impressionable at such a time, and that Sterling and Maurice, older and much wiser in matters of poetry and literature, and holding strong convictions, would naturally take on the role of guides, if not mentors. In the same 1831 letter to Sterling quoted above, in which he praises Maurice, Mill recounts a visit to the Lake District and meeting Wordsworth and Southey. His praise of Wordsworth is effusive:

In the case of Wordsworth, I was particularly struck by several things. One was, the extensive range of his thoughts and the largeness & expansiveness of his feelings. This does not appear in his writings, especially his poetry, where the contemplative part of his mind is the only part of it that appears.... The next thing that struck me was the extreme comprehensiveness and philosophic spirit which is in him.... Wordsworth seems always to know the pros and the cons of every question; & when you think he strikes the balance wrong, it is only because you think he estimates erroneously some matter of fact.
[*CWJSM*, 12:80–81]

Tellingly, Mill goes on to describe Wordsworth’s conversation on poetry, “the theory of his own art”: “no one can converse with him without feeling that he has advanced that great subject beyond any other man, being probably the first person who ever combined, with such eminent success in the practice of the art, such high powers of generalization & habits of meditation on its principles.” Of Wordsworth as a person Mill is no less enthusiastic: “there is a benignity & kindness about his whole demeanour which confirms what his poetry would lead one to expect, along with a perfect simplicity of character which is delightful in any one, but most of all in a person of first-rate intellect” (*CWJSM*, 12:81–82). In the case of Wordsworth, then, Mill had firsthand experience that had confirmed in advance his theory of the body and the mind behind the work. With Shelley there was no such evidence. The account also confirms Mill’s adoption of Wordsworth’s basic critical premises about poetry, and shows clearly the mutual admiration

for Wordsworth and Coleridge that was a basic element of the friendship between Mill and Sterling.

Mill's letter to Sterling, written from October 20–22, 1831, affords the means of understanding how the general political situation informs debates about poetry and poetics in this pivotal moment. The first several pages of the (rather long) letter are devoted to the political situation and the agitation surrounding the Reform Bill. Mill claims: "If the ministers flinch or the Peers remain obstinate, I am firmly convinced that in six months a national convention chosen by universal suffrage, will be sitting in London" (*CWJSM*, 12:78). That is, that England will have undergone a revolution. Wordsworth's political stance around this time can be gleaned from reading his letter in opposition to the "Catholic Relief Bill" of 1829. He was, of course, thoroughly opposed to reform. When Mill turns to his discussion of Wordsworth's politics, he claims that

all my differences with [Wordsworth], or with any other philosophic Tory, would be differences of matter-of-fact or detail, while my differences with the radicals & utilitarians are differences of principle.... I need hardly say to you that if one's own conclusions & his were at variance on every question which a minister or a Parliament could to-morrow be called upon to solve, his is nevertheless the mind with which one would be really in communion: our principles would be the same, and we should be like two travellers pursuing the same course on the opposite banks of a river." [*CWJSM*, 12:81]

At this same moment, it was the working-class Shelleyans—Benbow, Carlile, Watson, Hetherington, William Lovett, John Cleave, Julian Hibbert—that were leading the most militant wing of the Reform Movement through the National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC), formed in April 1831.

As Iorwerth Prothero puts it, "circumstances combined to make the NUWC *the* ultra-radical association in London, attracting many non-artisans and exclusively political figures"

(*AP*, p. 275). By July 1831, the NUWC was meeting weekly at Carlile's Rotunda "with an average attendance of 500" (*AP*, p. 285). Most of the radical groups, formerly separate, were drawn together into the union, including the Spenceans and the Owenites—"by July," Prothero writes, "the new union had absorbed all the ultra-radical groups in London" (*AP*, p. 285). Going far beyond the Reform Bill, the "NUWC declared for the main radical points and for abolition of the Corn Laws, Church of England, and House of Lords, and called for a national convention" (*AP*, p. 286). The idea for the national convention, which Mill references in his letter to Sterling, came from Benbow, who at the time was agitating for what he called a *Grand National Holiday, or Congress of the Productive Classes*. The plan was, in effect, a general strike coinciding with a national convention of the people's representatives. I will discuss this plan, which Benbow published as a pamphlet at the beginning of 1832, in the next chapter. For now, it is important to note that this "doctrine of the national convention...justified revolution, and most of those who advocated one were in fact advocating revolution."⁴¹

When the House of Lords rejected the Reform Bill in October—the same month in which Mill wrote his letter to Sterling—the "reaction was staggering," and the NUWC was at the center of it. The NUWC called for a "massive open-air meeting," reminiscent of Peterloo, scheduled for November 7. In response, Francis Place led a group of moderate reformers and utilitarians in opposition to the NUWC to try to prevent violence.

This rivalry and antagonism occurred in the middle of massive excitement. The ultra-radicals were aroused by the excitement and by clashes with the police on 12 October, the passage of a Bill legalising man-traps and spring-guns against poachers, the provincial riots and the rival union. Many other people were alarmed at the riots and the speeches at the Rotunda and there was a new panic over the imminence of a frightful convulsion and attacks on property. There was widespread advocacy of a householders' National Guard

⁴¹ Prothero, "William Benbow and the Concept of the General Strike," p. 137. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "WBGs."

to protect property. In opposition Hibbert and Hetherington urged popular arming, and Carlile published a booklet by Macerone giving instructions on street-fighting against troops. The NUWC publicised it, while Benbow was selling staves to be taken to the 7 November meeting, on which all eyes were now turned. The Home Secretary, Melbourne, thereupon banned it. [*AP*, pp. 287–88]

The tension continued to build, however, and in March 1832 the NUWC leaders led a march estimated to be over 100,000 participants in London, during which Benbow, Watson, and Lovett were arrested and charged “with conspiracy to cause disorder” (*AP*, p. 291). They were all acquitted in May. “An armed clash was apparently inevitable,” Prothero writes, “and Benbow, Cooper, Watson and Lovett led the arming, but the NUWC’s policy was to avoid *provoking* a clash and instead to wait on events” (*AP*, p. 292). The passage of the Reform Bill, which was ratified on June 7, ultimately averted the crisis.

The result of this intense political activity, however, was a clarification of class struggle: as Thompson put it, “in 1832 the line was drawn in social consciousness by the franchise qualifications” of the Reform Bill “with the crudity of an indelible pencil” (*MEWC*, p. 821). Thompson notes that the main thrust of the Reform movement was still confined to “the old programme of Jacobinism, with little development from the 1790s,” but that other tendencies were emerging that shadowed revolutionary socialism and the emergence of class consciousness:

The Owenites, the factory reformers, and ‘physical force’ revolutionaries like the irrepressible William Benbow were pressing still further demands. But, in the event, the terms of the contest were successfully confined within the limits desired by Brougham and Baines. It was (as Shelley had foreseen in 1822) a contest between “blood and gold”; and in its outcome, blood compromised with gold to keep out the claims of *égalité*. [*MEWC*, p. 820]

Thompson’s recognition of Shelley’s prescience here runs even deeper than Thompson himself realized, and the conjunction of Benbow and Shelley is apt, if not fully intended. For a brief moment in the lead up to the Reform Bill there was a fraught coalition of various radical

tendencies—the Spenceans, the Owenites, the radical freethinkers led by Carlile, the more moderate working-class political unions—that ultimately failed to achieve coherence or a practicable consensus. But if it can be asserted that there was a spirit held in common—it has been part of the burden of this work to show—that spirit was the spirit of Shelley, the spirit of the spirit of the age.

The Apostles, meanwhile, were engaged in their own revolutionary activity at this time, but it was in Spain, not England. It's a well-known story, as Allen points out:

Everyone acquainted with the facts of Tennyson's life has heard of the ill-fated Spanish adventure of 1830–31—of how Sterling persuaded his cousin, Robert Boyd, to help finance an insurrection of exiled liberals against the throne of Ferdinand VII, of how Hallam and Tennyson lent their aid to the scheme by carrying messages and money to the Pyrenees, of how Trench and Kemble joined a band of conspirators at Gibraltar, of how this would-be revolutionary movement ended in disaster and the death of most of those involved, including Boyd and the movement's leader, General Torrijos. [CA, p. 103]

This Spanish affair, as Carlyle memorably puts it in his biography of Sterling, was “the grand consummation of and explosion of Radicalism” in Sterling's life, “whereby, all at once, Radicalism exhausted and ended itself, and appeared no more there.”⁴² This dramatic failure, the guilt that accompanied it, and the influence of the “Coleridgean moonshine,” put an end to Sterling's youthful, Shelleyan, revolutionary enthusiasm. The story is much the same for the rest of the Apostles involved in the ill-fated insurrection, Hallam and Tennyson included. As Cronin says, after “their return from Spain the Apostles found again a common cause but this time the cause, ‘the good cause’ as Hallam calls it...was opposition to the Reform Bill” (“STA,” p. 35). With England itself on the verge of revolution, it might seem strange that these Cambridge radicals didn't take up the cause of the “Men of England”; it suggests that perhaps, despite their

⁴² Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1852), p. 88.

vigorous debating against Byron, the Byronic hero had more sway over their imaginations than they realized.

Mill's failure to mention Shelley in his account of these years in his *Autobiography* can, I think, now be read in another light. Calling Maurice and Sterling "Coleridgeans" covers over the fact that this "second Liberal and even Radical party" opposed to Bentham and the utilitarians was in fact indebted to Shelley for its radical politics. It fits with the account that Mill was later to develop in his famous essays on Bentham and Coleridge, "the two great seminal minds of England in their age" (*MBC*, p. 40). Bentham and Coleridge, Mill writes

have never been read by the multitude; except for the more slight of their works, their readers have been few: but they have been the teachers of the teachers; there is hardly to be found in England an individual of any importance in the world of mind, who (whatever opinions he may have afterwards adopted) did not first learn to think from one of these two; and though their influences have but begun to diffuse themselves through these intermediate channels over society at large, there is already scarcely a publication of any consequence addressed to the educated classes, which, if these persons had not existed, would not have been different from what it is. [*MBC*, pp. 39–40]

This revisionist history requires that Maurice and Sterling (and the Apostles) be "Coleridgeans" and not Shelleyans. It retroactively prunes the wildness of the life of ideas at that time—in which, for example, the influence of Shelley and the influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge could occupy, however tenuously, space in the same mind—into two currents, the liberal-progressive (Bentham) and the reactionary-conservative (Coleridge). It is the standard liberal ideology that there is no alternative to itself but one, that of reaction (or totalitarianism).

The relationship between the politics of Mill's lyric theory and the cultural incorporation of Shelley's body (physical and textual) should now come into clear focus. Stripping Shelley's corpus of thought, the lyricization of his body was an ideological maneuver against the body of

thought that most fully presented in these years a leftist challenge to the liberal-utilitarian status quo. Of course, the vast majority of Shelley's prose remained unpublished until 1840, and some of it—including, vitally, his *Philosophical View of Reform*, in which he most fully articulates his political philosophy, and does so directly in dialogue with Bentham—until much later. For the Victorian bourgeoisie, the groundwork was laid for Shelley the lyric angel, the eternal child that died too young to realize his potential and see his errors—"poor Shelley," as Coleridge condescendingly put it. *Queen Mab* was banished to his juvenilia; *The Revolt of Islam* and his other major works were not read; but his lyrics were celebrated and constantly anthologized—their prominence in *The Golden Treasury*, of which Tennyson was the presiding influence and spirit, being only the chief example.

The life of Shelley's *thought* in the Victorian era is another story altogether, and a story that hasn't yet been fully told or fathomed. But it is closely allied with the development of socialist and Marxist thought, with the ongoing development of class struggle and class consciousness. Friedrich Engels had plans to translate *Queen Mab* into German, and Karl Marx's children were raised on quotations from Shakespeare and Shelley. This surely would not have been the case had not *Queen Mab* become the gospel of the Owenites and the bible of the Chartists; had it not been for the struggles of George Cannon, William Benbow, Richard Carlile, James Watson, Henry Hetherington, Julian Hibbert, inter alia, both for freedom of the press and on behalf of the political enfranchisement of the working class.

Mill's lyric theory, meanwhile, has had a deep and lasting impact, both on poetry and criticism. As already mentioned, Abrams identified Mill's theory as the culmination of a momentous shift from mimetic to expressive aesthetic theories during the Romantic period. But he also points out that "the innovations of the romantics persist as the commonplaces of modern

critics” to a remarkable degree, showing the similarity between Eliot’s notion of the objective correlative and a similar passage in Mill’s 1835 review of Tennyson (*ML*, p. 25). And, indeed, the entire development of New Criticism can be read in this light, as is done, *mutatis mutandis*, in the two most influential contemporary accounts of lyric, Jonathan Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric* and Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins’s *The Lyric Theory Reader*. “As lyric becomes the poetic norm in England,” Culler puts it

resistance to it becomes an impetus to poetic experimentation, from Browning’s desire for more ‘objective’ forms, which led to the dramatic monologue, to modernism’s fragmentation of the lyric subject and imagist experiments. In the twentieth-century resistance to the lyric becomes very much a part of poetic practice. But this model of lyric as the passionate expression of the poet remained well-established, especially in pedagogical contexts, until the mid-twentieth century.... Anglo-American New Criticism, eager for students to interpret poems rather than just appreciate them, succeeded in shifting attention from the poet to the text by the strategy of treating lyrics as spoken by a persona, not the poet...⁴³

In Culler’s account, there is a dialectic at play in which the dramatic monologue is developed precisely in opposition to the expressive lyric, and then is taken up as the model of reading poetry in general, via the notion of a “speaker” or “persona,” by New Criticism, dominating the teaching and reading of poetry for much of the twentieth century.

Jackson and Prins tell a similar story, though their method, unlike Culler’s attempt to construct an alternative model for lyric theory, is a deconstructive historicism rooted in the notions of “lyricization” and “lyric reading.” “If nineteenth-century thinking about poetry sought to distinguish a transcendent version of lyric from contemporary cultures of circulation,” they write in the introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader*, “and at the same time imagined an ideal (and perhaps impossible) new culture of circulation, the twentieth-century criticism that inherited

⁴³ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 77.

these ambitions for the lyric tended to embrace it not as an ideal to be aspired toward but as the given poetic genre already in circulation.” They cite Northrop Frye’s reiteration of Mill’s notion that lyric is “preeminently the utterance that is overheard,” and argue that this “lyricization of poetry is a product of twentieth-century critical thought.”⁴⁴ The “historical process of lyricization,” as Jackson defines it, is “the gradual collapse of various verse genres that had specific social functions into an idea of poetry as a genre.”⁴⁵ In Jackson’s account, influenced by the work of Mary Poovey and Clifford Siskin, this process began with the Romantics, was solidified with the Victorians, and became dogma with New Criticism, when all poetry was measured against the Romantic lyric as the pure ideality of the genre.⁴⁶ For Jackson, nothing epitomizes lyricization more clearly than Shelley’s oft-quoted figure of the poet as “a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why,”—a figure that Jackson calls the “Shelleyan lyric ideal” and mentions no less than four times (*DM*, pp. 27, 128, 188, 226).

The same quotation is also cited by Abrams as an example of Romantic expressivism, and, indeed, although Mill couldn’t have read it, it seems to coincide remarkably with Mill’s account of lyric as overheard speech. Compare the nightingale quote to the following, however: “Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it”; “Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of

⁴⁴ *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 4, 7.

⁴⁵ Virginia Jackson, “Please Don’t Call It History,” *nonsite.org*, September 22, 2011, accessed online: <http://nonsite.org/the-tank/being-numerous>.

⁴⁶ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *DM*.

knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred”; “Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.”⁴⁷ These are, of course, all quotations from Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry,” from which the quotation about the nightingale also comes. My point should be apparent: taking Shelley’s quotation about the nightingale out of context of the rest of the “Defence of Poetry,” and calling it “the Shelleyan lyric ideal” is a false representation of Shelley’s poetics. Shelley has no lyric ideal, as such; where Mill narrows poetry’s essence through analysis, Shelley expands it through synthesis, arguing that the distinctions between poetry and prose, and between poetry and philosophy cannot hold. The nightingale quotation itself comes from a section of the Defence devoted to ascertaining poetry’s “effects upon society” (*SP*, p. 281). Jackson’s account of lyricization in *Dickinson’s Misery* is itself founded upon the lyricization of Shelley, and of Romanticism, effected by the Apostles and Mill in the late 1820s and early 1830s, and fundamentally indebted to Wordsworth’s critical theory and poetics.

Shelley’s own historical poetics as developed in his two major prose works—the *Philosophical View of Reform* and the “Defence of Poetry”—as well as in his late poetry offer a far other view of Romanticism, and of lyric. It is to this that I turn in my final two chapters: Shelley’s poetic forms infused with history under the “gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present.”

⁴⁷ *Shelley’s Prose*, pp. 285, 293, 297.

Chapter 4

Prophets of Revolution: “The Mask of Anarchy” as Historically Real Prophecy

“Kings and their ministers have in every age been distinguished from other men by a thirst for expenditure and bloodshed.”¹

On October 25, 1819, a government agent attended a popular radical debating club known as Hopkins Street Chapel, in Soho, because word had spread that the attendees debated “political and religious subjects” with “extraordinary freedom.”² The subject of debate that night was the trial of Richard Carlile, the question: “Whether the refusal of the Chief-Justice to allow Mr. Carlile to read the bible in his defence, was to be attributed to the sincere respect he had for the sacred writings, or to a fear lest the absurdities it contained should be exposed?” (ibid.) After two speakers, the dissenting minister Robert Wedderburn, “a poor superannuated journeyman tailor, on the verge of 60,” and a Black man from Jamaica, got up and spoke on the absurdities in the bible.³ In the course of his speech he supposedly claimed that “Christianity consists only in what I told you before: acknowledge no king;—acknowledge no priest:—acknowledge no father: and this, gentlemen, never was practised” (*TRW*, p. 6). Wedderburn was arrested and charged with blasphemous libel.

¹ *Shelley’s Prose*, p. 166.

² *The Trial of the Rev. Robert Wedderburn, (A Dissenting Minister of the Unitarian Persuasion,) for Blasphemy*, ed. Erasmus Perkins (London: Printed for the Editor, 1820), p. 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *TRW*. On Wedderburn and George Cannon, see McCalman, *Radical Underworld*.

³ Erasmus Perkins, *A Few Hints Relative to the Texture of Mind, and the Manufacture of Conscience. Published for the Benefit of the Rev. R. Wedderburn, Now Suffering Two Years Imprisonment in Dorchester Jail, for Alleged Blasphemous Libel* (London: T. Davison, 1820), p. v. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *FHR*.

Wedderburn's arrest was part of the massive government crackdown on radical activities in the wake of Peterloo. In his trial in February 1820, Wedderburn gave some account of himself, saying "he was the offspring of a female slave, by a rich European Planter, and that his *Christian* father sold his mother while pregnant with him, in consequence of which he had received no education" (*TRW*, p. 7). In a written defense, read by a clerk because Wedderburn's "sight was too bad to suffer him to read it," he claimed that he had to make his own defense because he was "so poor" that he couldn't "afford to fee counsel," and, anyway, a barrister wouldn't dare to make his defense "upon principle" (*ibid.*). He claims that "blasphemy"—a "word, so terrific in the ears of the ignorant and superstitious"—is "mere nonsense," for it means, "simply, *to defame*," and an incomprehensible deity cannot be defamed. "Tyrannical and intolerant laws," he goes on, "may exist and be enforced in times of darkness and ignorance, but they will be of little effect when once the human mind is emancipated from the trammels of superstition" (*ibid.*). The defense is a well-argued and rigorous apology for free inquiry and freedom of religious opinion, drawing upon an impressive library of Enlightenment thinkers and religious dissenters. In response to the defense, the Solicitor General claimed that Wedderburn's "audience were of the lower order," and that this "was the very reason why the defendant ought to be prosecuted." He elaborates: "A person professing the sentiments and possessing the popular talents of the defendant, was particularly dangerous among the class of people to whom he had alluded" (*ibid.*, p. 19). Wedderburn was convicted and sentenced to two years imprisonment at Newgate.

Wedderburn's defense, as with much of Wedderburn's published writing, was likely coauthored by George Cannon. The longest published piece of Cannon's writing (that we know of) is a pamphlet published in defense of Wedderburn with the strange, but strikingly modern title *A Few Hints Relative to the Texture of Mind, and the Manufacture of Conscience*. It was,

naturally, published under the name of Erasmus Perkins. Cannon begins by detailing the claims of “hordes of priests, scholiasts, and sophists” that “the affections” are “instinctive” and embody infallible moral principles, defending them by “appeal to *common sense*” (FHR, p. 7). Contrary to this, Cannon argues that these moral principles “*if instinctive*, would be universal, and their dictates irresistible,” which they are not (ibid.). Instead, Cannon appeals to Hartleian associationism, which played such a prominent role in the critical debate over the relative value of the Romantic poets, as discussed the previous chapter:

Dr. Hartley has proposed a much simpler and more truly philosophical hypothesis, which assumes perception,—a capacity for *pleasure* and *pain*, and the power of associating *ideas*, as the only original faculties, and which explains all the phenomena of the mind by those principles alone. [ibid., p. 8]

He then gives a brief summary of the Empiricist account of ideas, returning to Hobbes’s account of the mind as a blank slate, or a “sheet of white paper,” and Locke’s argument that there are no innate ideas (ibid., pp. 9–10). From Locke he leads into Epicurus and the principle that “*pleasure and pain are the measure of good and evil to mankind*” (ibid., p. 11). Cannon argues that while these doctrines are true, the style of the writers prevents them from reaching the large audience that they should: only Helvetius has dressed “our doctrine in such a simple yet elegant attire, as to render it attractive and fascinating to every one who approaches it” (ibid.). This commentary serves as “a kind of preface” to a discussion of conscience.

Here again, Cannon follows a similar method by first presenting the accepted wisdom on the issue:

The popular opinion is, that conscience is an internal monitor implanted in the breast of the human animal as an infallible guide of conduct, uniformly instructing it what is *right* or *wrong*—and that this principle is innate and instinctive. [ibid., p. 12]

(A note in passing: this seems to be one of the earliest uses of the phrase “human animal.”) In contrast, the “philosophical position” holds that conscience “is acquired” (ibid.). Remarkably, Cannon then, in order to distinguish instinct from acquired conscience, makes the argument that “other species of animals” are not guided simply by instinct, but “many of their actions are the result of experience, memory, reason, and judgment” (ibid.).

Do they not learn the names they are called by, know the meaning of different words which direct them to go to the right or the left, fast or slow, or to stop? Do they not, like children, remember who uses them well or ill? How often may you see a dog whose business it is to stay at home during the hours of repose, after having continued out all night, come slinking in when the door is open in the morning, fearing like the truant school-boy to look his master in the face;—and for why?—because he had been beaten for doing so before;—he was conscious of his error. This I call conscience, reasoning upon consequences, and judgment founded upon memory and experience, as opposed to the *instinct* which taught him to suck before his eyes were open. [ibid., pp. 12–13]

This was an extremely radical position to take in 1820, and is even a matter of serious philosophical controversy today.

Sticking insistently to the term “human animal,” Cannon accepts that there are certain biological factors that influence character, including the accepted theory of the four humors, and Hume’s “innate propensities” of “selfishness, revenge, and the sexual passion” (ibid., 13–14).⁴ But the more powerful determinant of “not only our conscience, but our character, conduct, manners, opinions, political and religious notions” is education, used in the broadest sense as all experience that forms character (ibid., p. 14). The point to which all of this has been leading is that religious opinions and conscience are not a matter of choice:

It does not occur to the generality of people, that a man’s being a pious Mahomedan, or a mere formal professor; a lukewarm, or an *evangelical* Christian; an enthusiastic Deist, a cold indifferent Sceptic, or a decided Atheist, does in no manner depend upon his own imperious *fiat*, or wise, prescient, and self-determining resolve; but upon the contingent

⁴ Hume was a Tory, who was taken up by the radicals in the 1790s, when Godwin turned to him.

circumstances of his falling in the way of receiving such, or such other impressions, and the force of those impressions on his mind. [ibid. p. 15]

Like La Mettrie in *L'homme machine*, Cannon claims that “man [is] a *mere machine*, the creature of *necessity* and *education*” (ibid., p. 16). In response to claims of innate conscience, Cannon argues that conscience is historically and culturally relative. Anticipating Nietzsche, he goes on to claim that good and evil are ex post facto justifications of social expedients:

Here then is the origin of Good and Evil—Vice and Virtue—Right and Wrong:—distinctions invented by man alone, but dictated to him by nature and experience, that is to say, by pleasure and pain, the standard of all our actions, and the foundation of all our morality, but varying according to the wants, advantages, times, situations, and circumstances of mankind. [ibid., p. 18]

This is the manufacture of conscience: morals are socially constructed and enforced by reward and punishment, both in this life and projected into the next.

At the end of 1819, when Reverend Wedderburn was arrested, Shelley was writing his own defense of freedom of religion and conscience in the form of a long letter to Leigh Hunt on the trial of Richard Carlile—as he had done previously with Daniel Isaac Eaton—and which he submitted to be published in *The Examiner*. In the letter, which Hunt declined to publish, Shelley points out that Carlile’s trial and imprisonment was a continuation of the class war begun at Peterloo. “The same Justice ought to be dispensed to all,” Shelley writes, going on to point out that if Carlile is imprisoned for being a Deist, then so should Jeremy Bentham, Sir William Drummond, William Godwin, and William Burden. “Why not indict Mr. Bentham or Sir William Drummond? Why crush a starving bookseller...?”

...the prosecutors care little for religion, or care for it only as it is the mask & the garment by which they are invested with the symbols of worldly power. In prosecuting Carlisle they have used the superstition of the Jury as their instrument for crushing a political enemy, or rather they strike in his person at all their political enemies. They know that the Established Church is based upon the belief in certain events of a supernatural character...that but for this belief the farmer would refuse to pay the tenth of

the produce of his labours to maintain its numbers in idleness; that this class of person if not maintained in idleness would have something else to do than to divert the attention of the people from obtaining a Reform in their oppressive government [LPBS, 2:142–43]

Shelley was much preoccupied with masks at this time. On September 23, Shelley had sent Hunt, also for publication in the *Examiner*, “The Mask of Anarchy,” written in a white heat of political rage after Shelley read about the Peterloo massacre in the papers sent to him in Italy. Hunt wouldn’t publish the poem until after the Reform Bill in 1832.⁵ Hunt wrote a long preface to the 1832 edition, published by the eminently respectable Edward Moxon, which, like Mary Shelley’s preface to the *Posthumous Poems*, deserves attention because of the way in which it frames readerly horizons. In particular, Hunt presents the political energies and urgencies of the poem as already fulfilled by the Reform Bill, denaturing Shelley’s revolutionary poem by assimilating it to the liberal progressivism of the reactionary wing of the Reform movement—the wing that had triumphed in 1832, betraying the working class.

By the end of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, which draws to a close with the 1832 Reform Bill, Utilitarianism—and the capitalist liberalism that it represents—emerges as the main enemy of the working class. The workers and the trade unions, Thompson writes, “met Utilitarianism in their daily lives, and they sought to throw it back, not blindly, but with intelligence and moral passion. They fought, not the machine, but the exploitive and oppressive relationships intrinsic to industrial capitalism” (*MEWC*, p. 832). The Reform Bill was a triumph of the liberals—the “annunciation of Acquisitive Man,” as Thompson puts it—and it was seen to be such by the working class. One hand-loom weaver said, in 1835, that his fellow workers “viewed the Reform Bill as a measure calculated to join the middle and upper classes to

⁵ *The Masque of Anarchy. A Poem*. By Percy Bysshe Shelley. Now First Published, With a Preface by Leigh Hunt (London: Edward Moxon, 1832). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *MA*.

Government, and leave them in the hands of Government as a sort of machine to work according to the pleasure of Government” (ibid.). This betrayal of the Reform movement would lead to the Chartist agitation, “probably the closest Britain ever came to a working-class revolution,” many of the leaders of which are by now familiar: William Benbow, James Watson, Henry Hetherington, William Lovett (*MEWC*, p. 24).

