Reading Shelley Negatively: Mysticism and Deconstruction

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This thesis advances three 'negative' readings of Shelley's poems, two of which are distinct, even conflicting, and one which goes some way towards resolving that conflict. The first reading exposes how Christian intentions and experiences are often negatively present in Shelley's ostensibly atheist poetry. The second reading negates, or more precisely, deconstructs, the belief implicitly held by the first that Shelley's intentions or experiences could ever be a determinate presence in his poems. The third and most important reading resolves, in some limited sense, the dispute between Christian and deconstructionist readings of Shelley's poetry through the *modus operandi* of mysticism and specifically negative theology.

Reading Shelley negatively in the first of these three senses enables the thesis to contend that the poet's ironic subversion of Christian idioms and even his philosophical denial of the Christian God still contained latently Christian elements. While poems like *Alastor* and *Laon and Cythna* often subvert Judaeo-Christian imagery, for instance, it was not usually Shelley's intention in writing them to entirely deny the religious meaning of those images. And even when it was his intention to deny religion altogether, the Godless universe depicted in poems such as *Queen Mab, Julian and Maddalo* and *The Triumph of Life* remains, negatively at least, the product of a Christian belief system. But while the first way of reading Shelley negatively advanced by the thesis argues that Christian intentions and experiences are obliquely present in Shelley's poetry, the second negative reading deconstructs this argument and, more generally, the naïve philosophy of language's relation to presence upon which it rests. Reading Shelley negatively in this second deconstructionist sense seems to challenge the possibility, suggested by the first reading, that Shelley's Christian intentions or experiences could be determinately present in his poetry. But in mysticism and negative theology, it is suggested, there exists a vocabulary of Christian intentionality and experience which is not *simply* indebted to the metaphysics of presence against which deconstruction takes arms. So the third and final way of reading Shelley negatively uses that vocabulary to offer a Christian reading of Shelley's poems which is less vulnerable to deconstruction. The presence of mystical experiences in *Queen Mab, Julian and Maddalo* and *The Triumph of Life* does not, it is argued, wholly determine the meanings of those poems in the way that deconstructionists are so eager to criticize. This is because by their very nature mystical experiences can transcend and destabilize even the most negative attempts to determinately signify them through language.

So the thesis concludes that this mystical reading goes some way towards resolving the dispute between Christian and deconstructionist readings of Shelley's poetry and, indeed, between Christianity and deconstruction *per se*. It does concede that some fundamental points of contest between the two discourses still remain. Whilst not *simply* beholden to the metaphysical assumptions criticized by deconstruction, mysticism never wholly escapes them either. But if reading Shelley negatively never totally resolves the dispute between the two discourses, it does enable readers to consider their relationship much more positively.

For my parents

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A Note on Texts

Poems written by Shelley before 1817, most notably *Queen Mab* and *Alastor*, are cited from *The Poems of Shelley*, eds. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London and New York: Longman, 1989-). *Laon and Cythna* is cited from *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Verse and Prose*, ed. Harry Buxton Forman, 8 vols (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880). Subsequent poems, and particularly *Julian and Maddalo* and *The Triumph of Life*, are taken from the Norton Critical Edition of *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977). Wherever possible, references to Shelley's prose come from the first volume of the projected two volume edition of *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, eds. E.B. Murray and Timothy Webb (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993-). Prose works not contained in that volume are taken from *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* or from *Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954). Letters are cited from *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

Abbreviations

CH: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology and The Celestial Hierarchies,* trans. The Editors of the Shrine of Wisdom, 2nd edn (Surrey: The Shrine of Wisdom Press, 1965).

DC: Harold Bloom *et al, Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

EOS: *Essays on Shelley,* ed. Miriam Allott (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982).

J: *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* The Julian Edition, eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols (London: Ernest Benn 1926-30; repr. New York: Gordian Press, 1966).

JC: St John of the Cross, *The Complete Works of St John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church,* trans. and ed. from the critical edition by P. Silverio de Santa Teresa by E. Allison Peers, 3 vols (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd, 1934).

Letters: *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

MT: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology,* intr. and trans. John D. Jones (Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1980).

OPW: *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* eds. E.B. Murray and Timothy Webb (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993-).

POS: *The Poems of Shelley,* eds. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London and New York: Longman, 1989-).

SR: *Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Gregynog Conference,* ed. Kelvin Everest (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983).

SPP: *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Norton Critical Edition, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977).

SPW: *Shelley's Poetical Works*, Oxford Standard Authors, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corr. G. M. Matthews, 2nd edn (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970).

TOP: *Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954).

WVP: *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Verse and Prose*, ed. Harry Buxton Forman, 8 vols (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880).

The Enquiry

What does it mean, then, to 'read Shelley negatively'? This thesis will propose three negative ways of reading Shelley's poems, two of which are distinct, even conflicting, and one which goes some way towards resolving that conflict. In none of these ways, I hasten to add, will reading Shelley negatively mean reading him pejoratively or demeaningly. To write a thesis on the poet in 1996 is to be conscious of the very great extent to which his critical reputation has been rehabilitated over the last thirty years or so. The efforts of successive generations of scholars have ensured that Shelley is now one of the most consistently respected of the Romantic poets, a respect which I would agree is thoroughly deserved. Where my approach does differ from the scholarly mainstream, though, and this is the first way in which I propose to read Shelley negatively, is perhaps over the question of *why* his poetry deserves such respect.

Shelley's scepticism, Shelley's socialism, even Shelley's vegetarianism: these are the sorts of topics which most interest Shelley critics nowadays. The proliferation of scholarly books and articles on these subjects in the last few years, particularly, may lead us to forget that for nearly a hundred years after the poet's death, scholars of Shelley concerned themselves with a totally different subject. Religion, and specifically, Christianity. It is not an exaggeration to say that almost as soon as Shelley was read at all, he was read religiously. William Hazlitt was perhaps the first reader to notice something other than blasphemy in the poet's heavy reliance upon Christian imagery. "Indeed it is curious to remark" he wrote as early as 1824, "every where the proneness to the marvellous and supernatural, in one who so resolutely set his face against every received mystery, and all traditional faith"[1]. These remarks may have proved influential for it is not twenty years after Shelley's death that we

[1]William Hazlitt, review of Shelley's "Posthumous Poems", *Edinburgh Review*, 11 (1824), 494-514, repr. *Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. James E. Barcus (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 335-346, 343.

find Mary Shelley observing "so many of the religious particularly like Shelley"[2]. Fifty years after that, in 1892, we find George Bernard Shaw confirming Mary's observation with these sarcastic comments upon the Shelley devotees gathered to celebrate the centenary of the poet's birth, at Horsham, his birthplace: "On all sides there went up the cry, 'We want our great Shelley, our darling Shelley, our best, noblest, highest of poets. We will not have it said that he was a Leveller, an Atheist, a foe to marriage, an advocate of incest" Shaw acidly observed. "He was a little unfortunate in his first marriage; and we pity him for it. He was a little eccentric in his vegetarianism; but we are not ashamed of that; we glory in the humanity of it (with morsels of beefsteak, fresh from the slaughterhouse, sticking between our teeth). We ask the public to be generous - to read his really great works - such as the *Ode to a Skylark,* and not to gloat over those boyish indiscretions known as *Laon and Cythna, Prometheus, Rosalind and Helen, The Cenci, The Masque of Anarchy* etc, etc. Take no notice of the Church papers; for our Shelley was a true Christian at heart"[3]. Indeed such was the profusion of students of Shelley's Christianity by 1937 that Ellsworth Barnard was moved to complain that the subject had become exhausted. "There are, in fact, already in existence a number of admirable expositions of Shelley's philosophical and religious beliefs, some of which aim at covering the same ground as this present study" Barnard admitted in his own *Shelley's Religion,* "and that these have not yet secured for him general recognition as one of the keenest and soundest thinkers among English poets only bears witness to the extraordinary vigor [sic] with which error always flourishes amid unregenerate humanity"[4].

It goes without saying that many of the views I have canvassed above are eccentric, if sometimes charmingly so. At best, Christian readings like these idealize Shelley; at worst, they grossly distort him and his beliefs. It is not surprising to find, then, that they were increasingly subject to attack in the first half of the twentieth

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[2]Mary Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), ii, 139.

[3]George Bernard Shaw, "Shaming the Devil About Shelley", in *Pens, Portraits and Reviews* (London: Constable and Company, 1932), pp. 236-246, 241.

[4]Ellsworth Barnard, *Shelley's Religion* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1937; repr. 1965), 5.

century. Indeed the rehabilitation of Shelley's critical reputation, which began in the second half of this century, was in no small part accomplished by destroying Christian stereotypes of the poet. "The debate as to whether Shelley was 'essentially' a Christian or could have been or might be if he were alive today - moot questions central to many of these works - seems now to be dying away"[5] wrote Donald Reiman and Bennett Weaver in the midst of that revival. The reason why the Christian debate was dying away, of course, was because one side was demonstrably winning it. In the last few years or so, Shelley scholars have amassed any number of compelling reasons why the poet should never be called a Christian and his poetry should never be read in a Christian way. His unequivocally atheist prose has been thought to merit much greater attention, as much attention, for some scholars, as the poetry itself. The curious question of why a self-professed atheist should depend so heavily upon Christian imagery and idioms in his poems has also been conclusively answered. "What he was attempting to subvert was nothing less than the whole fabric of received ideas" Timothy Webb contends. "Throughout *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley employs the language of religion but he employs it to these heterodox and revolutionary ends"[6]. And what is true for *Prometheus Unbound* is true for all Shelley's poems, Kelvin Everest argues. Those poems habitually recruit transcendental and idealist idioms, Professor Everest suggests, but only in order to turn them against their accepted meanings. "His intellectual orientation was not transcendent and idealist (and careful reading of the prose can help us to be clear about this); his fundamental concern in the poetry is always with human progress - the way in which life exists and evolves, in relation to the possibilities that we may imagine for it - and this concern is rendered variously by Shelley in ways that draw on his knowledge of forms and systems of ideas. The language of Platonic idealism is *transformed* in *Adonais,* and that language thus bears an ironic dimension that is not without its implicit polemical edge" (*SR*, 68).

[5]Donald H. Reiman and Bennett Weaver, "Shelley", in *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research and Criticism,* ed. Frank Jordan, 3rd edn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1972), pp. 327-379, 354.

[6]Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977) 129, 143.

In the light of these objections, it will undoubtedly seem somewhat perverse of me to want to revive the Christian debate about Shelley. Everything that could have been said about Shelley's Christianity has been said, it appears, and everything that has been said has been disproven. At least one renowned modern scholar, however, has expressed a belief that the death of the Christian debate about Shelley may have been somewhat premature. This is not to imply that someone like Stuart Curran has any sympathy for the crude hagiographies that have so often passed for Christian studies of the poet. "Studies of Shelley's 'religious' thought are now so dated that almost none can serve as a dependable base for further study", he writes. Rather it is to be aware that, for Professor Curran, the issue of Shelley's Christianity is perhaps a more complex and elusive one than either its supporters or its detractors have led us to believe. "The call should once again go out for a treatment of this subject by a critic versed in modern theological conceptions to which, paradoxically, Shelley as thinker is much attuned"[7].

I cannot claim to be the theological expert that Curran has in mind, but his call is one that I have nonetheless tried to answer. For I share his conviction that the Christian debate about Shelley has not yet reached its conclusion. There is still room, I think, for a religious reading which does not pretend that Shelley's God is the Christian God, nor his heaven the Christian Heaven, but which does not see why his ironic use of the language of Christianity must be thought to typify his whole attitude towards Christianity. There is still room, too, for a religious reading which does not underestimate the atheist leanings of Shelley's prose, but which prefers to read his poetry as poetry and not as some cryptic adjunct to the prose. And there is still room for a religious reading which never seeks to posthumously convert Shelley to Christianity, but which is nevertheless eager to explore the subconscious religious inclinations in his verse. This is the room my thesis aims to fill, and it is the first way in which it will attempt to read Shelley negatively. In this way, reading Shelley negatively signifies reading against the grain of Shelley's expressed intentions, and the expressed intentions of much of Shelley scholarship. It will involve uncovering

[7]Stuart Curran, "Percy Bysshe Shelley", in *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research and Criticism*, ed. Frank Jordan, 4th edn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1985), pp. 593-665, 625-626.

veiled intentions, unearthing buried fascinations and making present conspicuous absences. It will suggest ways in which Shelley's poems can be freshly read, and in which their author can be fairly respected.

I must stress, however, that this is only the first way in which we shall read Shelley negatively. For to read Shelley negatively is also to be aware of the extent to which Shelley specifically, and the concept of the author generally, has been negated by the theoretical projects of the last twenty years or so. The most famous or perhaps notorious of these projects is deconstruction, the portmanteau name for a collection of linguistic theories and practices devised by the literary philosopher Jacques Derrida. To reduce deconstruction to any simple definition is to be guilty of the very crime against which it takes arms, but for the sake of clarity let us risk committing that crime here. The guiding premise of deconstruction is that the linguistic structures that make meaning possible also forbid any attempt to absolutely determine those meanings. Recently, such attempts have come from outside the text, from sources such as reader-response criticism, which holds that linguistic meanings are realized by the reader. Historically, though, such attempts to determine meaning have more usually arisen from within the text and from the concept of conscious or subconscious authorial intention. The principal effect of the deconstructionist enterprise, then, has been that the humanist concept of the author as the creator and controller of textual meanings has come under increasing pressure. My thesis will continue to apply this pressure, or at least register its undoubted weight. Deconstruction, then, is the second way in which I am proposing to read Shelley negatively.

But if this is truly my intention, then a problem begins to come into view. For the deconstructionist reading of Shelley's poems that I am advocating here almost inevitably contradicts the Christian reading that I advocated earlier. The humanist concept of the author is one in which religious readings of Shelley's poems have traditionally invested much capital and ours was no exception. By crediting those poems with conscious religious intentions or subconscious religious inclinations which absolutely determine their meanings, though, we left ourselves under the very deconstructionist pressure that we are now seeking to apply. So the two ways of reading Shelley negatively that I have so far proposed represent a conflict of interests, then. To read Shelley negatively in the religious sense is to ignore the

deconstructionist revolution in literary studies generally and the very real extent to which it has contributed to Shelley studies in particular. But to read Shelley negatively in the deconstructionist sense is to neglect once more the already neglected influence of religion in the production of his poetry.

Of course this conflict of interests is not restricted to a religious sphere. The gulf between deconstructionism and liberal humanism worries Shelley scholars of all persuasions. Curran once advised that "If Shelley is beginning to emerge as a forerunner of deconstruction, the theorists and the historical critics need to open a spirited dialogue"[8]. But the modesty of this invitation belied a much trickier undertaking. It is not surprising, therefore, that recent studies of Shelley's poetry, outstanding though many may be, are often content to recommend one or other of the above allegiances. So we find William Keach, author of *Shelley's Style*, chiding the deconstructionists for not "distinguishing the elusive activity peculiar to Shelley's writing from the problematic condition of language generally"[9]. Or Paul de Man, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, confessing a somewhat sarcastic envy for those "who can continue to do literary history as if nothing had happened in the sphere of theory"[10]. My intention here is not to score easy points off two fine scholars, nor to underestimate the ideological gulf between them. It is only to note a depressing tendency amongst both humanists and theorists to prize uncompromising conviction over flexibility and dialogue. This is a genuine source of regret, I think, because a dialogue is both necessary and possible. One or two Shelley scholars, most notably, I think, Tilottama Rajan, have shown that it is possible to combine the classical sensibilities of Formalism and New Criticism with an unusually keen sensitivity to theoretical concerns. And it is this possibility, above all, that will be the focus of my thesis. For there is a third way of reading Shelley negatively, I think, and a negative reading which is neither quite humanist nor quite deconstructionist but which comprises elements of both.

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[8]ed., Jordan (1985), 622.

[9]William Keach, *Shelley's Style* (New York and London: Methuen, 1984), xii.

[10]Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), ix.

To read Shelley negatively in this way is to read his poetry according to the precepts of mysticism, or negative theology to be precise. These are clearly terms which require working definitions and this is a problem that we address in the next section, entitled *The Perimeters of the Enquiry*. But it is politic to say something about them now and why we use them as we do. Exactly what, to begin with, is negative about negative theology? The negative way is that branch of the mystical tradition which apprehends, and is overtaken by, a religious faith of such pre-eminence that words fail it. The God that it experiences cannot be encapsulated in any description, however exultant. So such descriptions must be revoked, if ever or whenever we are tempted to use them. For the medieval negative theologian Meister Eckhart, even the word 'God' itself was an inadequate way of describing God and had to be revoked whenever it was used, hence his paradoxical claim "Therefore I pray to God that he may make me free of 'God'"[11]. Negative theology is negative, then, because it tells us what God is not rather than what He is. Now this is all very illuminating in itself. But it is still not clear how reading Shelley negatively in this third way can bring our first two negative readings any closer together.

At least, it is not clear how it can bring them together in anything other than a shared suspicion of the third party. For example, the orthodox religious reading of Shelley's poems that we first proposed subscribed to the humanist notion of the author as the controller of textual meaning. But even if we accept that notion of the author, and further accept the notion that this particular author may have been in some way religious, it is still difficult to see Shelley as mystical. This was a poet who thought, at best, that "the moral teachings of Jesus Christ would be very useful if selected from the mystery and immortality that surrounds them" (*Letters*, i, 265). The deconstructionist reading that we proposed after that seems, at first glance, to have a little more in common with mysticism or negative theology. Describing deconstruction, Jacques Derrida does often sound like a mystic seeking vainly to describe a God who he knows at the same time cannot be described: "We are dispossessed of the longed-for presence" he once wrote "in the gesture of language

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[11]*Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 202.

by which we attempt to seize it"[12]. But deconstructionists have in fact gone to great lengths to disassociate deconstruction from mysticism. This "terrible and exhilarating vertigo" as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes deconstruction, "is not 'mystical' or 'theological'"[13]. Umberto Eco has even gone as far to suggest that deconstruction is "atheistic"[14]. And as we shall see, even Derrida himself has warned us not to confuse the negativity of deconstruction with the negative theology described by Meister Eckhart. For all their protestations about the inadequacy of language, he suggests, mystics like Eckhart still have faith in its ability to become determined. This is a faith which Derrida himself, of course, is famously unable to share.

Given the collective weight of these objections it is tempting to dismiss our project of reading Shelley mystically almost before it has begun. But this is a temptation that I think we should resist. As the coming chapters will show, a mystical reading can answer both the humanist objections that face all religious readings of Shelley's poems, and the theoretical objections against religion *per se*. To those who adhere to the humanist notion of the author, for instance, I hope to show that mysticism was something of which Shelley as an author was only too aware. In his prose he rages against it, but often in the rather futile manner of one raging against a vice which he knows he can never overcome: "When will the vulgar learn humility? When will the pride of ignorance blush at having believed before it could comprehend?" (*POS*, 398). What Shelley calls the pride and vulgarity of faith in his prose, we will come to see, is the unacknowledged source of much that is great in his poetry. All I am trying to indicate now, though, is the general direction of my argument and this is that Shelley's mysticism can be determined in the same humanistic ways that other readers use to determine his atheism or his scepticism. Where a mystical reading differs from those humanist readings, however, is that it is not nearly as vulnerable as they are to deconstruction.

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[12]Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 144-145.

[13]Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface", in Derrida (1976), pp. ix-lxxxvii, lxxviii.

[14]Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 156.

Saying this places me at odds, of course, with the perception of deconstruction, popularized by Spivak and Eco, as an anti-mystical and anti-theological discourse. But my thesis will also show that this perception needs to be, and indeed is being, substantially re-thought. Far from being antagonistic towards theology, we will see that at certain points deconstruction actually converses with it, and that one of these points is indeed mysticism. I should warn my reader from the outset that some portion of what follows will be spent considering the significance of this converse in its own right, as well as in its relation to Shelley. The continuing possibility of religion in the era of deconstruction is a question that interests me generally, and it will form a background to my thesis. But I still remain particularly interested in the possibility of a religious reading of Shelley's poems in the era of deconstructionist interpretation, and this question remains at the foreground.

Mysticism provides a possible answer to it. Just as there is no necessary contradiction between reading Shelley humanistically and reading him mystically, we will see, so there is no contradiction between reading Shelley mystically and reading him deconstructively. Put in this way, we can also see that mysticism might achieve something which, to my mind, recent Shelley scholarship has tried and failed to do. It might balance the deconstructionist and humanist equation. To read Shelley negatively will be to keep that balance, I hope, and thus our own.

A professedly 'balanced' reading should engage equally with ideas and arguments from all sides of Shelley scholarship, and this is something that I try to do. Books and articles by Miriam Allott, Bernard Beatty, Timothy Clark, Richard Cronin, Paul de Man, Paul Dawson, Kelvin Everest, Paul Foot, Jerrold Hogle, J. Hillis Miller, Michael O'Neill, Vincent Newey, Tilottama Rajan, Ronald Tetreault and Timothy Webb have influenced my view of Shelley greatly. My interpretation of deconstruction is principally derived from the works of Jacques Derrida, from Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, and from commentaries upon these three by Geoffrey Bennington, Christopher Norris and Richard Rorty. My knowledge of mysticism is chiefly drawn from commentaries, treatises and poetry by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, St John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, St Teresa of Avila and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and from critical interpretations of these mystics by Alain Cugno, John D. Jones and Andrew Louth. Books and articles by Kevin Hart, Mark

C. Taylor and John D. Caputo have shown me ways in which deconstruction and mysticism converse in mystical texts, and have suggested to me ways in which I might see them converse in Shelley's poems.

I should add that this converse does not always occur where one might initially think it would: in *Prometheus Unbound,* for instance, or *Adonais.* Although both these poems support my argument that Shelley was only too aware of mystical idioms, it seems to me that neither use those idioms to genuinely mystical ends. *Prometheus Unbound* is perhaps the finest example of Shelley employing the language of religion ironically, for thoroughly irreligious purposes, while the supposedly mystical surrender that concludes *Adonais* actually strikes me as a theatrical, and distinctly fey, flourish. To find Shelley really being "borne darkly, fearfully, afar" (*Adonais,* 492) I think we must turn to less self-conscious, less assured works like *Alastor, Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna.* The relative critical neglect of the latter two poems, in particular, would be reason enough for considering them in any new thesis on Shelley, but I have a more pressing reason still. If there is ever converse between mysticism and deconstruction in his poems, I think, it is there. Ordering those poems more or less chronologically, as this thesis does, can often indicate a correspondent development or maturation in their author's thought or ability. No simple development or maturation is intended to be indicated here. The chronological arrangement is based chiefly on thematic considerations as I try to make clear throughout. Where it is not clear, I would be grateful if my reader could keep this apology in mind.

The Perimeters of the Enquiry

The speculative man becomes engaged in mysticism" scorned Immanuel Kant, "where his reason does not understand itself and what it wants, and rather prefers to dote on the beyond than to confine itself with the bounds of this world"[1]. In seeking to define mysticism for what may understandably be a sceptical audience, it is apposite that I should first mention one of the architects of that scepticism. Perhaps more than anyone, Kant has fuelled the modern suspicion of mysticism as an alleged and dubious 'union' with other-worldly forces. His various sallies against it, though, never engage with any texts by persons who are normally understood to be mystics. Pseudo-Dionysius, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila and Meister Eckhart are all conspicuous by their absence. Instead Kant defines mysticism against, that is, as the opposite of, another text: his own *Critique of Pure Reason.*

As we shall see, this framing of mysticism is as formidable as it is influential. But Kant's failure to entertain texts that have been taken as mystical also licences some formidable oppositions to that frame, oppositions to which this thesis is in fee. Our own sense of mysticism is derived from the mystical texts named above, and particularly an important theological distinction they all wield. In his treatise the *Celestial Hierarchies,* the sixth-century mystic Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite clarifies this distinction, between cataphatic, or affirmative, and apathatic, or negative, theologies. Cataphatic theologies, he says, are a product of the believer's desire to gain account of God by representing Him via a series of positive images which are perceived to be 'like' Him. The cataphatic theologian represents God through "lofty symbolism as the Sun of Justice, as the Morning Star rising mystically in the mind, or as light shining forth unclouded and intelligibly". Sometimes he uses earthly images such as "fire flashing forth with harmless flame, or water affording abundance of life symbolically [sic] flowing into a belly and gushing out in perpetually overflowing rivers and streams" (*CH,* 27).

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[1]Immanuel Kant, "The End of all Things", in *On History,* trans. Robert E. Anchor (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1963), pp. 77-101, 79.

In contrast, Apathatic theologies remind the believer how difficult it is to know a God who is so inscrutable, so unaccountably remote from even our most exultant descriptions. They do this by using 'unlike' predicates to verify and correct the claims of 'like' predicates to describe God. By representing God through images that are exactly 'unlike' Him, in other words, the believer does not make the mistake of only equating Him with visions of perfection. So Dionysius and other mystics prefer to use incongruous images of God: "The lowliest images are also used, such as fragrant ointment, or the corner-stone, and they even give It the forms of wild animals and liken It to the lion and panther, or name It a leopard, or a raging bear bereaved of its young. I will add, furthermore, that which appears most base and unseemly of all, namely that some renowned theologians have represented It as assuming the form of a worm" (*CH*, 27). In an especially rich passage, which will be considered in more detail in our first chapter, Dionysius goes on to explain why he prefers such lowly images. "Thus all those who are wise in divine matters, and are interpreters of the mystical revelations, set apart in purity the Holy of Holies from the uninitiated and unpurified, and prefer incongruous symbols for holy things, so that divine things may not be easily accessible to the unworthy, nor may those who earnestly contemplate the divine symbols *dwell upon the forms themselves as the final truth.* Therefore we may celebrate the Divine Natures through the truest negations and also by the images of the lowest things in contrast with their own Likeness" (*CH*, 27) (stress mine). We will explore that last distinction, between negative predicates and what Dionysius calls the truest negation, momentarily. But the status of the former at least should now be clear. Negative predicates, in an almost dialectical way, are used to correct and refine the claims of positive predicates.

It is relevant that we grasp these recondite but fundamental theological insistences because, surprisingly, Shelley grasped them too. Less surprisingly, he gave them short thrift. "There is no attribute of God which is not either borrowed from the passions and powers of the human mind, or which is not a negation" he said in *A Refutation of Deism*, nicely summarizing the cataphatic and apathatic approaches. "Omniscience, Omnipotence, Omnipresence, Infinity, Immutability, Incomprehensibility, and Immateriality, are all words which designate properties and powers peculiar to organized beings, with the addition of negations, by which the

idea of limitation is excluded" (*OPW*, 120). With characteristic adroitness, Shelley discovers a problem in the constitution of negative theology. For all their humility, negative predicates still seek to designate (or as Shelley infers, create) anthropomorphic values for the divine. They just do it by a more circuitous route. This attack undoubtedly wounds. Mystical texts by Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart often use negative values, not so much to draw attention to God's utter inscrutability, as to progressively elicit and disclose His divinity. But this is not their only use. In its pre-scholastic mode, negative theology denies that God can be adequately described by either positive *or* negative predicates. So not only does it deny positive concepts of God, but it further denies even its own negative concepts, the very accuracy it seems to elicit. Perhaps, then, it evades Shelley's charge that even the most negative theologies are necessarily derived from human resources. For in this negative theology, God is said to be not like or even unlike any idea or thing. We cannot understand Him, even negatively, because He is not an object of human knowledge. This denial is what Dionysius, or as he is sometimes called, Denys, meant by the truest negation. Our thesis will call this radical form of denial 'negative (mystical) theology' in deference to the *Mystical Theology*, the brief treatise by Denys which deals with it most thoroughly. These dealings will be considered more expansively at a later stage. All we need to appreciate here is the distinction they compel us to make. The distinction between, on the one hand, what we have called positive and negative predicates and, on the other, what we are calling negative (mystical) theology. Negative predicates, to risk labouring the point, are not the same as negative (mystical) theology. These predicates have almost as affirmative a role as positive predicates. They correct and verify positive predicates so that, together, they can ultimately arrive at a more trustworthy discourse on God. Negative (mystical) theology, however, calls the whole notion of 'trustworthy' theological discourse into serious question.

An etymological point about the word 'theology' itself presents the same distinction in clearer terms, perhaps. 'Theology' derives from the Greek *theos* and *logos*, meaning God and the Word, or in more philosophical terms, the reality and the language which pertains to it. Positive and negative predicates stress the harmony of *logos* and *theos*, or more precisely, uphold *logos*'s claim to refer to *theos*. Patronized by

an emerging scholasticism, for instance, this is perhaps the most widely recognized use of theology and theological discourse today. But, again, it is not the only use. In mysticism, this discourse should be seen as distinct from another form of theology which is independent of all conceptual forms, however positively or negatively they are predicated. This form of theology is what we have called negative (mystical) theology. Instead of stressing the harmony of *logos* and *theos*, negative (mystical) theology emphasizes their discreteness, the unbridgeable difference between our representations of God and His reality.

Such exploits, which might reasonably be called 'meta-linguistic' or 'meta-philosophical', have become almost exclusively identified in our own era with the structuralist and post-structuralist movements. But in the last ten years philosophers and theologians, most notably Kevin Hart, John D. Caputo and Mark C. Taylor, have begun to explore the confluence between modern literary theory and mystical theology[2]. These explorations have produced some remarkable findings. Not the least of these is Kevin Hart's claim that "Deconstruction can illuminate how mysticism and negative theology work as discourses: certain concepts and textual manoeuvres developed by Derrida can be used to analyse the mystical theologian's use of language and his or her attitude to it"[3]. Hart's book, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, will play a pivotal role in this thesis. Its defining argument is that deconstruction and theology have always existed in a covert economy, an economy which mysticism makes explicit. Hart's claims are all the more remarkable because they fly in the face of the usual characterization of the relationship between mysticism, theology and deconstruction as mutually hostile and recriminatory disciplines. This characterization, and Hart's reply to it, will be weighed in detail elsewhere. In the remainder of this introduction we will consider, very briefly, his initial claim that there is converse between the textual manoeuvres of

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[2]Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Post-Modern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[3]Hart (1989), 174.

deconstruction and the rhetorical argot of mysticism. If this claim is true, then there are obviously important consequences for the study of mystical texts. But we have an ulterior motive for considering it as we do. For it is my contention that if the converse described by Hart exists, then it also has important implications for students of Shelley's poetry.

As *The Enquiry* recounted, Shelley's poems have proved a particularly responsive, some might say particularly vulnerable, site for "certain concepts and manoeuvres described by Derrida". *The Triumph of Life* alone has been targeted by Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and, tangentially, Jacques Derrida himself. Such readings, it hardly needs saying, have impacted not only on Shelley's poems, but on the classically set agenda of literary criticism itself. The notion of determinate meanings, whether established by the author or the reader was the most important casualty. It is no longer simply possible to elicit such meanings from literary texts, or even create our own meanings for them, in the process of reading. Mystical texts cannot hope to avoid this same problem. Indeed reading mystical texts is even more problematic than reading literary texts, in this respect, because we cannot help but judge them in terms of authorial intention and experience. This is because mystics characteristically claim to have undergone extraordinary and unlikely experiences, and further claim that these experiences give their texts a special status and authority. But before accepting that status, we might want to know if they really did undergo those experiences, and, if so, whether they have directly reported them, or rhetorically embellished them. Questions like these must be asked if we are to accord mystical texts the authority they claim. The textual medium in which they are couched, though, resists any possibility of conclusive answers.