Hunt’s politics aligned with the moderate middle-class reformers; he never fully embraced republicanism, much less democracy. And, as often happens, his political enthusiasm—at its peak, perhaps, when he was jailed for libel in 1811—cooled as he got older. By 1832, his views were quite distant from those of Shelley.⁶ His preface to *The Masque of Anarchy* attempts to smooth this over through a clever piece of casuistry. He begins by saying that the poem was written “on occasion of the bloodshed at Manchester,” and that Shelley sent it to him for *The Examiner* “to be inserted or not...as [he] thought fit.” He then casts himself as the protector of Shelley’s reputation, but also makes a political argument about what the poem would have done had it been published:

I did not insert it, because I thought that the public at large had not become sufficiently discerning to do justice to the sincerity and kind-heartedness of the spirit that walked in this flaming robe of verse. His charity was avowedly more than proportionate to his indignation; yet I thought that even the suffering part of the people, judging, not unnaturally, from their own feelings, and from the exasperation which suffering produces before it produces knowledge, would believe a hundred-fold in his anger, to what they would in his good intention; and this made me fear that the common enemy would take advantage of the mistake to do them both a disservice. [*MA*, pp. v–vi]

The subtext here is a concern that “The Mask of Anarchy” would have spurred “the people” to violence; just as Godwin had rebuked Shelley for preparing “a scene of blood” in Ireland during

⁶ By mid-century he could be sent up by Charles Dickens as the fey Mr. Skimpole in *Bleak House*.

his period of activism there, Hunt decided that the public were not fit to read Shelley's poem (*LPBS*, 1:270). But he also sets himself up as the authority on Shelley's poem and his intentions; his claims, however, are suspect. The pedal points of Shelley's letters written in the wake of the massacre are precisely indignation, anger, and a repeated insistence on action. He wrote to Charles Ollier, his publisher, on September 6: "The same day that your letter came, came the news of the Manchester work, & the torrent of my indignation has not yet done boiling in my veins. I wait anxiously [to] hear how the Country will express its sense of this bloody murderous oppression of its destroyers. 'Something must be done...What yet I know not.'" (*LPBS*, 2:117, the quote is from *The Cenci*, III. i. 86–87) Then on September 9 he wrote to Peacock: "These are, as it were, the distant thunders of the terrible storm which is approaching. The tyrants here, as in the French Revolution, have first shed blood. May their execrable lessons not be learnt with equal docility!" (*ibid.*, 2:119) Then, again to Peacock, on September 21 he writes: "What an infernal business this of Manchester! What is to be done? Something assuredly" (*ibid.*, 2:120). "The Mask of Anarchy," as mentioned, was sent to Hunt just after this, on September 23.

"The Mask of Anarchy," was, as I hope to show, Shelley's attempt to answer his own question—the same question that Lenin would pose at a moment of crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century. The poem was meant precisely to be, *contra* Hunt, a call to revolutionary action. His stance was made clear in a letter on the trial of Richard Carlile, sent to Hunt on November 3 to be published in *The Examiner*:

These, my dear Hunt, are awful times. The tremendous question is now agitating, whether a military & judicial despotism is to be established by our present rulers, or some form of government less unfavourable to the real & permanent interests of all men is to arise from the conflict of passions now gathering to overturn them: *We* cannot hesitate which party to embrace; and whatever revolutions are to occur, though oppression should change names & names cease to be oppressions, our party will be that of liberty & of the oppressed. [*ibid.*, 2:148]

It is clear from these letters that 1) Shelley thought that some form of violent conflict was inevitable; 2) that he was firmly on the side of the people, against the monarchy and aristocracy; 3) that he was thinking about what had happened in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and the emergence of another form of oppression and despotism after the overthrow of the existing order.

Hunt declined to publish this letter as well. Rather than thinking only of being a good custodian of Shelley and of the people, Hunt—observing what was happening to Carlile and other radical publishers—decided to avoid the inevitable charge of seditious libel. This is a perfectly reasonable position for Hunt to take, but his later account leaves the libel laws and government censorship completely out of the picture. Hunt presents “The Mask” as a prophecy fulfilled—consummated—by the Reform Bill:

the advice given by the poet, the great national measure recommended by him, is singularly striking as a *political anticipation*. It advises what has since taken place, and what was felt by the grown wisdom of the age to be the only thing which *could* take place, with effect, as a final rebuke and nullification of the Tories; to wit, a calm, lawful, and inflexible preparation for resistance in the shape of a protesting multitude,—the few against the many,—the laborious and suffering against the spoilt children of monopoly,—Mankind against Tory-kind.... in point of the spirit of the thing, the success he anticipates has actually occurred, and after his very fashion; for there really has been no resistance, except by multitudinous protest. The Tories, however desirous they showed themselves to draw their swords, did not draw them. The battle was won without a blow. [*MA*, pp. x–xi]

Hunt reduces the enemy to the Tory party. But Shelley’s most extensive work of political theory, “The Philosophical View of Reform,” written just after “The Mask,” makes very clear that Shelley’s political foe cannot be reduced to party politics: it was “the rich” and the entire social structure—monarchy, aristocracy, the church, (God, and King, and Law)—by which their power

was supported and sustained.⁷ Writing of the period from the Glorious Revolution to his day, Shelley claims that the “power which has increased...is the [pow]er of the rich. The name and office of a king is merely a mask of this power and is a kind of stalking-horse used to conceal these ‘catchers of men,’ while they lay their nets. Monarchy is only the string which ties the robber’s bundle” (*SRY*, p. 52). In other words, “the few” is not simply Parliament, is not simply the aristocracy, but rather is an economic class—the rich.

A prophecy fulfilled becomes a dead letter, a monument, rather than a source of action, of hope, and of striving. Hunt amputates the politics of “The Mask of Anarchy” to make them commensurable with the liberal progressivism on display in the Reform Bill, seeming to believe that Britain had arrived at the end of history. He makes very clear that his purpose in now publishing Shelley’s poem is merely memorial:

Mr. Shelley’s writings have since aided the general progress of knowledge in bringing about a wiser period; and an effusion, which would have got him cruelly misrepresented a few years back, will now do unequivocal honour to his memory, and shew every body what a most considerate and kind, as well as fervent heart, the cause of the world has lost. [*MA*, pp. v–vi]

Shelley’s most vigorous call for revolutionary action is here turned into “the adoption of a stubborn and loving fortitude which neutralizes resistance” (*ibid.*, p. vii). Many critics continue

⁷ “At this period [1688] began that despotism of the oligarchy of party, and under colour of administering the executive power lodged in the king, represented in truth the interests of the rich. When it is said by political reasoners, speaking of the interval between 1688 and the present time, that royal power progressively increased, they use an expression which suggests a very imperfect and partial idea. The power which has increased is that entrusted with the administration of affairs, composed of men responsible to the aristocratic assemblies, or to the reigning party in those assemblies which represents those orders of the nation which are privileged, and will retain power as long as it pleases them and must be divested of power as soon as it ceases to please them.” Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, in *Shelley’s Revolutionary Year: The Peterloo Writings of the Poet Shelley*, ed. Paul Foot (London: Redwords, 1990), p. 52. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SRY*. I cite “The Mask of Anarchy” from this volume as well.

to misread the politics of “The Mask” much as Hunt does; in what follows, I attempt to provide a corrective to such misreadings.⁸

William Keach details the difficulties with attempts to reclaim Shelley’s poetry for revolutionary politics in “Rise Like Lions? Shelley and the Revolutionary Left.”⁹ He takes up the Peterloo poems from 1819 and, with Paul Foot’s *Red Shelley* as the starting point, raises serious concerns about the poems that have been glossed over by leftist champions of Shelley. Keach agrees with Foot that “The Mask of Anarchy” is “one of the great political protest poems of all time,” but he draws attention to “doubts, hesitations, even contradictions that make some passages of the poem confusing for all kinds of readers” (“RLL,” p. 97). Keach highlights two aspects of “The Mask” that are problematic for the notion of Shelley as a revolutionary: 1) the indeterminacy of the voice that speaks the concluding half of the poem, and 2) the passivity displayed by the gathered masses in the “great assembly” that closes out the poem. These are serious problems, and not to be glossed over.

As Keach points out, many critics have interpreted the voice in “The Mask” to be that of “Hope, that maiden most serene,” but he notes that this is not at all clear from the poem. The words are simply said to arise, as if from the atmosphere—they seem to be disembodied, immaterial. Shelley further complicates this with two similes: “These words of joy and fear arose,”

As if their own indignant earth,
Which gave the sons of England birth,

⁸ Susan Wolfson, for example, writes: “Between its writing and its popular reading is a gap of over a decade in which its poet languishes as unacknowledged legislator (emerging in 1832 only as a belated, posthumous voice).” *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 195.

⁹ William Keach, “Rise Like Lions? Shelley and the Revolutionary Left,” *International Socialism* 75 (London, 1997): 91. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “RLL.”

Had felt their blood upon her brow,
And shuddering with a mother's throe

Had turned every drop of blood,
By which her face had been bedewed,
To an accent unwithstood,
As if her heart cried out aloud:

[SRY, p. 91]

As often occurs in Shelley's verse, the density of tropes here is dizzying. The metaphor of Mother Earth is vividly literalized, resulting in the grotesque image of a mother with the blood of her own children splattered on her face crying out in anguish.

The voice is further mediated by the opening "ghastly masquerade," which is itself framed as a vision of Poesy from within a dream:

As I lay asleep in Italy,
There came a voice from over the sea,
And with great power it forth led me
To walk in the visions of Poesy.

Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy, and Anarchy—Lord Castlereagh, Lord Eldon, Lord Sidmouth, and the Prince Regent (soon to be King George IV), respectively—are encountered, masked and marching in a royal pageant as in the Renaissance masque. What follows is the first figurative account of the Peterloo Massacre in the poem:

With a pace stately and fast,
Over English land he passed,
Trampling to a mire of blood
The adoring multitude.

And a mighty troop around
With their trampling shook the ground,
Waving each a bloody sword
For the service of their Lord.

And, with glorious triumph, they
Rode through England, proud and gay,
Drunk as with intoxication

Of the wine of desolation.

O'er fields and towns, from sea to sea,
Passed that Pageant swift and free,
Tearing up, and trampling down,
Till they came to London town.

[*SRY*, pp. 87–88]

The trampling, repeated three times, and the bloody swords clearly evoke the Yeoman cavalry that performed the gruesome “Manchester work.” Though no one seems to have commented on it before, part of what is striking about the opening masque is that it sounds exactly like how a Tory, in order to instill reactionary fears, would describe a French-style revolution in England. Anarchy spreads from “fields and towns” into London, where it proceeds to “seize upon the Bank and Tower.” The fears associated with revolutionary politics were precisely apprehensions about violence and anarchy. Shelley states this clearly in *A Philosophical View of Reform*, where he claims that the moderate reformers “are prompted to this view of the question by the dread of anarchy and massacre” (*SRY*, p. 79). Reactionary government resistance to Reform had from the beginning displayed the fearmongering mask of anarchy. The Bill to suspend habeas corpus in May 1794 (34 Geo. III. cap. 54) stated that “a traitorous and detestable conspiracy has been formed for subverting the existing laws and constitution, and for introducing the system of anarchy and confusion which has so fatally prevailed in France.”¹⁰ The law was soon used to arrest and try for treason Thomas Hardy, one of the leaders of the London Corresponding Society, and John Thelwall. In his opening speech, Lord Chief Justice Eyre quoted the bill to suspend habeas corpus, and explicitly presented anarchy as the sole alternative to monarchy: “A conspiracy of this nature is therefore, at best, a conspiracy to overturn the government, in order

¹⁰ See Henry Jephson, *The Platform: Its Rise and Progress*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1892), p. 177ff.

to new model it, which is, in effect, to introduce anarchy, and that which anarchy may chance to settle down into; after the King may have been brought to the scaffold...”¹¹ In the same trial, the Attorney General at the time—none other than Lord Eldon—also repeatedly invoked the specter of anarchy.

One of Eldon’s examples is of particular relevance: “It is within the memory of most of us living, that a few thousand men in St. George’s-fields, combined in one purpose, reduced this metropolis to an absolute state of anarchy, a state in which no government existed” (*TTH*, pp. 66–67). Eldon is referring to what came to be known as “The Massacre of St. George’s Fields,” on May 10, 1768, when protesters gathered outside the prison where the reformer John Wilkes was incarcerated, and—similarly to Peterloo—soldiers opened fire on the unarmed crowd, killing several people. Riots ensued in London. Eldon goes on to explain why this was possible, in terms germane to Shelley’s account of what happened in St. Peter’s field: “a combination of the few,” Eldon says, “will subdue the many, who are not combined, and with great facility; and combined bodies of men have had, as you will find, an existence in this country, to an extent which few men had any idea of” (*ibid.*, p. 67). The few here are the treasonous conspirators, like Hardy and the LCS, who carry the threat of anarchy. Shelley, Caliban-like, will turn Eldon’s words against him: the few are the rich, Shelley claims, combined in conspiracy to subdue the many, the poor.

The government’s Jacobin-baiting succeeded, however, to the extent that many within the Reform movement itself had adopted a fear of revolution and anarchy. One of the resolutions of the LCS stated: “That this Society do express their abhorrence of tumult and violence—aiming at

¹¹ Joseph Gurney, *The Trial of Thomas Hardy for High Treason*, vol. 1 (London: Martha Gurney, 1794), p. 13. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *TTH*.

reform, not anarchy—reason, firmness, and unanimity, are the only arms they themselves will employ, or persuade their fellow-citizens, to exert, against ABUSE OF POWER” (*TTH*, p. 208). It’s to the reformers that Shelley is speaking to try to dispel a mystification, saying, in effect: you’re already living in violence and anarchy. The revolution that Shelley both hoped for and feared himself is present already in this opening scene, but transformed into its grotesque negative image.

After seizing the Bank and Tower, Anarchy is “proceeding with intent / To meet his pensioned parliament,” when “a maniac maid” intervenes. The maniac maid personifies Hope, though “she looked more like Despair,” continuing the film-negative-like inversions that characterize the opening masque. At this point, the maniac maid—and it is significant, of course, that she is a maid, and not a Lady—makes a speech, to no one in particular, which hasn’t received much attention:

‘My father Time is weak and gray
With waiting for a better day;
See how idiot-like he stands,
Fumbling with his palsied hands.’

‘He has had child after child,
And the dust of death is piled
Over every one but me—
Misery! oh, misery!’

[*SRY*, p. 90]

The first thing to observe here is the oddness—one could say absurdity—of this personification of Time as an old man, waiting “idiot-like” and “fumbling with his palsied hands” hoping for a “better day.”¹² It’s in line with the grotesquerie of the antimasque, a conventional feature of the

¹² To compound the bathos, the line “Misery! oh misery!” is surely an echo of Wordsworth’s already notorious poem “The Thorn,” mocked (and used) by Byron in the Preface to *Don Juan*, also in 1819.

Renaissance form, and which Hunt is keen to emphasize, pointing attention to “the union of ludicrousness with terror” in the poem: “His very strokes of humour,” Hunt writes “while they startle with their extravagance and even ghastliness, cut to the heart with pathos” (*MA*, pp. vii–ix). But this father, I think, rather than an incongruous abstraction, would have been all too real for many working-class readers. This points to a problem with straightforward allegorical readings of “The Mask,” a problem that I think hasn’t been adequately addressed before. All of the personifications of abstractions in the opening masquerade have *concrete historical reality*; rather than removing readers to a world of ideas, the poem remains firmly rooted in history and material reality.

Just as Anarchy seems on the brink of total triumph, the maniac maid “lay down in the street, / Right before the horses’ feet” and changes the course of history. The following eleven stanzas (26–36) are perhaps the most controversial in the entire poem. Hope seems about to be slaughtered,

When between her and her foes
A mist, a light, an image rose,
Small at first, and weak, and frail,
Like the vapor of a vale;

Till as clouds grow on the blast,
Like tower-crowned giants striding fast,
And glare with lightnings as they fly,
And speak in thunder to the sky,

It grew—a Shape arrayed in mail
Brighter than the viper’s scale,
And upborne on wings whose grain
Was as the light of sunny rain.

On its helm, seen far away,
A planet, like the Morning’s, lay;
And those plumes its light rained through,
Like a shower of crimson dew.

Amanda Jo Goldstein, in a brilliant recent reading, sums up the critical discussion well: “This moment—a *figura-ex-machina* moment in which a flagrantly poetic ‘Shape’ handily finishes off the task of political struggle—has been taken for a tendentiously lyrical and aesthetic one.”¹³ In what is still perhaps the most trenchant and powerful critique of the politics of “The Mask,” Susan Wolfson argues that “the central agency, the ‘Shape’ (its visionary status marked with the capital *S*) is elevated and limited to an intangible, phenomenal ‘presence’ that finally produces ‘empty air’—in other words, visionary poetry itself, rather than an analysis of how material change might be realized in the historical moment of 1819.”¹⁴ Goldstein’s reading is a compelling and timely response to this and similar critiques, so it is worth summarizing here.

Goldstein sees the emergence of the Shape as a “pivot to Lucretian materialist poetics,” drawing in particular on “an eighteenth-century tradition of neo-Lucretian didactic poetry that moved between social history and nonhuman nature not to ‘naturalize’ historical events but to attempt their revisionary reconstruction” (*SS*, p. 167). The argument draws on accounts of lyricization to argue that critiques of “The Mask” are beholden to a lyric reading of the poem that fails to recognize a generic tradition informing, and forming, the poem and what its intended effects. Focusing on the didactic aspect of the poem, Goldstein argues that “*The Mask of Anarchy*’s aesthetic politics are less about the practical (in)efficacy of poetic speech than about the politics of pedagogy: they concern the limits and possibilities of poetic instruction in radical action, historical remembrance, and emancipatory means of generating and communicating

¹³ Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 167. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SS*.

¹⁴ Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, p. 202.

knowledge” (SS, p. 168). Her reading stages a formal conflict within the poem between “two different semiotic regimes,” namely “allegory and didactic allegoresis” (ibid.). The emergence of the Shape marks “the hinge” by which

Shelley shifts from a semiotic system in which the allegorical second-sense of the violence at Peterloo is itself violently imposed upon the bodies of ‘the multitude’ from above, to one in which such allegorical meaning is, to crib from *The German Ideology*, the “direct efflux of their material behavior” at the scene, reflected back for further interpretation. And while the poem’s first form of allegorical double-speak encodes a *moral* condemnation of the massacre, this second kind speaks social theory instead, deriving from the ‘Shape’ a systematic critique of ordinary immiseration, wage slavery, and the money form. In moving from one mode of allegory to another, that is, Shelley’s poem has much to say about the kind of semiotics conducive to expressing materialist conceptions of history and biopolitical analytics of power—as well as about the combination of feeling and teaching that critical, materialist pedagogy requires. (ibid.)

This reading is a powerful corrective to critiques of the poem that have emerged out of various ahistorical lyric reading practices. “At stake in this transition,” as Goldstein puts it, “is a limit case not, as in many prior readings, for the political (in)efficiency of lyric fiat, but rather for the ability of materialist allegory to articulate affect and structure: to demand and to facilitate a passage between sensory-affective and discursive-analytical knowledge” (ibid., pp. 182–83). The near-oxymoron “materialist allegory” is, in turn, the hinge by which I want to engage with Goldstein’s reading.

Goldstein correctly and deftly links Shelley’s Shape to the fourth book of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, and to his word for such shapes “*figura*.” In his influential essay “*Figura*,” Erich Auerbach traces the history of the word from the Romans down to the Middle Ages, noting that Lucretius in particular “uses *figura* in the Greek philosophical sense in a highly idiosyncratic, free, and significant way.” He notes in particular that

a very special variant of the meaning of ‘copy’ may be found in Lucretius’s theory of the forms that peel off from things like thin sheets of skin (*membranae*) and float about in the air. This is his version of the Democritean doctrine of ‘film images’ (Diels), or *eidola*

[images], which are conceived of in materialist terms. Lucretius calls them *simulacra*, *imagines*, *effigias*, and sometimes also *figuras*. It is also in Lucretius that we first find *figura* used in the sense of ‘dream image,’ ‘a figment of one’s imagination,’ and ‘shadow of the dead.’¹⁵

It is precisely this “variant” of the term that is under discussion at the beginning of the fourth book of *De Rerum Natura*, and which, as Goldstein notes, Shelley references in “The Mask.” The connection is further strengthened by the fact that Shelley introduces it as “a mist, a light, an image.” Rather than a sign of “its visionary status,” as Wolfson has it, the capital *S* of Shape indexes a poetic-etymological inheritance that is of great significance in understanding Shelley’s political and historical thinking in “The Mask.”

As Auerbach points out at the beginning of his study, “the idea of something that is new and appears for the first time, of something that creates change in things that normally resist change, marks the entire history of the word” *figura* (“F,” p. 66). It is precisely the emergence of something *historically and politically new*—a *nova figura*—that Shelley is presenting in the Shape. The Lucretian nature of the Shape, as Goldstein notes, is further signaled by the presence of the Morning Star:

On its helm, seen far away,
A planet, like the Morning’s, lay;
And those plumes its light rained through,
Like a shower of crimson dew.

[SRY, p. 90]

I want to point to a further source for the figuration of the Shape, however: Dante’s *Purgatorio*.

The opening of the first canto describes the passage from hell to purgatory (“where the human spirit purges itself and becomes worthy to ascend to Heaven”) in the following manner: “The

¹⁵ Erich Auerbach, *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. James I. Porter, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 69–70. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “F.”

sweet color of eastern sapphire, gathering in the cloudless aspect of the air, pure to the first circle, began to delight my eyes again, as soon as I came forth from the dead air [*l'aura morta*] that had weighed my eyes and breast with sorrow. The lovely planet that strengthens us to love was causing all the east to laugh, veiling the Fish, which were her escort.”¹⁶ Dante and Virgil then encounter Cato of Utica, who guards the passage from hell to purgatory. Significantly, he is described in a similar fashion as Shelley’s Shape: “The rays of four holy lights so adorned his face with brightness that I saw him as if the sun had been before him” (*DC*, ll. 37–39, pp. 20–21). Cato questions them, and Virgil responds for Dante: “Now may it please you to favor his coming: he seeks freedom [*libertà va cercando*], which is so precious, as one knows who rejects life for her sake. You know it; for to you, because of her, death was not bitter in Utica, where you left the raiment that will be so bright on the great day [*ove lasciasti / la vesta ch'al gran dì sarà sì chiara*]” (*DC*, ll. 70–75, pp. 22–23). Cato is a representative of liberty, as is Shelley’s Shape, both adorned in light and thus hardly visible.

But the significance of Dante here extends beyond Cato to the very form and genre of “The Mask.” Auerbach’s destination in “*Figura*” is Dante, and he comments in particular on the striking oddity of Cato appearing where he does in the *Purgatorio*: “Cato of Utica is the figure that God has placed as the guard at the base of Purgatory: a pagan, an enemy of Caesar, a suicide. This is quite astonishing and the very first commentators, such as Benvenuto of Imola, were already taken aback by it” (“F,” p. 105). So why Cato? Auerbach’s account takes us to the

¹⁶ *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, vol. 2, *Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 19. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *DC*. Mary Shelley’s journal notes that in the fall of 1819 they were reading the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* together, as well as the Bible (*JMWS*, 1:293–304). Shelley echoes Dante’s phrase *l'aura morta* (dead air) in stanza 77 of *The Mask*.

crux of the matter, not just of Cato, but the matter, and materialism, of the Shelleyan Shape.

“Cato is a *figura*,” Auerbach writes:

Or better, the earthly Cato, who in Utica gave up his life for freedom, was a *figura*, and the Cato who appears here in *Purgatory* is that figure revealed, or fulfilled, the truth of that figural event. For the political and earthly freedom for which he died was only a *figura futurorum*, a prefiguration of that Christian freedom that he has been placed here at the foot of Purgatory to defend and for the sake of which, here too, he resists all earthly temptations.... How Dante came to choose Cato for this role can be explained by the position above all party loyalties that he held among Roman writers who took him to be the ideal image of virtue, justice, piety, and love of freedom. [ibid., p. 106]

By this point in the essay, Auerbach has distinguished between allegory and figural interpretation, or “historically real prophecy,” a distinction rooted in the way that early Christian theology inherited and changed the pagan notion of *figura*. As James I. Porter explains, Auerbach “sets up a contrast between two kinds of interpretive schemes, those that affirm historical realities...and those that look outside of history and create spiritualized, abstract meanings.... Auerbach places the former under the rubric of *figura*, the latter under allegory.”¹⁷ Hence, for Tertullian, Moses is an historically real prefiguration of Christ, who is no less historically real. For Dante, Cato is an historically real prefiguration of the ultimate liberty of Christianity. As Auerbach puts it:

There is no doubt that Cato is a *figura*—not in the way that the characters in the *Roman de la Rose* are allegories, however, but a figure of the kind I have described above, a fulfilled figure that has already become true. The *Divine Comedy* is a vision that regards figural truth as already fulfilled and proclaims as much. This is precisely what is so special about it. That is, following the logic of figural interpretation, it joins the truth that it has witnessed in its vision with earthly and historical events in a precise and concrete way. The character of Cato as a stern, just, and pious man who, at a crucial moment of both his own fate and the providential history of the world, valued freedom above life, is preserved in all its full historical and individual force. [“F,” p. 107]

¹⁷ James I. Porter, “Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach’s Theory of *Figura*,” *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Autumn 2017): 87. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “D.”

What I want to claim, and where my reading differs from that of Goldstein and all previous commentators, is that “The Mask of Anarchy” should not be read as allegory at all, but as figural interpretation—as historically real prophecy.

Just as Dante preserves the unique individual, the historically real figure of Cato of Utica, Shelley wants to preserve the full historical reality and force of the event of Peterloo, and of the agents who precipitated the massacre: Castlereagh, Eldon, Sidmouth, and the Prince Regent. They are not meant to be obliterated into the abstractions of Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy, and Anarchy; rather, those abstractions are meant to be *embodied* in the precise historical persons and conditions that made the Peterloo massacre a possibility, perhaps an inevitability. The relation between Hope and Time, their words, their actions, hardly cohere as allegory, but as ideas embodied in historically real figures of the oppressed and desperate working class, they powerfully concreate. The most significant use of figural interpretation in “The Mask,” however, is Shelley’s treatment of, as the subtitle of the poem puts it, “the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester.” And it is only through the lens of figural interpretation and biblical hermeneutics, I contend, that Shelley’s thinking about history and politics at this juncture becomes fully visible.

We’ve seen that Shelley has already offered one depiction of Peterloo in the opening masque. What follows on the emergence of the Shape has been interpreted as a second depiction of the massacre:

With step as soft as wind it passed
O’er the heads of men—so fast
That they knew the presence there,
And looked—but all was empty air.

As flowers beneath May’s footstep waken,
As stars from Night’s loose hair are shaken,
As waves arise when loud winds call,
Thoughts sprung where’er that step did fall.

And the prostrate multitude
Looked—and ankle-deep in blood,
Hope, that maiden most serene,
Was walking with a quiet mien;

And Anarchy, the ghastly birth,
Lay dead earth upon the earth;
The Horse of Death, tameless as wind
Fled, and with his hoofs did grind
To dust the murderers thronged behind.

[SRY, p. 91]

Hunt reads this as the “rise and growth of the Public Enlightenment,” which is perfectly in line with his reduction of Shelley’s thought to liberal progressivism. But a figural interpretation reveals this to be a *figura futurorum*, a prophecy rooted in the historically real occasion of the Massacre at Manchester. The clear connections between “The Mask” and the “Ode to the West Wind,” composed soon after it, reinforce this interpretation. The ode describes clouds gathering before a storm—recall here Shelley’s letter to Peacock after Peterloo, in which he wrote: “These are, as it were, the distant thunders of the terrible storm which is approaching” (LPBS, 2:119). The lightning from the clouds is likened to hair in the sky; “The Mask” uses the same metaphor, the stars “from Night’s loose hair are shaken.” “The Mask,” like the ode, mobilizes the four elements of pagan physics. And, of course, the ode concludes with the exhortation to the West Wind: “Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!”

The emergence of the Shape, then, is prophetic: it is a shadow of futurity.¹⁸ And, far from the nonviolence that Shelley is generally said to advocate in “The Mask,” this prophecy leaves the Prince Regent/Anarchy “dead earth upon the earth,” and Anarchy’s army of murderers—the

¹⁸ It is important to note here that Auerbach discusses the close historical relationship between shadow (*umbra*) and shape (*figura*) in his essay.

Yeoman cavalry, but also the standing army—are ground “to dust” by the “Horse of Death,” which fled “tameless as wind.”¹⁹ (Here again note the similar language in the ode, where the wind is “tameless, and swift, and proud.”) It is worth reiterating here Auerbach’s point that *figura* historically denotes “the idea of something that is new and appears for the first time, of something that creates change in things that normally resist change” (“F,” p. 66). What I want to suggest is that Shelley is presenting us with a poetic account of something very like the emergence of class consciousness, rooted in a proto-theory of historical materialism.

The Shape and its effects on the “prostrate multitude,” then, far from visionary lyric excess, are an attempt to *describe*, through a mobilizing of Lucretian materialism, the concrescence of something seemingly immaterial. As Goldstein puts it “in the passage adapted in *The Mask of Anarchy*, Lucretius is explaining a particular case: simulacra that derive from no single thing, but instead arise spontaneously (*sponte sua gignantur*), when floating figures shed from *many* sources accidentally cohere (*concreescere*) in air” (SS, p. 179). To anyone who has participated in a large protest or mass demonstration, and who has felt the intangible yet somehow deeply tangible, distributed power of solidarity, Shelley’s lines read not as airy nothings hatched from an overfired imagination, but rather as rich phenomenology—though the deeply felt presence, the “sense, awakening and yet tender,” is “empty air,” it is nonetheless as real, material, and natural as flowers, stars, and waves. It must be stressed as well that the Shape emerges only through an act of resistance spurred by hope / despair.

¹⁹ “It is true,” Hunt writes in his preface, “the Poet recommends that there should be no active resistance, come what might; which is a piece of fortitude, however effective, which we believe was not contemplated by the Political Unions,” p. x. He is no doubt referring here to the National Union of the Working Classes, which Benbow, Watson, Hetherington and others founded in 1831, showing his political cards very clearly.

This interpretation of the Shelleyan Shape prepares a ground to respond to the concerns raised by Keach with which I began. “Shelley’s similes here,” Keach writes, “powerfully transmute the blood of political oppression and violence into ‘an accent unwithstood’—but why does he make the matter of vocal agency, much as he makes the matter of physical agency in the destruction of Anarchy, so indeterminate?” (“RLL,” p. 99). Keach goes on to argue that “Shelley needed this indeterminacy,” delineating what seem to be contradictions in the poem:

He wanted the course of the poem to turn on the heroic actions of both a despairing woman and a militant ‘Shape arrayed in mail’; he wanted to generalise the effects these figures produce by transforming the ‘maniac maid’ into Mother Earth and by having the voice of political insight and protest arise not from any single individual, not even from any single allegorical figure, but from the collective consciousness of the oppressed; above all he wanted to face what he saw as the inescapability of armed rebellion—‘He believed that a clash between the two classes of society was inevitable’, Mary Shelley says in her note to the poems written in 1819—and yet somehow minimise the possibility of mob violence and rioting which, instead of putting an end to the perpetuation of authorised state violence of the kind he had read about at Peterloo, would only provoke further massacres. [“RLL,” p. 100]

Strong as it is, Keach’s reading is troubled by an allegorical approach, the symptom of which is that word “generalise.” Those complicated ‘as ifs,’ as I mentioned before, result in a startling image: the earth figured as a mother with the blood of her own children splattered on her face. The image would have had a particular resonance with contemporary readers, for a major part of the horror of the Peterloo Massacre was that women and children were among the crowd, and among the number murdered.

The account of the massacre published in *The Examiner* (extracted from *The Times*) noted that “five or six are known to be dead. There are 26 in the Infirmary, several of whom cannot live, and at least as many out-patients severely wounded. There are men, women and children, constables, and also soldiers among them; and, in all probability, there are many

wounded who have not been heard of at the Infirmary.”²⁰ Perhaps the most striking image in the whole account is that of “a woman on the ground, insensible, to all outward appearance, and with two large gouts of blood on her left breast” (*EX*, 540–41). Carlile, who was present at the massacre, wrote the following in *Sherwin’s Political Register* (which might very well be one of the papers that Shelley had sent to him from England):

when the Yeomanry Cavalry made their appearance.... They galloped furiously round the field, going over every person who could not get out of their way, to the spot where the Police were fixed, and after a moment's pause, they received the cheers of the Police as the signal for attack. The meeting at the entrance of the cavalry, and from the commencement of business was one of the most calm and orderly that I ever witnessed. Hilarity was seen on the countenances of all, whilst the Female Reformers crowned the assemblage with a grace, and excited a feeling particularly interesting. The Yeomanry cavalry made their charge with the most infuriate frenzy;—they cut down men, women, and children, indiscriminately, and appeared to have commenced a premeditated attack with the most insatiable thirst for blood and destruction. They merit a medallion on one side of which should be inscribed THE SLAUGHTERMEN OF MANCHESTER, and a reverse, bearing a description of their slaughter of defenseless men, women, and children, unprovoked and unnecessary. [*REG*, vol. 5, no. 16, pp. 240–41]

Both Thomas Davison’s *Medusa* and T. J. Wooler’s *Black Dwarf* carried the words of Sir Francis Burdett, the *Black Dwarf* on the front page, who said the following: “What! kill men *unarmed! unresisting!* And, Gracious God! WOMEN too, *disfigured, maimed, cut down, and trampled upon* by DRAGOONS. Is this England? This a Christian Land! A Land of Freedom! Can such things be? and pass by us, like a summer cloud, unheeded? Forbid it every drop of English blood, in every vein! that does not proclaim its owner bastard.”²¹

²⁰ *EX*, August 22, 1819. Thompson writes that “Eleven were killed or died from their wounds.... The Peterloo Relief Committee had, by the end of 1819, authenticated 421 claims for relief for injuries received on the field (a further 150 cases still awaited investigation). Of these, 161 cases were of sabre wounds, the remainder were injuries sustained while lying beneath the crowd or beneath the horses’ hooves. More than 100 of the injured were women or girls” (*MEWC*, p. 687).

²¹ *The Black Dwarf*, no. 34, vol. 3, Wednesday August 25, 1819, p. 549. See also *The Medusa; or, Penny Politician*, no. 28, vol. 1 (London, August 28, 1819), pp. 220–21.

The complicated prosopopoeia in *The Mask* is prefigured by Burdett, who gives a voice to “every drop of English blood” calling for resistance, calling for response. Shelley echoes the phrase almost verbatim, the earth “shuddering with a mother’s throe // Had turned every drop of blood, / By which her face had been bedewed, / To an accent unwithstood” (*SRY*, p. 91). From the perspective of the figural interpretation of historically real prophecy, there is not a generalizing movement that obliterates the maniac maid into Mother Earth. What we are left with in fact, is an all-too-real, *historically real*, image of the mother whose child’s blood has stained her face. The maniac maid has in fact been made more concrete, more material, more historical at this point in the poem than she has been hitherto. “Maniac,” which seems perhaps gratuitous at first, now makes perfect sense.

This strange accent has another prefiguration, however: one of that series of sonnets in 1802 by William Wordsworth, many of which were written in post-revolutionary France, and which were first published in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807) under the heading “Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty.”

It is not to be thought of that the Flood
 Of British freedom, which to the open Sea
 Of the world’s praise from dark antiquity
 Hath flowed, “with pomp of waters, unwithstood,”
 Road by which all might come and go that would,
 And bear out freights of worth to foreign lands;
 That this most famous Stream in Bogs and Sands
 Should perish; and to evil and to good
 Be lost for ever. In our Halls is hung
 Armoury of the invincible Knights of old:
 We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
 That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
 Which Milton held. In every thing we are sprung
 Of Earth’s first blood, have titles manifold.²²

²² William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), p. 142.

This is Shelley's Wordsworth, before he became "a slave," the Wordsworth still holding onto the republican ideals of the English and French revolutions.²³ Shelley's "accent unwithstood" speaks Shakespeare's tongue, and holds the morals of Milton: it is the voice of freedom, which through Dantean figural interpretation the Shape represents.

It might seem that Shelley is coming very close to a kind of "conservatism" here, and, indeed, Donald Reiman has claimed that he was an agrarian reactionary.²⁴ But this reading fails to recognize the ways in which Shelley is making use of the rhetoric of the Reform movement, and not as mere demagoguery. There certainly was a wing of Reform that was basically reactionary, and hoped for a return to a pastoral ideal of agrarian life. But there was also a forward-looking avant-garde that nonetheless looked backward for sustenance to an enduring and powerful tradition of "British freedom," which was seen to be enshrined in the common law and the constitution. Robert Southey's *Wat Tyler* is a document in this vein, looking to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 as an historical prefiguration of a hoped-for republican revolution. Its immense popularity when pirated in 1817 speaks to the powerful ways in which the tradition of the "freeborn Englishman," as Thompson puts it, informed working-class struggle in these tumultuous years.

Anne Janowitz offers a powerful reading of "The Mask of Anarchy" precisely from the perspective of this tradition as it was developed and complicated in the poetry of the radical press. "The radical revival of 1815–24," Janowitz writes, "recovered the Spencean lyric and

²³ When the Shelleys first read *The Excursion*, Mary Shelley wrote in her journal of Wordsworth "he is a slave." *JMWS*, 1:15.

²⁴ See Donald Reiman, "Shelley as Agrarian Reactionary," *The Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, no. 30 (1979): 5–15.

reinvigorated it, and Shelley's 'The Mask of Anarchy', as well as his 'Men of England' stanzas make their appeal within the conventions of the radical song."²⁵ She notes that the Spencean poet E. J. Blandford's poem "A Real Dream; or, Another Hint for Mr. Bull," published in *The Medusa*, "seems to be a precursor" to "The Mask of Anarchy" (*LL*, pp. 95–6). The formal similarities between the two poems are indeed striking. Blandford's poem is a dream vision (which turns out to be real), and concludes with a speech from the voice of "Fancy" calling the people to action. But, perhaps most strikingly, Blandford sees in his "vision" "titled pomp's all-splendid raree-show":

This was a scene iniquitously base,
Here blood-stained vice assuming saintly grace,
With pecculation, fraud, and falsehood stood
On tip-toe, boasting of their noble blood!
Were folly, pride, and guilt, together mix'd,
While on each face deceptive smiles were fix'd;
Here pimps and panders, punks and pious jilts,
And black-coat bugbears mounted on the stilts
Of class, and rank; who *rank* enough are found,
For on corruption's dung-hill they abound,
Well-fed and fattened,—gross and over-grown
With waste of fruits and viands *not their own!*

Janowitz anatomizes the ways in which Shelley is drawing "upon the language of urban radicalism" by utilizing "the rhetoric of constitutionalism, Anglo-Saxon rights, customary right, and non-Godwinian rationalism" in his post-Peterloo popular songs (*LL*, p. 99). Shelley sees clearly that there is much of value in the tradition of the freeborn Englishman, and draws upon this strain in the radical Reform movement in his own way. The poems published in *The Medusa*

²⁵ Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 97. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LL*.

in response to Peterloo show how pervasive this rhetoric was in radical song and poetry of the moment:

Can any brave free-born Sons endure the sight?
Oh! no—Perish the heart that does not *wish*,
That does not *thirst* for vengeance.

Arouse! arouse! ye freemen brave,
And claim the rights your fathers held;
Prepare, prepare, these rights to save
Tyrants basely have withheld.

Chorus.
This is our Watch word—our watch word this shall be—
“Or give us death or liberty”.—

Soon shall fair freedom’s sons their rights regain,
Soon shall all Europe join the hallow’d strain,
Of liberty and freedom, equal rights and laws,
Heaven’s choicest blessings crown the glorious cause,
While murky tyrants crouching minions too,
Tremble for feats performed at Peter-loo.

The rigorously ironic “A New Song, In commemoration of the invincible courage of the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry, displayed in St. Peter’s Field, on the 16th August, in the year 1819,” published in *The Medusa*, has a structural parallel with “The Mask” in that it tells the story of the massacre, with its own “maniac maid” intervening:

A woman and child,
In their way ran so wild;
The woman cried—“spare, spare my child, O!”
But these true sons of Mars,
Exclaim’d “now for the wars”
Our *glory* must never be spoil’d, O!”²⁶

²⁶ All of these poems are from *The Medusa; or, Penny Politician*, vol. 1, Feb. 20th, 1819 to Jan. 7th, 1820 (London: Thomas Davison, 1820), pp. 240, 251–52, 255, 271–72.

The lyricized readings of “The Mask” that Goldstein exposes, then, also, crucially, fail to acknowledge what Edward Said might call the poem’s political “affiliations”: radical popular song, the rhetoric of Reform, and Spencean communitarian millenarianism.²⁷

A striking example of such affiliations can be found in one of Benbow’s incendiary prints dating from November, 1820, during the Queen Caroline Affair (Figure 7).²⁸ The caption of the print reads “Justice miraculously delivered from the Voracious Jaws of her crying enemy,” and depicts Lord Eldon and George IV riding on a crocodile, like Sidmouth in Shelley’s “Mask.” Both Eldon and the crocodile have “big tears” pouring from their eyes—the crocodile tears of Hypocrisy—and Justice is caught in the jaws of the crocodile. At the feet of the crocodile, baby crocodiles are hatching out of eggs, labeled “Disgrace,” “Blood sucker,” “Quack,” and so on, and bearing the visages of government agents, including Castlereagh (“Derry,” signaling the nickname “Derry Down Triangle”—a torture device—made famous in William Hone’s *The Political House that Jack Built*) and Sidmouth (“Quack”). Eldon carries, like Anarchy, a “sceptre” inscribed “Oppression” in one hand, and a scroll that reads “Pains and Penalties” in the other; both have been struck by lightning, breaking the sceptre and setting the scroll on fire (humorously, Eldon’s wig is also on fire). The lightning comes from ominous thunderclouds at the top of the print. In the top left corner stands Queen Caroline in the light of an eye, suggesting

²⁷ See Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

²⁸ British National Archives, TS 11/115/326, no. 86. “Dolby, Fairburn, and Benbow featured in Shegog’s reports to Sir Robert Baker, Conant’s successor at Bow Street. Shegog was alarmed by the ribald and biting nature of the products of their presses and by their attempts to secure high sales and a wide distribution. On 10 July he reported: ‘Men and boys have been employed by Benbow, Fairburn etc...to circulate in the Metropolis, and for 50 miles round it, vast quantities of Bills, Placards and publications of a seditious and inflammatory [*sic*] nature, with a view to inflame the passions...and to stop the investigation in the House of Lords respecting the Queen.’”

in the Benbow print. Shelley, then, isn't ineffectually prescribing as a panacea the workings of the lyric imagination from a safe perch on top of Parnassus; he is engaging seriously and thoughtfully with the literature, pop culture, and traditions of the nascent working class—attempting to give it voice.

Recognizing this lends further significance to Shelley's use of historically real prophecy in "The Mask," for this tradition of Biblical hermeneutics would have been immediately familiar to working-class readers, many of whom, if they owned a book at all, that book was the Bible. As Iain McCalman has shown, Christian eschatology and biblical hermeneutics were a key part of the Spencean tradition: "The millennial promise gave Spence a potent means of achieving his desired social and political transformation" (*RU*, p. 64). This radical potential of historically real prophecy is indicated by Auerbach, who claims that it gave to Christianity "a sense of the basic concept of world history" ("F," p. 96). My reading of *Queen Mab* in the first chapter attempted to show that one of the important concerns of Shelley's political poetry is to cultivate historical consciousness, and with it the recognition that present political and social conditions are contingent and subject to change. The same concern, though further developed from the essentially Volneyan framework of *Queen Mab*, continues to animate Shelley's late works, including "The Mask."

Let me turn now to the other major problem raised by Keach: the passive resistance advocated by the voice in the concluding speech. After calling for a great assembly "Of the fearless and the free," the voice offers what seems quite like yet another account of Peterloo:

Let the tyrants pour around
With a quick and startling sound,
Like the loosening of a sea,
Troops of armed emblazonry.

Let the charged artillery drive
Till the dead air seems alive
With the clash of clanging wheels
And the tramp of horses' heels.

Let the fixed bayonet
Gleam with sharp desire to wet
Its bright point in English blood,
Looking keen as one for food.

Let the horsemen's scimitars
Wheel and flash, like sphereless stars
Thirsting to eclipse their burning
In a sea of death and mourning.

This seems to be preparing a great scene of battle between the people and the forces of Anarchy.

But the battle never comes. The voice tells the people to resist with nonviolence:

Stand ye calm and resolute,
Like a forest close and mute,
With folded arms, and looks which are
Weapons of unvanquished war.

And let Panic, who outspeeds
The career of armed steeds,
Pass, a disregarded shade,
Through your phalanx undismayed.

Let the laws of your own land,
Good or ill, between ye stand,
Hand to hand, and foot to foot,
Arbiters of the dispute:—

The old laws of England—they
Whose reverend heads with age are gray,
Children of a wiser day;
And whose solemn voice must be
Thine own echo—Liberty!

On those who first should violate
Such sacred heralds in their state
Rest the blood that must ensue;
And it will not rest on you.

And if then the tyrants dare,
Let me them ride among you there,
Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew;
What they like, that let them do.

With folded arms and steady eyes,
And little fear, and less surprise,
Look upon them as they slay,
Till their rage has died away.

[*SRY*, pp. 96–98]

Andrew Franta has argued that “the poem does not chart a course of action for the future but provides an account of Peterloo itself,” reading these lines not as a “political program” but as a “more pedestrian set of identifications.”²⁹ The problem with this reading is that these lines would be a blatantly false description of what happened that day in St. Peter’s Field. The newspaper reports, which are our main source of knowledge of what happened, just as they were for Shelley, belie it. There was no “charged artillery” present. And, most obviously, the people did not stand “calm and resolute” without panicking once the slaughter started. They—very sensibly—tried to escape, and many of them fought back as best as they could. So, while these lines resemble what happened at Peterloo, they simply cannot be taken for a description of the event.

But then how are we to read this third version of Peterloo? Why retell the event yet again, and falsify the details? We’ve seen that Shelley offers what is a short description of Peterloo in the opening masque; he then presents a *figura futurorum* of Peterloo in the form of the conquest over Anarchy by the Shape. Auerbach anatomizes figural interpretation as a triadic form:

we should note that in addition to the opposition between figure, on the one hand, and fulfillment and truth, on the other, another opposition emerges, namely between *figura* and *historia*. *Historia*, or also *littera*, is the literal meaning or the event to which it refers;

²⁹ Andrew Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 125.

figura is the same meaning or event, but seen from the perspective of the future fulfillment hidden within it, and this fulfillment is *veritas*, or truth. *Figura* thus appears as the middle term between *littera-historia* and *veritas* and means approximately the same thing as *spiritus* or *intellectus spiritualis*.” [“F,” p. 91]

According to this schema—the immanent logic of the *figura*—the first account of Peterloo in “The Mask” would be the *historia*, the actual event (the second account) would be the *figura* of the future fulfillment, the triumph of the people over “God, and King, and Law,” and the final account would be the *veritas*. What is complicated, however, is that whereas there are typically two separate historical events in figural interpretation—Moses and Jesus Christ, for example—Shelley is taking a single historical event and turning it into a *figura* of itself: Peterloo is at once 1) a real historical event; 2) a figure of its own future fulfillment; and 3) the spiritual truth of that fulfillment.

Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry” offers a helpful gloss on this point. “A poem,” Shelley writes, “is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.” Thankfully, he unpacks this a little bit by making a helpful distinction between a story and a poem:

a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other bond of connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature.... Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted. [*SPP*, p. 485]

The *veritas*, the eternal truth of Peterloo is what is expressed in the closing speech of “The Mask.” It is no dead catalogue of the facts of what happened, no pedestrian set of identifications, but an attempt to extract moral and political truth from the carnage: that it is simply wrong, for example, to “Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew” people that are peaceably protesting; that in a just world, anyone who participated in such a thing wouldn’t be able to show their face in public

anymore. In these closing lines, in other words, Shelley isn't advocating that the people of England engage in nonviolent resistance so much as expressing why it works.

You may have noted a discrepancy in titles in this chapter: Hunt published the poem as *The Masque of Anarchy*; but Shelley, in his final manuscript used the title "The Mask of Anarchy." Is the difference of significance? This raises a larger question of form and genre: Why does Shelley make use of the masque, a courtly form par excellence, which, according to Stephen Orgel, has at its very root the notion that the "sovereign wins...because it is his nature to win"?³⁰ The masque's "function on the most simple level was always to honor the monarch," Orgel notes (*JM*, p. 20). It would seem to be an odd formal choice for a poem of the "exoteric species," as Shelley referred to it—that is, directed toward the people, a broad audience.

The power of appropriating this form, I argue, lies precisely in the role that the sovereign takes within it. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Orgel notes, "the sovereign had become a more integral part of the masque than ever before by taking on the role of the chief masquer" (*JM*, p. 22). The culmination of a masque comes "in the final merging of symbol and reality" with "the king's unmasking," at which point "the illusion was at last firmly established in the actual world of royal protocol, and the admiration of the spectator for dancer turned necessarily to the homage of subject for sovereign" (*ibid.*, p. 32). But rather than putting masks on the nobility, Shelley has *turned them into masks*, by which operation the monarchy, the order of "God, and Law, and King," is transformed into Anarchy, its negation. Shelley, then, is taking up a form dedicated to the sovereignty of the monarch, precisely to undermine the monarchy. He is

³⁰ Stephen Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 19. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *JM*.

turning George IV, Castlereagh, Eldon, and Sidmouth into masks in order to unmask them. Orgel's account of the merging of symbol and reality, which occurs with the unmasking of the king, is here true *only through* the masking of the king, who is thereby made a symbol of the reality of anarchy clothed in dress of sovereignty. Hence, what Orgel says of the spectator can be reframed: the homage of subject for sovereign is turned necessarily into the hatred of citizen for despot. It would be more accurate, then, to say that the opening dance of death is an *antimasque*, representing "everything that threaten[s] the ideal world" of Shelley's poem (*JM*, p. 35). The *Philosophical View of Reform* is germane at this point:

the nobility, having by the assistance of the people imposed close limitations upon the royal power, finding that power to be its natural ally and the people...its natural enemy, made the Crown the mask and pretence of their own authority. At this period began that despotism of the oligarchy of party, and under colour of administering the executive power lodged in the king, represented in truth the interests of the rich. [*SRY*, p. 52]

The sovereign is a symbol, and Shelley merges this symbol with the reality of the power behind it: the few, the rich. To change the title from "Mask" to "Masque," then, is of profound political significance.

There is a final form to consider, for "The Mask" is a variation on ballad meter. It is broken into (mostly) quatrains, and the lines are often in iambic tetrameter. But the first two lines of each quatrain tend to be in trochaic meter, fairly rare in English language poetry. George Saintsbury writes in his *History of English Prosody* that "one of the powers of the trochee—its capacity for expressing retained or reined-in feeling, be it passion, or satire, or rage," is "perfectly mastered, and with the occasional iambic alternations capitally managed," in "The Mask."³¹ The tension between the two prophetic versions of Peterloo, one nonviolent resistance

³¹ George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody: From the Twelfth Century to the Present Day*, vol. 3: From Blake to Mr. Swinburne, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1923), p. 109.

and the other violent revolution, can be read in the shifting meter of the stanza: metrically, the poem is in tension with itself, as Shelley was clearly in tension with himself about what exactly was to be done. Was violent revolution an inevitability, a necessity?

“The Mask,” then, draws together four formal principles, or structuring elements: the ballad, figural interpretation, the masque, and the songs and lyrics of ultra-radicalism. It is notable that these forms coincide with the four historical eras as understood in the Romantic period: the ancient (ballad), the medieval (figural interpretation), the masque (Renaissance), and the radical song (contemporary). That this is an intentional schema in Shelley’s late poetics, I will hope to establish in my final chapter. Here, however, I want to focus on Shelley’s historical thinking—what might even be called his philosophy of history—by returning briefly to that strange troping of Time.

What does it mean to say that Time is the father of Hope? Or that Time is “waiting for a better day”? One could put an Enlightenment spin on this, drawing on Kant, say, or Godwin, and suggest the inevitable progress of humanity, and this reading wouldn’t obviously clash with what seems to be Shelley’s belief in progress elsewhere in his oeuvre—in *Queen Mab*, for example. But the powerlessness of father Time, his standing around idiot-like, the piling up of death—these, I suggest, anticipate another philosophy of history:

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him

into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.³²

This is Walter Benjamin's famous description of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." I note the similarity not to boost Shelley's contemporary stock by transforming him into a prophet of Benjamin's Marxian philosophy of history, but simply to help capture the complicated development of Shelley's thinking about history, political agency, and radical change. The figure of Time seems to be completely powerless, and the revolutionary change that occurs in the poem is the result of direct action spurred by Hope/Despair. The problem of agency becomes central, a question that, as Keach suggests, remains unanswered.

A striking passage in Auerbach's account of "Figura" is worth drawing into this constellation. "The provisional nature of events in figural understanding," Auerbach claims, is fundamentally different from the modern idea of historical progress; here, the provisional nature of history is steadily and consistently interpreted as part of a never-ending horizontal sequence of future events. In figural understanding, however, meaning must at all times be sought vertically, from above, and events are understood individually, not as part of an unbroken sequence, but as torn apart from one another, and always waiting for a third thing that has been promised but has not yet come to pass. ["F," p. 100]

I've argued that Hunt's preface attempts to retroactively assimilate "The Mask" to an Enlightenment progressivism, exemplified by Kant and Godwin, and certainly influential on the young Shelley, which typifies Auerbach's description of the "the modern idea of historical progress." But by the time of "The Mask," Shelley was articulating a very different sense of history, and an historical poetics through which he would give it form. Auerbach's description of

³² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 257–58. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "TPH."

figural understanding of history calls to mind once again Walter Benjamin's "Theses," the sixth thesis of which goes like this:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. ["TPH," p. 255]

Peterloo was for Shelley a moment of danger—he saw the clouds gathering on the horizon. In "The Mask of Anarchy" he sought to grasp this moment of danger by wresting poetic tradition—the ballad, Dantean figural interpretation, the masque, radical song and the tropes of popular radicalism—away from conformism by presenting a figural interpretation of "the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester" in order to fan the ashes and sparks of hope contained within the despair of that tragedy. It is the "trumpet of a prophecy," but a prophecy historically real.

To conclude, I turn to another text of 1832, but one with a very different politics than those of Hunt's introduction to *The Masque of Anarchy*. William Benbow couldn't have read "The Mask" when he was peddling his radical, satirical prints during the Queen Caroline Affair. But, if my argument that he and Cannon collaborated with Mary Shelley on their editions is correct, he may have read the poem by the time he published his most important and influential pamphlet—widely recognized as the origin of the modern notion of the general strike—*Grand*

National Holiday, and Congress of the Productive Classes.³³ This text has received a fair amount of attention from labor historians, but otherwise has gone unnoticed, especially by literary critics and scholars of Romanticism. By the same token, social and labor historians have neglected the connection with Shelley, which was so vital to the development of working-class radicalism in the 1820s and 30s, which in turn has led to a reading of Benbow backward toward the 1790s rather than forward toward 1848.

In his “Dedication to the Productive Classes,” where traditionally authors would grovel to aristocratic patrons, Benbow, the dissenting minister, presents himself as a prophet of freedom:

Plundered Fellow-Sufferers! I lay before you a plan of freedom. Adopt it, and you rid the world of inequality, misery, and crime. A martyr in your cause, I am become the prophet of your salvation. A plan of happiness is pointed out and dedicated to you. With it I devote to you my life and body, my soul and blood. [*GNH*, p. 2]

As Shelley did, Benbow turns Christianity toward revolutionary ends. The connection with the Old Testament prophets carries over to the epigraph from *Ezekiel*: “The possessors of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery and have vexed the poor and needy” (*GNH*, p. 3). The “Introductory Address” then begins with one of the central problems in Shelley’s late work—life.

Benbow presents the existence, the lives, of the many—the productive classes—as a negation of life, because they exist and work not for themselves, but for the few. “Life, when

³³ William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday, and Congress of the Productive Classes* (London: Printed and Published by the Author, undated [1832]). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *GNH*. Prothero gives January 1832 as the date of publication. But Benbow had been presenting versions of this as speeches at the Rotunda and elsewhere back in 1831. “William Benbow and the Concept of the ‘General Strike’,” *Past & Present*, no. 63 (May, 1974): 133. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “CGS.”

good for any thing, consists of ease, gaiety, pleasure, and consequently of happiness,” he begins.

But the

only class of persons in society, as it is now constituted, who enjoy any considerable portion of ease, pleasure, and happiness, are those who do the least towards producing any thing good or necessary for the community at large. They are few in number, a fraction, as it were, of society, and yet they have become possessed of a most monstrous power, namely, the power of turning to their own advantage all the good things of life, without creating themselves the smallest particle of any one of those good things. [*GNH*, p. 3]

The many, in contrast, “have not even existed,” because their “existence has been enjoyed by others; they have been, as far as regards themselves, *non-entities*” (*GNH*, p. 4). Benbow, like Shelley, presents a dialectical view of life and death: “What working man can say he lives? Unless he says he lives when he is pining away piecemeal, producing with an empty stomach and weary limbs what goes to make others live. The existence of the working man,” he concludes “is a *negative*” (*GNH*, p. 4). The language of the few and the many is adopted, but also a ratio: the aristocracy is a “*fraction* of society, to which has been foolishly conceded, or which has impudently and unnaturally usurped, the preposterous right to exercise a monstrous power over almost every man”; it “is as *one to five hundred* when compared to the people who produce all the good things seen in the world.” He goes on:

Notwithstanding the *one*, the *unit*, the mere *cypher*, has all the wealth, all the power in the state, and consequently prescribes the way and details the manner, after which he pleases the 499 should live in the world. The 499 who create the state, who are its instruments upon all occasions, without whom it cannot go on for a single second, who dig deep, rise early, and watch late, by whose sweat and toil the whole face of nature is beautified—rendered pleasant to the sight, and useful to existence;—the 499 who do all this are reduced to less than nothing in the estimation of the *unit* who does no one thing, unless *consuming* may be called doing something. The one—the unit or cypher—consumes, luxuriates, revels, wastes: in the winter fur and down warm him: in the summer he cools himself in the marble bath or in the shady bower: the seasons are *his*—their flowers, fruits, and living creatures are *his*—the 499 are *his* purveyors, they procure him every thing; and more to be pitied and worse treated than the jackal, they are not left even the offals. Not content with every thing—marrow and bone—if the bone be of any use: not

content with their own peculiar titles, this consuming portion of society call themselves the *people!* [*GNH*, pp. 3–4]

This passage bears the marks of a powerful and experienced orator: indeed, the entire pamphlet clearly reads as a transcription of a speech, and Prothero notes that Benbow had been presenting the idea of the Grand National Holiday at the Rotunda and elsewhere.