It is strange, then, that Hart's *Trespass of the Sign* nonetheless insists that questions like these can, in some sense, be answered: "Instead of working to discredit these discourses, as Derrida sometimes seems inclined to do, deconstruction may in fact help us to understand how they work"[4]. In other words, the structural instability of texts that Derrida traces can be used to illuminate the distinctive argots and attitudes of mysticism. Hart's ostensibly local project has big implications, although

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[4]Hart (1989), 174.

we must be careful not to exaggerate these. It brings into view the possibility of a benign dialogue between the textual manoeuvres of deconstruction and some of the classical retainers of literary criticism: individuality, rhetoricality and determinate meanings. For readers of Shelley, perhaps, it offers a way out of the critical impasse described above, and in *The Enquiry*. Deconstruction can help us to appreciate the distinctive ways in which the mystic uses language. So can it also illuminate the distinctive usages of Shelley's poems, given what Stuart Curran described as the "theological concepts to which, paradoxically, Shelley as thinker is much attuned"? This will be the guiding question of this thesis and to answer it we will need all our collected distinctions: positive and negative mystical predicates, negative (mystical) theology, *theos*, *logos* and so forth.

But there remains, we said, a risk of exaggerating the larger relevance of Hart's project. And this must be addressed first of all. Hart categorically denies, as we shall see, that deconstruction illuminates literary rhetoric, experiences, and intentions *per se*; on the contrary, he concedes that it intervenes most vehemently against these literary determinations. A benign dialogue is really only possible, he wagers, when deconstruction encounters a special kind of theological attitude, which is covert in all theological discourse but only explicit in mysticism. This 'non-metaphysical' theology, as Hart paradoxically labels it, is the only determination that deconstruction does not douse, but rather illuminates. We do not need to understand this theology fully, yet, in order to grasp just how little its advantages lend themselves to wider literary deployment. It remains true that deconstruction does not necessarily discredit poetic intentions, but the proviso must be added that this only happens in cases where those intentions are of an intricately theological, mystical nature. Shelley, it must seem, can never be one of these cases. His intentions, for those who are still confident enough to speak of such things, were not of this nature. Paul Foot makes this point with characteristic bluntness: "Gleams of godlike light have been detected in Shelley's later work by biographers and essayists who wanted to prove that god almost always catches up with errant and youthful atheists. This is all nonsense"[5].

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[5]Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980), 73-74.

The Enquiry has already indicated our disagreements with atheist readings of Shelley's verse. These are not just theoretical scruples, concerning the possibility of recovering authorial intentions *per se*, and so necessarily atheist intentions. For we will also see that atheist readings of Shelley's verse often fail to satisfy even when judged by the very standards of classical literary criticism to which they adhere. Mysticism, however, judged according to those same classical standards, disturbs areas of his verse that materialism, historicism and humanism all leave untouched. But Hart's *Trespass of the Sign* promises even greater rewards for mystical readers of Shelley. In this reckoning, mysticism will still provide a more accurate understanding of Shelley's attitudes, according to the aforementioned standards of literary criticism. But deconstruction, as well, will be able to cast a benign analytical light on those attitudes, thus bringing classical and theoretical criticisms into conversation over Shelley's poems.

The following section will begin to put this converse to the test. In the next chapter, we examine some of Shelley's philosophical and psychological responses to mysticism. Initially, we argue, his responses are influenced by the views of Immanuel Kant, cited above. But as our reading of the poem *Alastor* will show, Shelley ultimately defies mysticism's *bête noire*. The subsequent chapter traces Shelley's growing mystical sympathies in a reading of *Laon and Cythna*. Those sympathies, we contend, are influenced by an even more surprising source than Kant: the Catholic political philosopher, and contemporary of Shelley, Joseph de Maistre. The declaredly philosophical and psychological concerns of these chapters betrays that their approach will be deliberately, even stubbornly, classical. 'Shelley' is used, not to "name something without identifiable bounds" (*DC*, 243) as J. Hillis Miller once put it, but to signify a secure psychological, intellectual and authorial agency. In the final part of this section, we subject our notion of 'Shelley' to an equally obstinate deconstruction. Stressing the distinctive and competing voices of classical and deconstruction criticism in this way makes it possible to consider, without risking tendentiousness, the question of their converse.

Part One: Conflict

Chapter One

Veiled Threats:
Alastor and some fragments

How does Shelley hate religion? We don't need to count the ways. The essay *A Refutation of Deism,* written in 1814, concludes with the following statement: "I have proved, that on the principles of that philosophy to which Epicurus, Lord Bacon, Newton, Locke and Hume were addicted, the existence of God is a chimera" (*OPW,* 123). The allusions to Newton, Locke and Hume indicate the material and empirical nature of Shelley's scepticism. But for all their potency, the generally reductive sciences espoused by that trio are only a part of his non-belief. In many ways, Shelley's atheism is a much more expansive labour. Its purpose is not simply to negate religious possibilities, unequivocally, but to commit what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls a form of "deicide"[1]. God is destroyed, that is, so that He may be replaced by a rival, human, scheme of justice. This is a familiar atheist stratagem. Nietzsche supplants the Christian God with the *Übermensch,* while Maritain describes his own non-belief as an act of inverted faith. In *On Christianity,* Shelley himself writes that "Whoever has maintained with his own heart the strictest correspondence of confidence, who dares to examine and to estimate every imagination which suggests itself to his mind, who is that which he designs to become, and only aspires to that which the divinity of his own nature shall consider and approve...he, has already seen God" (*OPW,* 251). Another passage from *On Christianity* also seeks to align what "the divinity of his own nature shall consider and approve" with "that philosophy" to which Epicurus, Bacon and so forth were addicted.

"Every human mind has, what Lord Bacon calls its *idola specus,* peculiar images which reside in the inner cave of thought" Shelley wrote. "These constitute the essential and distinctive character of every human being, to which every action and every word bears intimate relation, and by which in depicturing a character the

[1]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy,* trans. John Wild and James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 42.

genuineness and meaning of those words and actions are to be determined" (*OPW*, 261). In Bacon's *Novum Organum*, as Timothy Clark's decisive study has shown, the *idola specus* is a term used to mean something like 'prejudice' or 'preconceptions'[2]. In Shelley's account, though, they can be seen as an inner ground of thought which verifies the authenticity of human words and actions. That this ground is called an 'image' vexes Clark but need not trouble those who do not share his predominantly philosophical view of Shelley's poetry. It could hardly be insisted, for instance, that the author of a poem like *The Witch of Atlas* subscribes to the usual opposition of image and reality. At any rate, the philosophy of mind proffered in this passage is also a long way from Hume's view of the mind as a motley collection of different perceptions, the last of the philosophical influences cited in the *Refutation*. Instead the *idola specus* more reasonably recall another of the poet's philosophical authorities: Neoplatonic idealism. And not unreasonably, perhaps, an already familiar bearer of the idealist torch: Kant, once again. The *idola specus*, we see, are found in the mind and their function is to synthesize and transcendentalize disparate words and actions. So could we also see them as a simplified, pictorialized, version of Kant's *a priori* concepts, those innate faculties that mediate and ground our perceptions? That may be an extravagant claim for such a simple image. But there is certainly evidence that Shelley's debt to Locke, Hume, and so on belies an equally enduring fascination with the critical philosophy[3]. And whether the poet knows it or not, the philosopher who

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[2]Timothy Clark, *Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 72.

[3]It is clear that Shelley had ordered and received F.G. Born's Latin edition of Kant's works from Thomas Hookham as early as December 1812 (*Letters*, 341-42) but whether he actually read this edition is less clear. Thomas Hogg recalls seeing it lying "uncut, and unopened" in Shelley's sitting-room in Half-Moon street (Thomas Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1906), 445). But this is also the edition that Shelley's Peter Bell is said to have looked on "for nine several days," (528) in *Peter Bell the Third* (1819). Nevertheless, Hogg maintains that Shelley never read "a single page of the transcendental philosopher" (Hogg (1906), 445). Joseph Barrell agrees that Shelley "never read Kant", and adds "One should remember that no edition of the *Kritik* was available in English until 1838, and that although Shelley, toward the end of his life, was able to read *Faust* in the original, he could hardly have been equal to the German of Kant" (Joseph Barrell, *Shelley and the Thought of his Time: A Study in the History of Ideas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 197). Both Hogg's and Barrell's judgements, however, are almost certainly

described the moral world as a "realm of grace" and the community of rational beings as a "mystical body" is a certain influence on his own appropriations of religious imagery for the veneration of mortality[4]. For Kant, the transcendentally unified (as opposed to the merely sensory) status of the mental faculties distinguished the critical philosophy from, amongst other things, mysticism. The philosopher's objections on this score are already familiar but, in the light of their seeming confluence, a more testing view of Shelley's attitudes to mysticism may be possible if we briefly trace the reasons behind those objections.

If God is a transcendental being then there is nothing that can be said about Him from our perspective except that He transcends it. This is the gist of Kant's objection to all dogmatic theologies, but within it he reserves a special contempt for mysticism. Perversely, dogmatic theology seeks to make God intelligible through empirical images, he argues, through the very categories, in other words, that He must necessarily transcend. But mysticism claims not only to make intelligible that which must be unintelligible, but to "participate immediately in the divine ideas,

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mistaken. Even if we are prepared to admit that Shelley did not read Kant in the Latin translation to which Hogg refers, and could not have read him in the original German, there is still the matter of the new French translation of Kant that he ordered from Horace Smith in Florence in 1821 (*Letters*, ii, 662). Remembering Shelley's command of the French language, it is reasonable to assume that he read at least some of this translation. We can assume, also, that he liked what he read. This last assumption may seem questionable, given that just eighteen months previously Shelley had scorned Kant's work as "Five thousand crammed octavo pages / Of German psychologics" (*Peter Bell The Third*, 523-524), but Richard Holmes agrees that this translation, along with the complete edition of Calderón and the German translation of *Faust* that were ordered at the same time, would have "a significant bearing on the writing of the coming winter and spring" (Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1974), 677). And, indeed, *The Triumph of Life* praises Kant as a "sage / Whose name the fresh world thinks already old" (237-238). But perhaps the last word on this intriguing subject should be given to Mary Shelley, who believed that if her husband had been able to complete his "theory of mind" it would have been one to which "Berkeley, Coleridge and Kant would have contributed" (*J*, V, xi).

[4]Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith, 1st edn (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 815, 808.

which are the authors of all things in themselves"[5]. It is this claim, particular to mysticism, that particularly vexes Kant. In his philosophy, intuitive experiences can never be immediate because experience is by its very nature a synthesis of intuition and concepts, whereby intuitions are formalized by the act of judgement. Under the auspices of this transcendental apperception, therefore, the alleged mystical intuition of God, or participation in God, is philosophically impossible. Kant even went so far as to call it the death of philosophy.

If, then, Shelley's *Essay on Christianity* exhibits the influence of Kantian rationalism, does this mean that, given Kant's segregation of the two, it cannot also betray a mystical influence? This is a question that we need to ponder at some length, I think, for it has consequences both for our understanding of mysticism in general and in its relation to Shelley's poems. In the remainder of this segment, I want to consider several different ways of answering it. One such answer is provided by Jacques Derrida. Derrida has argued, *pace* Kant, that all philosophical discourses are implicated in religious discourses and, specifically, that "rationalism is complicit with mysticism"[6]. We will examine these remarkable claims in detail at a later stage, but they can be introduced now in very simple terms. *Of Grammatology* holds that rational and empirical discourse is characterized by the appeal to a ground which is always somehow beyond, and which always somehow confirms, its sign systems. For Derrida, this ground or 'presence' is a chimera. Philosophy's continued appeal to it exhibits, he concludes, a faith of religious proportions.

Reading with Derrida, and even with the bowdlerized version of his thought just offered, it would seem that Shelley's philosophical dependence on presence ensures that his rational discourse is necessarily 'theological' or even 'mystical'. Our excitement at this prospect should be tempered by the fact that, in Derrida's logic, nearly all representatives of the Western philosophical tradition, including such self-professed anti-mystics as Kant, Hegel and Marx, could also conceivably be branded thus. It would be polemical, therefore, to attribute theological or mystical beliefs to

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[5]Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and Gertrude M. Clarke, intr. Allen W. Wood (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 86. See also "Kant: Mysticism and Parėga" in Hart (1989), pp. 207-226.

[6]Derrida (1976), 80.

Shelley in particular when these beliefs are actually the *institutional* conditions for the operation of philosophy. So putting Derrida to one side for the moment, it could be useful to question some other reasons for leaving mysticism out of the rational frame, some thematic reasons, as well as structural or institutional ones.

We might contest what rationalism means by mysticism, for example, by arguing, again *pace* Kant, that not all mystical experiences claim to be unmediated by intellectual understanding. In his *Divine Names*, Pseudo-Denys confirms the ability of rational strategies to disclose God: "All are about it and for the sake of it, / It is beyond all / It is before all, / All has been brought together in it, / It is the bringing forth of all and / what stands under all, / All desire it: / *The intellectual and rational / in a knowing way* / What is inferior to these / in a sensible way, and / all others, according to their / habituated capacity for a living / or merely existing motion (*MT*, 114) (stress mine). In Denys's account, intellectual knowledge is 'brought forth' not only by the unity of the perceptions, but by their eternal and transcendent abode. Returning to our chosen passage from *On Christianity* after reading Denys, we can find evidence that Shelley, too, conceived of something eternal and transcendent that is active in the human mind. Although the idols of the cave are said to "reside" in the inner cave of thought, this intimacy should not obscure the fact that they are not in themselves thoughts. "All are about it and for the sake of it" says Denys of his God, "It is the bringing forth of all and / what stands under all". The *idola specus* are apparently 'under', or independent of humanity and demonstrably 'bring forth' its essential and distinctive character. God can be known through rational and empirical knowledge, and through what Denys calls "the habituated capacity for a living / or merely existing motion". Comparably, the *idola specus* are said to bear intimate relation to every category of thought and every action.

Of course it may easily be countered that the resident caverns of the mind are not *literally* transcendent, only a transcendental symbol for collective human energies, like Kant's "mystical body" of rationalism. But this should not obscure the fact that the mystical names and concepts described above are a very long way from the unphilosophical, irrational intuitions scorned by Kant. Denys's *Divine Names* discloses its divinity in, and through, a series of analogical concepts and, in that respect, is a precursor of scholastic theology. And while Kant scorned all forms of scholasticism

too, of course, he did not deride them as vehemently as he did mysticism. This may be because scholasticism often shared certain pivotal assumptions with Kant, such as a belief in the importance of rational systems, which allowed him to criticize it and find it wanting. So while he certainly found scholasticism to be 'bad' philosophy, he never went so far as to say that it was the very death of philosophy, the honour which he bestowed upon mysticism. Given the undoubted presence of pre-scholastic elements in texts like the *Divine Names*, though, we may begin to wonder whether even mysticism deserves that rather dubious honour. If Kant's rather prohibitive view of them is discarded, there is really no reason why mystical theologies, and specifically that aspect of them which deduces God's existence through names and concepts, cannot be seen as co-operative with rational strategies. This would be a more thematic answer, following Derrida's exposure of their shared structural grounds, to our question of the complicity of rationalism and mysticism. It might be used to interpret Shelley's Promethean credo, that those "who are faithful and sincere witnesses before the tribunal of their own judgement of all that passes within their mind...shall see God" (*OPW*, 250), as not necessarily contradicting the orthodox creed, as it is conceived by conceptual mysticism. This interpretation has much to recommend it. But I wish to try one last answer to our guiding question.

This answer never forgets that Kant severely underestimates the range and sophistication of mystical projects. But neither does it pretend that his view of them as irrational and intuitive is simply misgiven. For although conceptual forms of knowledge are useful at a very simple level of mystic apprehension, Denys testifies, "the higher we ascend the more our language becomes restricted by the more synoptic view of what is intelligible. Now, however, that we are to enter the darkness beyond intellect, you will not find a brief discourse but a complete absence of discourse and intelligibility" (*MT*, 217). Thus understanding is finally displaced, in Denys's mystical *via*, by an intuitive participation in the transcendent. This alone confirms Kant's suspicions of mysticism, but the fact that the mystical *via* culminates in an "absence of discourse and intelligibility" may offer an ironic vindication of his judgement of mysticism, as well. For the mystic, this absence signifies that intelligibility has become surplus to requirements because, at this point, he has achieved his unity with God. For Kant, though, this absence would betray either

man's inability to achieve that transcendental unity, even to realize if such a unity exists, or the obtuseness of those who claim such realizations. The difference between the two views is stark. Denys claims that mystics attain a superior state of knowledge, a post-rational wisdom. Kant claims that mystics have simply become confused, irrational. As much as these views differ, though, in one sense they agree, an agreement which, for our purposes, is significant. For Denys and Kant agree, albeit for different reasons, that it is only when the eye of reason and sense closes that the mystical eye opens. So to really find mysticism in Shelley's poems, then, we must ultimately look for a faith that pressurizes reason, not one which, as we have seen so far, benignly co-operates with it. A fragment written three years before *On Christianity*, describing a different set of *idola specus*, seems to fit this bill:

> But thought can with difficulty visit the intricate and winding chambers which it inhabits...The caverns of the mind are obscure, and shadowy; or pervaded by a lustre, beautifully bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals. If it were possible to be where we have been, vitally and indeed - if, at the moment of our presence there, we could define the results of our experience, - if the passage from sensation to reflection - from a state of passive perception to voluntary contemplation were not so dizzying and tumultuous, this attempt would be less difficult. (*TOP*, 185-6).

The above fragment, which Mary Shelley entitled *Difficulty of Analyzing the Human Mind*, has long been associated with *Alastor*'s dream-voyage. But it can be strikingly compared, too, with our passage from *On Christianity.* All three extracts conceive the nature of consciousness in external terms, as an obscure and cavernous landscape. Yet the psychological terrain they share only serves to cast their critical differences into greater relief. In *On Christianity*, some ambiguities aside, the idols of the cave are simply used to depict Shelley's awareness of the unified state of his consciousness, of Kantian apperception. But, in effect, the *Human Mind* fragment seeks to turn the gaze of that consciousness upon the nature of consciousness itself, so that the subject of perception becomes an object of perception. And this is a distinctly unKantian desire. The section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* entitled "Paralogisms of Pure Reason", for instance, argues that it is a mistake to deduce from

the unity of our present consciousness the nature of the thing which *bears* that consciousness. This is because the nature of that bearer, or what we call the 'I', actually transcends the perimeters of our knowledge. So those who seek to understand our nature, like Descartes, who assigned the human quality of substance, *sum,* to consciousness, *cogito,* are really seeking to subsume under the categories of the empirical world a thing which exceeds those categories[7] .

Thus any 'insights' into the nature of consciousness, such as those claimed by Cartesian psychology, are really illusions, Kant concludes. They appear the moment we are tempted to reflect on the datum before us and dissipate just as rapidly. Shelley's experiences in the *Human Mind* fragment lend credence to this view. He is tempted to reflect on data in just the way Kant suggests. Introspection, he says, "is the passage from sensation to reflection". But his attempt to reflect upon those innate objects, or chambers, from which present consciousness emanates has the disastrous consequences that Kant predicted. By the end of the prose fragment, Shelley's hopeful premise, that "thought can with difficulty visit the intricate and winding chambers which it inhabits", has been overturned by an ever more sceptical procession of 'ifs': "if it were possible to be where we have been, vitally and indeed". His return to those chambers is finally halted by fresh epistemological doubts about whether reflection truly can escape the whirlpool of sensations: "if the passage from sensation to reflection - from a state of passive perception to voluntary contemplation were not so dizzying and tumultuous, it would be less difficult".

So the seamless unity of mind that Shelley imagines in *On Christianity* visibly teeters on the edge of an "absence of discourse and intelligibility" in *Difficulty of Analyzing the Human Mind.* But is that absence simply the consequence of seeking self-consciousness where self-consciousness is not possible? Of committing, in Kant's terms, a paralogism? Perhaps. Yet this also seems a rather miserly account of Shelley's philosophy in the *Human Mind* fragment. The premise of that fragment, we note, is that the mind really *can* apprehend itself. And this is a long way from what

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[7]"The unity of consciousness which underlies the categories is...mistaken for an intuition of the subject as object, and the category of substance is then applied to it" *The Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Norman Kemp-Smith, 2nd edn (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 421.

we know to be Kant's view of self-consciousness. *Alastor*, written at the same time as the *Human Mind* fragment, tells us more about the nature of that apprehension. That poem's fictional Poet famously seeks to discover something called "a prototype of his conception" (*POS*, 462-463). The author of the *Human Mind* fragment apparently discovers, and seeks to understand, a similar prototype in his real life. This professed desire for understanding, or as the fragment puts it, "to define the results of our experience", leads Timothy Clark to hail Shelley's "extraordinary faith in the power of the will in this period"[8]. This is a better account of Shelley's thoughts than any we have offered previously. But it is still not quite good enough. For Shelley does not merely seek to define the *locii* of the mind, as Clark suggests, but to participate in it, as it is in itself, "vitally and indeed". Which suggests an even more extraordinary faith than the one described by Clark. For the participation in the thing-in-itself desired by Shelley here is the same desire that Kant finds so repugnant in mysticism.

The comparison is worth spelling out. Shelley's introspective destination is imagined as a dark and cavernous topography; mystical texts like *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* by St John of the Cross also map an inner, although defiantly unpsychological, *via* as an external landscape. The Shelleyan introspect seeks not just to see, but to be "where we had been, vitally and indeed". And mystics too, Kant told us, intimately commune with their own prototypes of conception, what the philosopher called "the divine ideas, which are the authors of all things in themselves". None of this would move Timothy Clark from his conviction that Shelley's journey remains avowedly psychological and so cannot be "in any sense a visionary or mystical moment, but essentially an introspective crisis", the advent, that is, of Cartesian self-knowledge[9]. But would the distinction Clark assumes, between introspective and religious knowledge, have impressed Kant any more, whose "Paralogisms" convict Cartesian psychology of exactly the same crime as theology? By seeking to attribute anthropomorphic qualities to what must lie beyond reason, whether it be God or the self, both supply no more than "a negative conception of our being" he argues[10].

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[8]Clark (1989), 117.

[9]Clark (1989), 103.

[10]*Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Norman Kemp-Smith, 1st edn (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 403.

So Kant would surely have concluded, happily for our purposes, that Shelley's fragment exhibited mystical propensities. Or, less happily for us, that it exhibited the mental confusion which masquerades as such propensities. That last accusation may be irrefutable and it is as much as we can do here to acknowledge it as a problem. We already know, for instance, that it is impossible to say from Denys's texts whether the mystical experiences they suggest are genuine or illusory. And Shelley's status as the Romantic ironist *par exemplar* hardly needs mentioning. But even if we assume the sincerity of his intentions, can we be sure that the *Human Mind*'s pursuit of fugitive *locii* captures anything other than, as Kant's familiar deduction goes, the limits of its own reason? By challenging the integrity of the author and his visions in these ways we may begin to suspect the nature of Shelley's commitment to mysticism, then. But the *fact* of that commitment, to identifiably mystical programmes, remains. For Denys, this commitment leads him through the "darkness beyond intellect". It assures him that the failure of his faculties does not mean he has trespassed the limits of what can be known, as Kant argues, but that he has achieved a more elevated form of knowledge, a "knowing beyond intellect / by knowing nothing" (*MT*, 214). The *Human Mind* undergoes its own crisis of understanding, where the contemplation of the chambers of the mind becomes "dizzying and tumultuous", but Shelley's mental storm, like Denys's before it, rages around an almost serenely assured centre. Both may doubt their ability to define the prototype of their being, but their intuition, misguided or not, of the presence of that prototype is unshaken.

So I am arguing, firstly, that Shelley is certain his voyage into the nature of being in *Difficulty of Analyzing the Human Mind* will ultimately be vindicated, and that this faith sustains him in his present mental trauma. And, secondly, that the same account could be given of Pseudo-Denys's avowed journey into God's divine darkness, although this was an avowal which Shelley would certainly have derided. All this is sugar for readers who have always suspected the sincerity of that derision, but there is also a pill. Having compared Denys's mystical journey and the *Human Mind* fragment, let's contrast them this time. For all its confident expectation of gain, Shelley's *via* remains strangely, even joylessly, preoccupied with what it is losing. Reflection and contemplation are ecstatically surrendered in Denys's account but grudgingly, reluctantly conceded here. This contrast of moods may be the corollary

of a more serious discrepancy in attainment. Shelley's losses of insight are not recouped, as Denys's apparently are, by the more substantial fulfilments mysticism should offer. Such 'mystical poverty' remains a consistent theme in his poems: his characters may anticipate mystic consummations, as they do in *Epipsychidion* or *Adonais*, or face the aftermath of failed consummations, as we will see in *Alastor*, but they rarely if ever experience the critical moment itself. An 1811 letter, musing on yet another psychic landscape, gives us the earliest clue as to why this is so:

> [the landscapes] present an appearance of enchantment - but *why* do they enchant...it cannot be innate, is it acquired? - Thus does knowledge lose all the pleasure which invol[un]tarily [ari]ses, by attempting to arrest th[e] fleeting Phantasm as it passes - vain al[most] like the chemists æther it evaporates under our observation; it flies from all but the slaves of passion & sickly sensibility who will not analyse a feeling.
> (*Letters*, i, 119-120)

Although the *Human Mind* fragment exceeds the limits of reason (as Kant draws them) it is still couched in rational terms. Words like "analysis", "definition" and "observation" figure largely in it, and in the above letter. Its stinging condemnation of those who "will not analyse a feeling" would not look out of place in one of the passages on mysticism in Kant's *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*. So it is surprising to detect a certain envy of those "slaves of passion & sickly sensibility" and the "enchantment" they derive from their palsy. There is a certain plaintiveness, too, in the description of how those feelings disappear, like the mental caverns in the *Human Mind*, as he tries to analyze them. A lingering regret at their consequences, though, is not enough to stop these analyses. The alternative, what he calls an 'enslavement' to the intuitive pleasure that arises, remains unpalatable.

But to my mind Shelley's desire to analyze those intuitions, to know what really requires a "knowing beyond intellect / by knowing nothing", is not much of a 'freedom'. Shelley's rational will is not unyielding because it is resolute here, I think, but because it is chronic. If this seems an excessive statement, then perhaps we should ask ourselves if a will that persists even though it destroys its very object can ever be justified. The answer is 'no', I think, but this is exactly what Shelley's will does. The landscape's strange "enchantment" is said to evaporate, like the chemist's æther, under his unyielding scrutiny. Like Schopenhauers's will, then, Shelley's will to reason exhausts its objects, but is inexhaustible in itself. It is an end rather than a

means. In reality, mystics argue, the opposite should be the case. Reason and reasonable concepts like fire, fragrances and even worms should only be an avenue to trans-rational pleasures, not an end in themselves. Negative predicates guard against this mistake. If you say that God is a worm, for example, you don't really mean that He is a worm, and you know you don't really mean that He is a worm. But if you say He is Perfect Beauty, you may think you mean just that. The 1811 letter, though, like the *Human Mind* fragment before it, evinces Shelley's compulsive and destructive dependence upon reason for its own sake[11].

Alastor, to which we now turn, dramatizes this mistaken tendency to, in Denys's words, "dwell upon the forms themselves as the final truth". It is this destructive compulsion to render sensible, to understand, which finally kills any real mystical possibilities in Shelley's writing. But it should not, and does not, obscure the extent to which those writings are haunted by mystical possibilities, even when mysticism is simply something they are intended to combat. Their victories over it, when they come, are pyrrhic. The determined meditations on the *Human Mind* only meditate, in the end, on that mind's ruin. The 1811 letter reproaches the slaves of "sickly sensibility" but its supposed cure is in fact a deathblow. And in seeking at all costs to avoid similar enslavements, *Alastor*'s Poet suffers an equally profound defeat.

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Before considering the character of the Poet and his downfall, however, I would first like to consider *Alastor*'s Narrator, who manages to avoid a similar fate. In reading Shelley's poem as involving these two implicit characters, incidentally, I

[11]Admittedly the 1811 letter lends itself equally well to an orthodox, empiricist reading. My only reply to such readers could be that while no teenaged devotee of Hume would conclude that sense-impressions are "innate" in the object-world, it may be significant that this is still the first explanation Shelley considers for their "enchantment".

am adhering to Earl Wasserman's famous structuring of the poem in *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. "The Narrator is a subtly operative factor not only because he distances the Visionary from us psychologically and prevents his self-torment from lapsing into René's sentimentalism" says Wasserman, "but also because the Narrator (poet of the natural world) and his subject (poet of the ideal) can ironically play against each other in the skeptical and ironic manner of the Christian and Deist in *A Refutation of Deism*"[12]. Wasserman's frame, and especially his suggestion of a contrast between the politic Narrator and the unyielding Poet, are assumed in what follows. Where we will differ from Wasserman's reading is in our interpretation of *Alastor*'s defining compromise: the one which the Narrator reluctantly accepts, and which the Poet fatally refuses. For him, the terms of this compromise are Wordsworthian. The poem's moral, he suggests, is that the solace of social and natural loves, the joys of a Wordsworthian "brotherhood with the other creations of nature"[13], should be preferred to the solitary pursuit of ideal love. The merits of this reading are obvious to all readers of the poem. Its one adverse effect is that it has been so successful, in fact too successful, in tying Shelley to Wordsworth. *Alastor* is suffused with religious and mystical allusions, but readers and editors (Reiman and Powers are only the most blatant offenders) have often been content to attribute these to the influence of an innocuous Wordsworthian pantheism. This attribution has had the unfortunate effect of disarming those allusions, and of ever so subtly domesticating the poetry in which they appear. Sometimes, of course, Shelley's engagement with religion *is* enabled by a friendly mediator like Wordsworth. But often, and as *Alastor*'s defining compromise will show, he engages with it as directly as Vaughan.

The Narrator's introductory invocation (*Alastor* 1-49) usefully introduces these ideas too. Considering this passage, Michael O'Neill has noted the poem's first significant divergence from Wordsworth. "Where Wordsworthian Nature offers security and comfort, stays against uncertainty" he writes, "Shelleyan Nature arouses fear and awe, emotions associated with the 'sublime', with awareness of the mind's

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[12]Earl Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1971), 34.