But beneath the rhetoric there is a powerful conception, shared with Shelley, of the few and the many. Its power is demonstrated by its continued recurrence, whether in the language of the one percent and the 99 percent of Occupy Wall Street, or Jeremy Corbyn’s adoption of it for the Labour Party slogan “for the many, not the few.” The term *cypher*, which in mathematics stands in distinction to the “significant numbers,” in figurative use means “A person who fills a place, but is of no importance or worth, a nonentity, a ‘mere nothing’.”³⁴ There is an interesting tension here, for it is the working class that, from the perspective of life, Benbow referred to as non-entities, a *negative*. But when he shifts to the question of labor, it is the ruling class—the “Lords and Masters”—that become the cypher, the nonentity. And it is from the perspective of labor that the many become significant, that their value and their power is revealed.

This is precisely the central insight of Benbow’s plan for a *Grand National Holiday*, and the central insight of the general labor strike: that it reveals the truth that the power really resides with the many, the productive classes. “The people are nothing for themselves, and everything for the few”:

If they are the source of all wealth—that wealth is not for them: if they are all-powerful, their power is used for the benefit of others:—they protect and support those who grow fat on the sweat of their brow! They fight too; yea, they *fight*—but for what? for religion, for honour, for the caprice of kings and ministers! When they fight for *themselves*, then will they be a people, then will they live, then will they have ease, gaiety, pleasure and

³⁴ "cipher | cypher, n." *OED Online*. March 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/33155?redirectedFrom=cypher> (accessed May 1, 2021).

happiness; but never until they do fight for *themselves!* When the people fight their own battle—when they are active in resistance to the greater part of existing institutions—when they have a proper opinion of themselves; that is, when they are convinced of their own power and worth, they will then enjoy the advantages a people ought to enjoy. [GNH, pp. 4–5]

Active in resistance is a good gloss on the concept of the labor strike, which in its very name contains the paradox it represents: to strike is an act of violence, but the labor strike is an act of nonviolence, a refusal. But it is a refusal that can have profound effects, as with *Bartleby* in Melville's story. Benbow clearly recognized that it had revolutionary potential.

Benbow argues that the “monstrous power” obtained by the few over the many was achieved through their “unity of thought and action,” and that this must be imitated by the people. Through unity of thought and action, the Lords and Masters have kept the many in a state of ignorance, and of “misery and degradation”; they have prevented the people “from knowing ourselves” (GNH, pp. 5–6). “In short,” Benbow writes, “the knowledge we want is to be fully convinced of the weakness and villainy of our enemies, and to be resolved to use the means we have of destroying them” (GNH, p. 6). With this, Benbow turns to “The Holiday,” a month-long general strike, in which everyone will stop working, a congress will be called and representatives elected to discover “the source of our misery, and the best way of destroying it” (GNH, p. 10). Provisions will be gathered for one week by appropriating the funds of local parishes, and after that they will be “given” by the rich. This has been taken as an example of naivete. But Benbow's use of irony has been missed here: it is a show of force, and force itself, if necessary, that will ensure provisions from the rich. He uses Sir Francis Burdett as an example:

The Committee will depute 20 persons to wait upon Sir Francis, and state to him respectfully, but energetically, their business. Suppose, but it is the most improbable of all suppositions, that Sir Francis should not be inclined to pay full attention to the application. Then the Committee will send 100 persons, with the same request, urging it still more respectfully and energetically; and should there still be indifference on the part

of Sir Francis, the Committee shall send 1000 persons, and so on, increasing in proportion, until the Lord's cattle be forthcoming. The persons sent by the Committee, shall allow no one to disturb the peace of the people. [*GNH*, pp. 12–13]

Here Prothero points out that Benbow did not expect this to be peaceful, but rather to spark a revolution by inducing the one, the cypher to strike first. Benbow “from at least 1816,” Prothero writes, “was a physical-force revolutionary” and that “Benbow’s holiday is to become a political revolution, and probably a violent one at that” (“CGS,” pp. 147–48). Fair enough, but if one sticks to the letter of the text, what is in fact advocated is a transformation through nonviolent resistance, a show of the force of numbers and unity of thought and action—much like the *veritas* of Peterloo in “The Mask of Anarchy.”

Prothero issued a corrective to over-eager attempts to assimilate Benbow’s pamphlet with Owenite socialism, instead emphasizing its continuity with the tradition of ultra-radicalism on which Benbow cut his teeth. It was a necessary corrective, but I think it goes too far in reducing Benbow’s pamphlet to the mainstream of ultra-radical thought. In my first chapter, I argued that *Queen Mab* represented a departure from the Painean radical tradition, of which Benbow was certainly a product. Prothero mentions Shelley’s “Song to the Men of England” as an earlier example of the idea that “labour is the source of all wealth,” and he goes on to examine in some detail Volney’s *Ruins* and its role in popularizing this idea in the ultra-radical tradition. *Queen Mab*, which became in the 1820s and 30s every bit as much a part of the canon of working-class radicalism as Volney’s *Ruins*, receives no mention. And Benbow’s association with Cannon and his role in popularizing Shelley’s work and in the first burgeoning of the co-operative movement were unknown. The point is not to attribute the originality of Benbow’s ideas to Shelley, but rather to suggest that Shelley’s work and thought were a part of a major shift that was happening

within radicalism and toward socialism and communism in this period, and that Benbow was a major voice in this shift.

To emphasize this point let me return briefly to the ever-masked George Cannon, the link between the Shelleys and Benbow. Robert Wedderburn makes a cameo appearance, in dismissive terms, in Prothero's article—the fullest and best piece of writing on Benbow that has been published—when Prothero is running through previous examples of the idea that a universal show of resistance could prevent violent revolution: “The Spencean mulatto, Robert Wedderburn, urged the West Indian slaves to gain emancipation merely by refusing for short periods to work; freedom would inevitably follow. But he was a violent man; indeed Bob Wedderburn was one of those of whom Thistlewood had great hopes” (“CGS,” p. 164). At the core of Prothero's argument is the claim that as a mainstream ultra-radical, Benbow fundamentally divided society into rulers and ruled, rather than rich and poor or workers and employers. The exceptions to this were few; Prothero cites “the Spencean Thomas Evans, who felt that the cause of the rulers' power was their wealth—they were landlords” (“CGS,” p. 162). Cannon was a Spencean, of course, and the key collaborator with Wedderburn. In this light, certain passages of the *Grand National Holiday* come to sound much more socialist than not, as when, contra Malthus, Benbow argues that during the holiday they will “take a census of the people, and a measurement of the land, and see upon calculation, whether it be not an unequal distribution, and a bad management of the land, that make our Lords and Masters say, that there are too many of us.” Or again, when he claims that equality is the target of the holiday: “Equal rights, equal liberties, equal enjoyments, equal toil, equal respect, equal share of production.” Or the following:

Not only is society rotten; but the land, property, and capital is rotting.... Every thing, men, property, and money, must be put into a state of circulation. As the blood by stagnation putrifies, as it is impoverished by too much agitation, so society by too much idleness on the one hand, and too much toil on the other has become rotten. Every portion must be made work, and then the work will become so light, that it will not be considered work, but wholesome exercise. [*GNH*, pp. 8–9, 13]

To say that Benbow, or Shelley, or Cannon didn't have a theory of the exploitation of labor is merely to state the obvious. That is what Marx provided in *Capital*. But there are continuities as well as discontinuities, and theoretical events such as Marxism must have a groundwork in previous thought. So the relation between the following quotations, from Benbow and Marx, respectively, is stronger, I would argue, than simply the use of similar terms:

The people are nothing for themselves, and everything for the few.

...no particular class in Germany has the constituency, the penetration, the courage, or the ruthlessness that could mark it out as the negative representative of society. No more has any estate the breadth of soul that identifies itself, even for a moment, with the soul of the nation, the geniality that inspires material might to political violence or that revolutionary daring which flings at the adversary the defiant words: *I am nothing but I must be everything*.³⁵

³⁵ Karl Marx, Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marxists.org: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>. First published in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (February 1844).

Chapter 5

The Politics of Historical Form: Shelley's Late Lyrics

In my argument to this point, I have been advancing a theory of cultural incorporation in which canonization is seen as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon, involving various different media, literary forms, and ideological maneuvers. Understood in relation to such a model, Shelley and Byron have always been problematic for the Romantic canon, precisely because of their extimacy. In the case of Shelley, as I've tried to show, incorporation into the main body of the canon of English literature required a severing of his lyric poems from his corpus of work, a lyricization of his body of work, which was itself a cultural aspect of class antagonism. I've further argued that lyricization, understood from the perspective of historical materialism, has its origin in the problem of Shelley's extimacy—a literary event that precipitated a reorientation of criticism by the Romantic Victorians between 1824–40. The result was a seismic shift in the hierarchy of poetic genres, a shift that reverberated throughout twentieth century poetry and criticism.

One effect of this shift is that Romantic lyric poetry—a diverse and complicated body of forms, styles, meters, social relations, and poetic thought—was buried under the rubble of a theory of subjective expressivity. Another effect of the shift, indeed, immanent to the logic of the shift itself, is a repeated failure to read Shelley's lyric poems in relation to his larger body of work and thought. My primary purpose in this chapter is therefore to show that Shelley's late lyric poems are part of a larger programmatic effort—evident in Shelley's major prose works of the time, *The Philosophical View of Reform* and the "Defence of Poetry," as well as his major poetic works of the time, *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*—not only to work out a radical

philosophy of history and historical poetics, but also to create new forms in which to sustain them. These forms infused with history, as I'm calling them, represent not just historical self-consciousness, but an attempt to resurrect the past in the present, a political imperative to see poetic forms not as dead monuments of the past, but as vital and historically charged modes of writing and thinking for the now.

Perhaps a word is needed here about *form* as a concept. Without getting too deep into the weeds, I basically adopt Kenneth Burke's notion of form as "an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence."¹ It is a very broad definition, as I think any general definition of form must be. I would supplement Burke's definition, however, with James J. Gibson's notion of affordance: "The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill."² Gibson's notion is valuable, I believe, because it allows for the expansion of the understanding of form beyond the psychology of the reader. Form understood as affordance applies as well to the work of art itself, and to the artist. As Gibson puts it:

an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer. [*EA*, p. 129]

The properties of a sonnet, then—iambic pentameter, a set rhyming pattern, the volta, the condensed space of just fourteen lines—are affordances of the form itself that allow that strange

¹ Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), p. 124.

² James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), p. 127. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *EA*.

animal the poet to write one, as well as affordances that allow (also increasingly a strange animal) a reader to read one. What is lacking here is historical perspective, but that will, I hope, be accrued in what follows.

In my previous chapter, I analyzed the various forms that Shelley drew on for “The Mask of Anarchy.” It is striking, as I pointed out, that the four poetic forms that Shelley mobilizes in the poem—the masque, the ballad, the radical song, figural prophecy—correspond to the four major periods of the historical development of Western civilization, which Shelley makes explicit reference to in both the “Defence of Poetry”—responding to his friend T. L. Peacock’s “Four Ages of Poetry”—and the *Philosophical View of Reform*.³ It is all the more striking given that Shelley uses the same formal strategy—I almost want to coin a portmanteau, “stratagy,” to express the layering of forms from different historical eras, like various strata in geology—in a very different poem composed around the same time, his “Ode to the West Wind.”

The intricate stanza structure of the “Ode to the West Wind” draws together four forms: the ode, Dante’s *terza rima*, the sonnet, and that most Romantic of lyric forms, now familiarly called the Greater Romantic Lyric. These forms again correspond to the four major historical ages: ancient (or classical), medieval, Renaissance, and contemporary. This formal structure,

³ Peacock’s essay was first published in *Ollier’s Miscellany* in 1820. See *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. Henry Cole, vol. 3 (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1875), pp. 324–38. On March 21, 1821, Shelley sent the first part of his “Defence of Poetry” to Peacock with a letter, which opens: “I dispatch by this post the first part of an essay intended to consist of three parts, which I design as an antidote to your ‘Four Ages of Poetry.’ You will see that I have taken a more general view of what is poetry than you have, and will perhaps agree with several of my positions, without considering your own touched. But read and judge; and do not let us imitate the great founders of the picturesque, Price and Payne Knight, who, like two ill-trained beagles, began snarling at each other when they could not catch the hare” (ibid., p. 473). Peacock, significantly, had written in his “Four Ages” that “Poetry, like the world, may be said to have four ages...” (ibid., p. 324).

condensing historical eras into a single constellation, is what I'm calling *historical form*, or form infused with history; it is a central aspect of Shelley's poetic, political, and historical thinking—his historical poetics—in his later works, and has been obscured through the process of lyricization and cultural incorporation that I've attempted to analyze in my previous chapters. In what follows, I offer a reading of the "Ode to the West Wind" that attempts to sublimate lyric readings of the poem, demonstrate the power of Shelley's historical form, and return the poem to its own historical context in Shelley's body of work and the body politic in England in 1819–20. In the process, I hope to shed some light on our current historical moment in politics and literary criticism—two centuries on.

It will be well to start here by returning to the most trenchant and violent critique of the Ode, that of F. R. Leavis, because it ties back to the early history of Shelley criticism analyzed in the previous chapters, and because it epitomizes the modernist and New Critical position toward Shelley, to which my reading in part responds. Leavis begins with T. S. Eliot's tortured essay on Shelley, in which Eliot has the honesty to admit that his problem with Shelley's poetry is one of belief: "I can only regret," writes Eliot, "that Shelley did not live to put his poetic gifts, which were certainly of the first order, at the service of more tenable beliefs—which need not have been, for my purposes, beliefs more acceptable to me."⁴ This is, *mutatis mutandis*, one of the oldest critical positions toward Shelley's work, expressed by Wordsworth, found repeatedly in

⁴ T.S. Eliot, "Shelley and Keats," *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. Jason Harding and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), p. 647. The essay was first delivered as part of Eliot's Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1933. On Eliot's complicated relationship to Shelley, see Michael O'Neill, "Romantic and Victorian Poetry," in *T.S. Eliot in Context*, ed. Jason Harding (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011) p. 205ff.; see also George Franklin, "Instances of Meeting: Shelley and Eliot: A Study in Affinity," *ELH*, vol. 61, no. 4 (Winter, 1994): 955–90.

reviews written while he was still alive, and often repeated thereafter. It is at the core of the contradiction posed by Shelley's extimacy: it could not be denied that Shelley had "genius," that he was a first-rate poet; but the philosophy and politics of his poetry could not be admitted into the canon, could not be allowed to infect the body politic.

This contradiction, I've argued, led to the necessity of the lyricization of Shelley's corpus—at its core, a process of depoliticization. Leavis, however, takes a tactic that only Shelley's Tory detractors had taken previously—that is, to argue that Shelley is not a good poet at all; to attempt to banish him from the canon entirely. Calling out Eliot for the "impertinence" of letting his personal beliefs into the discussion at all, Leavis states his aim: "It does, in short, seem worth endeavouring to make finally plain that, when one dissents from persons who, sympathizing with Shelley's revolutionary doctrines and with his idealistic ardours and fervours—with his 'beliefs,' exalt him as a poet, it is strictly the 'poetry' one is criticizing."⁵ Leavis calculates well his death blow. Knowing that previous criticism had established Shelley's "genius" as "essentially lyrical," Leavis takes critical aim at the best and most famous of Shelley's lyrics, the "Ode to the West Wind" (*ERP*, p. 270).

Leavis's critique attempts, in essence, to show that Shelley was a poet of effusive expression, unbridled passion, undisciplined emotion, and empty music and rhetoric; that he had "a weak grasp upon the actual" and was incapable of sustained and systematic poetic thought. This is, as I've shown, at the heart of Hazlitt's critique of Shelley. The difference is that, whereas

⁵ F. R. Leavis, "Shelley," in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 268–69. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ERP*. The essay was first published in Leavis's journal *Scrutiny* in 1935.

Hazlitt used this critique to dismiss Shelley's larger works, Leavis is here transferring it to his lyric poetry: there is no part of the diseased body that can be saved.

Leavis quotes the opening of the second stanza of the "Ode," proceeding to dissect the imagery:

In what respects are the 'loose clouds' like 'decaying leaves'? The correspondence is certainly not in shape, colour or way of moving. It is only the vague general sense of windy tumult that associates the clouds and the leaves; and, accordingly, the appropriateness of the metaphor 'stream' in the first line is not that it suggests a surface on which, like leaves, the clouds might be 'shed,' but that it contributes to the general 'streaming' effect in which the inappropriateness of 'shed' passes unnoticed. What again, are those 'tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean'? They stand for nothing that Shelley could have pointed to in the scene before him; the 'boughs,' it is plain, have grown out of the 'leaves' in the previous line, and we are not to ask what the tree is. Nor are we to scrutinize closely the 'stream' metaphor as developed: that 'blue surface' must be the concave of the sky, an oddly smooth surface for a 'surge'—if we consider a moment. But in this poetic surge, while we let ourselves be swept along, there is no considering, the image doesn't challenge any inconvenient degree of realization, and the oddness is lost. Then again, in what ways does the approach of a storm...suggest streaming hair? The appropriateness of the Maenad, clearly, lies in the pervasive suggestion of frenzied onset, and we are not to ask whether her bright hair is to be seen as streaming out in front of her... [ERP, pp. 269–70]

The verdict supposed to arise from this series of rhetorical questions is clear: Shelley's poetry can't bear scrutiny.

Shelley's lyrical genius relies, in fact, on casting a spell on the reader. "This poetry induces—depends for its success on inducing—a kind of attention that doesn't bring the critical intelligence into play: the imagery feels right, the associations work appropriately, if (as it takes conscious resistance not to do) one accepts the immediate feeling and doesn't slow down to think" (ERP, p. 271). This judgment accords with—indeed, is a central constituent of—the broader modernist and New Critical revision of the canon, which sought to demote Romanticism, and Shelley in particular, through the charge of sentimentality. The concomitant elevation of the metaphysical poets is of a piece with the general critical tenor of the time: Donne and the

metaphysical poets were devoted to thought, ideas, irony, formal complexity; the Romantics were swept away by emotional effusions of the soul. Leavis is well aware of these broader stakes. Shelley “counted, in fact, for a great deal in what came to be the prevailing idea of ‘the poetical’,” he writes. He goes on to quote that most quoted of Romantic dicta, Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” but, rehashing the reversal carried out by J. S. Mill, concludes that “since the poetry of ‘the age of Wordsworth’ became canonical, the assent given to Wordsworth’s dictum has commonly been Shelleyan” (*ERP*, p. 271). Leavis’s critique of Shelley, then, is more broadly a critique of Romanticism tout court, or at least a certain kind of Romanticism.

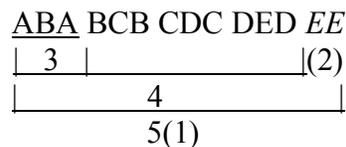
I will return to the question of sentimentality, and also respond to Leavis’s critique of the incoherence of the imagery in the second stanza of the Ode, but doing so requires first understanding the overall formal structure of the poem, the generic conventions and formal affordances at play, and how the poem exemplifies Shelley’s late thought and politics. For all his close “scrutiny,” Leavis can’t seem to see the tree for the leaves, nor the forest for the trees; and his critical failure, aside from the clear ideological nature of his motivations, and despite pretensions to objectivity, is precisely a failure of lyric reading—a failure, that is, to read Shelley’s own historical poetics embodied in the very work of lyric thought.

I. Shelley’s Historical Form

In *England in 1819*, James Chandler analyzes the elaborate 3-4-5 formal patterning of Shelley’s Ode in a powerful reading that has as its horizon Shelley’s own self-conscious

historicism.⁶ Here I pick up on Chandler’s insights into the formal structure of the Ode and attempt to demonstrate how the poem works as a totality—taking into account not just the formal traditions that it mobilizes, but how it fits into the book in which it was published—and why, if one values formal complexity, self-reflexivity, and poetry of powerful thought, it should be considered one of the great masterpieces of lyric poetry. In the process, I hope to hold onto the importance of close reading, but with a method very different from that of the New Critics. The New Critical method of close reading, I contend, was on the one hand a historical result of Shelleyan lyricization, and on the other—and precisely for that reason—was unable to do justice to Shelley’s lyric work. The reading proceeds along three axes: form, style, and music.

The visual appearance of the Ode on the page is the first sign of the verse forms at play: each of the five numbered sections is composed of fourteen lines broken into four tercets and a couplet. Already here, at the most basic visual level, the 3-4-5 formal patterning is apparent, the sonnet stanza itself a divided whole. This stanza structure can be mapped in the following way:



Dante’s *terza rima* is the internal motor, the driving force, of the rhyme scheme, cut off by the traditional concluding couplet of the sonnet after four tercets. It is worth noting in passing that the presence of the couplet not only turns each stanza into a sonnet, the lyric form par excellence of the Renaissance, but also invokes the ghostly presence of the primary verse form of the eighteenth century, still commonly in use in Shelley’s time.⁷

⁶ Chandler, *England in 1819*, ch. 10. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *1819*.

⁷ This is one of the ways in which lyric reading, and restrictive canonization, distorts literary history. A broad statistical analysis of the verse of the Romantic period would no doubt show

The ode is a dialectical form—in the main tradition deriving from Pindar and Horace—which makes it ideal as the primary lyric form for Shelley’s purposes in the “Ode to the West Wind,” involving a complicated dialectic between the poet and history, subject and object, necessity and contingency, materialism and idealism. The first three stanzas, constituting the strophe of the traditional ode, are descriptive; the scene, although this fact is often ignored (I will have more to say about this oversight), is given by Shelley in a footnote, keyed to the title of the poem so that it is read first:

This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions.⁸

These three stanzas, as many commentators have pointed out, proceed through the traditional four elements of classical cosmology: earth, water, air. But where fire should predominate over the fourth stanza, as Chandler points out, instead the poet enters into the poem in dramatic fashion, the first appearance of the “I”—indeed, of any first-person pronoun—in the poem. It is a shift from the objective scene to the subjective, the antithesis in dialectical form, the antistrophe of the ode. The fifth stanza is that of synthesis, the epode, the poet and the West Wind unified through the medium of the poem itself, the poet’s thoughts and words identified metaphorically with the other elements.⁹

that the couplet was a more commonly used verse form than the Greater Romantic Lyric, or the ode, or other forms that we now commonly associate with Romanticism.

⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama, in Four Acts, with Other Poems* (London: C. and J. Ollier, 1820), p. 188. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *PU*. I cite the original 1820 edition of *Prometheus Unbound*, where the “Ode to the West Wind” first appeared in print for reasons that will become clear.

⁹ Shelley’s notebooks show that the first three stanzas were composed initially, and that the final two were only added sometime later. The opening stanzas were composed in pencil in a

In his famous essay on the “Greater Romantic Lyric,” M. H. Abrams notes that the “Ode to the West Wind” “is a variant on it.”¹⁰ It is perhaps most problematic to the argument I’m making here—that Shelley consciously aligned the main forms of the Ode with historical eras—to include the Greater Romantic Lyric in the analysis. After all, it wasn’t named as such, or as a lyric form at all, at the time that Shelley was composing the poem. That Shelley was aware of many of the poems that Abrams points to as distinctive of the form, however, is quite clear—the major exemplars being such poems as Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and the Intimations Ode; Coleridge’s “Eolian Harp,” “Frost at Midnight,” “Fears in Solitude,” and “Dejection: An Ode.” Abrams notes that Shelley’s “Stanzas Written in Dejection” “follows the formula exactly” (“GRL,” p. 201). Shelley almost certainly had Coleridge’s “Dejection” in mind when writing his own stanzas on the theme, just as he had previously written “Mont Blanc” in dialogue with Coleridge’s “Hymn before Sunrise.” The engagement with Wordsworth is even deeper, as is well

notebook given mostly to the composition of *Prometheus Unbound*, “that battered, tattered, water-stained note book” that H. B. Forman believed bore the traces of composing in a thunderstorm. The final two stanzas occur in draft form in *The Witch of Atlas* notebook, now at the Bodleian library, and published as the fifth volume of *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*. H. Buxton Forman, “How Shelley Approached the Ode to the West Wind,” *Bulletin and Review of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Rome*, vol. 1, no. 2 (New York, 1913): 9. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “HSA.” This notebook was transcribed and annotated by Forman after it was purchased by W. K. Bixby, along with two other Shelley notebooks, and published as *Note Books of Percy Bysshe Shelley, from the Originals in the Library of W. K. Bixby*, ed. H. Buxton Forman, 3 vols. Privately Printed for William K. Bixby (St. Louis, MO: 1911). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *NBPBS*. The original notebooks are now in the Huntington Library, where they have been digitized as part of the Huntington Digital Library and are available online: <https://www.huntington.org/>. Hereafter cited parenthetically as HM and the manuscript number. See *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, et al (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986–).

¹⁰ M. H. Abrams, “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), p. 201. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “GRL.”

known. It seems safe to conclude that Shelley wrote the Ode in conscious dialogue with the modified ode forms of the poems exemplary of the Greater Romantic Lyric.

It is worth quoting Abrams's description of the structure of the Greater Romantic Lyric, and to keep it in sight moving forward:

They present a determinate *speaker* in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, *whom we overhear* as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometime with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening mediation. ["GRL," p. 201, my emphasis]

The Greater Romantic Lyric, then, is like the traditional ode a triadic, dialectical form, shifting the movement to the site of a confrontation between the subjective and the objective. Shelley's Ode does fit into this structure in broad outline, but the precise way in which it is "a variant" on the form is of paramount significance, as I will show.

Simon Jarvis recently challenged Abrams's designation of the Greater Romantic Lyric in his essay "Hyper-Pindaric: The Greater Irregular Lyric from Cowley to Keston Sutherland."¹¹ Where Abrams wants to designate a new lyric form distinctive to the Romantic period, Jarvis instead emphasizes continuity through modulation of the Pindaric ode. Nominating the poems "those irregular grand lyrics," Jarvis writes: "In the extent of their variation in line length, rhyme scheme, and meter, these poems revive and mutate a tradition which might well have been

¹¹ Simon Jarvis, "Hyper-Pindaric: The Greater Irregular Lyric from Cowley to Keston Sutherland," in *Active Romanticism: The Radical Impulse in Nineteenth-Century and Contemporary Poetic Practice*, ed. Julie Carr and Jeffrey C. Robinson (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015), pp. 127–144. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "HP."

considered dead at their date of composition, that of the great irregular lyric, or ‘Pindaric,’ pioneered by Abraham Cowley, but then forcibly regularized by Congreve and most succeeding authors of English Pindarics” (“HP,” p. 127). Understanding the history of this tradition is, in Jarvis’s reckoning, indispensable to understanding the Greater Romantic Lyric, renamed and shorn of period specificity. Also indispensable is analysis of the “nuts and bolts” of the poems, that is, “the ways in which they are put together, their rhyming patterns, and how these relate to the complex handling of rhythm and meter.”

It is as though their cloudy trophies should too rapidly be unwoven were they subjected to minute technical analysis of this kind. Yet, at the same time, these nuts and bolts constitute an essential condition, not only of the poems’ versification, but also of their loftiest and most rarefied thoughts. [“HP,” 128]

I intend to pursue Jarvis’s conditions here in regard to Shelley’s Ode. While the challenge posed by Jarvis’s essay is a necessary historical counterpoint to Abrams, however, it is worth holding onto the notion that the Pindaric ode—great irregular lyric, Greater Romantic Lyric, whatever one wants to call it—was given a distinctive formal twist by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats. Most immediately, the history of the Pindaric in English, and the ode more broadly, provides indispensable context for the formal affordances at play in the “Ode to the West Wind.”

What would calling a poem an “ode” signify to a reader who bought Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, the volume in which the Ode was first published, in 1820? The question deserves a fuller treatment than I can give it here, but some sense of the associations elicited by the form—it’s social status, you might say—can be gleaned by looking at some contemporary critical accounts. “The Pindaric,” Jarvis writes, “after its effective invention by Abraham Cowley, became in the public mind a synonym for uncontrolled license” (“HP,” 129). He quotes

Joseph Addison to the effect that his poetry is “after the Pindaric manner, and runs into the beautiful wildness of nature” (ibid.). The lack of any definite rhyme scheme and the varied line length of the Pindaric contributed to this sense of wildness, license, even licentiousness. They even, as Hugh Blair’s popular *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* show, courted the charge of incoherence: “As to professed Pindaric odes, they are, with a few exceptions, so incoherent, as seldom to be intelligible. Cowley, at all times harsh, is doubly so in his Pindaric compositions.”¹² Similarly, John Thelwall in *The Champion* dismisses “that eccentric incoherency of rhythmus first brought into popularity by Cowley,” going on to “disclaim all anarchy of rhythmus.”¹³ This inheritance, however, with a specificity to the English Pindaric tradition rooted in Cowley, must be balanced with an older formal inheritance: that the ode is a distinctly *public* lyric form, ideally suited to political statement. This tradition draws from both Pindaric (proper) and Horatian ode forms.¹⁴ Connected with the public, outward-facing nature of the ode is a recognition of the poet as a public figure of importance.

The final, and very important, aspect of the ode tradition is expressed forcefully by Thelwall’s essay “On Lyrical Poetry,” which condemns Cowley for anarchy.

The essence of the Ode is enthusiasm. It is fitted alike to the noblest and the most vivacious subjects; to the most tender and to the most convivial: it admits even of the mixture of them all.... But whatever be the theme, it must have the flights and the fervours of enthusiasm, or it is odaic only in name. In language it should be the most remote of all poetical compositions from the familiarity of colloquialism: it should be all inspiration. Its rhythmus should be at once discriminative and diversified,—as remote from the stately uniformity of the epic, as from the smooth and level ambiguity of

¹² Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Lecture XL: “Lyric Poetry” (London: Baynes and Son, et al, 1823), p. 435. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LR*.

¹³ Anon. [John Thelwall], “On the Characteristics and Composition of the Ode,” *The Poetical Recreations of the Champion* (London: The Champion Press, 1822), p. 150. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “OCCO.”

¹⁴ See Stella P. Revard, *Pindar and the Renaissance Hymn-Ode: 1450–1700*, (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001).

polished prose; and in the selection of its terms and collocations of its syllables, it should have a harmony as well as a vividness constant and sustained; a liquid melody capable of all diversities of expression... [“OCCO,” p. 149]

The ode is considered the “highest” form of lyric poetry, and the Pindaric is “the most perfect and the most beautiful form of the Ode,” fit “for subjects of the highest order” (“OCCO,” pp. 154–55). Samuel Johnson’s treatment of Cowley accords with that of the critic of *The Champion*, seeing Cowley’s Pindarics as a bastardization of the original, which is a noble form, carrying the enthusiasm of lyricism to public statement.¹⁵

License, freedom, enthusiasm, lyricism, politics, public statement—this small lexicon gives us some sense of the ode form inherited by Shelley, a form carrying its own affordances and readerly expectations. Shelley was at the time of the composition of the Ode engaging in his own study of the classical ode, in all of its main sources: Pindar, Horace, Anacreon, and the Homeric Hymns, several of which Shelley translated. Passages from Pindar’s odes, the Anacreontea, Horace’s Odes, and translations of the Homeric Hymns are dispersed throughout Shelley’s working notebooks of 1819–20, interspersed with drafts of *Prometheus Unbound*, the several odes that Shelley published in that volume, “The Mask of Anarchy,” and the other poems that made up that “little volume of popular songs.”¹⁶

With the four verse forms in view—the ode, *terza rima*, the sonnet, the Greater Romantic Lyric—I will turn now to the poem itself; but, as I will show, these forms can’t simply be forgotten, or taken for granted as static containers of the poem’s content, as they are integral to

¹⁵ Samuel Johnson, “Abraham Cowley,” *Johnson’s Lives of the British Poets, Completed by William Hazlitt*, vol. 2 (London: Nathaniel Cooke, 1854), pp. 88–127.

¹⁶ See HM2176 and HM2177.

closer analysis of the poem, which will also reveal how the forms themselves have further significance, and how Shelley mobilizes formal traditions for new purposes.

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

[*PU*, p. 188–89]

Chandler notes two opposing “movements” in this opening stanza, shifting in the fifth line with the repetition of the apostrophic address “O thou.” This structure repeats itself in each of the first three stanzas, and represents a departure from the traditional sonnet, characterized by a volta, or turn, from the octet to the sestet. Shelley, in effect, makes the structure triadic: a shift or volta near the center of the sonnet marked by a repetition of the apostrophic address, and the concluding couplet, each time repeating the exhortation to the wind to “hear.”

The two movements hinge on the status of the West Wind as “Destroyer and preserver,” simultaneously driving the leaves to their death and the seeds to their “wintry bed” to sleep until the rebirth of spring. It is perhaps useful here to make a bricolage of Structuralist reading itself, delineating the binary oppositions held in tension in the first stanza; these binaries give us a sense of the terms of the Ode’s dialectic. The first is already in sight, and it is the most

important: life and death, being and nothingness, preservation and destruction. To this can be added: 1. I | Thou; 2. Necessity | Contingency; 3. West | East; 4. Autumn | Spring; 5. Body | Soul; 6. Visible | Invisible. The I | Thou dichotomy is at the center of the classic reading of the Ode by Harold Bloom, drawing upon Martin Buber. I will have more to say about this; for now it is worth noting that the “I” is conspicuously absent from the opening stanza, only implied negatively by “thou.” These binaries offer a way into what might be called the deep conceptual form of the poem.

Necessity and contingency are central not just to the Ode but to Shelley’s thinking, his historical poetics, and his late works in general. The wind is a classic symbol of contingency, as in the famous lines of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*:

True, I talk of dreams:
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy;
Which is as thin of substance as the air,
And more inconstant than the wind, who woos
Even now the frozen bosom of the north
And, being angered, puffs away from thence,
Turning his side to the dew-dropping south

It is worth noting that this follows after Mercutio’s long speech about Queen Mab, which Romeo interrupts saying “Thou talk’st of nothing.”¹⁷ The inconstancy of the West Wind in the Ode is clear from the adjective “wild.” Against this is pitted the inexorable circular law of the annual change of seasons, captured here in the binary Autumn | Spring, itself bearing the necessity of death and rebirth. *Queen Mab* has further relevance here, because it is there that Shelley first developed this seasonal metaphors so central to the Ode.

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 1111, I.IV, ll. 96–103.

The passage comes at the beginning of the fifth canto of *Queen Mab*, as analyzed in my first chapter, the central canto of the poem both structurally and conceptually: the canto that places commerce and selfishness at the core of the “existing state of things.”

Thus do the generations of the earth
Go to the grave, and issue from the womb,
Surviving still the imperishable change
That renovates the world; even as the leaves
Which the keen frost-wind of the waning year
Has scattered on the forest soil, and heaped
For many seasons there, though long they choke,
Loading with loathsome rottenness the land,
All germs of promise. Yet when the tall trees
From which they fell, shorn of their lovely shapes,
Lie level with the earth to moulder there,
They fertilize the land they long deformed,
Till from the breathing lawn a forest spring
Of youth, integrity, and loveliness,
Like that which gave it life, to spring and die.
Thus suicidal selfishness, that blights
The fairest feelings of the opening heart,
Is destined to decay, whilst from the soil
Shall spring all virtue, all delight, all love,
And judgment cease to wage unnatural war
With passion's unsubduable array.

[*CP*, 2:197–98]

The tree represents “the system” of society, the leaves the generations of individual human beings that live and die within that system. The metaphorical constellation of the tree and the seasons concretizes Shelley’s necessitarianism, derived from Hume, Godwin, Volney and the other *philosophes*, and from Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*. An empire and tyranny may last for many generations, just as a tree survives for many years, shedding its leaves each autumn; but all empires fall eventually. What remains is the “imperishable change” and the soil that will give

birth to new trees. The same core philosophy is presented in “Ozymandias”: the tyrant’s monument has fallen, but the “lone and level sands” remain.¹⁸

As Chandler analyzes in some depth, this metaphorical constellation is developed further in canto 9 of *Laon and Cythna*. Significantly, seeds replace the leaves in the metaphorical structure:

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

[*PS*, 2:214]

The first stanza of the Ode draws together the two aspects of this metaphorical schema developed in *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*: the wind scatters the leaves and the seeds simultaneously, both destroyer and preserver. It is social change conceptualized through the cycle of the seasons, itself a traditional symbol of the cycle of life in pastoral, all of it determined by the doctrine of necessity, a strict materialism.

The politics of this conceptualization are the liberal politics of the Enlightenment, the historicism progressive. This can be exemplified in the early exchange of letters between Shelley and Godwin when Shelley was engaged in radical organizing in Ireland and Wales—“preparing a scene of blood,” as Godwin put it (*LPBS*, vol. 1, p. 270). For Godwin, much as for Kant, as exemplified in *What is Enlightenment?*, change must proceed through the progressive spread of knowledge among the populace: the task of the enlighteners is to secure freedom of the press and

¹⁸ Cf. also “Adonais”: “The One remains, the many change and pass.” *CP*, 3:326–7.

to circulate knowledge. Tyrants and oppressive systems will eventually succumb to this gradual enlightenment, and the people, in the process, will have been prepared to replace them with more just systems of governance, eventually, for Godwin, obviating the need for any government at all. The movement of history is toward the perfectibility of mankind: a progressive development of knowledge, justice, and equality.

There's a problem with this conceptualization, however. Where does the cycle stop? All empires eventually fall, and why should republics, like Rome, or democracies, like Greece, be exempt from this imperishable change? With this problem comes the recognition that enlightenment must be global, it cannot be merely national—it must encompass all the people of the earth. (Here, the East | West binary becomes of paramount importance.) In *Queen Mab*, Shelley turns to Christian eschatology to solve this problem, offering a vision of a millenarian utopia: heaven on earth. It is the strategy deployed generally by pre-Marxist, or prescientific, utopian socialism, whether in Owenite or Lasallian variations. That Shelley had, by Peterloo in the fall of 1819, become uncomfortable with—skeptical of—this liberal conceptualization of cyclical change is clear not only in his explicitly political works such as “The Mask of Anarchy” and the *Philosophical View of Reform*, but in the Ode itself. The Ode develops a competing conceptualization, a competing metaphoric, for revolution: that of the storm, or more broadly, the natural disaster. Against the necessity of the cycle he pits the contingency of the event.

II. Shelley's Style and Its Others

Having now analyzed the formal framework and what can be called, drawing on Structuralism, the semiotic framework (the network of binary oppositions), I will turn to stylistic analysis. Chandler's reading proceeds by highlighting the “metaphorical mismatching” of the

opening stanza, which is characteristic of Shelley's verse in general, incongruities of the type decried by Leavis. The leaves are driven from the "unseen presence" of the west wind, and "by *what* the leaves are driven is left, as it were, up in the air." The simile shifts agency to the leaves, which are now not "driven" but "fleeing" from "an enchanter." And wouldn't "the enchanter's power...tend to hold the ghosts against their will"? Unlike the metaphors of the opening lines, however, those of the second movement of the first stanza "cooperate, corroborate, and cohere." Chandler concludes that this juxtaposition of incoherence and coherence, obscurity and clarity are "tellingly motivated," and that the "two movements comprise an introduction to the *Ode* only, therefore, when they are read together" (1819, p. 533–34). It's a canny insight, and I hope to build upon it here.

My argument is that the opening stanza of the *Ode* is not just a recapitulation of *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*, respectively, but also a process of self-revision. The incoherence of the opening metaphors, from this view, reflect Shelley's doubts about the cyclical trope of social change—and, more generally, liberal progressivism—as developed with such self-assurance in the fifth canto of *Queen Mab* and further elaborated in *Laon and Cythna*. The incoherence, or incongruities, of the metaphors all point to one problem: that of agency. Where does agency lie, with the leaves, with the wind, or with the enchanter? This problem of agency, as I noted in the previous chapter, is key to Shelley's late political and poetic thinking.

A further look at *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna* helps in clarifying the status of the "enchanter," which Shelley identifies with the illusions of religion as wielded by tyrants, the "opiate of the masses." Thus, Cythna's speech in canto 9 continues:

Virtue, and Hope, and Love, like light and Heaven,
Surround the world.—We are their chosen slaves.
Has not the whirlwind of our spirit driven

Truth's deathless germs to thought's remotest caves?
Lo, Winter comes!—the grief of many graves,
The frost of death, the tempest of the sword,
The flood of tyranny, whose sanguine waves
Stagnate like ice at Faith, the enchanter's word,
And bind all human hearts in its repose abhorred.

[PS, 2:214–15]

At the end of canto 4 of *Queen Mab*, just before the passage quoted above that begins the fifth canto, Shelley argues that the system of monarchy and empire rests on “three words:”

—well tyrants know their use,
Well pay them for the loan, with usury
Torn from a bleeding world!—God, Hell, and Heaven.
[...]
These tools the tyrant tempers to his work,
Wiends in his wrath, and as he wills destroys,
Omnipotent in wickedness: the while
Youth springs, age moulders, manhood tamely does
His bidding, bribed by short-lived joys to lend
Force to the weakness of his trembling arm.

They rise, they fall; one generation comes
Yielding its harvest to destruction's scythe.
It fades, another blossoms: yet behold!
Red glows the tyrant's stamp-mark on its bloom,
Withering and cankering deep its passive prime.
He has invented lying words and modes,
Empty and vain as his own coreless heart;
Evasive meanings, nothings of much sound,
To lure the heedless victim to the toils
Spread round the valley of its paradise.

[CP, 2:195–95]

The tyrant's red “stamp-mark,” coupled with the tyrant's “Pale victims on the guarded scaffold” in *Laon and Cythna* provide further specificity to the “Pestilence-stricken multitudes,” “Yellow and black and pale and hectic red” of the Ode.

The problem of agency in the openings lines is also fundamentally connected with the last of the binary oppositions delineated above: body | soul and visible | invisible. The first is

brought into play in the first metaphor of the poem, the West Wind as “breath of Autumn’s being,” Shelley knowing very well that *anima* in Greek means “soul” and “breath.” It is further developed in the simile likening the leaves to “ghosts.” This, as is well known, draws on a long-standing epic tradition; and the epic simile of the leaves as the multitudes of dead spirits also brings the question of redemption into play. The descent to the underworld in *The Aeneid* is particularly germane. On the banks of the Acheron, “A huge throng of the dead came streaming toward the banks,” “As thick as leaves in autumn woods at the first frost / that slip and float to earth.” More important than this shared trope, however, is the description of the “spirits” who are “owed a second body by the Fates”:

the sky and the earth and the flowing fields of the sea,
the shining orb of the moon and the Titan sun, the stars:
an inner spirit feeds them, coursing through all their limbs,
mind stirs the mass and their fusion brings the world to birth.
From their union springs the human race and the wild beasts,
the winged lives of birds and the wondrous monsters bred
below the glistening surface of the sea. The seeds of life—
fiery is their force, divine their birth, but they
are weighed down by the bodies’ ills or dulled
by earthly limbs and flesh that’s born for death.¹⁹

Not only are the four elements here, but the presentation mirrors that of the Ode: air, earth, and water are given, interrupted by “mind,” and then fire enters last as the source of rebirth. The redemption for these souls in *The Aeneid* is a cyclical process—“a cycle of time” must be “seen through” before these “great armies of souls” “may revisit the overarching world once more” (ibid., p. 207). In countering this with the logic of the event, as in the “Mask,” Shelley folds damnation and redemption, destruction and preservation, death and rebirth into a single moment,

¹⁹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 2006), book VI, pp. 192, 206.

unifying points that are widely separated in time. This will become clearer through analyzing Shelley's negative dialectics of life and death, through the figure of the grave.

The central binary opposition of the poem—life | death, preservation | destruction—initiates the *terza rima* machine, for the first two end-line rhymes are “being” and “dead.” The word “dead” bears a great weight, not just because it is the rhyme word that jump starts the *terza rima*, but because of the syntax of the line and a metrical aberration: “leaves dead” is both syntactical inversion and a spondee, ending the line with two strong stresses and in the abeyance of enjambment. Here it is worth returning to a similar moment in the “Mask,” a moment that likewise seems poor versification and perhaps an example of what Empson called Shelley's “self-inwoven” tropes.²⁰ It is the conclusion of the stanzas that are central to my reading of the poem as historically real prophecy, the presentation of the *figura futurorum*:

And Anarchy, the ghastly birth,
Lay dead earth upon the earth;
The Horse of Death, tameless as wind
Fled, and with his hoofs did grind
To dust the murderers thronged behind.

[SRY, p. 91]

Here, too, the word “dead” is at the center of a moment of metrical aberration. How should “Lay dead earth” be scanned? Again, the weight given to the word “dead” stops us in our tracks. I don't know quite what to do with this line as a reader, and what I'm trying to suggest is that this is a calculated effect on Shelley's part—he makes the word “dead,” in both instances, a kind of dead weight on the reader, something that stops us in our tracks.²¹

²⁰ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p. 160–61. See also William Keach, *Shelley's Style*, ch. 3, “Reflexive Imagery” (New York: Routledge, 2016 [1984]), pp. 79ff.

²¹ Here some of the tools of phenomenology could prove useful. Such metrical and syntactic aberrations could be seen as throwing the reader into a state of unreadiness-to-hand in relation to the poem; that is, when meter is simply functioning, it is not an object of attention in the world, it

Above, I noted the strong correspondences between the Ode and the Mask at this moment. It is now worth reflecting on these correspondences in the opposite direction, because the “dead” that were most indelibly on Shelley’s mind at the time must have been the people—men, women, and children—murdered in the Peterloo Massacre. With this in mind, the leaves “fleeing” the “enchanter” take on a concrete historical reality: the unarmed masses of people fleeing from the tyranny of the Yeoman cavalry at St. Peter’s Field. This is not to say that the larger metaphorical complex in which the generations of mankind are troped as leaves, a figure with its own deep roots in the epic, is not operative—in fact, I would argue that the event of Peterloo is responsible, at least in part, for Shelley questioning the philosophy of history and revolution that gave birth to that metaphorical schema first laid out in *Queen Mab*, and gives rise to the doubts about its coherence that plague the opening lines of the Ode. As noted previously in my reading of the Mask, arguably the central interpretive problem at the core of the poem is that of agency, just as it is the problem at the core of the incoherence of the figures at the beginning of the Ode.

Shades of Peterloo haunt as well the seeds that lie “Each like a corpse within its grave” awaiting the rebirth of spring. More problematic for a revolutionary reading of Shelley than anything in the Mask, perhaps, is the conclusion of the “Song to the Men of England,” which has been hailed as the most openly revolutionary of Shelley’s poems and as presenting, in embryo, a theory of the exploitation of labor. But the final two quatrains take an unexpected swerve:

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells;
In halls ye deck another dwells.
Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see
The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

recedes into the background. We only become conscious of it when it breaks down, which could be intentional on the part of the author or not.

With plough and spade, and hoe and loom,
Trace your grave, and build your tomb,
And weave your winding-sheet, till fair
England be your sepulchre.

[*SRY*, p. 102]

Keach argues that attempts to explain these lines as “sardonic” and through “sceptical irony” are unsatisfying, requiring “a simpler and more straightforward reading that accounts plausibly for what Shelley says to his readers in these lines” (“RLL,” p. 94). I can’t offer a simpler and more straightforward reading of these lines, because I don’t think there is one. What hasn’t been fully appreciated, however, is the complexity of the figure of the grave, and, correspondingly, the difficult figure of life, in Shelley’s late works.²²

Having just called on the people to “Forge arms,—in your defence to bear,” it seems an inexplicable reversal to then immediately tell the men of England to “shrink” away to “cellars, holes and cells” (*SRY*, pp. 101–2). Having in the *Mask* called on the people to “Shake your chains to earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you,” it seems contradictory that here Shelley questions “Why shake the chains ye wrought?” (*SRY*, pp. 99, 102). Instead of taking up the tools of their labor in self-defense, they are told to “do what Marx and Engels said the capitalist bosses do—dig their own graves,” as Keach puts it (“RLL,” p. 95). But there’s the rub: Shelley uses the verb “trace” exactly where one would expect the verb “dig.” What does it mean to “trace your grave”? *Trace* is a complicated verb, semantically rich. According to the *OED*, in its oldest meanings it carried a sense of movement, travelling over something—traversing. Closer to our present sense of the term is to track, pursue, or follow something, as well as,

²² On the concept of *life* in Shelley’s work, see Ross Wilson, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

relatedly, to draw, sketch, plan, map out, or diagram something. But whatever sense is applied, the trace is not the thing itself, and the command is ambiguous.

Shelley made his own trace related to the grave as he was first composing the lines that would ultimately conclude the “Ode to the West Wind” (see Figure 8). It’s a grave drawing of a face resting behind the concluding lines of this draft in *terza rima*:

And what art thou presumptuous who profanest
The wreath to mighty Poets only due?
Even whilst, like a forgotten name thou wanest
Touch not those leaves which for the eternal few
Who wander oer the Paradise of fame
In sacred dedication ever grew—
One of the crowd thou art,—without a name
Ah friend, ‘tis the false laurel which I wear
And though it seem like it is not the same
As that which bound Milton’s immortal hair
Its dew is poison, and the hopes which quicken
Under its chilling shade, though seeming fair
Are flowers which die almost before they sicken
And that I walk thus proudly crowned withal
Is that I know it may be thunderstricken
And this is my distinction, if I fall
I shall not creep out of the vital day
To common dust nor wear a common pall
But as my hopes were fire, so my decay
Shall be as ashes covering them. Oh, Earth
Oh friends, if when my has ebb’d away
One spark be unextinguished of that hearth
Kindled in²³

The concluding lines, which rest on top of the trace of the grave face, are heavily revised, scratched out, themselves traces of hesitations and doubts. H. Buxton Forman, who first published these lines as they appear in the notebook, describes Shelley’s drawing:

²³ Transcription of the lines from notebook HM2176 by H. Buxton Forman, in “How Shelley Approached the Ode to the West Wind,” *Bulletin and Review of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Rome*, ed. Sir Rennell Rodd and H. Nelson Gay (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913), pp. 7–8. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “HSA.”

Now on the page of the drafted *terza rima* with which we have just been dealing—the page where the rejected utterances about the “wide grave” and the “wide pit” occur—there is mixed up with the draftings about ashes and the unextinguished spark what seems to be a facial illustration of the word *grave*; it is a rocky, ghastly, savage face, recalling in a rough way the abject semi-human giants of George Cruikshank. It suggests a personification of the man-eating grave; and over the top of the head Shelley has scrawled in pencil (the top of the head is itself pencilled, though the horrible face is done in ink) the words *homo gravis*, and then a capital H, as if he was about to repeat *Homo* with a capital. Higher up, over the words *To common dust*, he has pencilled *Je suis un homme grave* and then between that and *homo gravis* the word *Un* as if he would have repeated the last three of the five French words with an initial capital. [“HSA,” p. 10]

The presence of the French perhaps recalls the remarkable and surrealistic appearance of Rousseau as just such a distorted face, a “grim Feature,” merged into the earth, in “The Triumph of Life,” the poem in which Shelley gave full rein to *terza rima*—the poem forever interrupted by Shelley’s own death.

The lines follow immediately on the jubilee of death that succeeds the procession of the chariot of “A Janus-visaged Shadow,” recalling the procession of Anarchy in the Mask.

Struck to the heart by this sad pageantry,
Half to myself I said, “And what is this?
Whose shape is that within the car? & why”—

I would have added—“is all here amiss?”
But a voice answered...“Life”...I turned and knew
(O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)

That what I thought was an old root which grew
To strange distortion out of the hill side
Was indeed one of that deluded crew,

And that the grass which methought hung so wide
And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,
And that the holes it vainly sought to hide

Were or had been eyes...

[*PP*, p. 460]

As in the Mask, a voice emerges from the earth, but where that voice is left deliberately and confoundingly indeterminate, this voice is gruesomely particular. Rousseau is undead—like the old man in Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence,” “not all alive nor dead.”²⁴

This draft fragment of *terza rima*, then, and Shelley’s tracing of *homo gravis* might be seen as the seed not only of the Ode, but of “The Triumph of Life.” One of his models for “The Triumph of Life” is, of course, Petrarch’s “The Triumph of Death,” the substitution suggesting “the identity of identity and nonidentity.”²⁵ Shelley’s punning on “grave” in Latin and French, which Forman reads just a grim joke, has, I think, a more profound significance—a significance that bears on both the Ode and the “Song to the Men of England.” Much as death has become life-in-death, the grave has become in these late works a symbol not of death, but of rebirth-through-death.

In this regard, Shelley’s movement, or rather the workers’ movement from grave to tomb to sepulchre is significant. A tomb is grander than the grave, and the sepulchre, of course, carries connotations of Christ’s burial and resurrection. Shelley, always conscious of his audience, again appeals to the millenarian strain in popular radicalism, as he had done in *Queen Mab*. In this light, Keach shouldn’t be so surprised over the “thunders of applause” that greeted G. W. Foote’s reading of the poem before a large audience of workers in London in 1892 (“RLL,” pp. 94–5).

The millenarianism of the sepulchre and Christian eschatology would be clear to working-class

²⁴ William Wordsworth, “Resolution and Independence,” *The Collected Poetry of William Wordsworth* (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 196. The phrase *un homme grave* appears *Emile*, in a passage that seems perhaps germane to the Ode: “It was, it seems to me, a rather touching spectacle to see a grave man become a rascal’s comrade and to see virtue lend itself to the tone of license in order to triumph over it more surely.”

²⁵ Hegel’s *Logic*, quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ND*.

radicals, but it hardly dispels the difficulty of the concluding quatrains of the “Song.” There’s an ambiguity to this series of commands and questions, an ambiguity that seems to hinge on the problem of labor that is so central to the poem as a whole.

The poem begins with a series of questions—very similar to Benbow’s *Grand National Holiday*—asking why the workers perpetuate with their very lives a system that exploits their labor for the few. The fifth quatrain states the point simply, and the sixth responds with a parallel series of commands:

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.

Sow seed,—but let not tyrant reap;
Find wealth,—let no imposter heap;
Weave robes,—let not the idle wear
Forge arms,—in your defence to bear.

The song could have ended there without confusion. But in so doing it would have ended without really addressing the difficult problem that has been raised: that is, the ultimate source of the system of class oppression. The penultimate stanza seems to suggest that active resistance itself is another form of labor to be exploited. It seems at first glance to advocate quietism, but the lines are unstable. “Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells” and do what? “Why shake the chains ye wrought?” could be interpreted not as an injunction to accept the chains, but to throw them off entirely. It is noteworthy that the final lines enjoin a refusal of the labor that makes the system of oppression work.

The primary goal of the Reform movement, of “Orator” Henry Hunt, the main speaker at Peterloo, was the expansion of voting rights. Shelley responds to this by saying: No, the system has to be overthrown from the very foundation, which is the exploitation of your labor by the

few. Representation in Parliament isn't enough; all of England must be fundamentally transformed. "The system of society as it exists at present," Shelley wrote to Hunt, "must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms..." (*LPBS*, 2:191).²⁶ Perhaps more relevant than Marx and Engels's passage from the *Communist Manifesto* that the bourgeoisie dig their own graves, is the recognition that the historical task of the proletariat is its own destruction—that is, the end of itself as a class by the abolition of the entire system of class oppression.

But the poem still leaves us with the same generative indeterminacy that is at the center of the Mask, an indeterminacy that centers on the question of agency. Should the workers engage in passive resistance, or in violent revolution? Is a refusal of labor, including even the labor of active resistance, enough? Can the workers say, like Bartleby the Scrivener, "I would prefer not to," and transform the system of their exploitation? Can they go on a general strike—Benbow's *Grand National Holiday*—and through nonviolent means put an end to the exploitation of labor? Shelley ultimately leaves this generative indeterminacy unresolved; this doubt is shot through his late works, including the *Philosophical View of Reform*. More immediately, in terms of the reading of the Ode being advanced here, my claim is that this indeterminacy is registered by the competing tropes of the cyclical change of the seasons and the storm, Enlightenment progress and the event, liberal and radical historicism.

Another puzzle, also unresolved in the Ode, concerns its pointed numerical permutations. The 3-4-5 logic of the Ode is at play in the first stanza with the four seasons, though,

²⁶ The letter, appropriately, is dated May 1, 1820.

importantly, only autumn, winter, and spring are operative; there is no mention of summer. That is, much like the development of the four elements, the fourth season is absent. It enters the poem only in the third stanza. It has long been recognized that the description of the leaves—“Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red”—correspond with the traditional four races of humanity. This has been used as an example of Shelley’s “weak grasp upon the actual,” and his tendency to fly off into cloudy obscurities, letting his metaphors take over the poem at the expense of coherence and grounded thought. *Black leaves?* But this is precisely where a corrective to the critical tradition is necessary. It is a point, as I analyzed previously, of critical unanimity from the beginning, whether it is interpreted as a strength or a weakness, that Shelley’s poetry cannot hold the phenomena in view. And, as we’ve seen, it’s at the core of the modernist critique of Shelley, as exemplified by Leavis.

Anyone who has attended closely to the fallen leaves, however, especially if they have Shelley’s lines in mind—as I always do (it’s not a matter of choice)—will have noticed that yellow leaves frequently have black spots on them, sometimes so many that they are almost covered in them. The order in which Shelley gives the colors—“Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red”—is surely not accidental; the phenomenal truth at the base of the line would be lost if it were, say, “Yellow, and pale, and black, and hectic red.” Again, this is not to say that Shelley doesn’t intend the abstract association with the four races of humanity, but only to say that the poem remains rooted in the phenomena in front of him. It is, in fact, a remarkable and vivid description—perhaps the best we have in all of poetry in English—of the onset of a thunderstorm in autumn.