[13]Wasserman (1971), 35.

loneliness in an unknowable universe"[14]. Indeed the great Mother, whom the Narrator invokes, is only known through her phenomenal traces: "I have watched / Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps" (20-21). She is not made manifest in herself. What this first section of the poem traces, I shall argue, is how the Narrator gradually comes to accept his Mother's concealment, and paradoxically to find much greater revelation through "knowing beyond intellect / by knowing nothing". It begins, though, with his obsessive desire to know everything about her. In its sheer perversity, this compulsion recalls both the 1811 letter and the *Human Mind* fragment. Like the Shelley of those extracts, the Narrator's analytical curiosity endures even as he recognizes its fruitlessness: "I have made my bed / In charnels and on coffins, where black death / Keeps record of the trophies won from thee, / Hoping to still these obstinate questionings / Of thee and thine" (23-27).

That last line is of course an allusion to the *Intimations of Immortality* Ode, "Those obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things" (142)[15], but Wordsworth is the incidental rather than the orchestral presence here. For the reference to "obstinate questionings" is not the self-rebuke of a Wordsworthian narrator, reconciling himself to the fact that he will never know their answers, but the invitation to a different way of knowing "outward things". The great Mother may not be an object of the Narrator's knowledge, in other words, but she can be the recipient of his love: "I have loved / Thee ever, and thee only" (19-21). Later on, too, the Narrator speaks of how "I mixed awful talk and asking looks / With my most innocent love" (33-34). The crude distinction this passage draws, then, is between fruitless 'knowledge', the worthless questionings, the asking looks, and a love which entrusts itself to "the depth / Of thy deep mysteries" (22-23). It is a distinction which certainly precedes the Lake Poets. "The important thing", the sixteenth century mystic St Teresa of Avila once wrote, "is not to think much, but to love much"[16].

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[14]Michael O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 14.

[15]*The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 297-302.

[16]*The Complete Works of St Teresa of Avila*, trans. E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, 1978), 233.

There are understandable objections to my interpretation here. *Alastor* may well be a love poem, even a poem in which love is sublime. But it is also a poem in which love resonates with the systole and diastole of physical passion, not mystical adoration. Shelley later described this passion in his essay *On Love*: "if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood. This is Love" (*SPP*, 473). One of the best examples of this intensely physical expression of love in *Alastor* appears right after the Narrator's declaration of his love's "innocence", mentioned earlier. This deceptively rich passage merits close attention:

> Like an inspired and desperate alchemist
> Staking his very life on some dark hope,
> Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks
> With my most innocent love, until strange tears
> Uniting with those breathless kisses, made
> Such magic as compels the charmèd night
> To render up thy charge:...and, though ne'er yet
> Thou hast unveiled thy inmost sanctuary,
> Enough from incommunicable dream,
> And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought,
> Has shone within me...(31-41)

Awful talk and asking looks are mixed with innocent love, the Narrator says, "until strange tears / Uniting with those breathless kisses, made / Such magic as compels the charmèd night / To render up thy charge". Does the mystic's love of God involve "breathless kisses" on a "charmèd night"? To those who are not especially acquainted with their works, it might seem unlikely. That the form of love described in the above passage from *Alastor* is physical seems almost certain by comparison. The implication behind the "breathless kisses" and the "charmèd night" seems obvious enough. But this interpretation actually has as many problems as my own. Following it, for instance, you might think that the next line (and though ne'er yet / Thou hast unveiled thy inmost sanctuary") is intended to convey something of Salome's seductive dance and thus an erotic figurative charge for "thy inmost sanctuary". And this interpretation would have some explaining power, were it not for the fact that

the detail of the seven veils did not begin to embellish recitations of Salome's story until some years after Shelley's death. To my mind, we can only begin to appreciate the full significance of this passage if we first grasp that the veiled "inmost sanctuary" might refer to an actual sanctuary as well as a metaphor for sexual consummation. For in the book of Exodus, the veil of blue, purple and scarlet is said to divide the Holy of Holies, which represented the highest heaven, from the holy place where the Church militant, or its representatives, met and served God.

Admittedly, the suggestion of a similar representation in Shelley's poem confuses before it clarifies. It may seem that by adding this literal and sacred dimension to *Alastor*'s imagery, after having accepted the figuratively erotic context of the preceding lines, we are attributing more dexterity to the poetry than it is able to sustain. The veiled "inmost sanctuary" arrives already replete, that is, with the sexual associations of "breathless kisses" and the "charmèd night": so how can it support the seemingly sex*less* associations of Christianity at the same time? This is without even mentioning the problem of how Shelley's "sanctuary" can be expected to refer to both a corporeal *person* (and so thus a potential sexual partner) and a *place* (of worship) simultaneously. The brief answer to these objections is that if Christian interpretations do place a grave poetic burden on *Alastor* then at least they do not run the graver risk of underselling its imaginative achievements. Reiman and Powers, who usefully but banally gloss our extracted passage with the news that "Shelley in his youth actually hunted ghosts and tried to raise the Devil and spirits of the dead in churchyards and burial vaults" (*SPP*, 71) may be guilty on that count. In contrast, this section will show that the Christian onus is one that Shelley's poem often, and often triumphantly, carries. That onus is most obvious, as we have already begun to suggest, in the poem's numerous images of veils and veilings. A great deal has already been said about the significance of veils in Shelley's poetry, of course, but still not quite everything. For it will be my contention that *Alastor*'s veiled "inmost sanctuary" bears, not just Shelley's usual Platonic baggage, but also a mystical weight, in which the veil conceals and yet paradoxically reveals God's divinity. It is this doctrine of the veil, we will see, that illuminates *Alastor*'s strange and, at first glance, objectionable, conflation of sex and the sacred. But first a few moments should be taken to answer these objections in detail and in turn.

A poet we mentioned in passing, a few pages ago, helps us to do this. It may be arguable whether Henry Vaughan is a direct influence on Shelley, but a parallel reading of his negative theological poem *The Night* probes passages of *Alastor* that the *Intimations* Ode leaves curiously undisturbed. For instance, Vaughan's image of the "*Virgin-shrine*" in that poem effects the same puzzling conflation of *corpus* and *topos*, body and place, as *Alastor*'s "sanctuary". It will be helpful if the reader has the first stanza of Vaughan's poem in front of him or her:

> Through that pure *Virgin-Shrine*,
> That sacred veil drawn oe'r thy glorious noon
> That men might look and live as glow-worms shine,
> And face the moon:
> Wise *Nicodemus* saw such light
> As made him know his God by night. (*The Night*, 1-6)[17]

In an enlightening essay, Alan Rudrum has argued that the "*Virgin-shrine*" refers concurrently to both the virgin body of Christ and the shrine of the unclouded night sky[18]. Vaughan's poem found it possible to do this, Rudrum argues, because its author was influenced by hermetic theology, and particularly the hermetic concept of the Cosmic·Christ. This concept describes Christ as both incarnate as a human being on earth and also, without contradiction, in some sense the universal life of the world. For "while God became Man" the hermetics teach, "His humanity was everywhere His divinity existed"[19]. Vaughan knew this. He would have known, too, that one of the ways in which the separate yet identical existence of humanity and divinity is conveyed in the Bible is through the image of the veil. In the Old Testament, as we have seen, the veil is used to describe the hidden Holy of Holies; but in the New Testament it refers, without incongruity, to the human person of Christ. For the anonymous author of what has previously been thought to be St Paul's letter to the *Hebrews* describes His body as a veil: "By a new and living way,

[17]*Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 289.

[18]Alan Rudrum, "*The Night*: Some Hermetic Notes", in *Essential Articles for the Study of Henry Vaughan*, ed. and intr. Alan Rudrum (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1987), pp. 141-153.

[19]F. Hartmann, *Personal Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 242.

which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh" (Hebrews, 10. 19-20). Hence both Vaughan's "sacred veil" and "*Virgin-Shrine*", *corpus* and *topos*, together and separately. And hence, too, the veiled "inmost sanctuary" of *Alastor*'s great Mother?

The concept of the Cosmic Christ might explain how *The Night*'s "*Virgin-Shrine*" and *Alastor*'s great Mother can be both corporeal and sacred, then. But one aspect of that corporeity endures, in Shelley's poem at least, as a problem. Sexuality. *Alastor*'s Narrator, we know, "compels the charmèd night" with "breathless kisses" to render up his great Mother. But Nicodemus in *The Night* certainly never resorts to such measures. Vaughan's Christ remains sacred because, although human, His humanity is immaculate, virginal. Yet how can *Alastor*'s deity be sacred when she is not merely humanized, but a blatantly sexy human at the same time? The obvious answer, given Shelley's declared atheism, is that she is never *actually* sacred, nor intended to be so. Its reasoning is familiar. The poet would become uncommonly good, in later years, at using divine images to glorify profane goals. So would it be unreasonable to see the great Mother as an early product of his poetic irreverence, an irreverence that would conclude with the crowning blasphemy of a poem like *Epipsychidion*, which is no less than the sexualizing of God? This objection always needs stating and is devastating if true. That blasphemy, in our era of general apathy concerning religious matters, might almost constitute a form of piety is not an adequate reply to it. Before considering blasphemous explanations for *Alastor*, though, we should make quite sure that we have exhausted all possible religious ones first. For there is one more thing to be said about veils, both sexual and sacred, before we proceed.

Return, for a moment, to that Pauline description of Christ: "By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us through the veil, that is to say, His flesh". The Pauline idea that carnal forms are emblems for transcendental longings seems to have a Platonic origin. The transcendental longing itself appears most explicitly in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. In his dated but still useful book *Passion and Society*, Denis de Rougemont describes that longing as "a desire that never relapses, that nothing can satisfy, that even rejects and flees the temptation to obtain its fulfilment in the world, because its desire is to embrace no less than the All"[20]. De

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[20]Denis de Rougemont, *Passion and Society*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 62.

Rougemont calls this transcendental passion "*Eros*". He goes on to describe how the medieval mystical tradition used the figure of a woman, particularly, as an emblem for *Eros*. The Germanic Velleda of Chateaubriand's *Martyrs*, for instance, appears at night to a sleeping Roman general. "Do you know" she asks him, "that I am a sprite?". The feminine guise that *Eros* must take is rather significant, I think. Although it is a divine desire that ultimately leaves all carnal objects behind, mystics often use carnal objects, such as women, to symbolize *Eros*. Mystical descriptions of *Eros* are of a piece, in this particular respect, with the Pauline description of Christ quoted earlier. Christ's infinite divinity, the Pauline author of the letter to the *Hebrews* reckons, is shrouded in His earthly incarnation. *Eros* is also a divinity that is imperfectly manifested through a veil of flesh, albeit female flesh. This erotic veil of flesh suggests a mystical justification for *Alastor*'s unreserved and so seemingly blasphemous sexuality.

To enshroud *Alastor* in this mystic veil is paradoxically to reveal it. *Eros*, we now know, is a desire that breaks all earthly bounds, objects and desires in order to enter the Absolute. Like *Alastor*'s Narrator, it does not gaze unadornedly on the object of his love but on "the depth / Of thy deep mysteries" (22-23). It could be that the desire felt by *Alastor*'s Poet is also *Eros*. "So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured," the Preface declares of the Poet, "he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed" (*POS*, 462). For both the Narrator and the Poet, then, sexuality may only be the veil of this infinite and unmeasured desire. We will consider the character of the Poet in the light of this possibility presently, but first I would like to see how it clarifies our guiding passage. The Narrator describes how breathless kisses compelled the charmèd night "To render up thy charge:...and, though ne'er yet / Thou hast unveiled thy inmost sanctuary, / Enough from incommunicable dream, / And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought, / Has shone within me" (37-41). This passage tracks the Narrator's ascent from the aforementioned erotic compulsions to a more rarefied meditative plane. His "breathless kisses", that is, certainly oblige the "charmèd night" to reveal "Enough" of his adored object. Yet those nocturnal adorations are not satisfied, as you might expect them to be, by an appropriately nocturnal, sexual reciprocation. Strangely, it is the decidedly sex*less* emanations received in "deep noonday thought" that constitute "Enough".

Stranger still, it is clear that these emanations do not come from the "deep noonday thought" itself, but from what must be an even more immaculate light that "shone within". Only "Enough" of this light is able to filter through that noon, a restriction which, paradoxically, makes the supposedly transparent contemplations of day seems as opaque as twilight or night. But, once more, Vaughan provides an explanatory gloss. In his poem, night is not simply something which follows day, but is symptomatic of a "land of darkness and blind eyes" (*The Night*, 8) and even more revealingly, "this world's defeat" (25). The image of the night is used, in other words, to signify the general fallibility of humanity, be it in nocturnal sex, or daytime contemplation. *Alastor* uses the same negative theological image, to the same end. Even the narrator's most lucid noon-day thoughts can only dim the light of the immaculate sun, because they enshroud it in the dark veil of his humanity. The veil ensures that this immaculate sun, what Vaughan calls "thy glorious noon" and Shelley "thy inmost sanctuary", is itself shrouded in darkness, and can only be seen through its emissions which shine "within". Through that dark veil "Wise *Nicodemus* saw such light / As made him know his God by night". *Alastor*'s Narrator sees a light by night that makes him know, if not God, then at least his own sexuality, cleansed and immortalized. Solemn midnight may wait, as if for a lover, in "tingling silentness" (7), but the "yearning for Light" that is *Eros*, de Rougemont says, "was symbolized by the nocturnal attraction of sex"[21]. *Alastor*'s night, then, is not charmed because it is the backdrop for erotic liaisons, but because such nocturnal liaisons are the veil for *Eros*. And its Narrator does not so much seek to sexualize the divine (always, as we shall see, a temptation for Shelley) as to divinize sexuality. This conclusion makes it possible to state exactly the terms of *Alastor*'s defining compromise, upon which the entire poem turns.

The seventeen year-old Shelley felt a strange "enchantment" and vainly wondered where it came from. *Difficulty of Analyzing the Human Mind* tried to go there, swimming against the tide of sensations towards the source of all thought. And now *Alastor*'s Narrator says that "Enough from incommunicable dream, / And

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[21]de Rougemont (1956), 64.

twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought, / Has shone within me" (39-41). Like the author of those fragments, he see the emanations of his desired object. Like them, too, he still hopes to see that object as it is in itself, albeit with less and less expectation that his wish will be granted: "and, though ne'er yet / Thou hast unveiled thy inmost sanctuary" (37-38). But there is one crucial difference from the *Difficulty of Analyzing the Human Mind* fragment and the 1811 letter. Reluctantly, grudgingly, *Alastor*'s Narrator comes to accept the veil that lies between him and his object. Some things, he realizes, simply cannot be known, or rather, they cannot be known in a rational way. "Enough" ("...from incommunicable dream") is the moment of concession, we know, even if we do not quite know why.

But yet again Henry Vaughan's negative theological poem *The Night* seems to know, and even praises a similar concession by Nicodemus as wisdom. The veil, Vaughan says, allows men to "look and live as glow-worms shine, / And face the moon" (3-4). These lines can be interpreted as follows. Glow-worms shine only when facing the veiled light of the moon, because sunlight would engulf them. And Man can live only when facing the veil of the incarnate God, for His naked light is so dazzling that it blinds him. God puts on a dark veil, of flesh or of night, and dims His light so that it becomes possible for Man to see Him. Nicodemus is content to see only that veil, he does not want to face God's "glorious noon". For Man, he knows, cannot see God's light and live: the reflection is too dizzying and tumultuous, the æther evaporates. So this, I think, is the vital concession that *Alastor*'s Narrator makes to his great Mother. "*Eros* has taken the guise of Woman and symbolizes both the other world and the nostalgia which makes us despise earthly joys"[22]. Her sexy, womanly veil is not too little that he should seek to cast it off. But it is not too much that he should convince himself that sex with her is anything more than a veil, or even the final truth of the divine. It is "Enough".

But for the Poet, the veil is not enough. Fatally, he refuses the vital concession. We can better understand that fate if we leave the Narrator behind us, and turn our attention exclusively to the figure of the Poet. We pick him up at perhaps the most

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[22]de Rougemont (1956), 63-64.

crucial moment in the poem:

> He dreamed a veilèd maid
> Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.
> Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
> Heard in the calm of thought...
> ...Sudden she rose,
> As if her heart impatiently endured
> Its bursting burthen: at the sound he turned,
> And saw by the warm light of their own life
> Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil... (151-154, 172-176)

The Poet has vivid dreams. "The warm light *of her own life*" (stress mine) even implies a real and independent existence for the object of his reverie. Lines like this, Michael O'Neill suggests, make it possible for the reader to "entertain two conflicting notions at the same time: that the veilèd maid both is and is not a being separate from the Poet"[23]. The presence of the veil, with its dual connotations of concealment and disclosure, enhances this possibility. By obscuring her from sight, the veil estranges the maid. Like Barthes's sequined striptease artist she becomes "unreal, smooth and enclosed like a beautiful slippery object, withdrawn by its very extravagance from human use"[24]. Yet as it estranges, the veil familiarizes, too. Because it obscures the maid from his sight, the Poet is compelled to attend only to her voice, which brings the revelation that it sounds like "the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought" (152-153). For readers of *Alastor*'s Preface, the Poet's familiarity with the maid would be less surprising. He has unconsciously created her, it is explained, to be the ideal fulfilment for his hitherto "insatiate" (*POS*, 462) thirsts. "Conversant with speculations of the sublimest and most perfect natures, the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture" (*POS*, 462). But she is principally a labour of, and for, love: "He images to himself the Being whom he loves" (*POS*, 462). For all his labours, though, the imagined lover does not provide real fulfilment. "He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception. Blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave" (*POS*, 462-463).

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[23]O'Neill (1989), 19.

[24]Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972; repr. London: Vintage, 1993), 85.

A timelier grave contains the many scholars who have sought, just as vainly, to interpret the Poet's cryptic "disappointment". So we would do well to ponder the fate of one or two of these interpretations, before offering our own. The most enduring of these suggests that the Poet's disappointment is a result of neglecting natural, obtainable loves in favour of a futile quest for their ideal origins. Yet even this view (notably associated with Evan K. Gibson) must assume that there really is something exceptional about the Poet's last disappointment, in order to conduct itself profitably. But, reading the Preface again, I am tempted to think that there is nothing exceptional about that disappointment and that it is truly only the culmination of a career of disappointments. The Poet has drunk deep, we know, from the fountain of knowledge, "and is still insatiate" (*POS*, 462). And the seemingly inexhaustible beauties of the natural world finally "cease to suffice" (*POS*, 462). No-one would disagree that his quest for ideal love is just as fruitless, but the suggestion that it is so because it neglects *real* loves, such as knowledge or the natural world, fails to take into account the glaring insufficiency of those loves; an insufficiency which inspires his quest in the first place.

So there is no question, to summarize, of the Poet being punished for his neglect of perfectly ample human loves. By the same token, though, there can be no question of praising his pursuit of ideal love; even Timothy Clark, who sees solitude as an all too necessary part of the Poet's function, concedes that its effect is destructive[25]. So the Poet is not disappointed, then, because he has mistakenly chosen ideal love over natural love, or even natural over ideal. It is rather in the nature of his desire, which is *Eros*, I think, that it is disappointed with all loves, real or imaginary. None shall suffice. "Nondum amabam, et amare amabam, quaerebam quid amarem, amans amare"[26]. His real mistake, as John C. Bean puts it in an unjustly neglected article, "Is to believe that *Alastor* "is somehow a poem about love" at all[27].

[25]Clark (1989), 142.

[26]"I was not yet in love, and I loved to be in love, I sought what I might love, loving to be in love"; the epigraph to *Alastor*, from St Augustine's *Confessions*, III.i. (*POS*, 463).

[27]John C. Bean, "The Poet Borne Darkly: The Dream-Voyage Allegory in Shelley's *Alastor*", *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 23 (1974), 60-77, 61.

Rather, argues Bean, *Alastor* is a poem that belongs to "a paradoxical tradition of mystic writing in which spiritual desire is expressed in the language of sexual passion"[28]. Thus his interpretation of the poem is by far the best companion for our own. The search for knowledge is the poem's initial theme, but Bean departs from the view that after the Poet discovers the "thrilling secrets of the birth of time" (128) his interest turns from knowledge to love. For even while gazing on the dream-maiden, the Poet recognizes that "Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme, / And lofty thoughts of divine liberty, / Thoughts the most dear to him" (158-160). The Poet's erotic pursuit of the dream-maiden is in fact symbolic of his earlier quest for non-erotic knowledge.

This is Bean's thesis and it is one to which, on the whole, I adhere. I do depart, though, from his passing portrayal of the dream-maid as "a direct revelation from the spiritual world, a revelation passionate, ideal, and complete, without the imperfect intermediary of nature"[29]. This portrait enables Bean to conclude that the Poet's subsequent dream-voyage is an attempt to recapture his experience of this unmediated spiritual revelation. That attempt flouts what Shelley understands to be the limits of man's earthly power, though: the occasional, imperfect emanations of spiritual reality that are granted to the Narrator. Thus by demanding mystical communion with the spiritual world beyond these limits, and refusing to accept man's fate as the narrator earlier accepts it, the Poet is driven to a speedy ruin. This interpretation (of the dream-voyage, especially) is compelling. The didactic significance Bean attributes to *Alastor*, that man's desire to 'lift the painted veil' inevitably leads to disappointment and death, coincides with one of our own views on this score. But Bean's portrait of the dream-maiden, as representing man's desire for "direct revelation", is badly drawn. The maid can never be a direct revelation, seen "without an imperfect intermediary", for the simple reason that she is said to be veiled. Her outstretched arms, granted, are said to become bare but this scarcely constitutes "a revelation passionate, ideal and complete". There is no reason to believe that the veil is ever discarded completely. So we need another explanation of the

[28]Bean (1974), 64.

[29]Bean (1974), 63.

Poet's fate, one which does not see it as simply his punishment for seeking to re-experience unveiled revelations that, as we now know, he had never experienced in the first place.

Bean's indifference to veils is somewhat ironic, given that they are a part of the very tradition of mystic writing ("in which spiritual desire is expressed in the language of sexual passion") that his article champions. In that tradition it would be absolutely fitting that "Divine liberty" comes in the form of a "veiled maid" (151). For, as we have seen, the veil of flesh intimates both this divine liberty and, as de Rougemont says, "the nostalgia which makes us despise our earthly joys". All this is familiar from our consideration of the Narrator, but, continuing, de Rougemont adds an unusual twist that is particularly helpful to our understanding of the Poet. For some, he finds, earthly joys are too seductive:

> But the symbol [of Woman] is ambiguous, since it tends to mingle sexual attraction with *eternal* desire. The Essylt mentioned in sacred legends as being both 'an object of contemplation and a mystic vision' stirred up a yearning for what lies beyond embodied forms. Although she was beautiful and desirable for herself, it was her tendency to vanish.[30]

For Bean, the tragedy of *Alastor*'s Poet is that he feels clearly, too clearly, the difference between earthly joys and spiritual ones. The consequence is that he does not simply disdain the earthly joys (like the Narrator) but wants, vainly, to discard them utterly, and enter direct mystical union. To my mind, however, the Poet's tragedy is not that he feels the difference between sexual attraction and eternal desire too clearly, but that he hardly feels it at all. It is this ambiguity, described by de Rougemont above, that is fatal. It means that the Poet is unable to separate his sexual yearning for the maiden in herself and his yearning for the "divine liberty" that lies behind her seductive form. The Narrator, contrastingly, benefits from being able to see the erotic attraction of his great Mother for exactly what it is. It is the guise of

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[30]de Rougemont (1956), 64.

Eros (a necessary guise, for without it the spiritual reality could not be enjoyed at all) but a guise nonetheless. The Poet, though, epitomizes the danger of clinging to the erotic guise as desirable in itself. Or more particularly in *her*self. Sexual attraction commingles with his eternal desire, making the lower indistinguishable from the higher. The sacred mystic veil becomes indistinguishable from the mock-exotic prop of the stripper:

> Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil
> Of woven wind, her outspread arms now bare,
> Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,
> Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips
> Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly. (176-180)

The parted outstretched lips briefly recall another opening, another mouth. The caverns of the mind in *Difficulty of Analyzing the Human Mind*, were "pervaded by a lustre" which enticed the introspect onwards, almost like a lover. But even as he succumbed to their temptation, Shelley was always careful to respect the elusiveness, the mystical *other*ness of the *idola specus*. Their kisses were difficult, nearly impossible to obtain. The dream-maiden, though, is an altogether more tractable prototype of his being. 'Tractable' may be an undeserved politeness. Obscenities belong to the other extreme, but one such is excusable on the grounds that no other description quite so exactly captures her totally submissive, and in that sense, totally unerotic, eroticism. The Poet's dream-maiden is what adolescent boys half-scornfully, half-longingly, call a 'zipless' conquest. When she is elusive, it is the elusiveness of the coquette: chiding, teasing, but above all temporary:

> He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled
> His gasping breath, and spread his arms to meet
> Her panting bosom:...she drew back a while... (182-184)

So my argument is that however desirable the maiden may be in herself, and however enticing the prospect of sex with her is, she cannot satisfy the Poet's yearning for what lies beyond erotic forms. That he nonetheless believes her earthly forms can sate those eternal yearnings is a fatal but by now familiar error. Both

Difficulty of Analyzing the Human Mind and the 1811 letter, you may recall, sought to retain the earthly forms of reason in areas that were far beyond their jurisdiction, a decision that had debilitating consequences for their author. The Poet in *Alastor* prefers erotic forms to these reasonable ones but essentially succumbs to the same temptation: to dwell, as Pseudo-Denys had put it, "on the forms themselves as the final truth". It is this temptation that leads the Poet to mistake the dream-maiden's eroticism for *Eros,* the emblem of his desire for the desire itself. "His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess / Of love" (181-182). The consequence is that his sexual experience with her, because it is conceived as an end in itself, remains bathetic, frustrating and unfulfilling.

My impression is that this frustration is the Poet's alone, incidentally, and not attributable to some failure in Shelley's overall poetic design. I say this simply because many of *Alastor*'s readers continue to call the poetic quality of these scenes in general, and the characterization of the dream-maiden in particular, into the most serious question. O.W. Simpson was perhaps the first to find her "much too earthly and realistic; she who should have been but a symbol of the soul's desire steps out of the land of imagery like some scantily dressed beauty of a society ball"[31]. Yet it remains odd that more recent readers of Shelley, who often delight in attributing ever more sophisticated degrees of ironic self-awareness to his poems, have never entertained the possibility that the maid's character may be deliberately earthly, deliberately bathetic. The symbol of the soul's desire to participate in the All becomes a scantily dressed beauty at a society ball because the Poet's sexual desire has suffused and degraded his eternal yearnings. If you say that God is Perfect Beauty, Denys warned us, you may think you mean just that. But this is exactly what *Alastor*'s Poet does say, think and, most tragically, mean. *Just* that.

Having stirred up yearnings that her beauty could not fulfil, it was the tendency of the Essylt "to vanish", de Rougemont told us, a disappearing act which is revealingly repeated by the dream-maiden in Shelley's poem. Spreading his arms to meet her panting bosom, *Alastor*'s Poet

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[31]O.W.Simpson, *Shelley and the UnRomantics* (London: Methuen, 1924), 190.

> Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.
> Now blackness veiled his dizzy eyes, and night
> Involved and swallowed up the vision; sleep,
> Like a dark flood suspended in its course,
> Rolled back its impulse on his vacant brain. (187-91)

The maid's arms dissolve, like the chemist's æther, in the moment of seizure. And blackness veils the Poet's dizzy eyes, recalling Shelley's "dizzying and tumultuous" journey into the mystical caverns of the mind. Amongst other things, Immanuel Kant had once called mysticism "monstrosities on reason"[32]. This was a disparaging view to which Shelley once adhered. But in *Difficulty of Analyzing the Human Mind,* and the 1811 letter, human reason is shown to be a monstrosity on mysticism. *Alastor,* we have argued, dramatizes this point both more painfully, and more poignantly. "Alas! alas! / Were limbs, and breath, and being intertwined / Thus treacherously?" (207-209). For Shelley's tragic Poet, the monstrosity is human love.

[32]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp-Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), 70-71, 85-86, 162-63, 262.

Chapter Two

Jerusalem Now:
Laon and Cythna

If Shelley had ever met Joseph Marie, Comte de Maistre (1753-1821) would he not have been one "In whom its earliest hopes my spirit found" (*Laon and Cythna*, v, 1757)? For, like Laon's boyhood companion, de Maistre shadows Shelley's career as faithfully as only a friend or a betrayer would.

He came from an upper-bourgeois French Catholic background but his preferred education was, like Shelley's, classical and contemporary[1]. Plato, Origen, Voltaire and Rousseau appear as regularly in his writings as do the expected Catholic theologians. Like Shelley's admired Wordsworth and Southey, he was a close and approving observer of developments in France in the years immediately before 1789. He sympathized with Necker's efforts at reforming what his writings called monarchical despotism. In 1788, he supported the magistrates of the French *parlements'* action in requiring the King to call the *Estates-General*. In 1789, he wrote enthusiastically about the possibility of regenerating what he described as a great but mortally sick nation. But Joseph de Maistre was quickly disillusioned by the revolution's sickening violence and successive tyrannies, and said so in one of his most significant works of political philosophy, entitled *Considérations sur la France*. Shelley's own disappointed considerations on France, published as the Preface to the poem *Laon and Cythna*, broadly concurred with de Maistre's view: "The revulsion occasioned by the atrocities of the demagogues and the re-establishment of successive tyrannies in France was terrible," he wrote, "and felt in the remotest corner of the civilized world" (*WVP*, 88).

Like Laon and his boyhood companion, then, it could be said that Shelley and de Maistre "a lofty converse keep" (i, 824). Consider these passages from de Maistre's *Essay on the Generative Principles of Constitutions* and *Laon and Cythna*:

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[1]This paragraph is based on Richard A. Lebrun's *Introduction* to Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, trans. and intr. Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974), pp. 1-19.

> Nothing is plainer to man than the existence of two opposed forces which ceaselessly battle in the universe. There is no good that evil does not defile and debase; there is no evil that good does not restrain and attack, in impelling all things towards a more perfect state. These two forces are everywhere present.[2]

> Necessity, whose sightless strength forever
> Evil with evil, good with good must wind
> In bands of union, which no power may sever:
> They must bring forth their kind, and be divided never!
> (ix, 3708-11)

According to Shelley's theory of Necessity, good and evil are involved in a Manichean struggle. "To suppose that the world was created and is superintended by two spirits of a balanced power and opposite dispositions" he writes in an essay provocatively entitled *On the Devil and Devils,* "is simply a personification of the struggle which we experience within ourselves, and which we perceive in the operations of external things as they affect us, between good and evil" (*TOP,* 265). Shelley's theory that good and evil are equal and opposite challenges, quite intentionally, the Christian belief that the two share a mutual origin. The Christian conviction that the evils of the world could ultimately be reconciled with the concept of a benign God particularly irked the poet. "Like panic-stricken slaves in the presence of a jealous and suspicious despot" he writes of Christians elsewhere in *On the Devil and Devils,* "they have tortured themselves ever to devise any flattering sophism by which they might appease him by the most contradictory praises, endeavoring [sic] to reconcile omnipotence, and benevolence, and equity in the Author of an [sic] Universe, where evil and good are inextricably entangled, and where the most admirable tendencies to happiness and preservation are forever baffled by misery and decay" (*TOP,* 266).