The importance of the prose footnote setting the scene of the poem becomes paramount here. The failure to consider it as part of the poem is a failure of lyric reading. In fact, the scene

provided gives the reader a perfect map of the development of the descriptive stanzas of the Ode: first, “that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating”; second,” the wind “collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains” and “a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions”; and, third, the “phenomenon alluded to at the conclusion of the third stanza,” which Shelley notes “is well known to naturalists,” of the “vegetation at the bottom of the sea, of rivers, and of lakes” sympathizing “with that of the land in the change of seasons” being “influenced by the winds which announce it” (*PU*, 188). The Ode remains rooted throughout in the phenomena of the scene described, even as it uses these phenomena for an elaborate and vital metaphorical superstructure.

Leavis’s critique, which fails to untangle the imagery and the phenomena in the scene, centers on the second stanza of the Ode. The primary phenomena of the first stanza are the leaves and the seeds, that is, earth. The second stanza shifts focus to the onset of the thunderstorm as seen on the horizon over the sea, and to the gathering clouds in particular—in terms of the four elements, air.

Thou on whose stream, ’mid the steep sky’s commotion,
Loose clouds like earth’s decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine airy surge,
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. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: O, hear!

Anyone who has watched a distant thunderstorm over a large body of water has experienced a merging on the horizon, to the point to which the horizon itself, the division between the water and the sky, has become indistinguishable—just as in a dense forest canopy it is unclear where the branches and leaves of one tree end and those of another begin. The poem is perfectly clear about the primary phenomena here: thunderclouds, rain, and lightning. As the clouds are composed of the vapor that eventually falls as rain, it hardly seems an incomprehensible simile to compare them to the falling leaves, especially given that the leaves are already on the reader's mind after the first stanza. And despite the explicit mention of lightning, both in the footnote at the beginning of the poem and in the stanza itself, Leavis seems unable to comprehend the simile that likens the lightning to hair. It may be that part of what is peculiar about that “magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions” is that the lightning often passes from cloud to cloud rather than from the cloud to the ground or the sea.

Part of the difficulty of Shelley's imagery here is that he is attempting a description of phenomena that are themselves indistinct, transitory, liminal. Paul de Man made this point apropos of the figuration of light in “Triumph of Life,” pointing out that “Shelley's imagery, often assumed to be incoherent and erratic, is instead extraordinarily systematic whenever light is being thematized. The passage condenses all that earlier and later poets...ever did with light, water and mirrors” (“SD,” 57). One of the burdens of de Man's reading in “Shelley Disfigured” is to show that the difficulty in Shelley's figures, his tropes, is strategic: “the syntax and the imagery of the poem tie themselves into a knot which arrests the process of understanding” (“SD,” 44). It is also worth recalling here Amanda Jo Goldstein's account of Lucretian

“simulacra that derive from no single thing, but instead arise spontaneously (*sponte sua giguntur*), when floating figures shed from *many* sources accidentally cohere (*concrescere*) in air” (SS, p. 179). The incongruities of the opening figures of the first stanza ultimately draw us to the problem of agency; the difficulty of the figures of the second stanza, while firmly rooted in the scene in front of Shelley, are likewise motivated.

I’ve argued that Shelley is providing two competing figurations of historical change: the seasonal cycle and the storm. The overlapping of the two figurations in the second stanza, through carrying over the metaphorical constellation of the tree and the leaves, which so confused Leavis, is clearly intentional. Unlike the revolution of the seasons, which leaves the tree intact through the life and death of generations, clouds are destroyed by the rain and hail that falls from them. The storm also brings in the Promethean element of fire through the lightning: the natural element that can interrupt the normal seasonal cycle of the tree by destroying it in a single flash. Contrary to Leavis’s dismissal that “we are not to ask what the tree is,” the superimposition of these figurations, properly understood in the context of Shelley’s oeuvre and his thinking about revolutionary politics, directs us to *exactly that question*. Similarly, it is not the leaves that are dead here, but the year itself: “thou dirge / Of the dying year”. Aside from this mention of the year, the seasons are completely absent from the stanza. In a single catastrophic event, the cycle is broken. The dual function of the west wind as “Destroyer and preserver” is carried into the second stanza, the lightning figured both as “Angels” and as “a fierce Maenad.” Lightning, like the wind, is a symbol of utter contingency. The figure of the “sepulchre,” as in the “Song to the Men of England,” promises resurrection. Leavis’s critique, then, demonstrates not the absence of thought in Shelley’s verse, but his own inability, or unwillingness, to think through the intentional difficulties of Shelley’s figures.

Here it is worth recalling Shelley's post-Peterloo letter to Peacock, where he explicitly uses the storm as a figure of an approaching revolution: "These are, as it were, the distant thunders of the terrible storm which is approaching. The tyrants here, as in the French Revolution, have first shed blood. May their execrable lessons not be learnt with equal docility!" (*LPBS*, 2:119). His subsequent letter to Hunt on Richard Carlile provides further context for the metaphorical sense of the "collecting of the vapours" before the storm:

These, my dear Hunt, are awful times. The tremendous question is now agitating, whether a military & judicial despotism is to be established by our present rulers, or some form of government less unfavourable to the real & permanent interests of all men is to arise from the conflict of passions now gathering to overturn them: *We* cannot hesitate which party to embrace; and whatever revolutions are to occur, though oppression should change names & names cease to be oppressions, our party will be that of liberty & of the oppressed. [*LPBS*, 2:148]

That these passages from Shelley's letters, specifying the figural status of the storm in his political thinking, have not been considered essential to any reading of the Ode is likewise a failure of lyric reading, the reader too long chained and bowed by the law of supposed fallacies.

The third stanza turns the focus to the third element, water, and to summer, the season that has thus far been conspicuously absent from the poem.

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh, hear!

[*PU*, pp. 190–91]

In the seasonal metaphorical scheme, summer figures as Shelley's earthly heaven, the utopian millennium. Canto IX of *Queen Mab* provides this vision of an eternal summer, the triumph of love over tyranny and violence and oppression. Summer in the Ode is presented only in dreams, a much more modest utopian vision—a negative utopia, one might say—carried by the melodic beauty of these lines. The “palaces and towers” overcome by flourishing nature—“All overgrown with azure moss and flowers”—recall the ruined palaces and prisons in canto IX of *Queen Mab*. The cleaving of the Atlantic, meanwhile, recalls the parting of the Red Sea by Moses in *Exodus*, a symbol of deliverance.

As mentioned, the fourth stanza brings an unexpected irruption of the “I,” of the poet, into the poem, interrupting the description of the natural scene and a patterned progression through the elements.

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

For better or worse, that most (in)famous line of the Ode—“I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”—has been taken as paradigmatic of the emotionalism, or sentimentality, of Romanticism. Take, for example, the following general account from the *Oxford Companion to Emotion and the Affective Sciences*:

The idea that the arts could or should express emotion came into its own in the Romantic period. Romantic poets, painters, and composers talked of themselves as expressing their own deepest emotions in their work, so that when Shelley cried, “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” his readers could take him to be expressing his very own emotions in his verse.²⁷

For Cleanth Brooks and the New Critics, the line exemplified Shelley’s sentimentality, his “sometimes embarrassing declarations,” and a lyricism run amok without the “restraining form” and “qualifying self-irony” that rescues the poetry of Keats.²⁸

This judgment attained such a degree of triumph by the 1950s, that any critical attempt to rehabilitate Shelley had to respond to it. This was done most influentially by Frederick Pottle’s student at Yale, Harold Bloom. Bloom announces that he is “following” Pottle’s “The Case of Shelley” in reading Shelley “as a prophetic poet” and that a “major purpose” of his book “is to demonstrate that Shelley is...‘a passionately religious poet.’”²⁹ As such, Bloom reads the Ode through the Old Testament prophets, the Psalms and Songs, and through Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. This framework allows Bloom a reading of some power, in particular, the power to

²⁷ Jennifer Robinson, “Aesthetic Emotions (Philosophical Perspectives),” in *The Oxford Companion to Emotion and the Affective Sciences*, ed. David Sander and Klaus R. Scherer (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 8.

²⁸ Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1967 [1939]), p. 237. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *MPT*.

²⁹ Harold Bloom, *Shelley’s Mythmaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 66–67. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SM*. On Pottle’s essay, and Bloom’s assuming of its mantle, see Chandler, *1819*, ch. 9, “The Case of ‘The Case of Shelley’,” pp. 483ff.

respond to the charges of sentimentality brought on the fourth stanza of the Ode. With the irruption of the “I,”

we move from the natural to the human order, and the wind must confront a Thou for the first time. The deep tragedy, and it can be demonstrated to be that, of this fourth stanza is to be found in the despairing prayer of a Thou to be treated as an It. Unless we understand the total contrast between this hopeless prayer and the resolving prayer of the last stanza, then we will fail completely to understand the whole of the ‘Ode.’ Too many readers fail to comprehend that the fourth and fifth stanzas are deliberate contrasts, with the result that they either isolate the fourth stanza from the poem or, still worse, carry it over to the fifth, and fail to see how either the fourth *or* fifth stanza is related to the first three. [*SM*, p. 84]

The drama of the stanza is in “a choice” between the I-It relationship and the I-Thou relationship to the wind. These are “the categories of religious choice: the way of despair, which is a submission to the natural process, a dwindling out of the myth down to object status, a denial of poetry; or another way...a renewal of myth, an affirmation of images and image-making power” (*SM*, 84). The poet is confronted with his status as just another object of the wind, just another part of the natural world like the leaf, the cloud, and the wave, subject to the immutable laws of nature. That in this recognition he “still addresses the wind directly” gives the stanza a “Jobean” tragic quality, redeeming it from sentimentality: “This is not *self*-pity; perhaps indeed no pity is involved but only recognition of an aspect of the human situation” (*SM*, 84).

Bloom’s reading does much to recover the power of the fourth stanza through relating it to Biblical prophecy, and understanding it in relation to the poem as a whole. But what is most telling in Bloom’s reading is what is absent, the misprision through which Shelley’s politics are entirely elided in favor of religious mythopoesis. I will return to this point, but for now it’s worth taking Bloom’s reading as a brief detour. In particular, I want to turn now to the music of the poem, what Mutlu Konuk Blasing has called the “microrhetoric” of lyric—“intraverbal condensations, substitutions and displacements of the elements of the signifier”—and what I

have called elsewhere the phonemic unconscious of the poem.³⁰ At this level one finds a very different kind of dialectic between the I and the Thou.

III. Lyric—I—Form—History

Blasing writes that “the lyric ‘I’ is the divide it inhabits; it lives the history of the passage from a cry to a shifter, the entry into language to become ‘human.’” This passage is condensed in the first two syllables, the first three phonemes, of the Ode—“O, Wild”—the “I” inscribed within the originary wildness of presymbolic nature, and the infant’s cry (/wa/). The passage also traverses vowel space itself, from the apostrophic /o/, close and back in the mouth, to the open front /a/ to the close front /y/. The “O” is a pure sound without sense. “Lyric is characteristically extravagant,” writes Jonathan Culler, “performing unusual speech acts of strange address, and the empty ‘O’ that often accompanies apostrophe—‘O wild West Wind’—beautifully illustrates the semantically empty play of language, as in sound patterning, that organizes and distinguishes lyric.”³¹ The repetition of /w/ in “Wild West Wind” is iconic of the blowing of the wind itself, and if one continues to map the passage through the vowels on the vowel chart of the International Phonetic Alphabet, it creates a sort of swirling motion—/o/, /ay/, /ɛ/, /ɪ/—culminating in a chiasmic repetition, /wa/-/aw/, in “Thou,” the whole whirlwind movement framed by “O” and “breath.”³² The “I,” then, despite not “appearing” in the poem until the fourth

³⁰ Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 86. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LP*.

³¹ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 212. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *TL*.

³² On phonemic iconicity in poetry, see Eric Powell, “Iconicity, the Phonemic Unconscious, and the Music of Poetry,” *Thinking Verse*, vol. 5, “Intonation” (2016): <http://www.thinkingverse.org/issue05.html>

stanza, is from the start, in the microrhetorical structure of the poem, in dialectical tension with “Thou.”

The juxtaposition of /o/ and /ay/, a symbol of passage from sound to signifier, entry into the symbolic itself, repeats throughout the poem in increasingly more complicated patterns. The first of these, appropriately enough, is in the first simile of the poem: “like ghosts.” It recurs again with the seeds that “lie cold and low,” each “like a corpse,” and, with slight vocalic modulation, with “like flocks.” Each of the three similes, then, in the first stanza repeat the opening two notes, as it were, of the poem, but with the priority reversed: the passage into language makes tropes possible, but simultaneously precludes any return to pure sound, the presymbolic. In the second stanza, the motif modulates but continues in “sky’s commotion,” and “horizon,” and likewise in the third stanza with “Lulled by the coil” and, significantly, “thy voice.” “Thy voice,” coming in the concluding couplet of the third stanza, before the entry of the “I” into the poem in the fourth, unifies at the phonemic level “Thou” and “I.” In a sense, it captures the magic and the paradox of prosopopoeia: the wind has no voice, it is only given voice through a speaking “I”—only when “Thou” and “I” have been unified in “Thy voice” is the “I” liberated to speak, simultaneously giving voice to the wind. In this way, the antistrophe of the fourth stanza is logically “prior” to the preceding stanzas. The motif continues in the fourth stanza with “my sore need” and “thorns of life,” but finds full consummation only in the prayer of the fifth stanza: “make me thy lyre even as the forest is”; “Drive my dead thoughts over the universe”.

Whereas /ay/ and /o/ form a motif, repeating throughout, after the initial chiasmus of “wild” and “Thou” the vowel notes of “I” and “Thou” are kept apart throughout the first three stanzas, with the sole exception of “clouds like” in the second stanza. The microrhetorical

structure of the third stanza is notable in that /ay/ disappears at just the moment in the poem when the /aw/ of “Thou” achieves greatest prominence. It is precisely the lines leading up to the merging of I, Thou, and O through “Thy voice.” After a dense concentration—one might say a coil—of /ay/ in the third and fourth lines—“Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams / Beside a pumice isle in Baiae’s bay”—*I* disappears, giving rein to O and Thou:

And saw in sleep **old** palaces and **towers**
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All **overgrown** with azure moss and **flowers**
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! **Thou**
For whose path the Atlantic's level **powers**

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far **below**
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless **foliage** of the **ocean, know**

Thy **voice**

The “I” drops out of the poem, as it were, at precisely the moment of the sublime contemplation of the universe without humanity, which overwhelms the senses. In *Queen Mab*, humans, liberated from tyranny, populated the ruins of the palaces and the prisons; here, there are no human beings, only the ruins “overgrown with azure moss and flowers.”

In the fourth stanza, I and Thou come back together in the microrhetorical structure of the vowel music: “cloud to fly”; “thy power”; “outstrip thy skiey speed.” The word “like,” central to the preceding analysis of the I-Thou dialectic in the vowel music of the poem, itself an index of the synthetic power of language so central to Shelley’s understanding of poetry’s historical and political efficacy, likewise disappears from the third stanza, which has no similes. The sublime vision of the earth without humanity is in fact the only pure description in the poem, without the superimposition of imagery derived from metaphor and simile. This absence of simile, the poet’s

synthetic power, continues throughout the fourth stanza; only at the end of the stanza does “like” return: “A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.” But this “like” is no simile—rather, it is an excess of simile that disarms simile itself: there is too much likeness.

As with the /o/-/ay/ motif, the I-Thou vocalic dialectic finds completion in the fifth stanza, where it is incorporated into a complete statement, the center of the stanza and of the prayer: “Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!” With this, the synthetic power of the poet returns for the final and essential similes of the entire poem:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

[*PU*, p. 192]

Notably, Thou is absent in these lines, except as a silent, ghostly presence: it is graphically contained in “thoughts” and “through,” and for the first time in the poem the /θ/ serves as a rhyme sound (though unvoiced whereas it is voiced in “Thou”). The “I,” also absent, finds its completion only as one small part of “mankind” and the hope for the future expressed in the concluding question.

The final sentence of the Ode in the first draft was not a question but a statement: “O Wind, / When Winter comes Spring lags not far behind” (“HSA,” p. 12). This indecision is not accidental, but is constitutive of the Ode itself. The question that Shelley settled on may seem at first purely rhetorical: of course spring will come, as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow. But in

the context of the competing metaphorical schemes—cycle and event—and the formal contradictions of the poem (to be analyzed further below), the rhetorical nature of the question is itself brought into question. A rhetorical question is no question at all, in fact, but a cue for the poser of the question to provide an answer. If Shelley's question is nonrhetorical, it raises another question: Who is to answer the question at the end of the Ode?

This brings us back to the problem of agency, which has been the central problem running through this chapter, and, I argue, in Shelley's late historical poetics. Chandler addresses the problem of agency, and the poet's instrumentality, in the final stanza of the Ode. He identifies a shift from the lyre, "the Romantic topos of the Aeolian harp," to the trumpet, which "reverses the directionality implicit in the earlier command":

In the context of the initial imperative about the lyre it is difficult not to read the "trumpet" of the penultimate line as an instrument, and, read this way, the metaphor turns itself inside out. This is so because, not only does the wind become in two senses the poet's instrument, it is the work of the poet that is "making" the wind that instrument. The wind will be the trumpet of a prophecy through the poet's lips: "through," in the sense now not of passive access but of active agency. [1819, pp. 544-45]

It's the first moment in the poem where the poet has any agency, and it's ambiguous, flipping between the wind and the poet like a Gestalt shift. As Chandler puts it, "The Wind makes Shelley make the Wind make Shelley make the Wind and so on" (1819, p. 545). But the problem of agency is more complicated here, encompassing the figure of apostrophe with which the poem opens, and the question with which it closes.

The term *apostrophe* is derived from the Greek *apostrophēin*, meaning "to turn back, turn away." To begin with apostrophe, then, is to begin with a turn, a swerve. But what is this swerve turning away from, or turning back to? Answering this question requires a reconsideration of Shelley's perceived audiences, or the lack thereof, as well as questions of voice—questions of

prosopopeia, or giving voice, that, as we've seen, animate the Ode and Shelley's other late works.

Culler quotes "Quintilian, speaking of oratory," who "defines apostrophe as 'a diversion of our words to address someone other than the judge'" (*TL*, p. 212). It's a turning away, then, from the law, the superego, the social. Adorno is emphatic on this point:

The "I" whose voice is heard in the lyric is an "I" that defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective, to objectivity; it is not immediately at one with the nature to which its expression refers. It has lost it, as it were, and attempts to restore it through animation, through immersion in the "I" itself. It is only through humanization that nature is to be restored the rights that human domination took from it. Even lyric works in which no trace of conventional and concrete existence, no crude materiality remains, the greatest lyric works in our language, owe their quality to the force with which the "I" creates the illusion of nature emerging from alienation. ["LPS," p. 41]

Adorno claims that lyric poetry is paradoxically grounded in society to precisely the extent to which it turns away from society toward an immersion in language itself. In apostrophic address, especially to the inanimate natural world, as in the Ode, the subject of the lyric "I" expresses its alienation, reducing itself to the status of an object. This in fact bears witness, as Adorno puts it, to "suffering in an existence alien to the subject and to love for it as well" (*ibid.*). The Ode performs this suffering in the irruption of the "I" in the fourth stanza, the desire to be an inanimate object, an It, and the actual state of Promethean suffering—"I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed! / A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee, tameless, and swift, and proud." But the turning away of apostrophe is not just an illusory escape from the social law, the judging superego; it's also a turning away from homogeneous time and a turning back to history.

Culler sees apostrophe as the quintessential figure of lyric. The distinction is predicated on lyric temporality:

The fundamental characteristic of lyric, I am arguing, is not the description and interpretation of a past event but the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special ‘now,’ of lyric articulation. The bold wager of poetic apostrophe is that the lyric can displace a time of narrative, of past events reported, and place us in the continuing present of apostrophic address, the ‘now’ in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur. Fiction is about what happened next; lyric is about what happens now. [*TL*, p. 226]

The relation of lyric temporality to Benjamin’s conception of *Jetztzeit*, now-time, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” is productive here. “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time,” Benjamin writes, “but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*].”³³ He goes on to clarify this concept in a number of ways, distinguishing “historicism” from “historical materialism.” Whereas historicism “contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history,” the historical materialist “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time” (*ILL*, p. 208). Shelley’s late lyric forms infused with history, I suggest, are an attempt to grasp the constellation of his own *Jetztzeit* in relation to earlier eras. If poetic forms are, objectively, “sedimented history,” then Shelley brings not just these forms into productive tension, but also these historical eras.³⁴ “Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration

³³ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, p. 205. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ILL*.

³⁴ I take “sedimented history” from Adorno, *ND*, p. 163, which takes up Benjamin’s terms: “The object opens itself to a monadological insistence, to a sense of the constellation in which it stands; the possibility of internal immersion requires that externality. But such an immanent generality of something individual is objective as sedimented history. This history is in the individual thing and outside it; it is something encompassing in which the individual has its place. Becoming aware of the constellation in which a thing stands is tantamount to deciphering the constellation which, having come to be, it bears within it. The *chorismos* of without and within is historically qualified in turn. The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects—

pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad.” This monad, Benjamin claims, is precisely how historical materialism “approaches a historical subject”: “In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (*ILL*, p. 207). The “Ode to West Wind” is just such a crystallization of the past into a “configuration pregnant with tensions,” not just in terms of the tropes and images, but formally, as I will show. Benjamin’s messianic time—*Jetztzeit*—meanwhile, can also be given another name: lyrical time.

It remains to consider the other form of address in the Ode—the famous question with which it concludes. The question is also in the form of apostrophe to the wind, which would entail that it’s a question that will never receive an answer. But the wind is a medium of circulation, and this is where the problem of audience becomes paramount. An event, if it is to have political effects, must be circulated. I’ve already shown the ways in which Shelley, from *Queen Mab* onward, thought about and struggled with problems of audience and circulation. The core of the prayer that is the Ode is that Shelley’s thoughts and words reach people, that they are somehow circulated.

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge.”

The two models of change—cycle and event—are here paired together: the leaves and the fire. The “dead thoughts” and “withered leaves,” as many have pointed out, suggest the pages of his books that had been published, neglected as many of them were. This is, of course, the obvious means of circulation of poetry at the time—in print, through books and journals. What model of circulation, however, is represented in the figure of the “unextinguished hearth” scattering his words like “ashes and sparks”?

Here I think it is necessary to return to the class politics of print and communication in the period. The nascent working class, unable to afford most printed material, had to resort to various other methods of circulation: the reading aloud of journals and other ephemera at coffee houses and other meeting places; the passing on of cheaply printed, often pirated, books through various hands; and simply by word of mouth. The point here is that Shelley again recognizes that the circulation of his words, if they were to accomplish the political awakening he so ardently desired and devoted his life and work to, would need to take many forms, not just the kind of “small neat Quarto,” he ironically requested for *Queen Mab*, “on fine paper & so as to catch the aristocrats: They will not read it, but their sons & daughters may” (*LPBS*, 1: 361). And, as I tried to show in my first chapter, this is exactly what happened, through the agency of the radical pirates: his words were detached and scattered out of the books in which they were first published—printed in fragments in cheap working-class periodicals, recited at radical meetings, memorized by Chartists and Owenites and kept close to the mind and heart. Publishing books, in other words, is insufficient: to live, words have to inspire real people.

At the time of the writing of the Ode, Shelley’s “Mask of Anarchy” and other radical songs were languishing with Leigh Hunt, who, as I’ve discussed, wouldn’t publish them until ten years after Shelley’s death, and after passage of the 1832 Reform Bill. Shelley’s attempt to take

the great political event of 1819—the Peterloo Massacre—and render it into the form of historically real prophecy, a revolutionary event, had no chance to reach an audience. In this light, the prayer to the west wind takes on an air of hopelessness.

But perhaps not, for I would suggest that an indispensable source for those “ashes and sparks” is Milton’s defense of freedom of the press, *Areopagitica*, which Shelley would reference in his letter on Richard Carlile:

But now the bishops abrogated and voided out of the church, as if our reformation sought no more, but to make room for others into their seats under another name; the episcopal arts begin to bud again; the cruise of truth must run no more oil; liberty of printing must be enthralled again, under a prelatical commission of twenty; the privilege of the people nullified; and, which is worse, the freedom of learning must groan again, and to her old fetters: all this the parliament yet sitting. Although their own late arguments and defences against the prelates might remember them, that this obstructing violence meets for the most part with an event utterly opposite to the end which it drives at: instead of suppressing sects and schisms, it raises them and invests them with a reputation: ‘The punishing of wits enhances their authority,’ saith the Viscount St. Albans; ‘and a forbidden writing is thought to be a certain spark of truth, that flies up in the faces of them who seek to tread it out.’³⁵ [*The Prose Works* (1848), pp. 84–5]

As I’ve shown, this is precisely what happened with Shelley’s “forbidden” works—including the ones that Hunt refused to publish, and precisely because of radical pirates, those unlicensed printers, such as Carlile and Benbow.

The concluding question, to return, and if I’m correct that it shouldn’t be read as merely rhetorical, directs agency to the reader. If apostrophe is a turning away from the collective, from society, the question at the end is a turning back to society, an opening of agency and responsibility to the reader. The problem represented by the juxtaposition of two models of change—the progressive cycle and the revolutionary event, as well as the seemingly inevitable

³⁵ John Milton, “Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing,” *The Prose Works*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Herman Hooker, 1845), p. 183.

recapture of the event within the cycle—is a collective problem. We have to figure it out together.

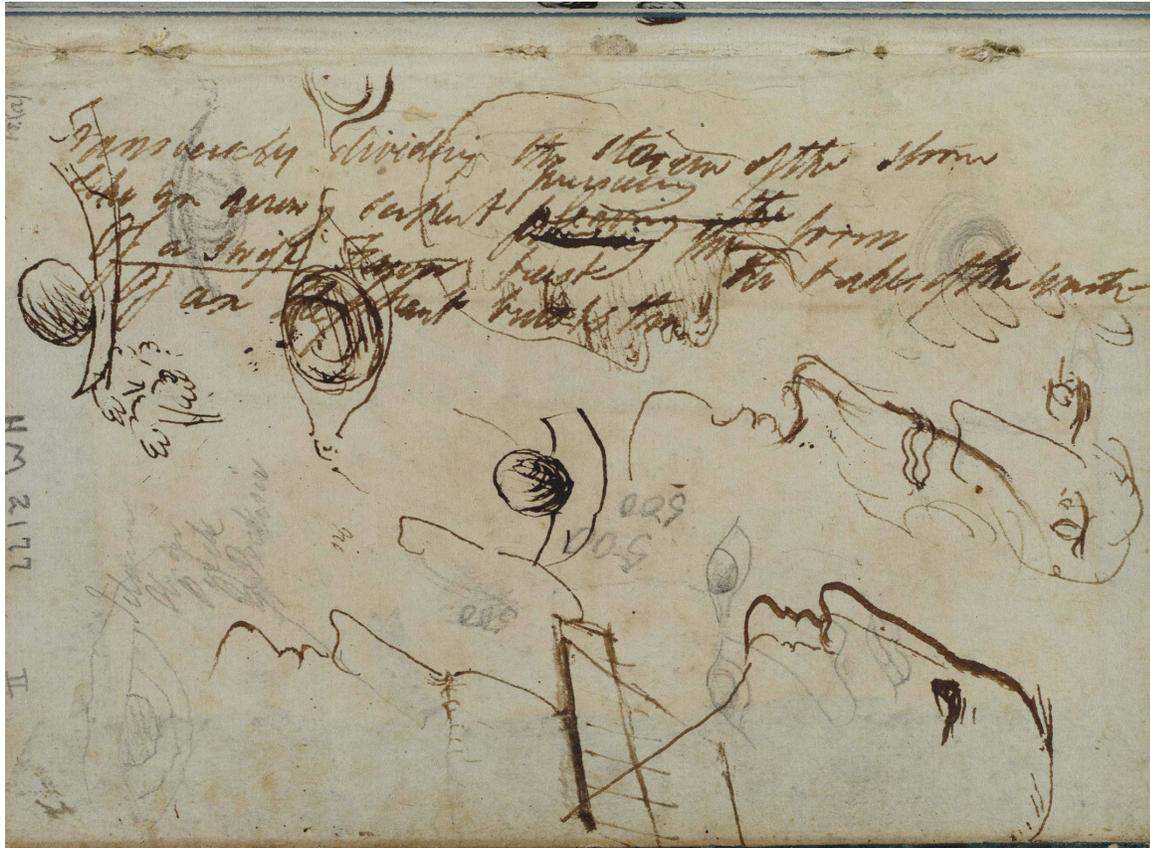


Figure 9: Shelley's notebook doodles of faces and other figures, over some lines of poetry. HM2177.

IV. Shelley's Expenditures, and (My Lack of) Class

O, what can I say about the figures—the numerous drawings, doodles, financial calculations, fragments of Greek and nonsense, names and pet names, lists of books and elements—all these myriad markings and inscriptions, indexes of the fullness of a human life, even the banality of the quotidian, that populate the notebooks in which Shelley composed the poems that we now read, wrenched out of the rich and dull palimpsest, in various books and

anthologies? Nothing. Instead, I'm to play a child's game of imagining that Shelley doesn't exist, that only the poem and its fictive drama exist. I'm to make up a story about this drama, turning the poem into a narrative, no matter how much it might resist this operation by drawing me into its non-narrativity—the excess, *dépense*, of sound and signification, the affordances of its verse forms, the incantation of its prosody. But Shelley isn't the only ghostly elephant in the room. I'm also to pretend that I don't exist, that I'm not an individual reader situated in a particular moment of historical time, a moment that makes demands on what and how I read and on how I respond to my reading. There's only the poem, not even a book, no material object of any kind.

The experience of reading the Shelley manuscripts, notebooks, and journals is far other than that of reading poems on the page, even in a critical edition with variations. It's not just the materiality of these objects, the aura of their age and status in special collections, which one must have certain qualifications, a certain authority, to access. It's that they're closer to the life of which they were a part, further away from dead letters and from that ideal abstraction “the poem itself.” To read them, you have to spend some time with the handwriting of PBS and Mary Shelley, they take some deciphering, some commitment. They carry the expenditure of time, and of thought, not just in the words, but in the various sketches, doodles, and so on—occupying the idle hand, while the mind searches for the words. They carry, too, humdrum everydayness—bills that need to be paid, financial calculations, expenditures of a more banal type. Finally, they carry the signs of the expenditure of time and energy and thought—the anguish and doubt—that was the act of composition: all the false starts, the words scored or crossed or blotted out, rewritten, crossed out again, the beginning again, and failing—the failing better, perhaps, and then

beginning again—the impossibility and necessity of writing. All of this creates sympathy between me, the reader, and PBS and Mary Shelley, the authors.³⁶ But I can't speak of this.

This amputation of the incommensurable—culling the wildness of any text and any personal encounter with it—is of a piece with the positivism that dominated twentieth-century criticism in the US, the most prominent sign of which is the prominence of the word “fallacy” in several major critical essays. The New Criticism must also be understood historically, of course: the method of reading championed by Brooks and Warren in *Understanding Poetry* served a pedagogical need, especially in the college boom following the G.I. Bill. It presented an effective way of teaching poems without the baggage of biography, history—all that indistinct and seemingly endless penumbra called *context*. Instead, there was only the text. There is something democratizing in this move: you don't have to be an expert on all the subtleties of the Romantic period to read Shelley or Keats; their poems are organic wholes, structures of words that stand or fall on their own. But this pedagogical method became critical law.

In *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, an attempt to redefine literary history and the canon following T.S. Eliot's ideas in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Cleanth Brooks takes Shelley as a central case:

One of the most striking evidences of the inaccuracy of the traditional account of English poetry is seen in the ease with which Shelley and Keats are paired. . . . The traditional historian hardly sees Shelley as a very unsatisfactory poet greatly inferior to Keats. A more considered view must surely hold him so. [*MPT*, p. 237]

³⁶ So many of the fair copy manuscripts are in Mary's hand: What did she contribute in the process? I don't think she was a mere typewriter.

He goes on compare Keats and Shelley on several points, always to Shelley's detriment. Here, however, it's worth focusing for a moment on the charge of sentimentality, which is at the center of Brooks's demotion of Shelley:

Shelley is not merely guilty of poor craftsmanship—slovenly riming, loosely decorative and sometimes too gaudy metaphor. Consideration of the two poets on the basis of tone and attitude will reveal more important differences. Keats is rarely sentimental, Shelley frequently so. Keats is too much the artist to risk Shelley's sometimes embarrassing declarations—'I die, I faint, I fail,' or 'I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!' Keats, even in his apprentice stage, attempts to give his lyricism a restraining form; he maintains his objectivity as in 'To Autumn'; he attempts a qualifying self-irony as in the 'Ode to a Nightingale.' [MPT, p. 237]

Above I summarized Harold Bloom's defense of this line from the Ode. I hope that my own reading further clarifies how this line and this stanza must be understood in relation to the poem as a whole and the various formal, stylistic, and microrhetorical patterns that shape it. Brooks goes to bat for perhaps Keats's most infamous line: "Even the abstract statement, 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty, that is all/Ye know on earth,' cannot be removed from the poem without violence. It is defined and given meaning only in terms of the context, and is taken legitimately only as a statement elicited by the preceding lines of the poem, and as one element in the whole experience" (MPT, p. 238). Apparently, Shelley's poems aren't worthy of this same treatment.

To a sympathetic reader aware of the details of Shelley's troubled life, the Ode is hardly sentimental. In fact, it's a remarkable act of self-restraint, avoiding even the pleasure of self-deprecation. Recall the lines quoted above, preceding Shelley's drawing of the *homo gravis*:

And what art thou presumptuous who profanest
The wreath to mighty Poets only due?
Even whilst, like a forgotten name thou wanest
Touch not those leaves which for the eternal few
Who wander oer the Paradise of fame
In sacred dedication ever grew—
One of the crowd thou art,—without a name
Ah friend, 'tis the false laurel which I wear

Similarly, the lines that fill the page of the drawing of the grave face—in my best attempt to replicate them here in Word—show how tortured Shelley was over the conclusion to the Ode, how wracked with doubt and uncertainty.

Is that I know it may be thun-
 derstricken
 And this is my distinction, if I fall
~~It may not be ingloriously~~
~~That I stand forth~~
 From these rest huddled into the wide
 Not to be huddled into the wide day
 Under the shall creep pit grave
 I will ^ not crawl out of their vital air
 je suis un homme grave
 Un To common dust, nor wear a common pall
 homo gravis H
~~But as hopes were fire, so my despair~~
~~Shall be as ashes—covering them.~~
 Dear Friend
 If any spark be unextinguished there
 the
 When I am dead
 If when this mortal — has ebb'd away
 do
 One spark be unextinguished, thou
 Let Spar

Contemplation of his own inadequacy as a poet, of his own death and the afterlife of his words manifested, in the end, in the fate of humankind as a whole and the pleading hope that his words at least reach his fellow creatures.

Put in the larger context of the history of Shelleyan criticism, the charge of sentimentality should perhaps seem odd. For Hazlitt, Shelley was too *philosophical*, too prone to getting tangled up in systems of thought. But this difference points to a shift in critical terms of evaluation in the hundred years or so that separate Hazlitt from Brooks and the New Criticism. Sentimentality had become, by the time of the modernists, perhaps the gravest charge that could

be leveled against a work of art. As I. A. Richards put it: “Nowadays the accusation of sentimentality is more annoying than any slur cast upon our capacity as thinkers, for our moral capital is invested in our feelings rather than our thoughts.”³⁷ The shift in the meaning of the term, from a positive term associated with refined sensibility, to a negative one associated with indulgence in gross emotion, was already well underway by the middle of the nineteenth century.³⁸ The adjective increasingly became attached to the word *socialism*, as often by Marxists critiquing utopian socialism as reactionaries defending the status quo.

A move that Brooks makes in *Modern Poetry* is telling from this angle. In his chapter on “Metaphysical Poetry and Propaganda Art,” he seeks to defend the one and damn the other on purely critical grounds, arguing that the “propagandist-poet” is guilty of “oversimplifying experience.” Rallying Eliot, Richards, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate behind him, he claims that propaganda poetry is a “poetry of exclusion,” and that “it lacks the inner poise and stability, the constant self-criticism of poetry of the highest type” (*MPT*, 50). It has been clear for some time at this point that the exemplar of the “propagandist-poet” is Shelley. Brooks goes on:

Here perhaps we have an answer for Horace Gregory’s defense of propaganda art in which he states that “Shelley’s failures *are not traceable to his use of propaganda*.” One could hardly choose a more apt case. The characteristic fault of Shelley’s poetry is that it excludes on principle all but the primary impulses—that it cannot bear an ironical

³⁷ Richards, *Practical Criticism*, p. 241.

³⁸ On the “sentimental mode,” see James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013). A Cambridge essayist from 1855 details the contemporary shift in the term: “Etymologically, ‘sentimental’ ought to mean, capable of sentiment; and, inasmuch as sentiment is nothing else than feeling, every man, and indeed every animal, might be described as being in that sense ‘sentimental;’ but the meaning which we popularly attach to the word has become considerably extended in some respects, and much narrowed in others. It denotes, not a capability of any sort of feeling, but the habitual indulgence of one particular class of feelings; that is to say, tenderness, and principally tenderness by way of association, and it is seldom used without implying disapprobation.” *Cambridge Essays, Contributed by Members of the University* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1855), pp. 172–73.

contemplation. What Shelley's regenerated world of *Prometheus Unbound* really has to fear is not the possible resurrection of Jupiter but the resurrection of John Donne. Grant that, and chaos comes again. [MPT, p. 51]

Pausing for a moment to admire Brooks's wit and his Donne pun—the next move is of particular interest at the moment. For Brooks immediately turns his attention to “the recently published anthology, *Proletarian Literature*,” which exhibits “modern examples” of the failure of propaganda poetry.

The characteristic fault of the type of poetry exhibited is *sentimentality*. The term is used advisedly. These poems demand a sympathetic audience upon which they may rely for a sympathetic context. At their worst, even the more obvious aspects of sentimentality appear. It requires no special definition of the term to convict the poems of Genevieve Taggard, Langston Hughes, and others in the collection of just this vice. The experience established involved illegitimate exclusions and a special posing in a special light. [MPT, 51]

That Brooks can dismiss an entire anthology with the summary charge of sentimentality, perhaps an oversimplification, which is also, as shown earlier, one of his chief grounds against Shelley, is not a coincidence. Beneath the sheen of objectivity is the substance of class politics.

Not to be accused of keeping two sets of books myself, and while I hope I've shown that Shelley can be defended against his detractors on more traditionally and rigorously literary-critical grounds, my motivation for doing so has much to do with my own beliefs and commitments. I am, as Shaw once said, “like Shelley, a socialist, an atheist, and a vegetarian.” I believe that for true human freedom to be realized, the institution of marriage must be abolished, that love must be free. I believe, with the editors of the *London Co-operative Magazine*, quoted in my second chapter, that Shelley's “Poems abound in the most glowing descriptions of social perfections, and in the most persuasive appeals to the finest feelings of the heart in favour of social equality, and a just division of the rights, duties, and enjoyments of life” (vol. 4, no. 2, 1830, p. 32). And, while I've tried to analyze the ways class struggle has informed not just

Shelley's reception and canonization, but the development of criticism itself, ultimately I consider this work itself no detached and cold analysis, but an act of class struggle, in two senses: I hope it embodies commitment to the class struggle in its content, but it was also a class struggle to write it.

So this is *my* Shelley, but not mine alone. I hereby inscribe myself in that class of readers for whom Shelley was always the poet of the working class, their struggle: George Cannon, William Benbow, Richard Carlile, Julian Hibbert, Henry Hetherington, James Watson, G. H. Lewes, George Eliot, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Eleanor Marx, G. B. Shaw, Henry Salt, Gregory Corso, Gandhi, Paul Foot, and all the nameless workers who found inspiration—fire—in his words.³⁹ The class of readers who have always fought to keep Shelley alive, to raise him from the tomb of the dead letter, to reconstruct his body, prevent him from being dematerialized, from being reduced to an ineffectual angel, or a mere religious maker of myths—to save him, that is, from liberalism and reaction. The class of readers who have recognized, at least intuitively, that, in Benjamin's words "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (*ILL*, p. 201). If Shelley is an angel, he is Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, via Klee, rather than Arnold's; or he is (Shelley's) Milton's angel of light, fighting, futility be damned, against tyranny.

Finally, it remains to be said that this reading, like all readings, is not for all time, but for and of its time. As with Shelley in 1819, it seems clear that there is a "terrible storm"

³⁹ Here, I take inspiration from Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1985) and in general from the socialist-feminist tradition, of which the Shelleys and the Godwins are an essential part.

approaching us, perhaps has already arrived. After decades of cyclical boom and bust of the neoliberal financial markets, each worse than the last, revealing that we are all captive to a financial system that can only continue its self-destructive predations through massive government intervention in the form of bailouts and injections of taxpayer liquidity; after decades of capitalist-imperialist wars, culminating in the perpetual “War on Terror”; after decades of declining wages, increasing immiseration, systematic destruction of labor unions, and erosion of social welfare; after centuries of murderous racism; after all of this, it seems that only some cataclysmic event can break the cycle. As with Shelley in 1819, the only ethical response is that “*We* cannot hesitate which party to embrace; and whatever revolutions are to occur, though oppression should change names & names cease to be oppressions, our party will be that of liberty & of the oppre{ss}ed” (*LPBS*, 2:148).

V. Form—History—Lyric

Let me return now to where I began, with the verse forms that Shelley deploys in the Ode. Considered from the larger context of the history of the Pindaric in English, the problem of incoherence of the metaphors and imagery of the Ode takes on another valence: wildness and incoherence are an integral part of the history of the form itself. But precisely at this point what might be called a formal contradiction comes into focus: the Ode is not, strictly speaking, a Pindaric. Instead of the varying line lengths, irregular rhyme schemes, and variable stanzas one would expect from the Pindaric, Shelley proceeds by way of strict iambic pentameter and the interlocking, law-like rhymes of *terza rima*—to form a series of sonnets, no less. The poem is, at every level, in a state of internal, formal strife against itself.

Dante's *terza rima* is perhaps the perfect machine for the endlessness of epic, creating what can be mapped as a series of interlocking circles, as in the figure below. It's a form, much like the interlocking circularity of the natural world—diurnal, annual—that is in perpetual motion. That Shelley cuts it off abruptly to form sonnets is remarkable, because in opposition to the *perpetuum mobile* of *terza rima*, the sonnet, that “scanty plot of ground,” is perhaps the most static of lyric forms—a form of repose and reflection, as expressed best perhaps in Wordsworth's famous sonnet “Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room.” Indeed, Wordsworth's characterization of writing a sonnet as being imprisoned was perhaps on Shelley's mind. For no less remarkable is turning a series of sonnets into the wildest, freest, most unrestrained and enthusiastic form, the ode. This may seem virtuosity for its own sake; but in fact, these formal contradictions reflect the dialectical tensions of the poem as a whole.

As the diagram shows, the 3-4-5 structural logic is operative in the rhyme scheme of the stanza. Each new rhyme word—each event of rhyme—is recaptured in the cycle, reproducing the circular motion: ABA gives way to BAB, which gives way to ABC, which in turn gives way to BCB, and so on. After the initial rhyme, the life, as it were, of each rhyme is five lines—encompassed in the largest of the circles. Moreover, each stanza has a total of five rhyme words. Some further observations about the rhyme scheme are in order. So far as I know, no one has thought to map the rhyme scheme of the poem as a totality; doing so produces some, let's say, interesting results (see Figure 11). There are a number of patterns that emerge. A benefit of this layout—spatializing the temporal phenomenon (at least in the experience of the poem) of rhyme—is that it can be analyzed horizontally as well as vertically. Starting with the initial rhyme words of each stanza, then, it's noteworthy that each stanza begins with a new rhyme with the sole exception of the fourth stanza, which begins with the E rhyme—that is, the rhyme that

encloses each stanza in the prison cell of the sonnet. This is, moving vertically now, also the stanza that breaks the pattern of concluding with the apostrophe “o hear!” And here we enter into some strange, murky territory, for the rhyme letters at the end of this stanza spell the word “no” twice, as in “that’s a no-no,” right along those embarrassing, sentimental lines.

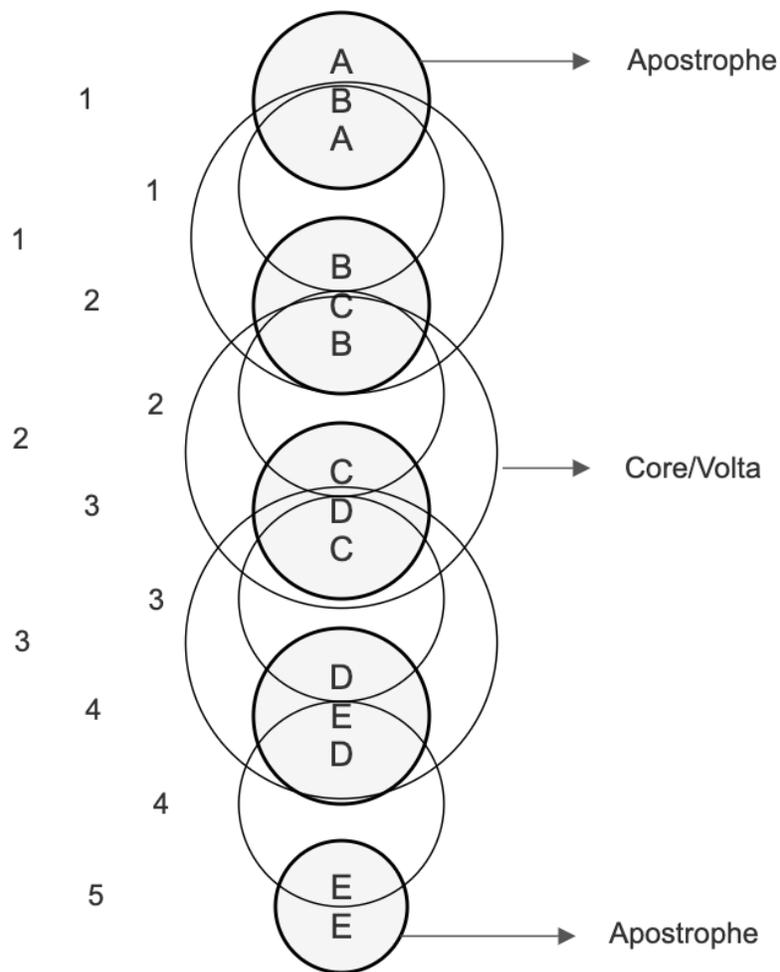


Figure 10: Diagram of the interlocking rhyme scheme of the *terza rima* of the Ode.

Stanza	1	2	3	4	5
Rhymes 1	being A	commotion F	dreams I	bear E	forest is P
2	dead B	shed B	lay J	thee L	its own Q
3	fleeing A	<u>Ocean</u> F	<u>streams</u> I	share E	harmonies P'
4	red B	spread B	bay J	free L	tone Q
5	thou C	surge G	towers K	even M	spirit fierce P''
6	bed B	head B	day J	be L	one Q'
7	low C'	verge G	<u>flowers</u> K	<u>Heaven</u> M	universe P'''
8	until D	height H	Thou C	speed N	birth R
9	blow C'	dirge G	powers K	striven M	verse P'''
10	fill D	night H	below C'	need N	hearth R'
11	<u>air</u> E	sepulchre E''	wear E	<u>cloud</u> O	mankind S
12	hill D	might H	know C	bleed N	<u>earth</u> R''
13	everywhere E	atmosphere E'	fear E'	bow'd O	<u>Wind</u> S'
14	o hear E'	o hear E'	o hear E'	proud O	behind S

Figure 11: The Rhyme Scheme of the Ode as a Totality

To practice Keats's negative capability for the moment, and stick with these "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts": all of the elements appear as rhyme words—"air" in the first stanza, "Ocean" in the second, "streams" in the third, "Heaven" and "cloud" in the fourth, and "earth" in the fifth—with the exception of "fire." In fact, the word "fire" only appears once in the poem, at the conclusion of the second stanza: "Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh hear!"

But fire is graphically contained in “Spirit fierce” in the fifth stanza. The first appearance of each new rhyme word is in bold in the table, revealing that the first, of course, has five rhyme words, the second has three, the third has three, the fourth has four, and the fifth has four, but with an asterisk next to it—an asterisk that I’ll return to shortly. The second and third stanzas only have three new rhyme words each, because each repeats two rhymes from the first stanza—E, of course, but the second stanza repeats the B rhyme, and the third repeats the C rhyme. This repetition of the C rhyme—right in the very middle of the poem at the end of the eighth line of the third stanza—isn’t just a repetition of the rhyme, but of the word itself: “Thou.” If this pattern were to continue, then the D rhyme would repeat in the fourth stanza, but it breaks with this pattern as well, jumping right to the E rhyme from the start.

I’ve already discussed the significance of the first two rhyme words, “being” and “dead”; but here it is worth returning for a moment to the microretorical structure of the poem, because these two rhyme words also introduce a kind of counterpoint in the vowel music that runs through the entire poem: that is, shifting from /i/ to /ɛ/. The concluding rhymes of the stanza repeat this pattern in reverse, creating a chiasmic structure: “everywhere” and “hear.” This variation in rhyme—slant rhyme, or off rhyme—is noted above with an apostrophe: E’. The second and third stanzas repeat this shifting of the vowel music of the E rhyme—and, notably “sepulchre” stands alone from the rest. The counterpoint again initiates the fourth stanza, but in reverse order from the first: “bear” and “thee.” But the counterpoint becomes most prominent, reaches a final dissonance and resolution, in the fifth stanza. Brooks would no doubt cite this stanza as an example of Shelley’s “slovenly rhyme.” In fact, it’s a wonder of slight modulation, breaking from within, immanently, the chains that have kept the poem bound. “Being” initiates the rhyme scheme, only to be immediately canceled by “dead.” “Night” and the “sepulchre” lord

over the second stanza, to be followed by “dreams,” and in those dreams, the “day” in the third; “be” appears in the fourth. The fifth begins with “is.” Is modulates into “harmonies,” which in turn modulates into “spirit fierce.” Then the vocalic shift that began the poem returns for the final, crucial time, to shift from “fierce” to “universe,” encompassing the concluding schwa of “sepulchre” in “verse,” after passing through the only appearance of /ɛ/ in the stanza in “impetuous one” and “dead thoughts,” which, as mentioned earlier, encompasses “thou.”

Reading through the end rhymes of stanza five by themselves reveals a kind of logic, not just the vocalic counterpoint, but also a counterpoint of the graphic and the aural, the visible and the invisible, but audible. The key letters and sounds of the poem merge together: the “O” of apostrophe and of “thou,” the “I” and “It,” the play of phonemes in counterpoint as just analyzed. “Forest is” contains I and It, as well as the “e” and “r” that will become so prominent as the stanza progresses. The I and It remain in “its own,” but with the appearance of “harmonies,” the It drops out, to be encompassed in “spirit.” The “harmonies” become a single “tone,” which modulates to “one,” followed by the “universe” at the center of the stanza. The multiplicity of the forest and harmonies is reduced to the One, a core concept of much of Shelley’s poetry. But a “new birth” follows, the poet becomes the enchanter, taking the place of religious faith, and multiplicity, diversity, returns again in the form of the many “ashes and sparks” scattered from the “verse.” “Breath,” which initiated the first metaphor of the poem, and is the medium of the unification of the Wind and the poet in the last metaphor, also contained the letters that are essential to the concluding rhymes. “Hearth” contains earth, hear, the ear which hears, but also

the heart necessary for hearing to bear any fire. “Being,” after passing through tenses and modalities, ends in “behind.”⁴⁰

I’ve mapped the rhymes of the fifth stanza as off rhymes with apostrophes marking the variation. But if they are instead considered as new rhymes it would be: P Q R Q S T U V U W X Y Z X. It encompasses the entire alphabet, with a little excess. As mapped above, I can’t help but notice the insistence on the P and S, the initials of Percy Shelley. And noticing that, I also notice that the vocalic counterpoint of “being” and “dead” plays on the two vowel sounds of “Shelley.” Then I notice that the *e* and *r* and the sibilants that become so crucial in the concluding rhymes are there in “Percy.” Let me now return to firmer ground.

The strophe of the Ode begins with apostrophe, a turning away, a swerve. On the microrhetorical level, I’ve characterized this as the entry into the symbolic itself from presymbolic sound, a prefiguration of the I-Thou dialectic. On the macrorhetorical, formal level, the turn initiates the poem itself as event. As Culler puts it, “In foregrounding the lyric as act of address, lifting it out of ordinary communicational contexts, apostrophes give us a ritualistic, hortatory act, a special sort of linguistic event in a lyric present” (*LT*, 213). In the metaphors of cycle and event central to the poem, the poem itself is the event, the intervention, a suspension of

⁴⁰ Germane here is Shelley’s analysis of the development of modern society in *PVR*, p. 36: “The mechanical sciences attained to a degree of perfection which, though obscurely foreseen by Lord Bacon, it had been accounted madness to have prophesied in a preceding age. Commerce was pursued with a perpetually increasing vigour, and the same area of the earth was perpetually compelled to furnish more and more subsistence. The means and sources of knowledge were thus increased together with knowledge itself and the instruments of knowledge. The benefit of this increase of the powers of man became, in consequence of the inartificial forms into which society came to be distributed, an instrument of his additional evil. The capabilities of happiness were increased and applied to the augmentation of misery. Modern society is thus an engine assumed to be for useful purposes, whose force is by a system of subtle mechanism augmented to the highest pitch, but which, instead of grinding corn or raising water, acts against itself and is perpetually wearing away or breaking to pieces the wheels of which it is composed.”

the cyclical law—just as apostrophe demands a suspension of the laws of nature. This, however, is exactly where *terza rima* and the sonnet exert their formal significance: for the event of the poem is immediately captured by the cyclical formal law of *terza rima*. The cycle is broken only with the reassertion of apostrophe at the end of each stanza: “hear!” No liberation, however, it merely encloses each stanza in the prison cell of the sonnet, necessitating a repetition of the event-cycle-event dialectic.

Here, the Greater Romantic Lyric as a variation on the Pindaric tradition newly exerts its importance to the formal structure of the poem, for it’s only the irruption of the “I” in the fourth stanza that allows for the final synthesis of the fifth that will bring the poem to a close (which is an opening). The process of the development of the Greater Romantic Lyric as described by Abrams can be seen as a process of lyricization. The 17th and 18th century loco-descriptive poem melded moral principles to description of a particular scene. By Abrams’s account, the decisive step from the loco-descriptive poem to the Greater Romantic Lyric came through William Bowles’s sonnets, adored by Coleridge and admired by Wordsworth. With Bowles, “The local poem has been lyricized. That is,” he continues,

Bowles’s sonnets present a determinate speaker, whom we are invited to identify with the author himself, whose responses to the local scene are a spontaneous overflow of feeling and displace the landscape as the center of poetic interest; hence the ‘occasional reflections’ and ‘sentiments,’ instead of being a series of impersonal *sententiae* linked to details of the setting by analogy, are mediated by the particular temperament and circumstances of the perceiving mind, and tend to compose a single curve of feelingful meditation. [“GRL,” p. 213]

The history of the loco-descriptive poem is intertwined with that of the Pindaric, as in the case of Thomas Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College.” Bowles transplants the distinctive movement of the dialectic between the subject and object, meditation and the natural scene, into the form of the sonnet. With Coleridge and Wordsworth, blank verse becomes the prosodic

motor for what Coleridge called “conversation poems,” allowing the movement between description and reflection to definitively structure the poem, sometimes marked through verse paragraphs (as in, for example, “Tintern Abbey”).

We’ve seen that Shelley makes use of the ode and the sonnet, in effect the two main forms that led into the Greater Romantic Lyric. The hallmark of the form became a crafted seamlessness in the movement from description to reflection, object to subject, so as to make “manifest a transaction between subject and object in which the thought incorporates and makes explicit what was already implicit in the outer scene” (“GRL,” p. 223). In Shelley’s Ode, however, the separation is formal and dramatic. In this schema, the pure description of the third stanza, absent any human agency, carried by a modulation in the music of the poem, takes on further formal significance. By Abrams’s analysis, Romanticism, and the Greater Romantic Lyric as definitive form, meant to reunite the subject with nature, overcoming the philosophical separation still best captured by Descartes’s concepts of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. It was a counter to materialism, to a dead world of matter, “the conception,” in Abrams’s words “of a dead world in which the estranged mind is doomed to lead a life-in-death” (“GRL,” p. 218). Shelley does not, in the fourth stanza, assert the primacy of the subject over objective reality, as he does, if inconclusively, at the conclusion of “Mont Blanc”; rather, he negates the subject in a prayer to be an object, a prayer that asks not to have to pray. As analyzed above, the ultimate dialectical resolution in the fifth stanza holds poet and wind in ambiguous tension: Is it the wind or the poet that sounds the trumpet? Whereas other examples of the Greater Romantic Lyric resolve their dialectical structures in positivity—“To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears”—the Ode’s dialectic is negative: no final assertion is arrived at, no ultimate ascendancy of subjectivity over objectivity.