Perhaps Shelley's biggest problem with the Christian view of good and evil is that it offered no way of combatting that "misery and decay". According to the Christian view, he believed, miseries would have to be tolerated because they are as

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[2]Joseph de Maistre, *The Works of Joseph de Maistre,* ed. and trans. Jack Lively (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1965), 166.

much the creation of God as happiness. The doctrine of Necessity allows the poet to take a very different view. "Necessity teaches us, that in no case could any event have happened otherwise than it did happen, and that, if God is the author of good, he is also the author of evil;" he had written in the extensive philosophical *Notes* to his early poem *Queen Mab*, "that, if he is entitled to our gratitude for the one, he is entitled to our hatred for the other; that, admitting the existence of this hypothetic being, he is also subjected to the dominion of an immutable necessity" (*POS*, 380). Necessity, then, enables Shelley to unleash his hatred both at God and at what he felt to be less abstract authors of evil, such as the institutions of Church and State. He could do this safely because he believed that while evil may be inextricably entangled with good, it is not in itself good and nor is it liable to turn into good. It could never be anything other than itself and thus could be relied on as something tangible to fight against. By the same token, Necessity also assures him that there is something tangible to fight for, a New Jerusalem which is uncontaminated by the old evils. Such assurances are absolutely crucial for a poet of revolutionary or even simply progressive leanings. So it is ironic that they help to create, in the case of *Laon and Cythna*, what I shall argue is in many ways a surprisingly anti-revolutionary, and even a conservative, poem.

This irony is almost immediately obvious. "The Manichean framework, depicted in the emblematic struggle between serpent and eagle in Canto One...is absolute and eternal"[3] Stuart Curran observes in his brief but perceptive reading of *Laon and Cythna*. But if that struggle really is "absolute and eternal" then why does the poem go on to predict, in the space of a few lines, that the evil eagle will ultimately be defeated by the good serpent: "The victor Fiend / Omnipotent of yore, now quails, and fears / His triumph dearly won, which soon will lend / An impulse swift and sure to his approaching end" (i, 429-432)? The answer to this question is that while the Manichean doctrine of Necessity may assure Shelley that there is a New Jerusalem to fight for, it is rather less certain about whether that state of unconditional good will ever actually be achieved. If the spirit of good can only exist

[3]Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1975), 30.

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in, and be defined by, its eternal struggle with the spirit of evil, in other words, then it clearly cannot be said to triumph over that evil. Yet this is exactly what the poem does say. The prediction of the first Canto is repeated in the last one when the Atheist also tells us that the evil Tyrant's victory will only be temporary. So it seems that the ultimate triumph of good over evil is the whole point of *Laon and Cythna,* then. But Necessity is what made that good fight possible and in doing so it dismisses the prospect that this fight can ever be won.

Other scholars have noticed this contradiction, but perhaps they have also resolved it slightly too neatly. In his excellent study of Shelley's poetic thinking, Richard Cronin accurately observes how, in *Laon and Cythna,* the "good, the beautiful, is always likely to precipitate, or to be transformed into, its opposite"[4]. While arguing that good and evil exist in a tense, precarious balance in Shelley's poem, however, Cronin nevertheless maintains that *Laon and Cythna* still holds out the possibility for "positive benevolent action"[5]. This, too, is an accurate representation of Shelley's thinking, for if the eagle's impending defeat, predicted in Canto One, is not a positive benevolent outcome then what is? But in his efforts to represent his subject's thoughts accurately here, it seems to me that Cronin fails to sufficiently exploit the contradictions that we have found within them. For if the relationship between good and evil in *Laon and Cythna* is really as precipitous as he suggests, then how can a "positive benevolent action" be possible when it must, logically, be likely to precipitate its opposite? This is not a question that Cronin can answer, at least not, as we shall see, in any way that remains as faithful as he usually does to Shelley's explicit thinking.

Perhaps Joseph de Maistre can provide an answer. After all, Shelley's views, even in their more convoluted aspects, are very like his own. Like the poet, he appears to reject the Christian notion of the mutuality of good and evil in favour of a Manichean system in which the two forces are perpetually opposed. They may be liable to switch places or collapse into one another but they never entirely transfuse. "There is no good that evil does not defile and debase, there is no evil that good does

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[4]Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 106.

[5]Cronin (1981), 108.

not restrain and attack," he had written, "in impelling all things towards a more perfect state". Like Shelley and Cronin, de Maistre also seems to accept the idea of a New Jerusalem, or what he describes as a "more perfect state", to match his positive benevolent action. So we can ask the same question of him that we do of them. Can good, should good, be vindicated "in the end" if it is only conceived through an interminable struggle and intercourse with its opposite? This is de Maistre's response:

> Human power extends perhaps only to removing or combating evil to free the good from it and to restore to the good the power to grow according to its nature. The celebrated Zanotti has said, *It is difficult to change things for the better.* This thought hides a profound meaning under the appearance of extreme simplicity. It accords completely with another saying of Origen, which is alone worth a whole volume. *Nothing,* he said, *can be changed for the better in social matters without divine help.* All men feel the truth of this, without being able themselves to express it.[6]

Shelley might have felt as betrayed by de Maistre here as Laon did by his boyhood companion: "the cold truth such sad reverse did seem, / As to awake in grief from some delightful dream" (ii, 819-20). Wordsworth and Southey, also youthful admirers of the Revolution, may have become disappointingly cynical with age but at least they had not turned into Catholics! In truth, de Maistre underwent no such sudden conversion: the biography that began this chapter was a little selective. Although unimpressed with the *ancien régime*, de Maistre opposed its usurpation, advocating instead some conservative reforms carried out by the judiciary as a way of keeping more radical popular opinions in check. And the young devotee of Rousseau was always and also a committed Catholic.

Clearly, then, the Joseph de Maistre described above could not have been a friend of Shelley's. But neither, I would argue, is he quite the enemy you might expect. This is the reason why I have chosen the much more ambivalent figure of Laon's *betrayer* to characterize de Maistre's relationship with the poet, for it is clear that a betrayer must have been a friend in order to be an enemy. He must have gained some confidence, or shared some faith to be able to betray it. And this is exactly what de Maistre does. It is interesting to note, for instance, that he provides

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[6]de Maistre (1965), 166-167.

a potential resolution to the contradiction which plagues Shelley in *Laon and Cythna.* Whilst acknowledging that good is inextricably connected to evil, in other words, he manages to show a way in which it can still triumph over evil. Humanity does not progress through any positive benevolent action of its own, he argues, but through the divine gifts of God described by Origen: "*Nothing,* he said, *can be changed for the better without divine help*". Now it goes without saying, of course, that Shelley would never explicitly profess the Christian faith embraced by de Maistre here. But it sometimes seems to me that Christian assumptions are implicit in his own beliefs, even his anti-Christian ones. Describing the poet's belief that "positive benevolent action" was possible despite all the evidence to the contrary, for instance, Richard Cronin suggests that "This extension of Shelley's scheme is not rationally defensible; it is a matter of faith"[7]. You may well wince at Cronin's injudicious use of the noun "faith" here, and wince again at the affinity between Shelley and de Maistre that I surely imply by quoting it. The following statement from Shelley himself, you might think, surely gives a more accurate account of the poet's thoughts on this matter. "The supposition that the good spirit is, or hereafter will be, superior," he writes in another section of the essay *On the Devil and Devils,* "is a personification of the principle of hope and that thirst for improvement without which present evil would be intolerable" (*TOP,* 265).

I am afraid, however, that passages like this compel me all the more to agree with Cronin's choice of "faith", no matter how unShelleyan an abstract noun it might seem. My only criticism of Cronin, in fact, is that he does not go far enough. To arrive at this conclusion, though, we first need to put the above passage in context. It is an excerpt from that essay in which, you will recall, Shelley chastises Christianity's efforts to reconcile omnipotence and benevolence in a universe "where good and evil are inextricably entangled, and where the most admirable tendencies to happiness and preservation are forever baffled by misery and decay". But immediately after arguing that good will never be able to separate itself from evil, in the above passage *On the Devil and Devils* goes on to suppose that "the good spirit is, or hereafter will be, superior". Why is this? The superiority of the good spirit is

[7]Cronin (1981), 108.

expected, not because there is any rational reason for doing so, but because if it were not then "present evil would be intolerable". The "principle of hope" described above is better described as a hope against hope, then, or perhaps a belief before comprehension. Shelley himself used that last phrase, ironically, to scorn Christian faith in the *Notes* to *Queen Mab*. "When will the pride of ignorance blush at having believed before it could comprehend?" (*POS*, 398) he had written. But as we are now perhaps beginning to see, the poet was not quite as averse to such "ignorant" beliefs as he claimed to be. For what *On the Devil and Devils* calls the "thirst for improvement" and the "principle of hope" are, by Shelley's own logic, religious faiths in everything but name.

So there are religious elements implicit in Shelley's political radicalism, then, elements which a rather more sceptical radical like William Hazlitt, for instance, had no difficulty in detecting: "Spurning the world of realities, he rushed into the world of nonentities and contingencies, like air into a *vacuum*. If a thing was old and established, this was with him a certain proof of its having no solid foundation to rest upon: if it was new, it was good and right", Hazlitt wrote in his acidly brilliant review of Shelley's *Posthumous Poems*[8]. In one sense this viewpoint is perfectly correct and we will bear it in mind in what follows. In another, though, it is perhaps a simplification of both Shelley's politics and of religion's role within them. Despite its "thirst for improvement", I think, essays like *On the Devil and Devils* never quite manage to spurn what Hazlitt calls "the world of realities". And neither, despite all its revolutionary zeal, does *Laon and Cythna*. The next section will try to substantiate my clearly controversial claim that Shelley's revolutionary epic is in many ways not an anti-revolutionary poem at all, but a conservative one. It will also see that even when the poem does reject the implicitly religious radicalism derided by Hazlitt, it does not reject religion *per se*. If anything, it embraces it more explicitly in this conservative form. For like his friend and betrayer Joseph de Maistre, Shelley does not rush into a world of "nonentities and contingencies", but waits for God to intervene in the real, and far from perfect, one.

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[8]ed., Barcus (1975), 338.

Before going on to explore the extent of *Laon and Cythna*'s commitment to political and religious conservatism, though, I would like to consider in a little more detail just what that commitment involves. A famous or perhaps notorious article by the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott called *On Being Conservative* offers the following definition of its titular disposition: "To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, present laughter to utopian bliss"[9]. That the Shelley described by William Hazlitt would have shared any of these preferences is extremely unlikely, of course, and indeed at one point in his article Oakeshott explicitly contrasts the poet's disposition with his own. But a number of more recent studies, most notably Paul Dawson's *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics*, have produced a great deal of evidence which discredits Hazlitt's rather disparaging view of the poet's political beliefs as utopian and revolutionary. This intriguing extract from a letter written to Leigh Hunt in 1819, for instance, reveals a pragmatic and reformist streak in Shelley's politics that is ironically very reminiscent of Hazlitt: "You know my principles incite me to take all the good I can get in politics, for ever aspiring to something more." he wrote. "I am one of those whom nothing will fully satisfy, but who am ready to be *partially satisfied* by all that is practicable (*Letters*, ii, 153) (stress mine).

What would we think of the revolutionary poem *Queen Mab*, for example, if Ianthe left that poem not speechless with bliss, as she does, but merely satisfied or even *partially* satisfied? The phrase is one which someone like Hazlitt would normally expect to stick in its author's throat. To use it, indeed, is almost to prefer what Oakeshott calls "the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, present laughter to Utopian bliss". It is almost, in other words, to be conservative. Readers like Dawson who remain essentially sympathetic to the dissenting tradition to which Shelley belonged would profoundly disagree with this assessment, of course, but for me the direction of his

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[9]Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 408.

argument actually tends to invite it. For by successfully demonstrating that Shelley's political instincts were sometimes as pragmatic and reformist as Hazlitt's, Dawson also succeeds in allying the poet with someone who, at other times, his circle believed might as well have been a conservative[10]. By apparently rejecting revolutionary action in favour of a more modest system of reform, then, it could be argued that Shelley comes closer to what he himself would identify as a broadly conservative position. Like de Maistre, Oakeshott and to a certain degree even Hazlitt, he accepts what, in the words of the first of this trio, the celebrated Zanotti had said: "*It is difficult to change things for the better*". And as we shall soon see, he even comes close to accepting a saying of Origen with which, according to de Maistre, Zanotti's thought agrees completely: "*Nothing,* he said, *can be changed for the better without divine help*". The greatest test for this argument comes in the form of *Laon and Cythna,* though, a poem to which we can now finally turn.

Even the Preface to this revolutionary epic presents difficulties for our prospective reading. Shelley's belief in Man's ability to control his own destiny without outside help is apparent from the very outset. "But mankind appear [sic] to me to be emerging from their trance" of despair (*WVP,* 89) he contends. This is a revealing choice of trope. The movement from sleep into full consciousness, from darkness into enlightenment, is apocalyptic, transformatory. And any poet who recommends transformation as a remedy for the unhappiness of man is clearly no conservative. But considering that trope of enlightenment again, another interpretation suggests itself. In a contemporaneous fragment, Shelley uses it in a strikingly different way: "The spring rebels not against Winter but it succeeds it - / *the dawn rebels not against night but it disperses it*" he writes[11] (stress mine). For Shelley, this is an oddly conservative image. The change it depicts is transitional rather than transformatory, evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Even its most obvious

[10]"He says that Shelley provokes him by his going to a *pernicious* extreme on the liberal side, and so hurting it" Leigh Hunt once wrote of Hazlitt, "I asked him what good he would do the said side by publicly abusing the supporters of it, and caricaturing them? To *this* he answers nothing". *The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt,* ed. Thornton Hunt (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1862), 166.

[11]Bodl.MS. ads. e.18, flyleaf. See Wasserman (1971), 387.

relation, the *Ode to the West Wind,* is careful to balance its desire for conservation with the need for destruction: "Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!" (13-14). In this image, though, destruction is replaced by a rather more muted dispersal: "the dawn rebels not against night but it disperses it". My point is simply that two quite conflicting interpretations can be placed upon the same poetic trope, and even by the same poet. The former is transformatory, and thus wholly appropriate to a revolutionary epic. But the latter is almost gestatory, and has ultimately led me to agree with Paul Dawson that *Laon and Cythna* is in fact "profoundly anti-revolutionary"[12].

That the Preface yields to the former interpretation is predictable; that it also bends to the latter is less so. For the darkness of despair is not only a trance but also a kind of womb. Strangely, Shelley describes his poem's creation in a manner akin to a mother's pregnancy and labour: "The Poem now presented to the Public occupied little more than six months in the composition. That period has been devoted to the task with unremitting ardour and enthusiasm. I have exercised a watchful and earnest criticism on my work as it grew under my hands" (*WVP*, 96). Poetry is born in darkness and nursed under the hands of its creator. While Shelley hopes it will startle and animate his readers, the poem's "newness and energy" is "slowly gathered" (*WVP*, 96) rather than instantly inspired. Once again, this is a strangely conservative image for the poet. In *Queen Mab* Shelley famously characterized his brand of radicalism as a rebellion against thinking, feeling, acting and living as our fathers did[13]. But in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* that radicalism is apparently nurtured by just the sort of earnest and watchful father which the earlier poem despised. "The claims of Shelley's ideology are ultimately antithetical to the generic properties in which he envelops them"[14] Curran writes about this poem, and looking at an image like this it is easy to see what he means. The next section

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[12]P.M.S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 74.

[13]*Queen Mab* iii, 96-99: "He, like the vulgar, thinks, feels, acts and lives / Just as his father did; the unconquered powers / Of precedent and custom interpose / Between a *king* and virtue".

[14]Curran (1975), 29.

will consider some of the many other images and ideas in *Laon and Cythna* which are "ultimately antithetical" to Shelley's revolutionary ideology. It begins by tracing what is surprisingly the poem's most conservative metaphor of all. Hunger.

(ii)

Food and its availability is pivotal in *Laon and Cythna*[15]. Its unequal distribution is an obvious sign of injustice while its redistribution is an equally obvious sign that injustice has been overcome. After the initial success of the revolution, for instance, the mighty crowd are said to feed on Cythna's victory address and Laon and Cythna, dying on the pyre, feed on each other's thoughts. Cythna, in a striking passage, is thought to gather "the sweetest fruit in human reach / For those fair hands now free" (iv, 1597-98). The possibility of this replenishment, whether the sweetest fruit really should be in reach of the fair hands now free, in other words, is a good test of Shelley's accepted radicalism and alleged conservatism. Cythna's redistributive idea hinges on one key assurance, namely, that there is enough food to go around and that its equal distribution is, in the first place, possible and, in the second place, unquestionably good. It should be absurd to doubt the logic of this in a poem like *Laon and Cythna*. Doesn't the Preface depict the calamities of a "social state, according to the provisions of which, one man riots in luxury whilst another famishes for want of bread?" (*WVP*, 88). Its endorsement of an attainable and marvellous liberty for all is made explicit, and in the case of Cythna's speeches, *ad nauseam*. Yet we have already seen elsewhere that Shelley had reservations about the feasibility of such a

[15]The prominence of food, hunger and cannibalism motifs in *Laon and Cythna* is first noted in Richard Cronin's discussion of the poem in *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (103-104) and discussed at greater length in Timothy Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

massive act of redistribution, declaring himself ready to be "partially satisfied by all that is practicable". Tracing the hunger motif now, we will see that this desire for partial and individual satisfaction mitigates against the poem's revolutionary, collectivist instinct again and again.

When people are hungry, they will eat almost anything. Consider this passage from Canto Two of the poem, in which Laon describes his hunger for change:

> I heard, as all have heard, life's various story,
> And in no careless heart transcribed the tale;
> But, from the sneers of men who had grown hoary
> In shame and scorn, from groans of crowds made pale
> By famine, from a mother's desolate wail
> O'er her polluted child, from innocent blood
> Poured on the earth, and brows anxious and pale
> With the heart's warfare; did I gather food
> To feed my many thoughts: a tameless multitude! (ii, 739-747)

My focus here is the extent to which Laon is obviously stimulated by the desolation he sees all around him. Like many revolutionary leaders, he thrives upon the suffering of his people. His food is their hunger. But it is interesting to note that his satiation seems initially to be little more than a form of self-aggrandizement: "did I gather food to feed *my many thoughts*" (stress mine). Dawson has also criticized Laon's initially "overweening excess of optimism" in this Canto[16]. It is not until Stanza XIII of Canto Two that Laon finally determines in what direction his new-found power will take him: "It shall be thus no more!" (ii, 775). So this is strangely egocentric behaviour from someone who supposedly believes in the fraternity of man. Until Laon decides that he will act on behalf of the hungry, and oppose inequality and its injustices, indeed, it is almost as if he embodies, in a psychological sense, the avaricious authority that he will later condemn. It is almost as if he feeds on the masses rather than on their behalf. This speculation leads to another one, which will be equally useful to us in our reading of *Laon and Cythna.* It is important to draw a distinction, I think, between why people say they do things in this poem and why they really do them. Their declared motives are not always their real motives. In the

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[16]Dawson (1981), 70.

above example this is true both for Laon and, by implication, Shelley himself. For, as Stuart Curran has noted, the poet often seems just as stimulated as Laon does by images of death and destruction, and for just as inappropriate reasons. "The bloody battle scenes, designed to shock a doubting Thomas into political awareness, sit uncomfortably next to avowals of pacifism"[17] he argues. This discomfort with Laon, and ultimately Shelley, too, increases as we move into Canto Three.

Cronin has identified another instance of what we might call Laon's psychological parasiticism or even cannibalism in that Canto[18]. At the beginning of Canto Three, Laon dreams of his imprisonment and separation from Cythna. But the dreamed separation turns out to be real and Laon finds himself incarcerated in a tower in that Canto. Starving once more, he succumbs to a hallucinatory fever, which concludes with a sado-erotic consumption of Cythna's body:

> A woman's shape, now lank and cold and blue,
> The dwelling of the many-coloured worm
> Hung there, the white and hollow cheek I drew
> To my dry lips - what radiance did inform
> Those horny eyes? whose was that withered form?
> Alas, alas! it seemed that Cythna's ghost
> Laughed in those looks, and that the flesh was warm
> Within my teeth! (iii, 1333-1340)

There are stories of how Shelley would sometimes playfully surprise an innocent friend and rejoin their startled cry with a louder cry of his own, which would provoke a still louder cry from his friend, and so on. This passage, lovingly designed to shock and be shocked, is perhaps an articulated equivalent of those screaming matches. As it is, we certainly hear Shelley's lip-smacking syntactics before Laon's sickened retch. The rhetorical questions create an expectation which is fulfilled, exceeded (not just flesh within his teeth but warm flesh!) and still more luridly embellished with exclamations. Gothic horrors, certainly, and if we weren't reading a poet noted for his seriousness and ambitiousness we would not expect anything more than this horror. But rightly we do.

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[17]Curran (1975), 29.

[18]Cronin (1981), 103.

Richard Cronin tries to fulfil this expectation. Whilst conceding that Laon's dreams, and to a certain extent Shelley's, often seem more wet than utopian, he manages to devise an ingenious psychological link between the two. He sees Laon's dreams as expressing his innermost desires and suggests that by accepting those desires, however depraved, the character begins the process by which they can be overcome. Thus he and Cythna are able to "confront unappalled such a demonstration of human depravity, because they have experienced it and recognised it within themselves". They can build their New Jerusalem on a "defiant recognition of the realities to which it is vulnerable". This is a typically deft attempt to rescue some semblance of "positive benevolent action" for Shelley's poem. The evidence Cronin cites in support of it, though, is not totally persuasive. In her speech to the sailors, he argues, Cythna demands that they "know themselves, but only so that they can reject their own evil"[19]. But as we saw at the very outset of this chapter, this is a poem in which evil can never be wholly rejected because it is inextricably linked with good. "Necessity whose sightless strength for ever / Evil with evil, good with good must wind / In bands of union, which no power may sever". Cythna makes this point even more strongly in her speech to the sailors: "'Disguise it not - we have one human heart - / All mortal thoughts confess a common home" (viii, 3361-3362). These thoughts include the depraved ones that Cronin thinks can be rejected: "Blush not for what may to thyself impart / Stains of inevitable crime" (viii, 3363-3364). *Pace* Cronin, depravity is actually an inescapable part of human nature.

Even if it were not, it is difficult to see where Laon really does "confront" his psychological cannibalism and parasiticism in the way Cronin suggests. It continues, unmodulated, in his behaviour, if not his rhetoric, for the rest of the poem. We have already seen that the inspiration he initially draws from the famine-stricken populace empowers *him* rather than *them*. That he feeds on the revolution as much as on its behalf, in other words. But even when Laon is finally inspired by the collective spirit, that inspiration is still couched in a language of consumption. The only difference is that now the revolutionary spirit is said to feed on him: "my brow was pale, but in my cheek / And lips a flush of gnawing fire did find / Their food and dwelling; tho' mine eyes might speak / A subtle mind and strong within a frame thus weak" (iv,

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[19]Cronin (1981), 103-104, 98, 105.

1671-1674). The strength and satisfaction of the one in *Laon and Cythna* always seems to come at the expense of the weakness and hunger of another. This is true for Laon but, as I said earlier, it is even more true for Shelley. It is no coincidence that the former's flushes of power are also the most poetically powerful moments in the poem. For like his hero, I think, Shelley is envitalized by irredeemably ghoulish, fallen spectacles: the hungry masses, the skeletal Cythna, the revolutionary bloodbath. Indeed it may be the fact that these scenes of death and impoverishment are irredeemable, that is, incapable of being recouped by any sort of revolutionary change, even the psychological revolution imagined by Cronin, which seems to satisfy him most of all. And why? "The central characteristics of this disposition are not difficult to discern" wrote Oakeshott in *On Being Conservative*, "although they have often been mistaken. They centre upon a tendency to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be"[20]. For this reason, perhaps, Islam is a kingdom where there is not enough food to go around.

This disparity is admirably demonstrated by the events of Canto Five, which begins with the success of the Revolution and the fall of the Tyrant. He demands food for his child: "'She hungers, slave, / Stab her, or give her bread!'" (v, 1953-1954). That Othman should still think in the logic of slaver and enslaved strains Laon's understanding: "I trembled, for the truth was known, / He with this child had thus been left alone, / And neither had gone forth for food" (v, 1958-1959). Does Othman not know, in other words, that since the revolution has brought equality, hunger has been eliminated? But still he cowers "in mingled pride and awe" (v, 1960) while his child is "a nursling of captivity" (v, 1961). Both are hungry only because they "Knew nought beyond those walls, nor what such change / might be" (v, 1962). Outside, in other words, there was food for them if only they had looked for it. That a Tyrant in a poem by Shelley should be proud is expected yet it is the unexpectedly mingled awe which is more revealing here and which eludes Laon's triumphant charity. Othman knows better than Laon what is beyond those walls, the mighty crowd, and is rightly fearful of their wrath. And so he is also right to cower and beg.

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[20]Oakeshott (1991), 408.

Why, exactly, does the crowd want to kill Othman? It is ironic that their wrath is exercised at the very moment when Laon's declared ideal of equal distribution is finally realized. The last hungry people in Islam are fed, namely, Othman and his child: "when food was brought to them, her share / To his averted lips the child did bear, / But, when she saw he had enough, she ate / And wept the while" (v, 1984-1987). But for the crowd, a vanquished Tyrant must still be a Tyrant. Laon pricks this assumption with another question: "'What do ye seek? What fear ye?'" (v, 2009). The rhetorical answer is of course that they have nothing to fear, let alone a demoralized and seemingly repentant ex-Tyrant. But in saying this, perhaps Laon forgets that the crowd remain Manicheans, committed to the overthrow of what they believe is an irredeemable evil. For them to forgive the Tyrant would be to admit that evil is not, in fact, irredeemable, which robs their struggle with it and their victory over it of much of its meaning. They need the eagle in order to be the serpent, in other words. Perhaps this is why they are so outraged when the Tyrant eats. When he stops being hungry, they believe, he will stop being vanquished. He will become like them: "the lonely man's despair / Hunger then overcame, and, of his state / Forgetful, on the dust as in a trance he sate. / Slowly the silence of the multitudes / Past, as when far is heard in some lone dell / The gathering of a wind among the woods - / And he is fallen! they cry, he who did dwell / Like famine or the plague, or aught more fell / Among our homes, is fallen!" (v, 1987-1995).

But of course evil is much more resilient than the mighty crowd think. Their desire to take revenge upon Othman demonstrates that they are just as capable of inflicting suffering and bloodshed as he is, as Laon argues in a plea that the Tyrant should be spared. Like Cythna's speech to the sailors, this address by Laon exposes the hypocrisy of those who would seek to reject and pass judgement upon the evil of others. For Shelley, it is a characteristically audacious revision of Christ's plea to the hypocrites who wanted to stone a woman for committing adultery: "'What call ye *justice*? Is there one who ne'er / In secret thought has wished another's ill? - / Are ye all pure? Let those stand forth and hear, / And tremble not. Shall they insult and kill, / If such they be? their mild eyes can they fill / With the false anger of the hypocrite?" (v, 2017-2022). Laon concludes his speech by pleading with the crowd to forgive Othman rather than wreak vengeance upon him, a plea which they accept.

The acceptance of Laon's plea, with its defining question "Are ye all pure?", is perhaps the most persuasive evidence for Cronin's reading of the poem. By knowing their own capacity for evil, in other words, the revolutionaries prove themselves capable of overcoming it. But upon my reading of the poem, you will recall, Shelley recognizes at least on some level that if "Evil with evil, good with good must wind / In bands of union, which no power may sever" then evil can never be overcome, at least not by human efforts. The fact that the pardoned Tyrant is already plotting his own revenge upon the crowd at the end of Canto Five is the most obvious example of this: "his straight lips were bent, / Men said, into a smile which guile portended" (v, 2041-2042). Yet even if the poem concluded at the end of this Canto, with the unconditional success of what is as yet an entirely bloodless revolution, there are still reasons for thinking that it has not totally overcome what Shelley, at least, would understand to be "evil". Foremost among these is the argument advanced in the first section of this chapter that, on the few occasions when *Laon and Cythna* does endorse an unambiguously radical position, it still implicitly contains elements of religious belief. And nowhere is this more true than in Canto Five. For as we shall now see, even in the moment of its success the revolution reproduces the political and, particularly, the religious hierarchy that it existed to overthrow.

I said earlier that Laon's plea to the crowd saves the Tyrant's life. But it also transforms his own:

> The murmur of the people slowly dying,
> Paused as I spake; then those who near me were,
> Cast gentle looks where the lone man was lying
> Shrouding his head, which now that infant fair
> Clasped on her lap in silence;- thro' the air
> Sobs were then heard, and many kissed my feet
> In pity's madness, and to the despair
> Of him whom late they cursed, a solace sweet
> His very victims brought - soft looks and speeches meet.
> (v, 2026-2034)

Why does Shelley include that detail about the crowd kissing Laon's feet? Isn't this exactly the sort of veneration that he most despises about Christianity? Describing the Christian idolization of God in *Queen Mab*'s *Notes*, he had written "Their addresses to this imaginary being, indeed, are much in the same style as those of subjects to a

king. They acknowledge his benevolence, deprecate his anger, and supplicate his favour" (*POS*, 379-380). Yet Shelley appears to be perfectly happy, here, for another imaginary being, Laon, to receive the supplications of his subjects: "thro' the air / Sobs were then heard, and many kissed my feet". The familiar response to this contradiction is that Shelley's poems enjoy recruiting the idioms of the religious and political establishment to anti-establishment effect. "The language of Platonic idealism is *transformed* in *Adonais*" Kelvin Everest told us, "and that language thus bears an ironic dimension that is not without its implicit polemical edge". By the same token it could be argued that the language of religious veneration is transformed in *Laon and Cythna*, with the same polemical intent. The crowd's spontaneous and unsolicited veneration of Laon is intended to compare favourably, in other words, with the infantile tribute that they are compelled to pay to God or Othman.

This argument has a certain plausibility elsewhere in the poem, but not, I think, here. This is not to say, of course, that Shelley ever consciously admitted any admiration for the target of his polemics. It never crossed his mind, in other words, that when he took things from the Christian religion, he might also be giving something of himself in return: "I have met with some waverers between Xtianity [sic] and Deism.-" he typically wrote, "I shall attempt to make them reject all the bad, and take all the good of the Jewish books" (*Letters*, i, 265). But subconsciously, perhaps, some admiration for the trappings of religion creeps unchecked into his poetry. Why else would he reward Laon, who condemns idolatry, with an audience which responds, not with polite applause or a show of hands, but by kissing his feet? The familiar response to this contradiction, that the crowd's idolization of Laon is somehow more meritorious than their previous idolization of God, will not suffice, as even Laon himself admits. His disciples are, he says, touched with "pity's madness" (v, 2032), which implies a faith as blind, if not blinder, than the idolatry it is supposed to outstrip. Laon's obvious discomfort at the crowd's behaviour in this scene exonerates him from any charge of soliciting that idolatry, but the poet who created that crowd and shaped their behaviour does not escape quite so easily. My own feeling is that on some basic level Shelley *wants* to idolize Laon, and to bask in his reflected glory. And that he uses Laon's discomfort with idolatry as a sort of defence, a poetic alibi behind which he can safely indulge his secret desire. But his

secret is not safe, as we have perhaps begun to see. The fact that *Laon and Cythna* venerates people rather than gods should not, and does not, obscure the extent to which the language of religious veneration remains stubbornly unironic and untransformed in this case. Perhaps we are beginning to appreciate the extent to which religion really is Shelley's betrayer, one of those edged friends who quietly, secretly receive while they openly or apparently give.

(iii)

To explore the extent of *Laon and Cythna*'s debt to religious and political conservatism it makes sense to consider not only the poem's conservative metaphors, like hunger, but also some of its conservative characters, like Othman, the figure of "Pestilence", and the Christian Priest. John Taylor Coleridge, nephew of the poet, described in an early review how Shelley's treatment of Othman "manifests a dislike to [sic] Christianity which is frantic, and would be, if in such a case anything could be, ridiculous". Which is a fair point. Sometimes Shelley's depiction of the Tyrant seems almost as hysterical as the character is himself. Coleridge also complains that Shelley chooses Othman and the Christian Priest "to be the organ of sentiments outrageously and pre-eminently cruel"[21]. Which is, again, not unfair. Shelley's dislike of these Christian characters, and his cruelty towards the Christian faith, hardly needs demonstration. But Coleridge opens up a more promising line of enquiry, in which we might see Shelley being slightly more sympathetic towards the Tyrant. Shelley's attacks on Othman are first ridiculous and finally outrageous, he stresses. The diverse meanings attached to this last adjective reluctantly merit it that most over-used of epithets 'indeterminate'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'outrageousness'

[21]John Taylor Coleridge, review, *Quarterly Review*, 21 (1819), 460-471, repr. in ed., Barcus (1975), pp. 124-135, 127.

attributes not only offensiveness and abusiveness to its object, but extravagance, extraordinariness and immodesty as well. In the subject, it can indicate feelings of repugnancy, admiration or amusement. Othman's almost Caligulan celebration of power for its own sake is outrageous in nearly all these senses, I think, for though undeniably obscene, it also exhibits the almost comic arbitrariness of his sovereignty. The analogy with Caligula is a considered one for, like the Roman Emperor, the frightening reach of Othman's power makes us recognize more and more his absurdity and that of the authority he wields. The genocide he sanctions so that he may feel "a King in truth" (x, 3861), for example, may well be a symbol of his dreadful power. But the irony that, to experience that power, he must destroy all those over whom it can be exercised is not lost on the reader. His love of the trappings of power disguises the fact that in the end his power does not markedly extend beyond those trappings. Ultimately, Othman can only be king over himself and even then only for as long as the famine, which his tyranny created, permits him: "So, near the throne, amid the gorgeous feast / Sheathed in resplendent arms, or loosely dight / To luxury, ere the mockery yet had ceased / That lingered on his lips, the warrior's might / Was loosened, and a new and ghastlier night / In dreams of frenzy lapped his eyes" (x, 4009-4014). The destruction that Othman unleashes only succeeds in destroying himself. For this reason, perhaps, it is easier to laugh at him or pity him than it is to hate him. The "King in truth" is really just an example of what *Queen Mab* calls "Man's brief and frail authority" (iii, 220).

Searching for food amidst the plague city that Othman's tyranny created in Canto Ten, Laon finds only the insane woman who calls herself "Pestilence". It might seem odd to pair this character with the Tyrant, but they share more than a grim sense of humour. By Canto Ten, Othman is also "raving mad" and "a dying seer of dark oppression's hell" (x, 4016-17). Both he and "Pestilence" are pitied by Laon, but despite his best efforts, both are unredeemed. And both happily invoke a murderous authority which, less happily for Othman, threatens to engulf the murderers. In this light, the woman's invitation: "'Eat! / Share the great feast - to-morrow we must die!'" (vi, 2795-96) belongs with the Prince's monstrous faith which falls "like a shaft loosened by the bowman's error, / On their own hearts" (x, 4020-21). The portraits of Othman and "Pestilence" confirm our suspicion, I think, that Shelley finds a

gratuitous, lurid life in the ostensible objects of his despair. I write 'ostensible' only, because it often seems that the poet's poetic fascination with conservative and religious forces underwrites any political indignation that he has for them. Laon, for instance, seeks to convert the mad woman to his cause but it is revealing to note that it is she who almost converts him. After meeting her, he says that if it were not for the thought of Cythna he would "rave in sympathy" (vi, 2801). But as we shall soon see the most obvious example of Shelley's curious fixation with the enemies of the revolution is the character of the Christian Priest. This character and the fundamentalist, indeed fanatical, brand of Christianity he represents dominates the final two Cantos of *Laon and Cythna* much more forcefully than Laon, Cythna and their revolutionary ideals. In the apocalyptic vision of these Cantos, the veils of irony in which Shelley's poems habitually wrap their use of Christian faith are increasingly stripped away, leaving the faith itself apparently unadorned.

Consider, for example, the deaths of Laon and Cythna in Canto Twelve. Once again, the accepted wisdom goes, Shelley transforms an admired religious language here for his own distinct purposes. In Canto Five, he revised the idiom of religious veneration to depict the adoration of the crowd for their reluctant saviour Laon. Here it is the idiom of religious martyrdom that is re-written, its good aspects separated from its bad. The good thing about religious martyrs, from Shelley's perspective, is that the submissive manner of their deaths very trenchantly rebukes the repressive political authority that sanctions those deaths. Jesus Christ, the poet had written, "stands in the foremost list of those true heroes, who have died in the glorious martyrdom of liberty, and have braved torture, contempt, and poverty, in the case of suffering humanity" (*POS*, 397). By submitting meekly to the pyre, Shelley must have hoped, Laon could join that list. But of course he did not think that the idiom of religious martyrdom was wholly good. For the submission of the religious martyr actually rebukes *all* human authorities, both repressive *and* liberal. It reminds radicals that there will come a time when they, too, have to submit, in other words. Now Shelley would obviously have disliked this element of religious martyrdom, which is why, in the very same essay in which he hailed Christ as a glorious martyr for liberty, he could scornfully remark "No religion ever existed, which had not its prophets, its attested miracles, and, above all, crowds of devotees who would bear patiently the most horrible tortures to prove its authenticity" (*POS*, 400).

So to suitably transform the language of religious martyrdom, it would seem, Shelley must play down its teleological and mystical implications and build up its historical and political implications. Indeed modern readers of the poet have been invited to see his involvement with religion exclusively in terms of questions like these[22]. Our thesis has politely declined this invitation. Our justification for doing so has been a suspicion that Shelley is not quite so willing to demystify religious idioms as many would have him be. He may be willing to *re*mystify those idioms, to bestow their mystery on others, such as Laon in Canto Five, but he is reluctant to forsake mystery altogether. This reluctance is apparent in the demystifications he does attempt. The essay *On Christianity*, for instance, tries to turn purely devotional passages of the New Testament into advocacies for historical and political action. But the result is singularly unpersuasive. Christ's "meek and majestic demeanour", for instance, is offered as proof positive of His opposition to "oppression and...falsehood" (*OPW*, 261), as if someone with a meek and majestic demeanour could not help but share Shelley's political opinions.

In fact Canto Twelve, like Canto Five, revises less of its despised religious prototype than would have been supposed. If anything, it is even more dedicated to its original source than the earlier Canto. That Canto's believers, although faithful enough, are rather incidental. There are no distinct faces in the mighty crowd which venerates Laon, no single voice raised above his own. But the Atheist, one who "uprose among the multitude" (xii, 4686) after Laon and Cythna have been burned on the pyre, is much more significant. Where the earlier crowd were distanced, he is obtrusive. Where they were mute, he is articulate. Revealingly, too, Shelley seems to endorse his interpretation of Laon and Cythna's life, and the lessons to be drawn from it. His speech is granted as sympathetic an audience as Laon's speech to the mighty crowd, or Cythna's equivalent speech to the sailors, if not more so. It is not hard to figure out why this should be. The Atheist's speech is altogether more important than either Laon's or Cythna's because it is given in the aftermath of

[22]"There is certainly room for a study of Shelley's religious thought by a competent critic thoroughly grounded, not in Roman or anglo-Catholic orthodoxy, but in the recent traditions of Protestant liberal and existentialist theologies originating with Shelley's contemporaries Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard", Donald H. Reiman and Bennett Weaver in ed., Jordan (1972), 354.

revolutionary failure. For Shelley, therefore, it obviously had a contemporary resonance that their speeches could not have had. Budding revolutionaries in Regency England were profoundly disillusioned when, as the first line of *Laon and Cythna* recalls, "the last hope of trampled France had failed / Like a brief dream of unremaining glory" (i, 1-2). The Atheist's speech, more than any other in the poem, seems explicitly tailored to combat that disillusionment.

For Joseph de Maistre, disillusionment with the French Revolution activated the Royalist Catholic views for which he is now best known. His mournful interpretation of France's rebellion lacks the animation of Shelley's account in *Laon and Cythna*, but it captures an elusive seriousness in the poem's gratuitous horrors which is a more productive creative vehicle than its obligatory propagandizing. "Less than twenty-five years ago," his *Essay on the Generative Principles of Constitutions* recounted, "we witnessed a serious attempt to regenerate a great but mortally sick nation. This was the first draft of a great work, and the *preface*, so to speak, of the frightening book that we have since had to read. Every precaution had been taken...Alas, all human wisdom was at fault, and everything ended in death"[23]. Yet this seems a needlessly sombre description of *Laon and Cythna*, if not the French Revolution itself. The Atheist may speak of filling "this dark night of things with an eternal morning" (xii, 4709-4710) but it is Laon and Cythna's inspirational memory which illuminates, not the divinity. And while de Maistre says that all human wisdom is at fault, the Atheist is consoled by the "wisdom of a high despair, / When such can die, and [man] live on and linger here" (xii, 4700-4701). And yet he does gather this curious message from Laon and Cythna's martyrdom: "*All* power and faith must pass, since calmly hence / In torment and in fire have Atheists gone" (xii 4704-05) (stress mine). This, we should stress, is from an interpretation of the poem that Shelley has apparently endorsed. From his appointed ambassador to Islam, so to speak. But surely it cannot be right. *Some* power and faith must pass, yes, that of corrupt religions and monarchies, but surely not *all*? For how, then, could the New Jerusalem imagined by Laon and Cythna be any superior to the corrupt, old society that it is supposed to transform?

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[23]de Maistre (1965), 160.

The answer to this question, as is so often the case with *Laon and Cythna*, doesn't so much lie in what the Atheist says as in what he *does*. For he is clearly not inspired by Laon and Cythna's memory to live on and linger here, let alone join the struggle. He commits suicide. This action is terribly consistent with the rest of the poem. All things really *do* end in death here, just as de Maistre predicted. Othman knows this fate, and fears it. "Pestilence" and now the Atheist, too, know, and welcome it. Even the fundamentalist Christian Priest, apparently so eager to escape "the withering ire / Of God" (x, 4138-4139), suspects. Like the Tyrant, "he misdeems / That he is wise, whose wounds do only bleed / Inly for self" (xii, 4538-4539). But he does not misdeem exactly how much his self is worth in the eyes of God: "And what are thou and I, that he should deign / To curb his ghastly minister, or close / The gates of death" (x, 4113-4115). No doubt the Atheist, with some justification, would think this apocalyptic brand of Christianity just one more of the tyrannical superstitions that Laon and Cythna have died to defeat. Yet this is to forget that as much as the Christian Priest superintends *Laon and Cythna*'s tyranny he also knows himself to be one of its victims, to be already defeated. His "dreadful strength" (v, 1965) is drawn from embracing that defeat, rather than evading it. And paradoxically, it may be the knowledge of that impotence which triggers the events leading to Laon and Cythna's execution: "'Peace! Peace!' he cried, 'when we are dead, the Day / Of Judgement comes, and all shall surely know / Whose God is God, each fearfully shall pay / The errors of his faith in endless woe!" (x, 4099-102). And, like the Atheist, when watching Laon and Cythna burn, his thoughts turn to his own death: "the glory be thine own" (xii, 4557).

(iv)

In a more generous mood, William Hazlitt once described how "in spite of all his obnoxious and indiscreet pessimism" Shelley possessed "a large share of credulity and wondering curiosity in his composition, which he reserved from common use

and bestowed upon his own inventions and picturesque caricatures"[24]. In *Laon and Cythna,* the last section argued, this is transparently the case. Othman, "Pestilence" and the Christian Priest demonstrate that Shelley's poetry is so much more than an exposition of the radical politics of his prose. These colourful creations obviously excite his imagination much more than the wan Laon and Cythna. Their speeches are pithy and witty whereas the revolutionary couple's are too often boring and, one suspects, bored. Othman and "Pestilence" first revealed for us Shelley's gratuitous relish for death and destruction, a relish that his Utopian lovers would find positively indecorous. In many ways, we have seen, the portrayal of the Christian Priest also confirms this view. Reading Canto Ten carefully, we can detect that Shelley embellishes the Priest's "pyre of expiation" (x, 4127) almost as lovingly as the character himself. He is just as happy to savour each of its grisly decorations, ("- and fix on high / A net of iron, and spread forth below / A couch of snakes, and scorpions, and the fry / Of centipedes and worms, earth's hellish progeny!" (x, 4131-4134). And his narrator is the one who tells us, with more than a hint of pride, that the pyre "overtopped the towers that did environ / That spacious square" (xii, 4164-45). But destruction and death are not just the source of vulgar comedy in *Laon and Cythna,* although that alone would be refreshing enough in what is still one of Shelley's least admired political poems. They are also the inspiration for an abject and deeply mystical religiousness. For beneath all the Golden City's unmitigated hopes and imagined victories, there is another Islam which expects and even desires that city's negation.

Watching Laon and Cythna burn on their pyre, the Atheist is struck by this thought: "'The flood of time is rolling on, / We stand upon its brink, whilst *they* are gone / To glide in peace down death's mysterious stream" (xii, 4688-89). Outstripping all that can be humanly learnt or hoped for, and uniting the Atheist and the Christian Priest in blood, "death's mysterious stream" is, in the end, the solemn meaning of the "pyre of expiation" and indeed *Laon and Cythna* as a whole. It is a meaning that Shelley's friend, Joseph de Maistre, expertly betrays to us. "Thus is worked out, from maggots up to man, the universal law of the violent destruction of living beings" he

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[24]ed., Barcus (1975), 343.

had written in his famous *Saint Petersburg Dialogues.* "The whole earth, continually steeped in blood, is nothing but an immense altar on which every living thing must be sacrificed without end, without restraint, without respite until the consummation of the world, the extinction of evil, the death of death"[25]. We need only look at what many critics see as *Laon and Cythna*'s only fulfilled hope, its only unadulterated good, to appreciate the extent to which dark and mysterious thoughts like these really animate Shelley's imagination.

The Temple of the Spirit plainly needs to be a paradise of sorts in order to provide a fittingly therapeutic resolution for the poem and, indeed, it is, as Stuart Curran claims, "suspiciously like heaven"[26]. But of course an atheist heaven can be neither divine nor even vaguely mysterious. Laon and Cythna must be preserved in their Hall of Fame as unambiguous and untranscendental instructions on the possibilities of *human* wisdom. So what Shelley calls the "diviner Heaven" (xii, 4788) is painstakingly demystified. Death's mysterious stream flows into a "windless, waveless", some might think stagnant, lake (xii, 4806). The Elysian islands are full of rocks, valleys and mountains, the Temple of the Spirit hangs in a hollow sky, yet the difference between one's things and the other's nothings is no longer disturbed by empiricism, solipsism, let alone those bothersome "human mind's imaginings" (*Mont Blanc,* 144)[27]. Not corporeal, but not divine or mysterious either, then, Laon and Cythna's final resting place is the pure abstract, a geometrician's paradise. Viewed in that way it is chill and beautiful: the spherical temple hangs improbably at the intersection of four vales and surrounded by snow-bright mountains. But compared to the Boschian vision of Islam, this is only as if M.C. Escher had taken his pen and ruler to a prospect of Mont Blanc. Or an equally arid vista, the flawless "pyramid of lasting ice" (*Rosalind and Helen,* 1299) in which Rosalind and Helen are buried. But

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[25]de Maistre (1965), 253.

[26]Curran (1975), 29.

[27]Michael O'Neill senses similar dangers in another, more accomplished, poetic stratosphere: "In *The Witch of Atlas* the impulse to fictionalize and celebrate fictions is always threatening to unmoor itself from human interest; the poem's sense of and response to this threat contribute to its ability to surprise and affect". O'Neill (1989), 9.

this is no matter: *Rosalind and Helen* is a poem about the depressing aftermath of personal and political loss, a poem where only polished ice and polished lyric lasts. *Laon and Cythna* finds such losses, the thought that nothing will change for the better, strangely more liberating than either domestic or political fulfilment. Shelley's poem promises a new Jerusalem, but prefers present laughter, present energy, even present piety, and so too Jerusalem 'now'.

This brings us to the end of our discussions of *Alastor, Laon and Cythna* and mysticism, discussions which we have tried to conduct in very classical, very straightforward terms. Before we can conclude our work in this part, though, we must return to the more vexing question of deconstruction and mysticism.

Conclusion to Part One:

Let's recollect the argument. Deconstruction can illuminate how mysticism and negative theology work as discourses, we suggested: certain concepts developed by Derrida can clarify certain moves and attitudes in mystical texts. The idea that deconstruction does not necessarily obscure the import of mysticism, and can in some cases illuminate it, had far-reaching consequences, we suggested. Mysticism may meet the growing demand for Romantic readings that involve both classical literary criticism and theoretical techniques. In the last two chapters, we have sought to put this theory to the test. Those chapters sought to demonstrate, in the accepted classical way, the extent to which *Alastor* and *Laon and Cythna* endorse mystical notions of humility, limitation and mystery. These mystical and negative theological readings challenged the more obvious, and perhaps more predictable, interpretations of Shelley's poems, as political creeds or ironic conundrums. And in the case of both *Alastor* and *Laon and Cythna,* we suggested, they revealed more exciting, and more disturbing works. In this conclusion, we will submit our classical critiques to a deconstruction. If our theories are correct, this deconstruction will not discredit our notions of a mystical dimension to Shelley's verse, as it may seem inclined to do, but actually enable a more acute understanding of it.

The idea that deconstruction could benevolently impact upon any notion of presence, let alone a theological notion of presence, is at odds with many interpretations of Derrida's philosophy. It even departs, as we shall soon see, from Derrida's own interpretation of his *oeuvre.* But you do not need to be a Derridaean to find fault with our approach thus far. An argument from our chapter on *Laon and Cythna* demonstrates this. That chapter contended that religious negativity brings forth Shelley's most excited and exciting writing whereas political speechifying produced only his most laboured and bored. Taken on its own terms, this may well be a persuasive argument. But who on earth would accept those terms today? There is no intrinsic connection between exciting writing and religious conviction, no intrinsic connection between exciting writing and conviction of any kind. Exciting

writing is brought forth by the facility of the writer, his command of a rhetoric of excitement, rather than by any exciting belief he may hold, or exciting experience he may undergo. The risks of confusing autobiographical experiences and literary writing in this way are axiomatic for all twentieth-century literary critics, not just literary theorists, of course. Our chapter on *Laon and Cythna* runs that risk, perhaps ill-advisedly. But the advent of literary theory makes this risk even greater. Deconstruction reminds us that our access to a writer's convictions and experiences is restricted not just by his literary facility but by the structure of writing itself. Another look at our chapter on *Alastor* graphically illustrates this point.

Jerrold Hogle guides us back into that poem. Hogle's interpretation of *Alastor* is particularly relevant to our argument. He begins by noticing that the character of the dream-maid is a re-working of the character of Venus in Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. And the similarities are obvious enough. The Venus is obscured by a veil and only appears in a series of incomplete manifestations. Hogle calls her a "self-veiling self-metamorphosis through and 'beneath the smooth-moving heavenly signs'". Hogle's veil seems to function in a similar way to the negative theological veil we described in our own account of *Alastor*. Both reveal as they obscure and obscure as they reveal. For as Hogle says, the veil in *Alastor* ensures that the Poet's vision of his dream-maid is "either skeptically conditional, confessing a temporary context...or deferred to another moment of incomplete re-manifestation"[1]. But on closer examination, important differences start to emerge. The renowned theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar once wrote that our perception of God is "necessarily a form of veiling - just because it reveals that which is utmost, the ineffable"[2]. For Hogle, though, *Alastor*'s veiled maid "is less a primal womb or bosom and more a figural movement...that both supplements and supplants itself by 'stepping' from context to context in the figures that remake and mask it in order to fulfil its 'nature'"[3]. The

[1]Jerrold Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of his Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 48.

[2]Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), 11.

[3]Hogle (1988), 48.

makings and maskings Hogle depicts here are clearly not the same as the mystical veilings and unveilings described by Von Balthasar and by us in our own reading of *Alastor*. We might say that our veilings and unveilings were *thematic*, referring to the distinctive rhetoric and intentionality of mystical faith. But Hogle attends only to *structural* makings and maskings, the shifting tropes that characterize all literary texts. Deconstruction usually defines itself in this way, by elevating structures of signification above literary themes. To consider those themes without first considering the structures that promulgate and endlessly distort them is to put the cart before the horse, Derrida would argue. Our own reading of *Alastor* is possibly vulnerable to this charge. Until now, we have treated the poem's veilings and unveilings in a purely thematic way, as the medium for its mystical profundities. But perhaps, like the cart-driven horse, we should start to consider things from a different perspective. A perspective from which mystical profundities cannot be seen through the veil of language because they are nothing more than a fold in that veil, a fold which will disappear as soon as the configuration of language changes.

Such is deconstruction's perspective on what Derrida calls the 'metaphysics of presence'. But let us try to put this more precisely. The phrase 'metaphysics of presence' marks a philosophical tendency to posit moments of simple presence which serve to originate, and determine, discourses. 'Metaphysical' discourses claim to do nothing more than represent these original moments, purely and simply, in their absence. Classical literary criticism, clearly, is a good example of a metaphysics of presence. Classical readings attribute philosophical, imaginative and emotional presences to literary texts, seeing them as pivots around which those texts can be thought to spin. Deconstructionists, though, have often tried to show that, while texts never quite spin freely, then neither are their movements entirely controlled by their pivotal presences. They propose readings, usually of texts that have become dominated by the search for such presences, which take account of this. *Alastor* and *Laon and Cythna* may be considered two such texts. In the last two chapters, we launched self-professedly classical readings of Shelley's poems, readings that blithely fashioned pivotal 'presences' for those poems, like mystical experiences and mystical intentions. So was our reading entirely 'metaphysical'? Perversely, perhaps, I do not think so. This is not to say that our suspicions that Shelley may have had mystical

intentions or enjoyed mystical experiences were not in some part enabled by a 'metaphysics of presence'. But the attribution of those intentions or experiences to his poems is not *simply*, I think, a metaphysical act.

We clearly need to take some time to explain this last suggestion, which has implications, not merely for scholars of Shelley, but for scholars of philosophy and theology as well. I want to consider those broader theological and philosophical implications firstly, and as briefly as I can, before returning to Shelley's poems. Some provisional conclusion about the status of mysticism in those poems can be arrived at much more safely via this minor philosophical detour so I hope the reader will forgive me for taking it. The largest philosophical implication of the above suggestion is, perhaps, that mystical theology and metaphysics are not exactly synonymous terms. To explore this implication we need to borrow Kevin Hart's daunting question and ask again "What is the relationship between metaphysics and theology?"[4]. One decisive answer to this question has been provided by Derrida. "The difference between signified and signifier belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics, and in a more explicit and more systematically articulated way to the narrower epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism when these appropriate the resources of Greek conceptuality"[5] he writes in the introduction to *Of Grammatology*. So, Derrida argues, the metaphysics of presence is connected in a "systematically articulated way" to the epoch of Christian theology. Some of the most compelling evidence for this connection comes at the very beginning of that epoch, the moment when, as Christians see it, theology first became imperative. The moment of Adam's Fall from Paradise.

"From God's presence we pass to His absence; from immediacy to mediation; from the perfect congruence of sign and referent to the gap between word and object; from fullness of being to a lack of being; from ease and play to strain and labour; from purity to impurity; and from life to death"[6]. The list could be extended indefinitely, but just one of the implications of the Fall that Hart mentions above is

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[4]Hart (1989), ix.

[5]Derrida (1976), 13.

[6]Hart (1989), 5.

significant for our argument, namely, the fall from the perfect congruence of sign and referent to the gap between the word and its object. The significance of that linguistic gap will concern us in due course, but what should strike us immediately here is the assumption that, before it opened up, language was in fact perfectly congruent with presence. This faith in, and yearning for, a lost congruence with presence is itself enough to confirm Derrida's view of Christian creationism as metaphysical, but Christianity's relation to that presence is not merely a nostalgic one. For while the story of the Fall only presupposes that a congruence between language and presence once existed, the vocabulary of salvation, or Christian theology, begins from the assumption that this congruence can be restored and indeed has been restored, by the incarnation of Christ. One of its fundamental tenets, of course, is that Christ was the Word of God, the Word made flesh. That language was once more perfectly congruent with presence. But I do not wish to labour this point. By fashioning a moment of simple presence to which its language once answered and will one day answer again Christian theology does indeed reveal itself to be metaphysical both in its origins and in its ultimate destination. This is unarguable. What *is* arguable, however, is whether Christian theology is wholly and simply metaphysical, whether there are not still theologians, like Pseudo-Denys, who bypass the metaphysical route. For if Christ restored the perfect congruence of signifier and signified then why do Christian mystics such as Denys still work from the assumption that their words can only imperfectly signify God?

Denys's answer to this question invokes a stark theological paradox. The Christian liturgy, and the mystical experience to which it gives rise, does absolutely signify God, *but only* as someone who is absolutely unsignifiable. "God is known / in all, and apart from all. / God is known / through knowledge, and / through unknowing. / Of God there is / intellect, reason, knowledge, / contact, sensation, opinion, imagination, name, and, / everything else. / God is / not known, not spoken, not named, / not something among beings, and / not known in something among beings" (*MT*, 178) Denys writes in the *Divine Names*. God does reveal something of Himself through language, in other words, and we can affirm that through what we have called positive predicates, those lofty symbols of God's likeness described in *The Perimeters of the Enquiry*. But what God reveals of Himself through language is not Himself, Denys argues, and to understand Him as He truly

is we must go beyond the positive predicates we use and engage with negative predicates. These lowly symbols remind us that, for all their local legitimacy, lofty symbols cannot ultimately account for a God who is so utterly unlike us. So by the very act of closing the gap between language and presence, paradoxically, the Christian liturgy also makes that gap infinitely wide. By making its predicates as inappropriate and arbitrary as possible, negative predicates make this width clearer. So does this mean that negative predicates are an aspect of Christian theology which, *pace* Derrida, is not wholly complicit with the metaphysics of presence?

But the philosopher has an answer to this question, too. While negative predicates certainly seem to accept that the gap between God as He is revealed in language and God as He is in Himself cannot be closed, Derrida argues, this acceptance can itself be a way of closing that gap. Negative theologies "are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, *only in order to acknowledge His superior, inconceivable and ineffable mode of being*"[7] *Margins of Philosophy* contends (stress mine). If negative theologians refuse God the predicates of existence, in other words, it is only so that they can better express the *superiority* of His existence. They negate affirmations of His presence in order to progressively reveal and affirm that presence. Far from denying or even situating positive theology, then, "the negative movement of the discourse on God is only a phase of positive ontotheology"[8], as Derrida argues in a footnote upon Meister Eckhart in *Writing and Difference*. And this is an emphatic answer to the question asked at the end of the last paragraph. Negative theology, upon this view, is not a non-metaphysical theology, but merely a hidden positive theology, a closet metaphysics of presence.

So Derrida's argument that the metaphysics of presence is intimately connected to the "epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism" would appear to be justified, then. But in fact this sweeping judgement of Christian theology is enabled by one

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[7]Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 6.

[8]Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 337.

specific, and very contentious, claim. Specifically, that "the negative movement of the discourse on God is only a phase of positive ontotheology". It is crucial to Derrida's general case that this local claim be true. For if he can put even "the most negative of negative theologies" in the metaphysical frame, he can quite reasonably go on to conclude that *all* theologies belong to the metaphysics of presence. Now if all we meant by negative theology was the aforementioned use of negative *predicates*, then there really could be no arguments with that conclusion. Negative predicates often do work in the way Derrida suggests, negating God's presence only in order to more accurately reveal and affirm it. In the *Mystical Theology*, for example, Pseudo-Denys compares himself to a sculptor, painstakingly chipping away at everything that is not God so that he can ultimately come closer to what is God. "We proceed similarly to those / who produce a natural statue / by removing every object which hinders or hides / the pure spectacle of what is hidden, and / by manifesting in a single denial and by itself / the beauty itself which had been hidden" (*MT*, 215) he writes. But later in the same treatise Denys submits a theory of negation that is not simply a closet positivism or metaphysics of presence.

This negation is what we, in *The Perimeters of the Enquiry*, called negative (mystical) theology. But, doubtless, our memories need refreshing. You will recall that we indicated a duality in negative theology. On the one hand, there are negative predicates, which function alongside positive predicates, in order to correct and enhance our knowledge of God. These are the negative predicates of the *Celestial Hierarchies*, of sculpture, of denials which are actually superior affirmations. In short, this is what Derrida understands as negative theology. On the other hand, though, there is negative (mystical) theology. The best way to understand this theology is to watch it at work. In the treatise entitled the *Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Denys describes his experience of God in a new way. "For while to it, / as cause of all / one must posit and affirm / all the position of beings, / as beyond be-ing beyond all / one must more properly deny all of these" he decides. Instead, we must "Think not that affirmations and denials / are opposed / but rather that, long before, is / that - which is itself beyond all position / and denial - / beyond privation" (*MT*, 212). This is a very opaque, very paradoxical description which needs careful consideration. A couple of things are immediately obvious, though.

Clearly, straightforward affirmations are no longer appropriate to God as He is apprehended at this level of mystical experience. Denys appears to prefer negations, for the reason that these are actually superior affirmations: "one must posit and affirm / all the position of beings / as beyond be-ing beyond all". In this respect, negative (mystical) theology follows the lead of ordinary negative predicates: denying simply in order to more gloriously affirm. But Denys also says "one must more properly deny all of these". This is where negative (mystical) theology departs from ordinary negative theology. The experience of God is said to transcend all affirmations *and* all denials or super-affirmations. This sculpture will never be complete. This unique denial has repercussions for our own discussion. It problematizes Derrida's specific claim that negative theology is only ever a hidden positive theology. As the above passage shows, negative (mystical) theology denies that negative predicates ever have an affirmative function. Saying God is inconceivable and inexpressible, "beyond be-ing beyond all" is not much more accurate than saying He is absolutely conceivable, absolutely expressible. But negative (mystical) theology does not only question Derrida's specific claims; it also challenges the general conclusion those claims enable him to draw, namely, that Christian theology is always complicit with the metaphysics of presence.