There is one final form to consider—the fifth; with Shelley, there is always a fifth—and that is the book itself. *Prometheus Unbound*, after the titular lyrical drama, concludes with nine lyric poems: “The Sensitive Plant”; “A Vision of the Sea”; “Ode to Heaven”; “An Exhortation”; “Ode to the West Wind”; “An Ode, written October, 1819, before the Spaniards had recovered their Liberty”; “The Cloud”; “To a Skylark”; and the “Ode to Liberty.” It’s quite clear that the poems and their order were not chosen arbitrarily. The “Ode to the West Wind” occupies the central position in the series, much like the fifth of the nine cantos of *Queen Mab*, which, as analyzed in my first chapter, not coincidentally deals with the evils of commerce. The four poems leading up to the “Ode to the West Wind” replicate the movement through the elements as in the stanzas of the Ode itself: earth (“The Sensitive Plant”); water (“A Vision of the Sea”); air (“Ode to Heaven”); the poet (“An Exhortation”). The Ode that follows the “Ode to the West Wind” can be addressed to the people of England in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre just as easily as to the Spaniards for whom it is supposedly written. It shares tropes and images with the “Mask of Anarchy” and the other Peterloo poems. This further suggests that the words that Shelley most wanted scattered like “ashes and sparks” were those “exoteric” poems in response to Peterloo.

He then lights on “The Cloud,” which unifies all the elements together: “I am the daughter of earth and water, / And nursling of the sky; / I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores; / I change, but I cannot die” (*PU*, 199).

For after the rain when with never a stain,
 The pavilion of heaven is bare,
And the winds and sunbeams with their convex gleams,
 Build up the blue dome of air,
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
 And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,

I arise and unbuild it again.

[*PU*, p. 200]

The figure of the tomb appears again in a place of prominence, as in “England in 1819” and the “Song to the Men of England.” “The Cloud” seems to reassert the sovereignty of the cycle, the law of necessity at the center of the natural elements.

“The Skylark” follows, however, and focuses on the contingent event of poetic inspiration and song. In the formal structure of this series of poems, the opening of the second stanza takes on added significance: “Higher still and higher / From the earth thou springest / Like a cloud of fire” (*PU*, 201). The breakdown of simile in the Ode is replicated in “The Skylark”—“What thou art we know not; / What is most like thee?”—with the difference that the absence of likeness here produces an overflowing excess of simile over the course of the next four stanzas of the poem. Where “The Cloud” centers on laughter, “The Skylark” centers on joy and gladness, but ends on a somber note that recalls the prayer of the Ode:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow,
The world should listen then, as I am listening now.

[*PU*, p. 206]

In the structure of the elements, “The Skylark” is the fire of inspiration, of song. The paradox “harmonious madness” condenses the prophetic power of poetry.

Finally, the volume concludes, as it must, with the “Ode to Liberty.” I cannot here give this remarkable poem the attention it deserves. But the opening lines demonstrate their continuity with the series *ab initio*:

A glorious people vibrated again
The lightning of the nations: Liberty
From heart to heart, from tower to tower, o'er Spain,

Scattering contagious fire into the sky,
Gleamed. My soul spurned the chains of its dismay,
And, in the rapid plumes of song,
Clothed itself, sublime and strong

[*PU*, p. 207]

No longer “chained and bowed,” the Pindaric returns to its true form—wild and free, no longer struggling against the mechanical law of *terza rima* or against the hard walls of the sonnet. That is, at least in appearance. The stanza structure is, in fact, rigid throughout the poem:

- 1 – iambic pentameter – A
- 2 – iambic pentameter – B
- 3 – iambic pentameter – A
- 4 – iambic pentameter – B
- 5 – iambic pentameter – C
- 6 – iambic tetrameter – D
- 7 – iambic tetrameter – D
- 8 – iambic hexameter – D
- 9 – iambic pentameter – C
- 10 – iambic pentameter – E
- 11 – iambic pentameter – C
- 12 – iambic pentameter – E
- 13 – iambic pentameter – D
- 14 – iambic pentameter – E
- 15 – iambic hexameter – E

In keeping with the Pindaric tradition, the stanza includes lines of varying length. However, if lines 6–8 were removed from the stanza, you would be left with a sonnet, except with a closing hexameter—a supplement, you might say. An attentive reader, reading the poems in sequence would probably, by the fourth line, expect a reiteration of the *terza rima* of the “Ode to the West Wind,” but the pattern is broken by the introduction of a new rhyme in line five. The ghost of *terza rima* remains, however. The closing alexandrine, especially considering Shelley’s longstanding admiration for Edmund Spenser, cannot help but evoke the Spenserian stanza—and, indeed, if you remove the opening *terza rima* tercet, and the rhyming tercet in the middle of the poem, the Spenserian stanza is precisely what remains.

Again, the eras of history are formally represented, in a poem that thematically moves through them from the vantage of freedom. The three middle rhymes can be read as an irruption of song, but contained within history and the law of necessity. The poem adopts the I-Thou structure of address of the “Ode to the West Wind,” with Liberty taking the position of Thou, adding the framing of recording an emergent voice that is used for “The Mask of Anarchy.” And what can be said of the poem’s closing lines?

My song, its pinions disarrayed of might,
Drooped; o’er it closed the echoes far away
Of the great voice which did its flight sustain,
As waves which lately paved his watery way
Hiss round a drowner’s head in their tempestuous play.

[*PU*, p. 222]

Prophetic—sadly—indeed.

Prometheus Unbound, the lyrical drama, concludes with an explosion of lyric forms. As Stuart Curran put it: “Genres bloom in this universal spring, reversing the tragic winter of Prometheus’ imprisonment.”⁴¹ Song emerges from everywhere and everything.⁴² It is, I would argue, a lyrical presentation of Adorno’s definition of utopia in *Negative Dialectics*: “Utopia

⁴¹ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 200.

⁴² Saintsbury writes that “*Prometheus Unbound* is as great a triumph prosodically as in other ways; perhaps even a greater. It is more flawless in this respect than even *Adonais*, though its larger bulk and greater variety would seem to invite flaws to show themselves. The triumph arises, not only from the beauty of particular passages, but from the intimate union and congruity of the blank verse with the lyrics themselves.... in all the long procession and pageant of English poetry which it has been my good fortune to survey as I have been preparing and writing this History, nothing has ever presented itself, and nothing, I think, will present itself, in such a combination of prosodic beauty and variety as this. The famous words of Asia on the Spirit voice are the only possible description of the sensations of the reader of *Prometheus Unbound* who is worthy to read it. This was the heritage of which seven centuries of poetic labour and experiment from Godric to Coleridge had put English poetry in possession; and Shelley’s was the golden key that threw it open to enjoyment. *History of English Prosody*, vol. 3, pp. 108–9.

would be above identity and above contradiction; it would be a togetherness of diversity” (*ND*, p. 150). I said previously that Shelley had no “lyric ideal”; if he does have one, it’s this lyrical dream of utopia.

A final note on form, to conclude: while I don’t have the space to fully explore it here—that will have to await separate treatment at length—I do want to point out that the three “levels” of the poem used for analysis here—form, style, and music—can be seen from a psychoanalytic perspective as corresponding with, respectively, the superego, the ego, and the unconscious. Forms are laws imposed from without, by society and convention and tradition. Style is what makes poems unique to individual poets, gives them a singular character. The music of the poem is not entirely, or even primarily, a matter of the poet’s control or intention—it is the infantile pleasure in words as pure sound that must be repressed to make a poem mean, but always leaves its traces. Reading, or analyzing, poems means speaking to them, with them, through them, around them—a talking cure of sorts, as much for the critic as for the poem. The poem is not the master, and neither are we as readers.

Coda: Toward 1848

This work began in 1840 at the start of the first chapter, and I want to return to that year now by way of conclusion. 1839–40 marked the height of the Chartist Movement in England, and with it the beginning of the end of the initial period of the development of socialist thought and class struggle. This closing, however, like the end of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” was also an opening: the 1840s would see Marx and Engels transform socialist theory into communism, a transformation marked by the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, coinciding with the intensification of the class struggle across Britain and Europe in that year. I also want to conclude with an opening: the horizon that I hope has become visible through this work is precisely that next period from 1840 until the Paris Commune of 1871.

There was a significant Shelley renaissance in the late 1860s and the 1870s, led by the Pre-Raphaelites, coinciding with the heightening of class struggle in those years. In fact, I would put forward the hypothesis that in every period of resurgent radicalism and class struggle, there is a corresponding Shelley renaissance. And a backlash. In the surging of the socialist movement in the US after the First World War, Shelley was quoted by Eugene Debs, as well as by workers in their struggles and on their strikes.¹ The New Criticism, southern and avowedly agrarian-reactionary, then, as I’ve analyzed, attempted to expel Shelley from the literary canon. I don’t mean to suggest any simple causality here: as I’ve tried to show, the mediations of cultural

¹ See Michael Demson, ““Let a great Assembly be”” Percy Shelley’s ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ and the Organization of Labor in New York City, 1910–30,” *European Romantic Review*, vol. 22, no. 5 (October 2011): 641–65.

incorporation are multiple and complex—the economic base and the cultural superstructure are imbricated, but it's not a simple relation of determinism, or a one-way street.

The year 1840 also saw the “invention” of a new lyric form—a form that would have profound consequences for criticism: the dramatic monologue. As Newton and Leibniz independently invented calculus around the same time, the dramatic monologue was the dual but seemingly independent creation of Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson.² It would, of course, come to serve as the model of “lyric reading” that came to dominate literary criticism and pedagogy of poetry for much of the twentieth century—and, pedagogically at least, is seemingly still the status quo. This is another horizon, for I believe that Shelley is central to this story as well. Both Browning and Tennyson were Shelley enthusiasts in their youth, only to retreat into silence before their reemergence with the dramatic monologue.

Browning, when he came to write at length about Shelley in 1851, did so through a distinction between “objective” and “subjective” poets.³ The essay can be seen as a kind of apotheosis of the cultural incorporation of Shelley, a subtle piece of Victorian critical casuistry. The objective poet is “one whose endeavor has been to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain) with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men” (*BES*, pp. 33–34). The subjective poet, on the other hand, of which Shelley is a preeminent example for Browning,

gifted like the objective poet with the fuller perception of nature and man, is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below, as to the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute

² This accepted genealogy is no doubt a simplification—itsself a lyricized literary history.

³ *Browning's Essay on Shelley*, ed. Richard Garnett (London: Alexander Moring, 1903), p. 33. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BES*.

truth,—and ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees—the *Ideas* of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand—it is toward these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity he has to do; and he digs where he stands,—preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute Mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak. [*BES*, p. 38]

Browning goes on to argue that an understanding of the biography, the personality, of the objective poet is unnecessary, though desirable, but with the subjective poet biography is essential, for “apart from his recorded life altogether, we might fail to determine with satisfactory precision to what class his productions belong, and what amount of praise is assignable to the producer” (*BES*, p. 45). Browning then claims that had Shelley lived he would have become a Christian, and relegates to Juvenilia “those passionate, impatient struggles of a boy towards distant truth and love, made in the dark,” such as *Queen Mab*, with its “delirious...notes” (*BES*, pp. 55, 64). And that is where *Queen Mab* has mostly stayed in editions of Shelley's work; even the Johns Hopkins edition, in other respects a remarkable work of scholarship, separates the notes from *Queen Mab* and puts them in an appendix, as if they weren't an integral part of the poetic and conceptual work of the poem.

Browning makes a plea for a biography of Shelley, which “should be written at once...not to minister to the curiosity of the public, but to obliterate the last stain of that false life which was forced on the public's attention” (*BES*, p. 55). It is, I would suggest, interesting, and can be taken as an index of the shifting of critical ground, that Matthew Arnold's essay on Shelley that contains the famous characterization of the poet as “an ineffectual angel,” was in fact written in response to the publication of Edward Dowden's *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1886. As earnestly as Browning desired a biography of Shelley, Arnold regrets Dowden's publication. “I have read those volumes,” Arnold writes, “with the deepest interest, but I regret

their publication, and am surprised, I confess, that Shelley's family should have desired or assisted it." He "would gladly have been left with the impression, the ineffaceable impression," left by Mary Shelley's full edition of the poems of 1839—the impression that Shelley was an angel.⁴ By the time of the modernists, Eliot would declare, near the end of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."⁵ Browning's "subjective" poet had become no poet at all.

These moments are just luminous details; this critical shift needs a much fuller treatment, of course, but what I mean to show is that Shelley remains a central figure—he proved indigestible, despite the careful efforts of those such as Browning. To return to the dramatic monologue: my claim would be that it must be understood in dialectical relation to Romanticism, and to the Greater Romantic Lyric, in particular. If the hallmark of the Greater Romantic Lyric, following Abrams, was to subjectivize the loco-descriptive poem, and Shelley, by the form's own immanent logic, pushed it to its limits, arriving at a sort of stalemate, or aporia, in the subject/object dialectic, then what was left was to re-objectivize the form, to historicize it, to dramatize it—which is exactly what the dramatic monologue does. The "subject," or speaker, of the poem is made the "object" of the poem. The play of subjective and objective cases for the first-person pronoun in the "Ode to the West Wind" already prefigures this formal shift.

British poetry in the 1840s and 50s also developed in a very different direction, however, which is also worthy of further attention: what was deprecatingly termed Spasmodic poetry. The

⁴ Matthew Arnold, "Shelley," in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by A. Dwight Culler, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 365.

⁵ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co, Ltd., 1920), pp. 52–53.

Spasmodic poets had been relegated to the trash heap of literary history, but have recently received renewed attention, most extensively in a special issue of *Victorian Poetry*.⁶ Shelley is at the center of this story as well. As Florence Boos has demonstrated, the Spasmodic controversy was shot through with class politics; the primary poets “were working- or lower-middle class in their origins and education, and several of these poets had contributed to the democratic fervor which culminated in the People’s Charter of 1848.”⁷ George Gilfillan, an influential critic who championed the Spasmodists (as they were also termed), was a “fervent admirer of Shelley and Godwin” at a young age (“SC,” p. 558). In his popular *Gallery of Literary Portraits*, Gilfillan—100 years prior to Harold Bloom—claimed that “Shelley, of all the modern poets, with the exception of Coleridge in his youth, reminds us most of Israel’s prophets.”⁸ Boos quotes an account of the period and of Gilfillan’s position from a contemporary looking back:

For about five years (1849–54) George Gilfillan’s position as a critic was one of very great influence. It may be doubted whether even Carlyle had more power over young minds. These years were the period of a movement. There was a thrill in the air, a belief that the new world was at hand. This was felt beyond his immediate circle; it stirred in the books of the Brontës, the socialism of Kingsley, and the passionate preaching of Kossuth and Mazzini... [“SC,” p. 561]

The echo of the Owenite “new moral world” is telling of the continuity in the radical movement from 1824–1840. A look at some of the Spasmodic poets also reveals the strong Shelleyan influence, showing that claims for Shelley’s canonical status among the working class were not overblown.

⁶ See *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 42, no. 4, “Spasmodic Poetry and Poetics” (Winter 2004).

⁷ Florence S. Boos, “‘Spasm’ and Class: W.E. Aytoun, George Gilfillan, Sydney Dobell, and Alexander Smith,” *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 42, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 553–83. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “SC.”

⁸ George Gilfillan, *First Gallery of Literary Portraits* (Edinburgh: James Hogg, 1851), p. 49.

Here I will focus on just one example: the Chartist poet and activist Ebenezer Jones, who in 1843 published a remarkable book of poems with the title *Studies of Sensation and Event*.⁹ The book opens with two narrative poems, one in the form of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the other in an aberrant blank verse resembling the Greater Romantic Lyric. The poems, I would argue, represent a kind of working through of the dual influence of Byron and Shelley. The first, “The Naked Thinker” tells the story of Lord Apswern, imprisoned in a tower by his father, who in dying recognized the errors of his ways:

“Duped, unsuspecting, from my birth
Till now, my life has been;
And yet I flaunted o’er the earth,
As I all truths had seen;
I thought I fought for man,—I know
’Twas for the thing man seemed;
I thought to man my love did flow,—
It flowed to dreams I dreamed;
With armies I have lashed the world,
And at my will it flew,
I knew not what the power I hurled,
Nor that I did subdue.”

In response, he condemns his son and heir to a life of isolation and observation:

“I die deceived;—but one shall tear
The masks that lied to me;
The lands that I bequeath mine heir,
He but retains, while he
Fights with his eyes against the world,
Against all things that are,
Mocking the veils around them furled,
And scattering them afar...

Lord Apswern—scornful, proud, elevated far above the madding crowd—unmasks and condemns the existing state of things, but in so doing is bereft of any human sympathy.

⁹ Ebenezer Jones, *Studies of Sensation and Event: Poems* (London: Charles Fox, 1843). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SSE*.

Lord Apswern's eyes are lightning keen,
So keen, his world is not
The world by other mortals seen,
His thought is not their thought:
Lord Apswern glows with glorious pride,
That life beyond earth's creeds,
Its thoughts and laws beneath him tide,
Hour storms he calmly reads;—
But ever in courts, in marts, in farms,
Whether we joy or moan,
Yea, even in the lovingest lady's arms,
Lord Apswern is alone.

For a working-class poet like Jones, who was also very active in the Chartist movement, there was perhaps some cognitive dissonance in reading and admiring the aristocrats Byron and Shelley. There is a composite in Lord Apswern of Byron's aristocratic disdain and cynical distance from the objects of his satire and Shelley's otherworldliness and commitment to the unmasking of tyranny.

The second poem, "Egremond," is clearly a portrait of Shelley, though removed to another period and dramatized. Egremond dedicated his life "to effect...change" from evil to good:

The world slept on; the creating Power toiled:
Egremond, through the midnight, in his cell,
Leaps with his passionate reason down the depths
Tempestuously tossed, of human nature,
Seeking the masked demons, that invoke
Suffering and wrong: he pauses for a while;
In thought he overbounds the travailing hour;—
Past man's redeeming, he beholds redemption;—
He sees beyond the hurtling cloudinesses,
A fair bright time; he hears the vast rejoicings
Of myriads changed by him to virtuous gods...

A dramatic monologue follows, in explicitly Shelleyan terms, derived from the "Ode to the West Wind":

“Pour no libation, drop no useless tear
 Above my sepulchre, the dead feel not:—
 But now, oh! Now; now, while this frame can quiver,
 And the hot blood leaps swiftly to my brain,—
 Now when the wildest hurricane of passion
 Were but a power to whirl my fearless spirit
 In dizzy transport,—while I would be driven
 Straight through the universe, swift as a leaf,
 So that my soul might widen to her fate,
 And throb exultingly against the storm,—
 Now give me fame; let nations fill the cup,
 And to the music of their myriad shoutings,
 I’ll drain it to the dregs: it will be, is,
 Mine, great God!—mine.”

The poem concludes with two further monologues in which Egremont addresses God, as the
 “Power of infinite love,” through apostrophe to the moon. Jones used the trope of poets as stars,
 prominent in Shelley’s “Adonais,” to conclude the poem:

“I claim, by virtue of the peace I make,
 Some dim, disorganized, sullen star,
 That I may be to it in place of thee,
 Teaching its heart all musics; through thy worlds
 Dismiss me glorying!”
 His eyes wild rioted; his brow upturned
 Pallidly grand against the vast empyrean,
 As though he heard, echoing from star to star,
 The voice of deity cry, “Come up hither.”

The influence of Shelley runs throughout the volume, clear even in the forms and the titles of
 poems: “Song of the Kings of Gold,” “Ode to Thought,” “Song of the Gold-getters.” But Jones is
 no mere imitator. Savaged by critics, would never publish another volume of poetry.

Instead, he devoted himself to the radical cause, publishing journalism and working with
 W. J. Linton, John Cleave, and Henry Hetherington. In 1849 he published a work on *The Land
 Monopoly*, which Boos comments “anticipated arguments made famous by Henry George in
Progress and Poverty two decades later” (“SC,” p. 553). Jones argues for the abolition of “the

land monopoly,” in effect for the abolition of the aristocracy and for land to be held in common. The dense, short pamphlet uses the same framing that Benbow had used in his *Grand National Holiday*: the “great majority” “have to beg for, and be indebted for, opportunity to live: the life thus ignominiously obtained being one of poverty, and, by reason of the disease, crime, and suffering which poverty induces, brief and miserable!”¹⁰ The populace must be “enlightened” and exert “combined interference” to change the intolerable situation.

W. E. Aytoun, Gilfillan’s reactionary critical adversary, attacked and satirized the Spasmodic poets, most famously in a parody called *Firmilian*; he wrote a mock review of his own book, published under the pen name T. Percy Jones. The provenance of Percy is obvious enough, and Boos comments that Jones suggests the “homely origins” of the working-class Spasmodics, but I would suggest that Ebenezer Jones is the more immediate source for the surname. Aytoun’s review is recognized as the source of the derogatory label of “the Spasmodic school,” but no one has seen the likely Shelleyan origin of the name itself. Leigh Hunt had written, at the very beginning of his portrait of Shelley in *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, that Shelley “was subject to violent spasmodic pains, which would sometimes force him to lie on the ground till they were over; but he had always a kind word to give to those about him, when his pangs allowed him to speak.” This wasn’t made up; Mary Shelley’s journal has several entries noting such “spasms.” But here again there is a kind of transference from Shelley’s physical body to his body of work, and the poetry itself becomes a kind of ailment or temporary derangement—hence Arnold: “The man Shelley, in very truth, is not entirely sane, and Shelley’s poetry is not entirely sane either.” An alternative canon—one not predicated on

¹⁰ Ebenezer Jones, *The Land Monopoly, the Suffering and Demoralization Caused by It; and the Justice & Expediency of Its Abolition* (London: Chas. Fox, 1849), p. 3.

Shelleyan lyricization—would require a reconsideration of the work of Ebenezer Jones, of the Spasmodic poets in general, perhaps of the entirety of nineteenth-century British poetry.

(Swinburne, for example, would not be left untouched.)

Meanwhile, there is much work to be done to determine Shelley's part in that spirit of the age of 1848, the "Gespenst"—that spirit fierce—that "geht um in Europa."¹¹ The authors of *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement* locate the burgeoning of the international socialist movement with the Owenites and Chartists: "The National Union of the Working Classes and Others, of which William Lovett, James Bronterre O'Brien and Henry Hetherington were members, was founded in 1831, in part as a response to the events in Europe." Hetherington and O'Brien began to introduce the British working class "to French radical and socialist thought," and with "the development and spread of Chartism, international contacts multiplied quickly." By 1844, the year that Engels published *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, "through Robert Owen's *New Moral World* and [George Julian] Harney's *Northern Star*, British workers were learning of the existence and activities of Karl Marx, later to play the dominant role in the history of the International."¹² That Engels, and likely through him, Marx, learned of Shelley from the Owenites and Chartists is very clear, for, as previously mentioned, Engels soon began an aborted attempt to translate *Queen Mab* into German.¹³

Shelleyan lyricization exerted its effects beyond literary criticism, I would argue. After Marx's turn toward scientific socialism and the stringent rejection of utopianism, scholars of the

¹¹ The quote is, of course, the first line of the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*.

¹² Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement: Years of the First International* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1965), pp. 4–6.

¹³ See Kenneth Neill Cameron, "Shelley and Marx," *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 234–39.

history of socialism, communism, and Marxism have been uneasy about recognizing Shelley's influence, and of the utopian origins of Marx and Engels's thought and work. Putting socialism on a scientific basis was historically necessary; now, however, perhaps it needs to return to its utopian origins, while maintaining a basis in science. In this regard, Shelley has much to offer to contemporary socialism, which must be, by necessity, ecosocialism.

A final horizon, also dating from 1848, the year generally designated as the beginning of that seemingly miraculous transformation that would result in that rich and strange character of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman. This horizon entails a further examination of the spread of radicalism and Owenism in the US, and with it the spread of Shelleyism.¹⁴ I mentioned in passing in my first chapter that excerpts from *Queen Mab* were published in the *Free Enquirer*, the freethought and Owenite socialist organ of Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen in America, and that Walt Whitman Sr. was a subscriber.¹⁵ We also know that Whitman Jr. owned,

¹⁴ See, for example, Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), pp. 32–3. “Why did the revival of freethought societies take place in the 1820's? Primarily, because of the large number of immigrants from the British Isles, who swarmed into America after the Panic of 1819. From Great Britain came the active freethinkers; among them were Robert and Robert Dale Owen, Frances Wright, Gilbert Vale, Benjamin Offen and others less well-known.” Gilbert Vale published a piracy of *Queen Mab* in New York in the 1840s.

¹⁵ *The Free Enquirer*, vol. 1, no. 18 (Feb. 1829): p. 144. “Walter Whitman, Snr. was interested in the radical solutions offered by figures such as Fanny Wright, Robert Dale Owen, and William Leggett, all of whom advocated economic and political programs specifically designed to promote social egalitarianism and based on respect for the primary wealth-creating power of labor. The Democratic Party itself developed a radical ‘Loco-Foco’ wing, in an attempt to contain labor agitation within the established mainstream of contemporary politics. One lasting outcome of these labor movements was the democratization of the press through the publication of new cheap ‘penny’ papers aimed at a mass market. Walt Whitman was to spend many years editing such newspapers, as he was also to account himself a ‘Loco-Foco’ for the whole of his writing life. He shared the movement's hatred of business monopolies, paper money, banks, the exploitation of female labor, and all the other social ills it attributed to a political system in which government (deeply mistrusted by the Loco-Focos) had been usurped by an un-American monied class.” *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Donald D. Kummings (Malden, MA: Wiley-

at some point, a nice edition of Shelley's poems. Certain passages in *Leaves of Grass* bear a striking resemblance to passages in *Queen Mab*. A full examination is in order, but let me point to one passage from *Queen Mab* (quoted in my first chapter) that I think could have served as a seed, or a spark, for "Song of Myself":

There's not one atom of yon earth
But once was living man;
Nor the minutest drop of rain,
That hangeth in its thinnest cloud,
But flowed in human veins...

How strange is human pride!
I tell thee that those living things,
To whom the fragile blade of grass,
That springeth in the morn
And perisheth ere noon,
Is an unbounded world;
I tell thee that those viewless beings,
Whose mansion is the smallest particle
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.

[*CPPBS*, 2:180–81, canto 2, ll. 211–43]

Could it be that the invention of the poet Whitman out of the prosaic newspaperman, which seemingly emerged *sui generis* from the American soil, has something to do with reading that juvenile poem *Queen Mab*? How ironic, how strange—how *funny*—it would be if Whitman's

Blackwell, 2009), p. 68. On Wright's influence on Whitman, as well as the freethought tradition, see also *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. with an Introduction by Michael Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. xxii–xxiii.

free verse could in fact be traced back to *Queen Mab*, and therefore to Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* and *Curse of Kehama*.

“Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past,” Benjamin wrote, “who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (“TPH,” p. 255). An example of this is apparent in the fact that many of the radical artisan and working-class figures who I have examined here have been virtually annihilated from history. It is only the work of socialist and labor historians that has recovered them. William Benbow was arrested during the Chartist agitation of 1839–40 and then imprisoned. It has only recently been discovered that he ended his days in Australia, perhaps by penalty of transportation, where he continued radical agitation until he died in 1864.¹⁶ George Cannon died in prison in 1854 on charges of obscenity for his publication of pornography. But from there the work of suppression, censorship, and imprisonment continued posthumously—a work of disappearance that is tangible in the Shelley archive, and throughout the entire life of Shelley's body of work. I would like to think of Benjamin's philosophy of history as providing coordinates for history as praxis, and I hope that I've shown that Shelley's late historical poetics shares a commitment to a nonlinear view of history and historical change. I hope, also, that the spirit of history as radical praxis animates this material and does some justice, however small, to the dead.

¹⁶ See Gary Kent, “Tom Paine's Grave-Robber Ends His Days in Sydney,” *History: Magazine of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, no. 123 (March 2015): 11–14. My thanks to Gary Kent for a productive exchange about Benbow in Australia.

Much of this work is devoted to Shelley's role in the development of socialist and communist thought: that role, however, is not over, for the development of socialist and communist thought is not over. Another task is to consider what Shelley offers to the future of socialism and radical politics. I have pointed in this direction at a few points: the contemporary relevance of a return to utopian thinking, Shelley's potential force within a framework of ecosocialism, the ongoing power of Shelley's sexual politics. But the question deserves full treatment, and debate.

This work began with a very general problem, and a want: to attempt to understand how poetry can change the world rather than just interpreting it. Alongside this desire was the conviction that it must be studied historically—that is, from the perspective of *praxis*—as well as theoretically. *Queen Mab* and “The Mask of Anarchy” seemed ideal historical case studies to approach the problem. It is a problem that Shelley himself thought deeply about, and had to confront, especially in an era when words such as his were vigorously censored. Shelley conceived of two different forms of writing, to different audiences, and inspiring different modes of transformation: the cycle and the event, again. He called these *esoteric* and *exoteric*. *Prometheus Unbound*, for example, was esoteric: only the enlightened few would understand the poem, but through their influence its ideas could eventually be spread. “The Mask of Anarchy,” on the other hand, was exoteric: it was aimed toward a broader audience—the many and not the few—and was meant to inspire immediate mass action. (Shelley's own condescension is revealed by the fact that he thought *Queen Mab* a work of the esoteric type.) In an age with no shortage of political poets, some even with revolutionary aspirations, it is worth reflecting on the fact that poetry is now, due to historical conditions, very likely limited to the esoteric model.

Such is our contemporary void that no matter how luminous the poet's wings, or shade, the light cannot reach very far. Revolutionary action must take other forms.