This is difficult territory, so it will pay to go slowly. As we saw firstly, metaphysical discourses claim to represent moments of pure presence, moments which are thereby thought to determine the meaning of those discourses. We next saw that, as Derrida has argued, the metaphysical assumption that discourse represents a presence belongs explicitly to the epoch of Christian theology. The story of the Fall assumes that Adam's sin shattered a perfect congruence of language and God's presence, for instance, while the belief in the incarnation of Christ assumes that He restored that congruence. Positive and negative predicates, in particular, are theologies based on the metaphysical assumption that Christ restored the connection between language and God's presence. Their shared belief that Christ was the Word of God made flesh makes it possible for the former to claim to properly represent God and for the latter to claim to *im*properly represent Him. Now what we have been calling negative (mystical) theology does not dispute that positive and negative predicates do in some sense represent God, for it could not be a Christian theology

if it did. But while agreeing that God is to a certain extent represented by these predicates, we have just seen Denys arguing that ultimately He exceeds all linguistic representations, positive and negative: "one must more properly deny all of these" he says. The denial that language can even negatively represent the God that is experienced at the farthest levels of mysticism marks a decisive shift away from the metaphysics of presence for Denys. For while God might be said to transcend the *instability* of language at the level of positive and negative predicates, at the level of negative (mystical) theology He even transcends its *stability*. In a penetrating introduction to his translation of Denys's *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology*, John D. Jones summarizes this argument very neatly. "There is a double sense to negative theology" he begins. "On the one hand, negative theology functions within affirmative theology or, more specifically, metaphysics to express the preeminence of the divine Cause. Here, if you will, the negations are 'super-affirmations'. On the other hand, negative theology provides the foundation for mystical unity with the divinity. Here negative (mystical) theology denies all that is and all reference to beings and, by my interpretation, ultimately denies all affirmative theology *and, hence, metaphysics*" (*MT*, 20) (stress mine). Negative (mystical) theology, in more succinct terms, is a non-metaphysical theology.

This conclusion is important to us. At the very least, it problematizes the assumption, tacitly held by Derrida and many of his followers, that metaphysics and theology are synonymous terms. That assumption had explained why deconstruction, which predominantly targets metaphysics, should feel averse to theology as well. It is also the reason why deconstruction has so often been seen as a form of atheism, and particularly often as a refinement of the Nietzschean doctrine that God is dead. Yet as I have said, this is very much an assumption. "If we take 'God is dead' to be a statement about the impossibility of locating a transcendent point which can serve as a ground for discourse, then deconstruction is indeed a discourse on God's death" Kevin Hart admits. "But if we take 'God is dead' to be a formula for unbelief or disbelief, then there is no reason at all to link it with deconstruction"[9]. Conversely, he argues, there is no reason why deconstruction cannot be linked with theology. And

[9]Hart (1989), 39.

the negative (mystical) theology elaborated by Pseudo-Denys is, perhaps, the most ambitious bid to forge this link. Like a deconstructionist, Denys questions whether metaphysical theology can ultimately deliver what Hart calls "a transcendent point" which can serve as a ground for discourse on God; but as a theologian he knows that the deconstruction of metaphysical discourse *on* God does not affect the existential status *of* God. Perhaps the etymological point we made at the very beginning of this section, about the root of the word theology, makes this point in a simpler and more memorable way. Negative (mystical) theology denies the adequacy of the words or *logoi* we use when we talk about God. It does not question the philosophical reality of God or his *theos*[10].

This is what Kevin Hart means, then, when we quoted him as saying that deconstruction can illuminate how mysticism and negative theology work as discourses: "instead of working to discredit these discourses, as Derrida sometimes seems inclined to do, deconstruction may in fact help us to understand how they work". But our abiding interest is in Shelley, of course, and his use of mysticism and negative theology. So instead of discrediting what we have identified as a negative theological impulse in his poetry, might not deconstruction also clarify for us how that impulse works? The very few previous studies of Shelley's predilection for negatives which bear "some resemblance to the language of theology and religious contemplation" (*SR*, 37) initially inclined me to think that the answer to this question was 'no'. For instance, Timothy Webb's account of the vast number of negative prefixes and suffixes in *Prometheus Unbound*, from which that last quotation is taken, actually seems to confirm what we have seen to be Derrida's suspicion that "the negative movement of the discourse on God is only a phase of positive ontotheology". "It is easy to mistake this kind of negative for the negative of deprivation, of limitation, of denial, associated with Jupiter" Professor Webb writes in his fine essay,

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[10]Although it does question the word *theos*. Developing a distinction inherited from Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen and Pseudo-Dionysius, the medieval theologian Gregory Palamas argues that *theos* denotes only an energy of God and not his unnameable essence. This argument is enabled by a rather suspect etymological relation of the Greek root *the* to divine *activities*, alone, such as seeing, burning or even running. Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. and intr. John Meyendorff, trans. Nicholas Gendle (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 144.

entitled "The Unascended Heaven: Negatives in *Prometheus Unbound*". "The task which Shelley sets before us is that of discovering that *so many apparent negatives are really positives,* that if we peel away the veil of seeming negativity we will find the potentiality slumbering within" (*SR*, 57) (stress mine). Far from being clarified by deconstruction, then, the sort of negatives that Webb finds in *Prometheus Unbound, Adonais, Ode to the West Wind, A Defence of Poetry* and many other poetical and prose works by Shelley belong indirectly to the very metaphysical tradition that deconstruction exists to question.

That there are many "apparent negatives" in Shelley's poetry will not be denied in what follows. But whether Webb's negatives that "are really positives", or what this thesis has been calling negative predicates, are the *only* sort of negatives to be found in Shelley's poetry is, however, a question to place on notice. In *Part Two* of this thesis, for instance, it will be suggested that *Queen Mab* exhibits the much more radical negativity that we have christened negative (mystical) theology. As we know, this theology is not concerned with "peeling away the veil of seeming negativity" to find "the potentiality slumbering within", in Webb's words, but with admitting that this potentiality is so transcendent that it can never be found, not even negatively. By involving this truly negative theology, the next chapter will argue, *Queen Mab* enters a non-metaphysical realm, and as a consequence becomes much less susceptible to potential deconstruction than the apparently negative theologies located by Webb in *Prometheus Unbound.* Further connections between mysticism and literary theory will be explored in chapters concerning *Julian and Maddalo* and Shelley's last major narrative poem, *The Triumph of Life.* To read these poems negatively, *Part Two* will argue, is to read with less fear of deconstructionist reprisals. This is not to pretend that deconstruction somehow endorses the classical speculations that characterized our chapters upon *Alastor* and *Laon and Cythna.* Our assumptions that Shelley's poems exhibit mystical experiences or mystical intentions remain to some degree indebted to the metaphysics of presence. But we are perhaps beginning to see that the attribution of specifically mystical intentions and experiences to texts does not do very much to metaphysically determine their meanings. And even if it did, that the deconstruction of those determinate mystical meanings should in no way be seen as a recommendation for atheism.

These thoughts conclude *Part One* of this thesis but they will be picked up again in *Part Two,* which begins with the aforementioned discussion of negative (mystical) theology in *Queen Mab.* The fact that the first part of this discussion actually concerns historicist criticism, incidentally, marks another small departure from *Part One.* For while continuing and refining our investigation of the relationship between mysticism and deconstruction in Shelley's poems, *Part Two* will also widen that investigation slightly, on occasions, to consider what contribution mysticism can make to some of the many other debates deconstruction has stimulated about those poems. Thus, the mystical reading of *Queen Mab* will partly address the current quarrel between textual criticisms, like deconstruction, and contextual criticisms, like historicism and materialism; the chapter on mysticism in *Julian and Maddalo* will consider just how far the deconstructionist argument that language is by its very nature indeterminate challenges the recent, yet in essence New Critical, interpretations of that poem as presenting its indeterminacies in an objective, determinate way, and the mystical interpretation of *The Triumph of Life* will ponder to what extent the quasi-deconstructionist concept of intertextuality problematizes prior notions of that poem's use of sources. Our main objective is still to establish positive links between mysticism and deconstruction, of course, but in doing this we can also see whether mysticism contributes positively to some other debates involving deconstruction as well.

Part Two:
Converse

Chapter Three

Notes and Queries:
Queen Mab

The Fairy paused. The Spirit,
In ecstacy [sic] of admiration, felt
All knowledge of the past revived; the events
Of old and wondrous times,
Which dim tradition interruptedly
Teaches the credulous vulgar, were unfolded
In just perspective to the view;
Yet dim from their infinitude.
The Spirit seemed to stand
High on an isolated pinnacle;
The flood of ages combating below,
The depth of the unbounded universe
Above, and all around
Nature's unchanging harmony.
(*Queen Mab*, ii, 244-257)

Queen Mab, a poem about history, is itself the subject of many histories. Not least among these are one or two of the poet's own. Wishing to disassociate himself from its 1821 re-publication and any prosecutions that might ensue from it, Shelley wrote to Leigh Hunt, the editor of the *London Examiner* newspaper, requesting "the favour of your insertion of the following explanation of the affair, as it relates to me". "A poem, entitled 'Queen Mab'," he continued, "was written by me at the age of eighteen, I dare say in a sufficiently intemperate spirit - but even then was not intended for publication, and a few copies only were struck off, to be distributed among my personal friends. I have not seen this production for several years; I doubt not but that it is perfectly worthless in point of literary composition; and that in all that concerns moral and political speculation, as well as in the subtler discriminations of metaphysical and religious doctrine, it is still more crude and immature" (*Letters*, ii, 304).

If the poet really wanted to draw a veil over *Queen Mab* then subsequent Shelley scholarship ensured that his wish was fulfilled. "To this day" complained the publisher H. Buxton Forman in an 1886 lecture, "Shelley is far more widely known

as the author of *Queen Mab* than as the author of *Prometheus Unbound*. As the latter really strengthens the spirit, while the former does not, we, who reverence Shelley for his spiritual enthusiasm, desire to see all that changed. And the change is advancing"[1]. It certainly was. The 1905 Oxford edition of Shelley's poems places *Queen Mab* at the back under a heading Forman had suggested: 'Juvenilia'. According to this edition, Shelley's career as a poet 'really' begins the year after *Mab*, with *Alastor*. By the late twentieth century, however, Forman's history had been revised. In their respective political studies of Shelley, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* and *Red Shelley*, Paul Dawson and Paul Foot trace the consistency, rather than the inconsistency, of the poet's political vision. They note how many of *Queen Mab*'s supposedly immature political speculations reappear in more mature poems like *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Masque of Anarchy*. Confronted with the fact that Shelley himself dismisses *Queen Mab* as immature in his letter to the *Examiner* newspaper, readers who are sympathetic to Dawson and Foot could point to other aspects of that letter, which cast it in a more favourable light. There are odd notes of defiance, they might suggest, in this supposed act of repentance. Shelley still declares himself a devoted opponent of "religious, political and domestic oppression" (*Letters*, 637), for instance, although these are the crude immaturities for which he is ostensibly apologizing. And at the same time as he was publicly disowning *Queen Mab* in this letter, the poet was, according to Mary Shelley, privately promoting its dissemination. Mary's notes on the poem describe a young Shelley "desirous of acquiring 'that sobriety of spirit which is the characteristic of true heroism'. But he never doubted the truth or utility of his opinions; and, in printing and privately distributing *Queen Mab*, he believed that he should further their dissemination, without occasioning the mischief either to others or himself that might arise from publication" (*SPW*, 835). Given evidence like this, Foot and Dawson felt able to query Buxton Forman's decision to remove *Queen Mab* from the Shelley *corpus*. In both *Red Shelley* and *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics*, consequently, the poem is one of the very first under discussion.

[1]H. Buxton Forman, *Notebooks of the Shelley Society* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1888), 4.

So which history is the 'real' history? Where does *Queen Mab* really belong? In this thesis, as you can see, the poem is neither the first nor the last under discussion. Instead it has been placed somewhere in the middle. This position is a considered one, by which I mean that it is not supposed to be indicative of some hesitancy on my part, over which historical interpretation to choose. Which is not to say, either, that such hesitations are to be deplored; on the contrary they are perfectly understandable. We need only look, once again, at that intriguing letter to the *Examiner* to see this. In writing it, Shelley is purportedly giving an honest and precise history of his doings in the *Queen Mab* affair, a history written to clear his name in a court of law, if need be. But ambiguities in his testimony abound. The poet was not merely "eighteen" when he wrote *Queen Mab*, as he says here, but over twenty. This could be an honest mistake, of course, but it could also be a deception. Can we be sure which? And even if we could be sure, things would not become much clearer. Say, for the sake of argument, that it is a deception. Exactly who is supposed to be deceived by it? Supporters of Paul Dawson's account might suggest that Shelley is deceiving the local Magistrates into thinking that he finds his poem an embarrassment, so that they will not look too closely when he next decides to disseminate it. Supporters of Buxton Forman's account might suggest that Shelley is really deceiving himself, because he really is embarrassed by his poem, and cannot bring himself to admit that he wrote it so recently. We still cannot be sure which view is correct. Indeed many phrases in the letter seem to support both historical views of *Queen Mab* at the same time. Does Shelley's curious description of his "*sufficiently* intemperate spirit" (stress mine) cringe over youthful folly, for instance, or admire its steely resolve?

At the level of the text, then, no one single history persuades. In the end, though, this may be the most interesting thing about the *Examiner* letter, that it makes us think about historical scholarship, and doubt it. Reading it now, in 1996, can we identify what sort of person Shelley 'really' was when he wrote *Queen Mab*? Could Shelley himself, in 1821? Did he even want to? It seems that only fairies can really grant a "just perspective" on "the events / Of old and wondrous times". Indeed the "unchanging harmony" that is Mab's view of history seems particularly ironic in the light of the "flood of ages combating below" that we have been describing here. In

many ways, though, her faith in the continuity of history is all the more striking for the inability of her readers, and perhaps even her author, to share it. I want to start my chapter by uncovering the roots of this faith.

From her privileged position, Queen Mab can watch history unfolding in a straight line, from past, through present, to future: "to me 'tis given / The wonders of the human world to keep: / The secrets of the immeasurable past, / In the unfailing consciences of men, / Those stern, unflattering chroniclers, I find: / The future, from the causes which arise / In each event, I gather" (i, 167-173). The special powers Shelley bestows upon the Fairy are reminiscent of those he attributes to the poet in *A Defence of Poetry*, who "beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time" (*SPP*, 483). In case of some imagined misunderstanding he adds "Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word" (*SPP*, 483). Shelley never completely explains that last gnomic assault on religion. Looking around, though, it may be possible to piece together what he means by it. Later on in the *Defence*, he writes that poets cannot "foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events" (*SPP*, 483). This statement contrasts strikingly with the following denunciation of religious believers, found in *Queen Mab*'s detailed accompanying *Notes*. "It is probable that the word God was originally only an expression denoting the unknown cause of the known events which men perceived in the universe" he wrote, "By the *vulgar* mistake of a metaphor for a real being, of a word for a thing, it becomes a man, endowed with human qualities and governing the universe as an earthly monarch governs his kingdom (*POS*, 379) (stress mine).

This 'vulgar' religion is close enough to the 'gross' religion of earlier to permit the following speculation. What Shelley calls a gross prophet may be one who mistakes metaphors for real beings, words for things. He foretells the form of things to come. A poet, or what we might call a refined prophet, does the opposite of this. He foreknows what *A Defence of Poetry* calls the spirit of events, their metaphors and words, rather than the events themselves. Shelley's privileging of signs over presences in the *Defence of Poetry* has prompted many deconstructionist interpretations of that essay. In his deconstructionist reading of it, Jerrold Hogle has even argued that poetry and prophecy are as much the effects of metaphor, of signs which are

infinitely coming into being, as their cause. Shelley writes that "the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness" (*SPP*, 503-504). For Hogle, this invisible influence is actually two, formidably precise, things: "it is the permanent, though self-concealing, self-mover causing all these transpositions, and it is the actual movement from state to state that turns one coloration [sic] into another without revealing any self-contained point of departure"[2].

Needless to say, Hogle does not hold out much hope for those who would like to consider Shelley's "mind in creation" in historical terms. To read his book is to be aware that the gulf between deconstructionism and historicism (even including the New Historicism of McGann, Levinson and others) has never been wider. For scholars like Hogle, this historical, authorial reality is concealed forever behind a tissue of metaphors, that is, if it exists at all. Those who ponder whether the historical author of *Queen Mab* was 'really' mature or immature might do well, then, to ponder the illusoriness of their own quest. How can Buxton Forman, Paul Foot or Paul Dawson be sure that the Shelley they seek is not himself a metaphor? Or that the Shelley they find is not found by dint of a "vulgar mistake of a metaphor for a real being, a word for a thing"? By a gross prophecy, in other words? Perhaps this is why we found it so hard to pin any particular historical interpretation upon the text of Shelley's letter to the *Examiner*. It is in the very nature of language, ultimately, to disrupt the supposed continuity between past and present upon which such histories generally depend.

These are all serious questions, but it must be said that they do not deter Foot, Dawson and subsequent critics like Timothy Clark from historicizing *Queen Mab* and other texts. The poem continues to be read, and its worth continues to be evaluated, in terms of the historical and political values that it exhibits. And so, perhaps, it should. For *Queen Mab* is not quite as "refined" in this sense as *A Defence of Poetry*, and tends to invite similarly unrefined responses from its readers. To appreciate this we need only compare the *Defence*'s account of "the mind in creation", as it has been described above, with Mab's account of her own powers, in Canto One of *Queen Mab*.

[2]Hogle (1984), 11.

In that account, Mab tells us that she is the unseen but all-seeing historian of mankind. Neither the sting of our "retributive memory" (i, 174) or "The thoughts and actions of a well-spent day" (i, 178) go "unforseen, unregistered" (i, 179) by her. Thus she is close, in one sense, to the *Defence*'s "mind in creation". She, too, is a "permanent, though self-concealing, self-mover", to borrow a phrase from Hogle's description of that mind. She may not be the cause of transpositions, as Hogle contends the mind in creation is, but she does lend man's transitory thoughts and deeds a permanence that they would not otherwise possess.

So in some respects, Mab really is like the mind in creation, then, and thus *Queen Mab* is really like *A Defence of Poetry*. But in other respects this is not the case. What about Hogle's suggestion that the creative mind is also the "actual movement from state to state that turns one coloration [sic] into another without revealing any self-contained point of departure"? Or *A Defence of Poetry*'s claim that the mind in creation is "as a fading coal"? There is no possibility, as Hogle notes, of a fading coal becoming bright again. Thus a mind that is said to be like a fading coal must be out of reach even at the moment of its origin, obscured even at the moment of its exposure. Similar tropes appear throughout *A Defence of Poetry*. "Veil after veil may be undrawn", Shelley writes of Dante, "and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed" (*SPP*, 500). But Dante is not Queen Mab. This fairy is permitted to

> rend
> The veil of mortal frailty, that the spirit
> Clothed in its changeless purity, may know
> How soonest to accomplish the great end... (i, 180-183)

Her special ability is to expose, unveil, and awaken naked beauty. To make the fading coal bright again. These are significant differences from *A Defence of Poetry*'s mind in creation. They also present clear difficulties for those who might want to deconstruct *Queen Mab*, or to see it as some sort of allegory for deconstruction, as many see the *Defence*. One problem is that Mab claims to reveal secret presences, when, according to these deconstructionist interpretations, she should endlessly conceal them in metaphors. Another is that she promises, not deconstructionism's chain of ever-more displaced effects, but a thoroughly metaphysical "great end". In sum, she is what *A Defence of Poetry* might call the very grossest of prophets.

You will recall the distinction. The poet, or refined prophet, seeks only the spirit of events, their signifiers rather than their signifieds. But Mab? "Whether referring to the past, present, or future," notes Ronald Tetreault, in his perceptive reading of *Queen Mab*, she "always indicates some determinate signified that admits of no interpretation"[3]. She is not shy, as anyone who has read the poem will know, of making unequivocal judgements. They will know, too, that she especially likes to make such judgements about matters of history and politics. Scornful judgements of monarchy, political tyranny, warfare, economic exploitation and religion, for instance, comprise the bulk of the poem. So, to answer a question asked earlier, can we really blame the likes of Foot, Dawson and even Forman for responding in kind? For picking up on those judgements, weighing them, and coming to their own judgements about their maturity and so forth? I'm not sure we can. My own feeling is that while *Queen Mab* unquestionably presents many problems for historicist scholars, it also presents difficulties for their deconstructionist rivals. Shelley himself may well have become "a hero to adepts of deconstruction"[4], but the theorists may be surprised to learn that, in his first poem of note, the poet had devised a heroine to followers of metaphysics.

Followers of this discussion might not be so surprised by this. The field of linguistic philosophy is not the first in which we have encountered a youthful Shelley professing a faith which an older Shelley would seem to dismiss. We have already noted, for instance, how *Queen Mab* displays a touching faith in the continuity of history, and how this was a faith that Shelley's readers, and even Shelley himself, may ultimately have found impossible to share. A corollary of this faith was the poem's commitment to the prophetic mode, we next saw, although this commitment also deserted Shelley by the time of *A Defence of Poetry*. But the stubbornly metaphysical approach to language displayed by a poet who would later become renowned as a proto-deconstructionist is perhaps *Queen Mab*'s most significant faith of all. It lies at the root of his other faiths, making the historical and political poetry

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[3]Ronald Tetreault, *The Poetry of Life: Shelley and Literary Form* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 33.

[4]Denis Donoghue, "Keach and Shelley", *London Review of Books*, 19 September 1985, 12. Also cited in O'Neill (1989), 4.

they profess possible. In an 1811 letter to Elizabeth Hitchener, he had expressed an opinion "that all poetical beauty ought to be subordinate to the inculcated moral", and "that metaphysical language ought to be a pleasing vehicle for useful & momentous instruction" (*Letters*, i, 98). Yet in the end, as we know, even this metaphysical approach was overturned: "a poem very didactic is I think very stupid" (*Letters*, i, 350), he wrote to Thomas Hookham. Thus the metaphysical language of *Queen Mab* changed into the proto-deconstructionist formulae of *A Defence of Poetry* and *The Triumph of Life*.

Now it would very tempting for us, especially after having just defended Shelley's historicist critics, to put all these changes down to what many of them would call Shelley's growing 'maturity' or 'experience'. The poet was only twenty when he wrote *Queen Mab*, as Buxton Forman was so eager to remind us. And in truth even Paul Foot and Paul Dawson are somewhat guarded in their praise of Shelley's first political poem. Even so, this is one temptation that deconstructionists are right to think that we should resist. *Queen Mab* is not some relic like the statue of Ozymandias, its authority ironized by the passage of time. Reading it today I am struck by just how often it seems to anticipate those ironies, to enclose them within its own textual field. By just how often it seems to grasp the fact that things are not as straightforward as it would like them to be. And to grasp this ourselves, I think, we must reject the singular historicist accounts which see *Queen Mab* as simply the exposition of a young man's political beliefs, just as we have rejected the singular deconstructionist accounts which see those beliefs as infinitely compromised. For Shelley's poem properly responds not to either one of these accounts alone but to both together. It professes a certain faith in the continuity of history, I will argue, while remaining, at the same time, somehow sceptical of that continuity. It trusts in the power of prophecy, while at the same time admitting that its prophets are frauds. And it believes in the values of metaphysics, while simultaneously taking delight in their deconstruction.

These are grand claims, I know. They are also rather paradoxical. How can any text, you might ask, let alone so lowly a text as *Queen Mab*, commit itself to things that it simultaneously knows to be illusory? To answer this question, and therefore prove the feasibility, at least, of my projected reading, I would like to turn briefly to

Jacques Derrida's collection of essays *Limited Inc.* At the end of that collection, in a section entitled *Afterword: Towards an Ethic of Discussion,* Derrida responds to some common queries about deconstruction and clears up, along the way, some common misconceptions about it. Chief amongst these are the misconceptions that deconstruction ever totally escapes metaphysics and that, indeed, it ever actually wants to. Responding to the charge that his essay on the speech-act theorist John Searle, entitled *Limited Inc a b c,* is at times impenetrable, Derrida offers the following explanation:

> Its text is written in at least two registers at once, for it answers to at least two imperatives. On the one hand, I try to submit myself to the most demanding norms of classical philosophical discussion. I try in fact to respond, point by point, in the most honest and rational way possible, to Searle's arguments...On the other hand, in so doing I multiply statements, discursive gestures, forms of writing, the structure of which reinforces my gesture in something like a practical manner... This dual writing seemed to me consistent with the propositions I wanted simultaneously to demonstrate on the theoretical level and to exemplify in the *practice* of speech *acts.*[5]

That last distinction Derrida draws, between deconstruction in theory and deconstruction in practice, reflects a larger debate about the nature of deconstruction generally. It is worth our while knowing a little about this. Deconstructionist critics have often tended to debate whether deconstruction is at root a classical, theoretical analysis of textuality or a practice and process that is closely tied to the texts it deconstructs. The most famous advocate of the latter view is perhaps the pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty. For Rorty, deconstruction is above all an exuberant freeplay of language. Any attempt to turn that play into a lucid philosophical theory will rigidify and ultimately falsify it: "The worst bits of Derrida are the ones where he begins to imitate the thing he hates and starts claiming to offer 'rigorous analyses'"[6] he claims.

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[5]Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc,* ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 114.

[6]Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-80)* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 98.

Well, Derrida certainly does claim to offer "rigorous analyses" in the passage we just quoted from the *Afterword.* "I try in fact to respond, point by point, in the most honest and rational way possible, to Searle's arguments" he says. But, in saying this, I cannot agree with Rorty that Derrida is in some sense succumbing to the allure of transcendental philosophy in the Kantian tradition, and betraying the non-Kantian tradition to which he properly belongs. Rather, he is simply acknowledging a pragmatic need to talk and write about deconstruction in conventional, transparent terms, even if these are the very terms against which it ordinarily takes arms. "In addressing my answers to *you*" he responds to his questioner in the *Afterword,* "in entrusting myself to the contextual limits determined by *your questions,* I shall reduce just a little the violence and the ambiguity. For that is what we want, isn't it, to reduce them, if possible? Is it certain that we can, on one side or the other, ever eliminate them?"[7]. Thus Derrida has a much less dramatic (or melodramatic) view than Rorty of the relationship between deconstruction in theory and deconstruction in practice. The theory expounds in a lucid, formal way the practical, structural ambiguities of language. It never eliminates those ambiguities, of course. They occur at the same time as, and independently of, their theoretical exposition. They might even enter into that exposition, complicating it, discrediting it. But *pace* Rorty, they do not quite falsify it. This is Derrida's point, and my own. Multiple statements, movements and forms of writing are said to "reinforce", rather than undermine, the theoretical exposition of his case "in something like a practical manner". And the theoretical exposition, as he says now, can "reduce just a little" their ambiguity. Now this is all very interesting, but our primary interest is Shelley, not deconstruction. So we must ask ourselves what relevance deconstruction has, as theory, practice or both, for our understanding of *Queen Mab.*

Deconstruction in theory would not appear to be very relevant at all. Even the most fervent adept of deconstruction would not argue that Shelley's poems are formal expositions of their philosophical case. Deconstruction in practice is much more common. Adepts of deconstruction will happily stress, it seems, the ways in which Shelley's poems fall apart without any help from either their author or their

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[7]Derrida (1988), 113.

readers. "Deconstruction", offers J. Hillis Miller in a famous comment, "is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself"[8]. Miller and other deconstructionists of what used to be called the Yale school of criticism focus very profitably upon what we have christened deconstruction in practice, the mechanical displacements of language which undermine Shelley's texts and all texts. But whether this is the *only* profitable focus for Shelley's deconstructionists, though, is now a very moot question. For all his alertness to multiplications of statement, gesture and writing, we have just seen that Derrida is still prepared to register the validity of philosophical and theoretical imperatives. Without limiting the scope of deconstruction in practice, in other words, he still feels it is possible to engage in "a very classical, 'straightforward' form of discussion"[9] with John Searle. So might it not be equally possible, on the same theoretical basis, for Percy Shelley to engage in a very classical, and even a historical, discussion with us?

Perhaps. But before beginning that discussion we need to place it in the context of our own. We asked, you will recall, how *Queen Mab* can cling to metaphysical assumptions while being fully aware of their potential deconstruction. Deconstruction in theory provides a possible answer to this conundrum. In saying this, I do not mean to endow Shelley with a modern theoretical consciousness that he could not have possessed, but simply to acknowledge, like so many others before me, possible points of comparison between his thought and that of the deconstructionists. For as much as Shelley's poem is vulnerable to what Derrida calls the violence and ambiguity of language, like him it might also be able to reduce that violence just a little by turning it into a theory. It might formalize, in other words, the series of binary oppositions that make up all language as a much larger series of philosophical, or more fittingly, poetic oppositions. It might translate differences that occur at the level of the text into poetic or thematic differences. And this, we shall see, is exactly what it does. We have already seen, for instance, how the character of

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[8]J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II", *Georgia Review*, 30 (1976), 330-348.

[9]Derrida (1988), 114.

Queen Mab "always indicates some determinate signified which admits of no interpretation". But like the language she claims to control, Mab remains curiously dependent on others to make good her claims. Others like Ianthe, the Wandering Jew, and most strikingly, the poem's philosophical *Notes*. Mab's poetic dependency on these others has the same outcome as a linguistic dependency. The others displace her, and ultimately deconstruct her. In the next section, we will trace this process in greater detail. In the sections after that, we shall see how it relates to our understanding of Shelley's mysticism.

(ii)

"The notes to Q.M. will be long & philosophical" Shelley wrote to Hookham, "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" (*Letters*, i, 350). But separate and self-contained though they are, *Queen Mab*'s *Notes* still cast a long shadow over the poem proper. "The poetry and the prose are closely interwoven in argument" writes Richard Holmes, "and the reader is constantly aware of a strong pressure of cross-reference which forces him to move back and forth between the two forms and between the various cantos"[10]. This is undoubtedly so, but perhaps the real question here is whether these cross-references propagate Mab's message, as Shelley seems to have intended, or distract from it. The places where it seems intended to propagate it are obvious enough. Describing the "man of ease" in Canto Five, Queen Mab Pythonesquely announces that "religion / Drives his wife raving mad" (v, 113). The *Notes* gravely corroborate: "I am acquainted with a lady of considerable accomplishments, and the mother of a numerous family," Shelley writes, "whom the Christian religion has goaded to incurable insanity. A parallel case is, I believe, within

[10]Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1974), 202.

the experience of every physician" (*POS*, 367). But even when the *Notes* confirm Mab's speeches so completely, we might still wonder why, if those speeches really do indicate "some determinate signified which admits of no interpretation", they need confirmation at all. The very existence of the *Notes* seems to be an admission of insecurity. For it is not as if, without them, *Queen Mab* would be exactly devoid of acquiescent voices. Ronald Tetreault has already suggested that the character of Ianthe is a surrogate for the reader in the poem, encouraging him to respond to Mab's speeches in just the way she does. And predictably, her response is not to question or to wonder why but simply to bend "her beamy eyes in thankfulness" (ix, 215). The actual effect on the reader, as we shall see, is quite the opposite. If Mab's word is good enough for Ianthe, and Ianthe is there to make us take Mab at her word, we wonder if the philosophical *Notes* aren't an insurance policy too far. Why isn't Mab's word alone good enough for us?

I want to consider these philosophical *Notes* a little more sceptically than Shelley might like me to, then. Their very existence, we said, seems to be a tacit acknowledgment of some insecurity, some lack, in the poem proper. A lack of what, though? The historian and philosopher Michel Foucault gives several answers to this question but the following one is perhaps the most intriguing. To note or comment, he suggests, is to admit, by definition, the existence of "a necessary, unformulated remainder of thought that language has left in the shade"[11]. Foucault's insight is best exemplified by a commentary which is already familiar to us. I am thinking, again, of Shelley's letter to the *Examiner*, cited at the very beginning of this chapter. Shelley's letter is a commentary on *Queen Mab* or, as the poet himself says, an "explanation of the affair, as it relates to me". His choice of words assumes a significance, in the light of our present discussion, that it might not otherwise have. For Shelley, the purpose of a commentary is to explain, to clear up, an original matter. Now to explain a matter, of course, we must tacitly acknowledge that it needed explaining in the first place. We must concede that it has not fully explained itself. So as much as commentaries do explain, they also alert us to the fallibility of explanations. They call their own ability to explain into question, to formulate the remainder of thought, as

[11]Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), xvi.

Foucault so rightly says. This is why, perhaps, Shelley's "explanation" of the *Queen Mab* affair in the *Examiner* only ends up making that affair more complicated. Why it leads, not to revelation, but to more explanations, more commentaries. For why, after all, should a commentary on *Queen Mab* be able to explain the poem if the poem cannot explain itself? Perhaps Shelley knew something of this. His strangely humble desire to explain *Queen Mab* only "as it relates to me" seems to concede that a full explanation is beyond even his power. But does the poem's own explanation, which takes the form of its philosophical *Notes*, make the same concession?

I think it does. The lengths to which those notes go to explain and confirm Queen Mab's arguments only serves to emphasize the tenuousness of those arguments. Even the most tenuous of these, such as Mab's conviction that Christianity induces insanity amongst mothers, is supported by some pretence of evidence. But the trouble is that this evidence can never be as indisputable as Shelley wants it to be. This is because, as Foucault showed us, evidence only exists because of a dispute and reminds us by its very nature of the possibility of disputation. It must be said that its anecdotal and tendentious nature in this case does not help matters either. Just as Shelley had confirmed Mab's story about the Christian religion driving a woman raving mad with a similar story of his own, so her belief that "Even love is sold" (v, 189) is corroborated by another dubious anecdote. "I have heard, indeed, an ignorant collegian adduce, in favour of Christianity, its hostility to every worldly feeling!" (*POS*, 369). So in sum, I think, *Queen Mab*'s *Notes* might complicate the arguments of the poem proper in two distinct ways. Firstly, their very presence seems to admit that the poem's arguments (or Mab's arguments, for they amount to the same thing) are in themselves unclear and unjustified. For a character whose speeches supposedly indicate "some determinate signified which admits of no interpretation" this is something of an irony. But a second irony is that while their presence acknowledges that Mab's speeches need to be explained or justified, the *Notes* are unable to do either of these things. These ironies do not detract from our appreciation of *Queen Mab*. At worst, they represent the intriguing contradictions at work in Shelley's poem. At best, they might even be something that his poem lucidly, and almost self-consciously, works *out*. We can best appreciate this point by looking at one contradiction in particular, the contradiction that started us thinking about *Queen Mab* in this way in the first place.

One of the poem's most fervent arguments, we noted, is for the continuity, "the unchanging harmony" of history. Someone keeps the secrets of the immeasurable past. Someone extrapolates the future from the causes which arise in each present event. History is the glue which binds past tyranny and present exploitation together, allowing us to see them as merely stages of a journey that will inevitably lead to Man's "glorious destiny" (viii, 10). But does the glue stick? We will see how the *Notes* answer this question presently, but first consider this speech, from Mab herself:

> O Spirit! through the sense
> By which thy inner nature was apprised
> Of outward shows, vague dreams have rolled,
> And varied reminiscences have waked
> Tablets that never fade;
> All things have been imprinted there,
> The stars, the sea, the earth, the sky,
> Even the unshapeliest lineaments
> Of wild and fleeting visions
> Have left a record there
> To testify of earth. (vii, 49-59)

One of its images is clumsy (how can a tablet wake?) but as a whole this passage is very significant. It contains within it Mab's concept of historical coherency. This concept involves two key elements. To begin with, there are the "tablets that never fade". After that, come "all things", even "the unshapeliest lineaments / Of wild and fleeting visions". History happens when these lineaments become imprinted upon the tablets, leaving "a record there / To testify of earth". It might be helpful if we put this process into more conceptual terms. Mab's belief in the existence of "tablets that never fade" is really an affirmation of what we might abstractly call historicity. It is a belief that history is possible, in other words, that beneath this apparent chaos and discontinuity, "our wild and fleeting visions", there is historical continuity, order. Mab's ability, then, is to piece these fragmentary visions together, and so reveal the original order.

Fragments and fragmentariness are recurrent themes in Shelley's poetry. One thinks of the "two vast and trunkless legs of stone" (2) in *Ozymandias*; of *When the Lamp is Shattered*'s disparate shards; of *Epipsychidion's* claim to be only a part of some

fictional, longer poem. The fact that many of Shelley's best poems are themselves fragments has ensured that fragmentariness is of equal importance to Shelley's critics. The question of whether fragmentariness necessarily implies an antecedent unity has been a particularly vexed one for both historicists and deconstructionists. 'Old' historicism's tendency to answer that question in the affirmative provoked the following famous question from Paul de Man: "What relationship do we have to such a text that allows us to call it a fragment that we are then entitled to reconstruct, to identify and implicitly to complete?" (*DC*, 40). For de Man, texts like *Epipsychidion* and *The Triumph of Life* often seem to revel in their supposed fragmentariness, and the impossibility of completion that involves. But what about a text like *Queen Mab*? Describing the wild and fleeting visions of earlier, Mab says "These are my empire, *for to me is given* / The wonders of the human world to keep, / And fancy's thin creations to endow / With manner, being, and reality" (vii, 60-63) (stress mine). This is one, quite blunt, answer to Paul de Man's question. Mab is entitled to reconstruct, identify and complete fancy's fragmented creations because she has been given that entitlement. But by whom? The answer, she tells us elsewhere, is nature: "'Spirit of Nature! no. / The *pure diffusion* of thy *essence* throbs / Alike in every human heart" (iii, 214-216) (stress mine). Time does not destroy natural essences, it merely (and purely) diffuses them. Historical continuity is natural, in other words: "Let every part depending on the chain / That links it to the whole, point to the hand / That grasps its term! let every seed that falls / In silent eloquence unfold its store / Of argument: infinity within, / Infinity without, belie creation; / The exterminable spirit it contains / Is nature's only God" (vii, 17-24).

But there are other, more sceptical, ways of interpreting Mab's appeal to nature. Having proclaimed her ability to endow fragmentary visions with manner, being and reality, Mab defers to one of those fragments: Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. Already bored by Mab's relentless polemicism, Ronald Tetreault offers this sardonic comment upon the new character. "The speech of the Wandering Jew" he writes, "provides tactical relief to Mab's lecture, but as a victim of the intolerance she has described he serves *naturally* to corroborate her observations"[12] (stress mine).

[12]Tetreault (1987), 33-34.

Tetreault uses the same word ("naturally") to describe this process that Mab would use herself but the similarity ends there. His "naturally" does not mean "organically" or "essentially", as hers does, but "predictably" or "typically". Its inevitability is not the inevitability of truth, in other words, but of rhetoric. And of *bad* rhetoric, at that. Mab's reliance on rhetorical devices, of whatever vintage, sits uneasily with her earlier championing of the eloquence of nature alone. It calls into question her case for the natural coherence of history, for there is nothing natural about a case which calls only friendly witnesses. Thus the suspicion arises, once again, that Mab's arguments are not quite as indisputable as they claim to be. The accompanying *Notes* seek to allay that suspicion, but we will not be surprised by now to find that they only serve to confirm it. More surprisingly, I think, they also confirm one of the premises of this chapter, namely, that the suspectness of its title character is something of which *Queen Mab* may be all too aware.

My argument is best understood by looking in detail at the character of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. Once again it is particularly helpful to compare the representation of him given in the poem with the representation given in the corresponding note. At first, the poem's Ahasuerus seems to be just a surrogate for Mab herself, a "phantasmal portraiture / Of wandering human thought" (vii 274-275), summoned and dismissed with a wave of her wand. Eight years later, the lyric drama *Hellas* (1821) would not treat him so dismissively: "but from his eye looks forth / A life of unconsumed thought which pierces / The present, and the past, and the to-come" (*Hellas*, 146-148) Hassan tells Mahmud in that poem. It is not hard to see why Shelley returned to this figure in later poems like *Hellas*. The Wandering Jew embodied many of his favourite ideas. Cursed to wander the earth eternally as a punishment for mocking the crucified Christ, he is Promethean in his heroic resistance of tyranny. The eternal nature of his punishment also makes him a potent, secular, symbol for historical continuity, or as Hassan puts it "The present, and the past, and the to-come". These elements, so obvious in *Hellas*, are also latent in *Queen Mab*. In our poem, the curse of Ahasuerus's immortality is also an opportunity to express Man's magnificent powers of endurance and resistance: "Thus have I stood - through a wild waste of years / Struggling with whirlwinds of mad agony, / Yet peaceful, and serene, and self-enshrined, / Mocking my powerless tyrant's horrible

curse / With stubborn and unalterable will" (vii, 254-258). Likewise, the eternal nature of his suffering is a secular symbol for historical permanence: "Even as a giant oak, which heaven's fierce flame / Had scathèd in the wilderness, to stand / A monument of fadeless ruin there; / Yet peacefully and movelessly it braves / The midnight conflict of the wintry storm, / As in the sunlight's calm it spreads / Its worn and withered arms on high / To meet the quiet of a summer's noon" (259-266). All in all, then, Ahasuerus is rather more than a sort of rabbit that Queen Mab has pulled out of her hat. She occasionally advocates resistance; he resists. She foresees future historical events, gathering "the future from the causes which arise / In each event". Ahasuerus, though, is history itself.

Or at least he is in the poem proper. But let us now consider how he is represented in the corresponding note, accompanying the line "Ahasuerus, rise!" (vii, 67). Does this note confirm the poem's view of him as a testament to the unbreakable powers of the human spirit? And does it corroborate the poem's belief that he is the living embodiment of historical coherency? The answer to the first of these questions, at least, must be no. The true testament to human endurance in the note is not Ahasuerus but Christ: "When our Lord was wearied with the burthen of his ponderous cross, and wanted to rest before the door of Ahasuerus, the unfeeling wretch drove Him away with brutality. The Saviour of mankind staggered, sinking under the heavy load, but uttered no complaint" (*POS*, 392-393). In contrast, Ahasuerus never stops complaining about his own load: "Ha! not to be able to die - not to be permitted to rest after the toils of life - to be doomed to be imprisoned forever in the clay-formed dungeon - to be for ever clogged with this worthless body, its load of diseases and infirmities - to be condemned to hold for millenniums that yawning monster Sameness, and Time, that hungry hyena, ever bearing children, and ever devouring again her offspring! - Ha! not to be permitted to die!" (*POS*, 395). Philosophically, too, this note is miles away from the corresponding passage in the poem proper. Immortality is not the stage for infinite resistance but for infinite misery. Humanity is not "self-enshrined" but a "clay-formed dungeon". It is no surprise, in the end, to find that Shelley himself did not write it. But who did? Shelley says he did not know. The fact that he did not know is significant, I think, because it provides an answer to the second of our two questions, asked above. Does

this note corroborate, namely, the poem's view of Ahasuerus as the very incarnation of history? Here is Shelley's answer: "This fragment is the translation of part of some German work, whose title I have vainly endeavoured to discover. I picked it up, dirty and torn, some years ago, in Lincoln's-Inn Fields" (*POS*, 395).

To grasp the full irony of this apology, attached to the note on Ahasuerus, we must go back a step or two. Mab's undoubted confidence in her abilities derives, we found, from a faith in the coherency of history. If she pieces together Man's fragmentary experiences, it is because they *can* be pieced together. They are related to an antecedent unity, in other words, a prior order, a whole. This continuity between parts and wholes is depicted in several different ways in the poem. The "wild and fleeting visions" are not lost, but recorded upon "Tablets that never fade". Similarly the essence of nature is not destroyed but diffused into "every human heart". But Ahasuerus, one of "Fancy's thin creations" endowed with "manner, being and reality", remains the poem's most fulsome affirmation of historical continuity. So it is all the more ironic, then, that this affirmation is revealed to be only a part of some other whole: "I picked it up, dirty and torn, some years ago". Indeed, in a larger sense, the irony is almost breathtaking. The continuity of history is *in itself* discontinuous. The very thing that entitles Mab to identify fragments and to reconstruct and implicitly complete them is itself a fragment. And a fragment whose reconstruction is anything but entitled, whose whole is lost, perhaps forever: "This fragment is the translation of part of some German work, whose title I have vainly endeavoured to discover".

It is difficult to see Shelley as entirely the victim of this irony when it is so lucidly staged, when it so enriches his poem, and when it is so portentous of his future scepticism. Far better to see him, and *Queen Mab*, as its beneficiary. By exposing their fragmentary foundations, the poem's *Notes* quietly deconstruct its arguments for the natural continuity of history. There is no natural beginning, they remind us, no "great end" that will resolve all difficulties, all fragments into a unified whole. And all of us, Shelley included, do need reminding of this sometimes. The times when we seek to establish *Queen Mab* as the 'real' beginning of his poetical canon, for instance, or to draw a line under it and show that his canon 'really' begins sometime later. Neither stance does full justice to the ironies so artfully presented in

Queen Mab. My own stance, which has involved placing this discussion of Shelley's first major poem as far as possible from the beginning of my thesis, is scarcely an improvement. But perhaps it is that decentred place which best reminds us that *Queen Mab* is a poem where every natural beginning is decentred.

This may seem a rather unhistorical and by extension, unmetaphysical interpretation of what is in many ways a very historical and metaphysical poem, but I do not mean it to be so. For while *Queen Mab* deconstructs its arguments for the continuity of history I have suggested that it does so in a way which respects the power, and even the necessity of those arguments. Deconstruction is most familiar to us as a passive process of textual doublings yet Derrida has shown us that it is also possible for some texts to actively formalize that process, to evolve an almost metaphysical theory of doubling, even. It is too much to say that *Queen Mab* is the sort of text that Derrida has in mind, but there are at least some interesting similarities. Like those texts, Shelley's poem translates structural concerns into formal questions. Ultimately, though, it translates them into *poetic* questions. *Queen Mab* poeticizes the structural doublings which befall it as a text, I think, by creating a poetic double in the guise of its accompanying philosophical notes, and deferring to it at every opportunity. The *Notes* poetically double *Queen Mab*'s message, just as language itself structurally doubles that message. For Shelley's poem to poeticize its structural doublings in this way does not mean that it is trying to eliminate those doublings, nor to pretend that they can ever be encompassed by any poetic framework, but to "reduce just a little" their violence and their ambiguity: "For that is what we want, isn't it, to reduce them, if possible?". *Queen Mab* remains as vulnerable as any other text to the structural doublings of language; but unlike those texts, it also poetically *stages* its doublings. It poetically doubles *itself*.

So *Queen Mab* submits, I think, to what Derrida calls "the norms of the context that requires one to prove, to demonstrate, to proceed correctly, to conform to the rules of language and to a great number of social, ethical, political-institutional rules, etc"[13]. In thinking this, of course, it may be that I am only betraying my own deference to such rules. Re-reading this chapter I discover that I have attributed to

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[13]Derrida (1988), 150.

Queen Mab an acute consciousness of its self-undoings, a consciousness so acute, in fact, that it might even be called 'mature'. Deconstructionists do not easily attribute characteristics like this to texts, and indeed we have spent much of this chapter criticizing those who do. But so long as we remain aware that they are only ever written in ink, not blood, there is no reason why deconstructionists should not themselves conform to a great number of social, ethical and political-institutional rules, in our case the classical rules of literary or historical criticism. Why we should not continue, in other words, to credit *Queen Mab* with a certain degree of mature self-awareness. And why we might even return it to its natural place at the beginning of Shelley's canon, so long as we understand exactly how 'natural' such beginnings are. Edward Said understands, as he shows by writing at the beginning of his *Orientalism*: "there is no such thing as a merely given, or simply available starting point: beginnings have to be made for each project so as to *enable* what follows from them"[14]. To read *Queen Mab* is to feel the powerful attraction of the merely given and the simply available; to read its *Notes* is to recognize the elusive complexities that enable them.

(iii)

"The oppressive forms of government and religion are mere 'shadows' without substance outside the minds of men" Paul Dawson tells us. "Nevertheless they rule them as surely as anything physical or exterior. This consideration helps to explain *the curious strategy by which Shelley in "Queen Mab" simultaneously denies the existence of the Christian God and arraigns and defies him as if he did exist.* In one sense a mere word by which men express their ignorance, he is in another sense the 'prototype of

[14]Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 16.

human misrule' (vi, 105) whose example is used to justify earthly tyrannies, and thus he has a potent existence in the sphere of 'opinion'"[15] (stress mine). Our reading of *Queen Mab* has uncovered similarly curious strategies along the way, although we have been unable to resolve them quite so neatly as Dawson. In the previous section we saw the very strategic way in which Shelley uses *Queen Mab*'s philosophical *Notes* to contradict, ironize and ultimately deconstruct the historical polemics of the poem proper. In this section, we will examine the ways in which *Queen Mab* disrupts its polemics against religion as well, a disruption caused chiefly in this case by the character of Ianthe. But we will also try to develop that reading a little before we conclude, and in a way which is highly relevant to this thesis. This is because what Paul Dawson calls Shelley's curious strategy of simultaneously denying and affirming the existence of God again sounds to me like mysticism.

The *Notes* are not the only insurance policy that Shelley takes out on his poem. "Ianthe", writes Ronald Tetreault, "supplies the reader's role in the poem, manipulating his responses and anticipating his questions. Her role, though, as one might expect in a work whose epic sweep ranges through history and cosmos, is subordinate to that of her guide and preceptress, Queen Mab"[16]. In fact this is not the only way in which Ianthe is similar to the *Notes*. Intended, like them, to mollify the reader, her complete acquiescence actually encourages us to question and complain all the more. "Fairy! the Spirit said, / And on the Queen of spells / Fixed her etherial eyes, / I thank thee..." (iii, 1-3) are her first utterances of note. By the end of the poem she is so thankful that she cannot speak at all: "Speechless with bliss the Spirit mounts the car, / That rolled beside the battlement, / Bending her beamy eyes in thankfulness" (ix, 213-215). All in all, then, Ianthe is an even less convincing foil than the *Notes*. She is so passive a presence in the poem, that she hardly seems to be a presence at all. The reader forgets she is there after the opening Canto. In this light, Tetreault's claim that she "supplies the reader's role in the poem, manipulating his responses and anticipating his questions" seems somewhat extravagant.

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[15]Dawson (1980), 107.

[16]Tetreault (1987), 33.

Ianthe's relationship with Mab is as meagre and disjointed as her relationship with the poem's readers. One particular exchange with her "guide and preceptress" is more reminiscent of Clov and Hamm, say, than Dante and Virgil. It begins:

> Weep not, child! cried my mother, for that man
> Has said, There is no God.
>
> *Fairy*
>
> There is no God! (vii, 12-13)

Ianthe's recollection of an atheist being burnt at the stake leads to the following series of farcical, misfiring exchanges. Firstly, Mab answers a question that Ianthe has not asked; secondly, Ianthe asks the question that Mab has just answered; and thirdly, Ahasuerus answers Ianthe's question again by totally contradicting Mab's previous answer. The farce is worth playing out at greater length. Ianthe's memory of the burned atheist prompts Mab to exclaim "There is no God! / Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed" (vii, 14). At worst this is a *non sequitur.* At best it is a rather tawdry attempt to score ideological points off Ianthe's personal experience. For if that experience is at all touching it is because it is devoid of polemical content. Ianthe may be impressed by the atheist's quiet resolution, but she is only moved when that resolution is shattered: "His death-pang rent my heart!" (vii, 10). In seeking to make polemical capital out of Ianthe's first experience of human suffering, Mab is really no different from the spirit's repugnant mother: "Weep not, child! cried my mother, for that man / Has said, There is no God!'".

As it is, Mab ploughs on for another forty lines, unbidden, before offering this decidedly retrospective justification. Ahasuerus, she tells Ianthe, will "meet thy questioning" (vii, 66). What questioning? Ianthe, as we know, has not asked any questions. Agreeably, though, she does so now. "Is there a God?" (vii, 83), she says. But this is a very curious query, given that Mab has just gone to great lengths to answer it with an emphatic negative. Ronald Tetreault argues that queries like this

are merely rhetorical devices, giving Mab "the opportunity to recapitulate her theme"[17]. But as much as they give an opportunity to recapitulate, they also expose, like the *Notes*, a need to recapitulate. Notes and queries seem to acknowledge, by their very existence, that Mab's arguments do not stand up on their own merit. Repeating a question that has supposedly just been answered is an expression of dissatisfaction, if not outright contempt, for that answer. So Queen Mab's authority is actually undermined by Ianthe's request that she explain herself. But that explanation, which arrives in the ghostly figure of Ahasuerus, undermines her still further. Called upon to corroborate Mab's testimony, Ahasuerus flatly contradicts it. Mab, you will recall, had told Ianthe that "There is no God!". Ianthe was not satisfied with that answer and, if Ahasuerus is to be believed, she was right not to be: "Is there a God! - aye, an almighty God," he declares "And vengeful as almighty!" (vii, 84-85). If Ianthe is more satisfied with Ahasuerus's vengeful God than Mab's dead one, though, we cannot say. Mab, who deferred to him because he could better meet the spirit's questionings, reasserts her own authority before we can find out: "The present and the past thou hast beheld: / It was a desolate sight." (viii, 1-2). "Is there a God?" are, significantly perhaps, the very last words Ianthe says in the poem.

Queen Mab piles inconsistencies upon inconsistencies, then. But two stand out as particularly bewildering. Firstly, why do the testimonies of Mab and the Wandering Jew conflict? This would be understandable if Ahasuerus really was the embodiment of "human error's dense and purblind faith" (vii, 65) that Mab says he is, but, as we saw in the last section, he is in fact as thoroughly heroic as Prometheus or Milton's Satan: "But my soul, / From sight and sense of the polluting woe / Of tyranny, had long learned to prefer / Hell's freedom to the servitude of heaven" (vii, 193-195). The second inconsistency, which concerns the character of Ianthe, is even more perplexing. For if she disagrees with the testimony of Mab, and we have no evidence to the contrary, why is she seemingly no more agreeable towards the testimony of Ahasuerus? Either God exists surely, or He does not. But faced with the choice between faith and atheism it is problematic that Ianthe continues to act as if this were no choice at all.

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[17]Tetreault (1987), 33.

To solve this particular problem, I think, we first have to recognize that Ianthe is far from the only person to act in this way. In fact there is a long tradition of intellectual thought which uncovers an essential unity behind the supposed antagonism of atheism and faith; over the next page or so we will mention one or two of its more noteworthy supporters. In the third essay of his *Genealogy of Morals*, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche observes that atheism shares the same ascetic ideals as faith, the same desire to answer questions absolutely. The only real challenge to that ideal is mounted, not by atheists, but by those like himself who are "the comedians of this ideal - for they awake mistrust. Everywhere otherwise, where the mind is at work seriously, powerfully, and without counterfeiting, it dispenses altogether now with an ideal (the popular expression for this abstinence is 'Atheism') - *with the exception of the will for truth*. But this will, this *remnant* of an ideal, is, if you will believe me, that ideal itself in its severest and cleverest formulation"[18]. If Ianthe thinks the choice between atheism and faith is no choice at all, in other words, she may be right. The significant choice is not between faith and atheism, Nietzsche suggests, but between being a servant of the ascetic ideal and what he presciently calls a comedian of that ideal. And as this is one choice that Ianthe *does* appear to make we should explore it a little more deeply.

I called Nietzsche prescient just then because his stress on comedy, joyful wisdom, the gay science and so on pre-dates by some seventy years or more the playful seriousness and serious play of some aspects of deconstruction. In many ways, Derrida is also a comedian of the ascetic ideal, as John D. Caputo makes clear in his account of deconstruction's attitude towards atheism and faith: "It does not settle the God-question one way or another" Caputo suggests. "In fact, it *un*settles it, by showing that any debate about the existence of God is beset by the difficulties which typically inhabit such debates, by their inevitable recourse to binary pairs which cannot be made to stick"[19]. Caputo's account of the role played by

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[18]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, 18 vols (Edinburgh and London: T.N.Foulis, 1910), xiii, 207.

[19]John D. Caputo, "Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart", in *Derrida and Deconstruction*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 24-46, 28.

deconstruction in matters of faith is so similar to our own account of Ianthe's role in *Queen Mab* that it is worth pursuing the comparison to its proper conclusion. So does Ianthe's unwillingness or inability to choose between atheism and faith also unsettle what Caputo calls the God-question? Does that reluctance mean that she, too, is a comedian of the ideal, in other words, and *Queen Mab* her comedy?

The answer to this question is, arguably, 'yes'. We could argue, to begin with, that Ianthe's question "Is there a God?" brings faith and atheism into such close proximity that even scholars who are particularly sympathetic to the latter find it difficult to tell them apart. Paul Dawson once again comes to mind here. But if we are indebted to Dawson for noticing the paradoxical way in which *Queen Mab* "simultaneously denies the existence of the Christian God and arraigns and defies him as if he did exist", I am less sure that we should welcome his attempts to resolve that paradox. His argument, you will recall, is that Shelley only defies God as if He did exist because He still has "a potent existence in the sphere of opinion"; the implication being that once such superstitions are eliminated, Shelley can dispense with the notion of a living God altogether. Yet surely even this sort of atheism, which does not actively defy God, but simply ignores Him as beneath serious challenge, must still begin from the presumption of His existence. It must ignore *something*, to put it crudely, or someone. "Theism and atheism are not simply an accidental conjunction, a successive accumulation of contradictory opinions", writes Michael J. Buckley, echoing Nietzsche nearly a hundred years after *A Genealogy of Morals*. "A bond of necessity stretches between them: atheism depends upon theism for its vocabulary, for its meaning, and for the hypotheses it rejects"[20].

The bond of necessity described by Buckley can be observed, in all its forms, in *Queen Mab*. The meaning of Mab's atheism is not to be found in that atheism alone, but in faiths previously affirmed, which it now rejects: "'Spirit of Nature! all-sufficing Power, / Necessity! thou mother of the world! / Unlike the God of human error, thou / Requirest no prayers or praises" (vi, 197-200). And Mab's atheism does not simply depend upon theism for its philosophy; it is also beholden to theism for

[20]Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 15.

what Buckley calls its vocabulary, and what we might call its textuality. Mab can only say 'There is no God!", in other words, because in the past people like Ahasuerus have said "Is there a God! - aye, an almighty God". 'Nay' has significance only insofar as it is not 'yea'. This linguistic difference is relational rather than, as Mab seems to think, essential.

By failing to settle the God-question one way or the other, Ianthe challenges the Fairy's assumption that it can be settled without inevitably referring back to some prior settlement, without invariably having recourse to "binary pairs which cannot be made to stick". It is a challenge from which the poem never totally recovers, I think. While "Is there a God?" disrupts the ceaseless flow of Mab's rhetoric only momentarily, it hangs, unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, over her remaining speeches. By this stage of the poem, we are well used to those speeches, their intellectual gaps, and the hysterical delivery that is supposed to plug them. But the speeches after Canto Seven are noisy and hectoring even by Mab's standards. It is just as well that Ianthe is said to return to earth "Speechless with bliss" after hearing them because they give her no opportunity to express her feelings, even if she had wanted to. "Are there not hopes within thee, which this scene / Of linked and gradual being has confirmed?" (ix, 180-181) the Fairy asks Ianthe, "And wilt thou rudely tear them from thy breast, / Listening supinely to a bigot's creed, / Or tamely crouching to the tyrant's rod, / Whose iron thongs are red with human gore?" she continues, before proceeding to answer her own questions: "Never: but bravely bearing on, thy will / Is destined an eternal war to wage / With tyranny and falsehood, and uproot / The germs of misery from the human heart" (ix, 185-192). Conspicuously silent throughout this speech, and conveniently contented after it, Ianthe is one who awakens "mistrust", to use one of Nietzsche's more modest labels. And for her questioning and quietly doubtful role in the poem as a whole, the spirit merits one of his less modest labels too, that of a "comedian of the ascetic ideal" or, as he might put it today, a deconstructionist.

So *Queen Mab* deconstructs its clearcut view of religion, ultimately, just as earlier we saw it deconstruct its clearcut view of history. As I was at pains to stress at the time, the poem's deconstruction of its linear concept of history did not amount to a wholesale *destruction* of that concept. On the contrary, it showed just how vital

such concepts were, if more as assumptions to work from than truths to behold. But if history escapes *Queen Mab*'s deconstructionist claws relatively unscathed, can we say the same for atheism or even faith? Can Ianthe's question "is there a God?" receive an answer that is not already compromised by the assumptions of its asking, by its inevitable recourse to binary pairs that cannot be made to stick? These are questions that cut right to the heart of my thesis. As the final section of this chapter will show, mysticism helps us to answer them.

(iv)

One of the abiding arguments of this thesis is that Shelley knew a lot more about mysticism than has previously been supposed. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the note appended to Queen Mab's declaration "There is no God!":

> From the phenomena, which are the objects of our senses, we attempt to infer a cause, which we call God, and gratuitously endow it with all negative and contradictory qualities. From this hypothesis we invent this general name, to conceal our ignorance of causes and essences. The being called God by no means answers with the conditions prescribed by Newton; it bears every mark of a veil woven by philosophical conceit, to hide the ignorance of philosophers even from themselves. They borrow the threads of its texture from the anthropomorphism of the vulgar. Words have been used by sophists for the same purposes, from the occult qualities of the peripatetics to the *effluvium* of Boyle and the *crinities* or *nebulæ* of Herschel. God is represented as infinite, eternal, incomprehensible, he is contained under every prædicate in non that the logic of ignorance could fabricate. Even His worshippers allow that it is impossible to form any idea of him: they proclaim with the French poet,
>
> *Pour dire ce qu'il est, il faut être lui-même.* (*POS*, 385)

If Shelley's grasp of negative theology is surprising, though, his scorn for it is not. His gripe, above, appears to be that mystics confuse one form of negation with

another. They "infer a cause" called God and "endow it with all negative and contradictory qualities" in order to conceal their "ignorance of causes and essences". They mistake their inability to know whether God *exists*, in other words, for their inability to know His *essence*. "God is represented as infinite, eternal, incomprehensible, he is contained under every *prædicate in non* that the logic of ignorance could fabricate". But mystics were not the only ones to confuse the question of whether a thing can be known with the question of whether it exists.

In their defence, for example, we might say that even if it is impossible to say for sure that God exists, this is not necessarily the recommendation for atheism ("There is no God!") that Shelley claims it is. For God might exist without our knowing, of course. The logic of this argument may not be inescapable in itself. A hundred years after Shelley's death Ludwig Wittgenstein could evade it by saying something like 'a nothing would do as well as a something about which nothing can be said'. But for Shelley it must have been more compelling. The Romantic poet did not, could not, share the analytical philosopher's expedient perspective on the unknown. When Shelley says God does not exist, in other words, he does not mean that he has reached the perimeters of knowledge beyond which all questions of existence become academic, he means that God *really* does not exist. His 'nothing' is real and absolute, as perilously real and absolute, in fact, as the mystic's 'something', outlawed earlier. The sight of Shelley wrestling with the fact that his atheist beliefs depend upon the very faith they supposedly reject has been a familiar one in this thesis. The above passage seems to leave him with the uncomfortable choice of either embracing mysticism or rejecting atheism, as well, in favour of a much more radical scepticism. According to Ronald Tetreault, he chooses the latter option: "In his long extenuating note to Mab's flat assertion, 'There is no God,' he succeeds not so much in denying the existence of a deity as in showing the lack of proof either to affirm or deny the principle at issue. Confessing that 'we are in a state of ignorance', Shelley defers the validity of metaphysical hypotheses which presume to explain the mystery of origins"[21].

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[21]Tetreault (1987), 37-38.

So radical is this deferral, Tetreault thinks, that Shelley even begins to distrust the language which might invent such explanations for the mystery of origins. He begins to fear that words have no relation at all to the things they describe, not even the negative relation that Timothy Webb finds so prevalent in other poems. Negative predicates, he writes, succeed only in hiding the "ignorance of philosophers from themselves". His objection" Tetreault concludes, "appears to be based on a suspicion that words are too often allowed to have a reference to some determinate entity beyond themselves which they cannot be properly said to have"[22]. The reasons *why* Shelley's words cannot be said to refer to some determinate entity beyond themselves, such as God, we recounted in the last section; whether this necessarily forbids all religious qualities in his verse is something we are trying to establish in this one. In his reading of the relationship between deconstruction and religion, Geoffrey Bennington remains resolute, though: "We can say that *the idea of God* is, precisely, inseparable from the traditional idea of the sign as the final signified putting an end to the movement and resolving *différance* into presence" he writes; "the point is not to kill God nor even to declare once more that He is dead, but, by showing that He is produced by and in *différance*, as the name of what would put an end to it, to inscribe Him in what He is supposed to go beyond"[23] (stress mine).

Refreshingly free of the sound of axes being ground, Bennington's deconstructionist account is all the more injurious to religion as a result. Our discussion of theology in the *Conclusion to Part One* confirmed his view that God has traditionally been imagined as the transcendental signified, resolving *différance* into presence. But the differential nature of language is such, Bennington suggests, that our idea of God as the *fons et origo*, the *arché* and *telos*, the alpha and omega of all scripture, is unable to finalize the play of significations, to resolve it into presence. Thus Bennington makes clear that deconstruction compromises the "idea of God". But he also specifies that an *idea* is just what it is, betraying some anxiety, perhaps, over

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[22]Tetreault (1987), 38.

[23]Geoffrey Bennington, "DerridaBase", in *Jacques Derrida*, by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 1-316, 79.

its wider jurisdiction. That deconstruction counts against ideas of God is certain, in other words; that it counts against God in Himself is, as even one of its most articulate champions admits, rather less certain. "The deconstruction of theism will show, consequently, that 'God', as used at any point and time of history, is a construction", is how Kevin Hart clarifies this point. "This may count against *arguments* for God's existence, such as Descartes's, which depend upon the idea of God being implanted in the mind, but it hardly counts against *belief* in God. After all, how we get the idea of something and if that idea is true are entirely different matters, as are arguments *that* God exists and confessions of belief *in* God"[24].

Mysticism, or more accurately negative (mystical) theology, stresses this difference. Being a theology, of course, it does have *something* invested in arguments that God exists, but it invests a lot more in invoking the reality of God, which no argument can apprehend, not even negatively. To recall a distinction that we have been using throughout this thesis, it is a theology with the emphasis on the *theos* rather than the *logos*. And it is a theology which might have appealed to Shelley, if only as a way of reconciling his radical scepticism about language with his desire for knowledge of the causes and essences of the universe. To see this, we need only return, for the last time, to Ianthe's curious question: "Is there a God?".

That query is so curious, you will recall, because it comes just after Mab has told the Spirit that God no longer exists: "Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed" (vii, 14). Now asking for God after just being advised of His death would seem to indicate some reluctance to accept that advice. But although Ianthe denies Mab's denial of God, this does not lead her to affirm God, but to deny His affirmation too. By refusing to answer the God-question either positively or negatively, by showing that such questions are beggared by the linguistic assumptions they involve, the Spirit throws a deconstructionist scare into the poem's discourse, making it a little less portentous, a little less authoritative than it claims to be. Read in this way, indeed, *Queen Mab* creates a sobering distrust in all its readers of the power of religious discourse to do what it really sets out to do. As real

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[24]Hart (1989), 37.

as this distrust is, though, there are some faiths that deconstruction does not and cannot shake. It can attack discourses that claim to apprehend God, we have found, discourses that use God as "the final signified putting an end to the movement and resolving *différance* into presence", but it can make no statement at all about the existence of God. And neither, consequently, can *Queen Mab.* Ianthe's question "Is there a God?" may receive answers that are simply conditions of each other, but this does not exclude the possibility that it *could* receive an answer which is not. Not from Mab or Ahasuerus, of course, but an altogether more elevated source. For as the poet said *"Pour dire ce qu'il est, il faut être lui-même".*

Deconstructionists may wonder exactly what God *could* say for himself, of course, whether any words at all could establish His presence as purely and absolutely as Shelley required. Derrida has even wondered whether the word of God is incompatible with His presence, in a famous dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas: "and if God was *an effect of the trace*?"[25] he asked the theologian. But to dismiss Shelley in the same way is to cut him off at the knees, I think, and to miss the extent to which deconstruction deepens rather than destroys his religious thoughts. Our discussion of *Queen Mab* has shown that the poet was on almost constant guard against mistaking the effects of *différance* for the things themselves, be those things historical, as we saw earlier, or theological, as we are seeing now. And if, after all, he still found it possible to believe in something (and who does not?) it was not because he had failed to be sufficiently vigilant, but because *différance* had failed to sufficiently explain the world around him. He realized, in other words, that even if "words are too often allowed to have a reference to some determinate entity beyond themselves that they cannot be properly said to have" this does not necessarily amount to a rejection of that entity. It can even be a way of praising its infinite mystery, as this intriguing quotation from the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* makes clear. "The erroneous and degrading idea which men have conceived of a Supreme Being, for instance, is spoken against," Shelley wrote," but not the Supreme Being itself" (*WVP*, 37).

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[25]Derrida (1978), 108.

And what is true for Shelley in the writing has also been true for us in the reading. This chapter has tried to deconstruct *Queen Mab*, has spoken against its erroneous ideas, as the poet put it. But it has also tried to clarify the very real limits within which that deconstruction must be said to work. It has laboured to expose, in other words, the pragmatic needs that deconstruction does not answer and the theological beliefs that deconstruction cannot explain. "Deconstruction offers a critique of theism, to be sure," Kevin Hart suggests, "but it is directed to the 'ism' rather than the 'theos'; that is, it offers a critique of the use to which 'God' is put, but does not make any claim whatsoever about the *reality* of God"[26]. By the same token, a deconstructionist reading of *Queen Mab* can criticize 'God' in as much as He is used, even negatively, as a transcendental signified to put an end to *différance*. Any attempt to identify God or Godliness as the definitive subject of Shelley's poem must, for instance, fall within its scope. We have made several such attempts ourselves, which must inevitably be deconstructed. But even so, there is no reason why *Queen Mab* cannot continue to be read theologically so long as it is a theology which proclaims the infinite distance of God from Shelley's text. That distance is too vast for us to hope that God could ever stabilize the text, stem its flow of signification, but it is vast enough, perhaps, for us to put that flow in "just perspective to the view". Vast enough, even, to let us see

> The flood of ages combating below,
> The depth of the unbounded universe
> Above, and all around
> Nature's unchanging harmony.
> (*Queen Mab*, ii, 254-257)

[26]Hart (1989), 27.

Chapter Four

Sacred Silence, Dungeon Deep: *Julian and Maddalo*

In 1972, Fredric Jameson was struck by a terrifying thought. Human beings, he realized, were trapped in "the prison-house of language". We were ensnared in something "which writes us, even as we imagine ourselves to be writing it"[1]. But language did not just imprison writing and writers, Jameson found. Readers, too, must negotiate some way out of its prison-house before they can ever arrive at the writings of another.

Reading mystical treatises, this thesis has found, requires not so much negotiation as special pleading. The significance of these texts, to risk labouring the point, is often conditional on those issues, of intention and experience, which are most problematic in the textual medium. How can theologians be certain, in other words, that the religious possessions they attribute to, say, Julian of Norwich, are not actually possessions by the prison-house of language? Roland Barthes's famous polemic *The Death of the Author* suspects one reason for their peculiar certainty, namely, religious faith. Literature, Barthes argues, "by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meanings is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law"[2]. To find faith in the writing of Julian or any other mystic, the implication is that we must first *have* faith in the reading. Indeed, upon Barthes's interpretation, *all* readings which seek to recover fixed meanings, be they religious or not, are theological activities, forms of prayers. The alliance Barthes forges between theology and metaphysics was also forged, we know, by many of his contemporaries. God and the Author-God are interchangeable terms in the books of Umberto Eco, Jacques Derrida

[1]Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 140.

[2]Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. S. Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-148, 146.

and Harold Bloom[3]. But it is still possible to tease out differences of tone between post-structuralists like Barthes and Jameson. For Jameson, the prison is the text, in which the existentially independent subject is helplessly enmeshed. But whereas Jameson mourns the death of this subject, Barthes jumps up and down on his grave. For him, it is the theology of metaphysics, the theology of the subject, that is the true prison. Trying to recuperate authors or origins, be they God or Percy Bysshe Shelley, arbitrarily imprisons the textual exuberance of *Ode to the West Wind* or the Book of Revelations.

All this is itself no revelation. Specialist readings of Shelley, we have noted, are increasingly polarized along such lines. Crudely put, the point of contest is between those readers who seek, if not an author, then at least a subjective intelligence in Shelley's poems, and those who prefer to range over the multiple discursive possibilities those poems present. The former school often scores points off the latter for accepting this infinite discursiveness indiscriminately, as a freedom, and as a good. The latter directly hits the former for advocating, just as unquestioningly, a bankrupt metaphysical theology. I have cited the cases of Jameson and Barthes simply because I think they offer a very distinctive version of this contest, between what we might call recuperative and disseminative reading strategies. A version only, because Jameson, although sympathetic to the idea of the autonomous subject, is all too keenly aware of the textual agencies that facilitate and discredit it.

In this respect his views broadly coincide with our own. This thesis has granted critiques like Barthes's up to a certain point. Trying to read Shelley, and not just the texts signed in that name, as religious *is* perhaps a prayer to a secret or ultimate meaning. But this thesis has also allied itself with those who have sought to

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[3]"We do not need 'God' in a discourse for it to be 'theological' in Derrida's sense; all we need is something which *functions* as an agent of totalisation, and that can be 'man', 'Being', 'substance', 'impression', 'Form', 'logical atom', and so forth" Kevin Hart writes. "If this is so," he continues, "'theological' and 'metaphysical' are convertible words in Derrida's lexicon, and it is evident that Derrida's usage of 'theology' is far closer to its original Greek sense, as the study of the being of the ground, than to its other, more common meaning, as the study of man's relationship in faith with God", Hart (1989), 32. Harold Bloom uses theology in this very general sense in his *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975). "Presence is a faith", he writes (122).

question the accepted post-structuralist equation of theology and metaphysics. These have led us to conclude that it is not necessarily the case, as Barthes alleges, that all readings which refuse to project secret or ultimate meanings are "anti-theological". Mysticism's status as a prayer is perversely conditional on the fact that it projects no ultimate meaning, remember, or that the lack of such a meaning is itself a sort of meaning. Our chapter on *Queen Mab* placed this argument in the context of Shelley's poem. In reading *Mab* religiously, we did not ultimately have to attribute to the work or its author any experience of God, or any personal belief in God. What we did identify, in its *text*, was what Kevin Hart identified in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, namely, "a certain attitude towards discourse on God"[4]. This attitude may be called an epistemological hostility towards our ideas of God, the secret or ultimate meanings which supposedly ground our theological discourses. But there is no reason to call this hostility anti-theological or atheistic, unless we accept the prohibitive interpretations of 'theology', as the definitive grounded discourse, offered by the deconstructionists. In fact, a hostility towards such grounds can predicate faith, as it does in Denys's *Mystical Theology*, as much as it does atheism, in, most obviously, the works of Barthes, Derrida and so on. "It may be that individual deconstructionists hold views which they do think are incompatible with the idea of God," Hart explains, "but they hold these on social, moral or other grounds, and not by dint of a commitment to deconstruction. And *mutatis mutandis*, it may be that individual deconstructionists do believe in God though not, of course, the God who functions as a transcendental signified"[5].

In sum, then, we have found that mysticism offers a way of reading theologically which does not pretend, as Barthes insists such readings must, that language is anything other than a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash"[6]. Yet without ever quite turning them back into *works*, mysticism has also helped us to specify, as Jameson demands, those strategies which are particular, even individual in Shelley's *texts*. These are

[4]Hart (1989), 182.

[5]Hart (1989), 28.

[6]Barthes (1977), 144.

successes in themselves, but we can go a little further perhaps. Could mysticism be said, then, to in some sense 'unlock' both Jameson's prison of the text and Barthes's prison of the subject? What follows is a general discussion on *topoi* of imprisonment and release in the conversation poem *Julian and Maddalo;* but we will keep this question in mind throughout.

Ennui; inexpressiveness; a dependence on negotiated, rather than given truths. These are the characteristics of Jameson's subjective prison-house, we saw, but they also appear in several important readings of *Julian and Maddalo.* So, from Jameson and Barthes, let us turn to another pair of scholars, in this case exemplary readers of Shelley's poem. Vincent Newey has written an essay called *The Shelleyan Psycho-Drama: "Julian and Maddalo"* (*EOS*, pp. 71-105). It is always an instructive one, if sometimes inadvertently so. In the former capacity, it takes the characteristics of the poem we mention above, such as its relativist attitude towards truth and its final inexpressiveness, much more seriously than Shelley critics had done before. Traditionally, such critics had taken these characteristics as evidence of some ultimate vagueness, or confusion, of intent on Shelley's part. For Newey, though, Shelley's intention is only too clear. *Julian and Maddalo,* he writes

> validates, and involves us in, different ways of experiencing, seeing, and interpreting the world without allowing total precedence to any. (*EOS*, 84)

Newey is typically sure-footed here. But he may be too sure, given the confessed unevenness of his ground. *Julian and Maddalo* does not allow total precedence to any way of experiencing seeing and interpreting the world, he says. Well, any way, we might reply, except yours. There is, in other words, something of a contradiction here, which also haunts the many subsequent subjectivist and relativist readings of the poem. If such readings are at all correct, then it follows that *Julian and Maddalo* must on some level *espouse* the total relativism they attribute to it. Which must surely mean that it is not quite as relativist as they claim. For is a "total" refusal of objectivity not, after all, itself a claim of objectivity? And by disengaging the poem absolutely from a transcendent level of discourse, does not Professor Newey, too, promulgate something like the "total precedence" it is his intention, here,

to deny? I am not trying to pick holes in the relativist case just for the sake of it. That case, as I said earlier, is genuinely and obviously instructive. So, though, are its holes. In particular, they help us to pose some interesting questions which are germane both for *Julian and Maddalo* specifically, and for the general problem of reading we encountered earlier. Namely, how, on a purely narrative level, can *Julian and Maddalo* manage to espouse relativism? Or how, to put the contradiction in more theoretical terms, can this text articulate what must still remain a cacophony of clashing voices, none of them its own? How can Shelley write his way out of the prison house of language?

Kelvin Everest provides a good answer. Professor Everest's essay, entitled *Shelley's Doubles: An Approach to Julian and Maddalo* (*SR*, pp. 63-88) is the second of our exemplary readings of the poem. That the poem invites a materialist, political interpretation seems incontestable for Everest. He makes great play of the fact that Shelley had described *Julian and Maddalo,* in a contemporaneous letter, as using "a certain familiar style of language to express the actual way in which people talk with each other whom education and a certain refinement of sentiment have placed above the use of vulgar idioms" (*Letters*, ii, 108). It is also partly set, he notes, in something like a 'prison'. This is significant because in Shelley's poems, prisons are generally places where people of "education" and "refinement", so to speak, put people who they think are "vulgar". You might recall Lionel, the hero of *Rosalind and Helen,* being imprisoned in a dreary tower on account of his heretical activities, or Emilia Viviani, to whom *Epipsychidion* was addressed, being placed in a convent by her parents whilst they arranged a suitable marriage for her. "A victim of sexist prejudice and familial scheming" suggests Geoffrey Ward, "she lay at the mercy of many of the social evils which Shelley inveighed against at a theoretical level in his writing"[7]. The fact that Shelley saw nearly every woman he was ever acquainted with as a victim of sexist prejudice and familial scheming is beside the point. For this poet, prisons are often instruments of state repression, no matter how crowded they may be. Kelvin Everest is quite entitled to argue this. So, like Newey, we find Everest searching for some narratival unity amid the competing opinions and experiences which make up

[7]Geoffrey Ward, "Transforming Presence: Idealism in *Prometheus Unbound* and *Epipsychidion*", in *EOS*, pp. 191-212, 204.

Julian and Maddalo. But he does not find it by turning relativism into a sort of dogma, as Newey seems to. Everest's unity is found in the radical, and radically unrelative, politics of Shelley's prose.

It is worth our while to consider his argument in a little more depth. For Everest, the poem's Maniac is not really a maniac at all but a dissident poet. His miserable plight in fact symbolizes the extent to which poetry, creativity, indeed anything remotely subversive is suppressed by the gentlemanly society of Julian and Maddalo. Although Julian, particularly, feels himself inexplicably drawn to the Maniac, he remains ultimately too attached to that bourgeois society to be able to rescue him from his plight. By assenting to the Maniac's suppression though, Julian unconsciously and ironically accepts his own suppression too. For he also, Everest suggests, is a potential poet and it is his poetic sensibility which drew him to the Maniac in the first place: "The figure of the maniac" Everest argues, "may then emerge in the poem as the externalized representation of this buried poetic potential in Julian" (*SR*, 80). The Maniac, in other words, is Julian's ironic double. The irony does not end there, however, for Julian, too, is a double, and the double of yet another frustrated poet. Shelley himself.

This is perhaps the most ambitious stage of Everest's argument. The character of Julian, he contends, actually represents Shelley's fear of *himself*, as merely a passive product of his aristocratic background: "*Julian and Maddalo* dramatizes the dangers that operate to nullify the creative radical potential of a man whose way of life identifies him with the class against which his radical critique is directed" (*SR*, 87). Shelley's double, Julian, falls prey to these dangers, Everest argues, but Shelley himself escapes intact. "*Julian and Maddalo* overcomes the problem by building its rhetorical strategies upon it; so that the damaging limitations of Julian's situation emerge as the condition of his failure, in forming the materials of Shelley's poetic success" (*SR*, 87). Whether Shelley's success could be anything other than poetic, whether he could ever physically escape the stultifying influences of his background is, by the way, a question that Everest cautiously hedges. He briefly floats the idea that *Julian and Maddalo* may be the vehicle for actual "human progress" (*SR*, 68), yet seems in the end to decide that Shelley accepted the damaging limitations of his real

situation, if never of his ideal, poetic one. The conclusion to *Shelley's Doubles* finds Shelley making the best of a bad lot, then. If *Julian and Maddalo* cannot engineer actual change, it suggests, then at least it may force some "change in consciousness" (*SR*, 68) among its readers.

There is clearly much to admire in Everest's account. Firstly, though, we must see how he answers the sort of questions that emerge from Vincent Newey's reading of the poem. Newey's reading, you will recall, championed the way in which *Julian and Maddalo* relativizes all philosophical stances. We did not argue, in response, that this case was fallacious, for indeed it is obviously accurate in many key respects. But we *did* argue that, in order to make it good, Newey must acknowledge that the poem contains at least one philosophical stance which has not been relativized. That its philosophical commitment to relativism itself, in other words, is absolute and objective. Newey is actually well aware of this contradiction, indeed even argues that it is not a contradiction at all. Ingenious though they are, however, those arguments remain unpersuasive. His concessions that the poem "does *construct* a coherent objective 'character'" and does create "*the effect* of objectivity" (*EOS*, 96) (stresses mine) manage, for me, to qualify themselves to death. So we asked again the question that Newey never quite answers. How, namely, does Shelley manage to resolve this particular contradiction, how does he communicate relativism or inarticulacy as the objective meaning of his poem? We turned to Kelvin Everest this time. Everest is much more willing than Newey to concede that *Julian and Maddalo*'s relativism is only recognizable because it has been narratively framed by an objective, and so unrelative, author. "Shelley quite manifestly stands beyond his gentlemanly creations," he contends "and places them for us within the limitations that prevent them from recognizing themselves in the maniac" (*SR*, 86). Untainted by relativism, Everest argues, a very radical Shelley hides behind his characters, emerging only to reveal for us the uniform banality in all their relative opinions and interpretations. By openly granting *Julian and Maddalo* this measure of ironic distance, or narrative detachment, from the relative voices of its characters, Everest resolves the contradiction which plagues Newey's reading of the poem. But unfortunately, his reading has problems of its own.

His modish depiction of Shelley's radicalism as implicit and ironic is the first of these problems. It is certainly true that, in places, *Julian and Maddalo* is more reminiscent of a contemporary novel than a Romantic poem. Its celebrated ending is one such place: "How did it end? 'And was this not enough? / They met - they parted' - 'Child is there no more?' / 'Something within that interval which bore / the stamp of *why* they parted, *how* they met" (*Julian and Maddalo*, 607-610). The way in which Julian's ceaseless questions echo our own questions as readers, here, might now be called metafictional. Equally, the way in which the poem refuses to answer those questions, and exposes their narratival assumptions, might now be called post-modern: "...-but the cold world shall not know" (617). If we add to such tactics the equally modish relativism described by Newey, and ironic detachment discovered by Everest, then we may have gone some way towards explaining *Julian and Maddalo*'s still-rising critical stock. But for all that uncanny modernity, we would do well to remember that Shelley is still a Romantic poet, and so still in many ways an enemy of relativism, detachment, and all the other things modern critics praise about *Julian and Maddalo.* Thus the brand of radicalism hailed by Everest seems unnecessarily furtive from a poet who, in *Laon and Cythna* and *The Masque of Anarchy* at least, was prepared to shout his political opinions from the rooftops. Likewise, the absence of a positive vision of what could be is puzzling from a poet who, Everest himself acknowledges, was usually happy to champion the ideal. All this adds up to another problem, then, and one which I'm not sure even Everest can resolve. He can tell us, expertly, how *Julian and Maddalo* manages to make its relativism meaningful, through irony, detachment and so on. What he does not explain is *why* it ever needs such cloak-and-dagger tactics in the first place. For Shelley to narrativize, or ironize, his characters' isolation in the prison of society, in other words, it follows that the poem's narrative cannot wholly reside in those characters or their society. Yet if *Julian and Maddalo* really can reside in just such a liberating better station, the fact that it *chooses* to rest in dark estates and cold worlds is all the more perverse.

Examples of chosen, even happy, prisons do abound in Romantic literature, from Coleridge's *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison* to Byron's *Prisoner of Chillon.* No doubt there are convincing psychological explanations for these choices, in which the prison would assume the status of a retreat, a place of safety, rather than a place of confinement. Victor Brombert advances some of these in his lively essay *The Happy*

Prison: A Recurring Romantic Metaphor[8]. But I would like to suggest a different interpretation. St John of the Cross's mystical treatise *The Dark Night of the Soul* is also concerned with *topoi* of confinement and release. Writing penetratingly about John's mystical journey Alain Cugno says "Perfection has taught him his inner emptiness, so he has learnt, not merely his nothingness, but his basic (and liberating) dependence resulting from this. But how can dependence be liberating? it may be asked. Because it is produced by the free gift of our being. Our being (the fact that we exist) has no definable origin - it has been given to us. Given. Our being is dependent because we do not make ourselves. But *being* is freedom itself"[9]. For St John, then, freedom is to be found *in* dependency, in confinement, and not, as seems more normal today, in the release from confinement. Casually paradoxical assertions of this kind are the standard idiom of John's texts, and so quite understandably incur the suspicions of those who do not share his convictions. But while we should not accept the above maxim on its own terms, we *should* acknowledge, warily, that it does provide an unexpected and perhaps illuminating response to the question we just asked. Namely, if there is a constructive alternative to what the Preface to *The Cenci* calls "sad reality" (*SPW*, 274-275), then why doesn't *Julian and Maddalo* enact it? St John, I think, would see this as a self-fulfilling, and therefore a self-problematizing, problem. The assumptions by which it exists, in other words, are also those which resist its potential answer. John did not think there was an alternative to sad reality, so Shelley's failure to act upon such an alternative would not be significant or even a 'failure' for him. He dismissed ideals, dreams of what could be on earth, as merely beguiling fictions. This did not make him a cynic, or a materialist, of course. Reality, for John, was God, and everything that was not real, like ideals, simply got in the way of God. As Alain Cugno concludes his study of the Poet's thinking upon this subject: "The perfect man thus discovers that he has received himself as a free gift, so that for him all is grace"[10]

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[8]In *Romanticism: Vistas, Instances, Continuities*, eds. David Thorburn and Geoffrey Hartman (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 62-83.

[9]Alain Cugno, *St.John of the Cross: The Life and Thought of a Christian Mystic*, trans. Barbara Wall (London and Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1982), 61.

[10]Cugno (1982), 61.

The paradoxically liberating view of imprisonment taken by St John of the Cross is useful to us in several ways. Firstly, it demonstrates that the apparent dilemmas of *Julian and Maddalo*, so closely adhered to by Everest, Newey *et al*, do not automatically recommend themselves to every other reader. Freedom doesn't necessarily mean the release from dependence. Prisons aren't necessarily bad places to be. This alternative will have consequences, not only for *Julian and Maddalo* and *Epipsychidion*, but for the question we posed at the beginning of this chapter about reading generally. The question, namely, of the relationship between the disseminative readings envisaged by Roland Barthes and the recuperative readings eulogized by Fredric Jameson. Barthes and Jameson characterized that relationship, we saw, as one of mutual imprisonment; perhaps St John, with his markedly less melodramatic opinion of prisons, can offer a more positive view. But this view can only come at a later stage; first we must consider *Julian and Maddalo* on its own terms. We shall do so with the following premise in mind. While *Julian and Maddalo* is centred in a prison and the flight from it, it may be that Shelley's poetic authority is most emphatic when, like St John's, it is in the thrall of the limitations such prisons place upon it. Given this premise, we may now project a reading which ponders limitations, like the Maniac's bell-tower or Emily's convent room, not as prisons for dissident poets, but as dynamic energies in themselves.

(ii)

Walter Bliss Carnochan writes a history of just these sorts of prisons in his book *Confinements and Flight*. "Prisons are real" he says, "but we characteristically think of them as standing metaphors of existence: to talk of the 'basic prison metaphor' is to show how smoothly, here, reality slips over into the service of representation - and how, by the same token, we think of mental states as real

confinements"[11]. Carnochan goes on to show how confinements are also characterized by solitude, and the loss of communication. Surveying an illustration of oakum pickers at the Middlesex House of Correction in 1862, he saw "chilling tributes to Victorian efficiency and the gospel of work. They are still more chilling emblems of lives shut off from other lives in permanent silent solitude"[12]. It is easy, perhaps too easy, to read many prisons (and especially Shelley's) as just such chilling tributes to social orthodoxy. But Carnochan reminds us that the quotidian prison image equally and just as potently supplies religious believers with a symbol for the human condition. Indeed the notion that the soul is imprisoned in the body or that the body is imprisoned in the world are commonplace in the Gnostic, Christian and Neo-Platonic traditions. This dual status reminds us, again, of a contradiction in commonly accepted interpretations of *Julian and Maddalo* and specifically the character of the Maniac. It is active in this extract from Kelvin Everest's reading of the poem. Taking issue with Donald Davies's "bewildering indentification [sic] of civilizing virtues and values with 'the habit of gentlemen'" Everest contends that "It may be suggested that this identification is something that the whole movement of *Julian and Maddalo* is directed against, in its presentation of Julian's creative, 'poetic' potential as frozen within his quiescent commitment to the manner of a repressive and repressed dominant social group. The figure of the maniac may then emerge in the poem as the externalized representation of this buried poetic potential in Julian, a potential tragically unmediated for any audience and thus possessing the aspect of a tragic incoherence" (*SR*, 80).

Typically insightful though this is, I am once again struck by just how unShelleyan Everest's vocabulary is here. Buried, frozen and repressed potentials are not things we associate with poems which normally abound with billowing winds, flowing rivers and exploding volcanoes. The Maniac may well be someone who has been repressed by a dominant social group, as Everest suggests, but his failure to match this image of imprisonment with an equivalent image of freedom haunts his

[11]W.B. Carnochan, *Confinements and Flight: An Essay on English Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 3-4.

[12]Carnochan (1977), 4.

reading of the poem. What would society be like if it were not repressed and repressive? How would a liberated poetic potential differ from a frozen one? That Everest does not answer these questions is revealing, but not so revealing, I think, as why he does not answer them. Walter Carnochan is of help here. Upon his reading, remember, the literary prison does not simply have the material and social function that Everest attributes to it, but is also a metaphor for the universal and existential fallibility of mankind. If the Maniac's bell-tower were as much a metaphorical prison as a literal one, then I think that this would explain why Professor Everest does not, indeed can not, address the question of his escape. For where could someone in a prison like this escape to, except another universe, or another existence? There are reasons for thinking, in other words, that *Julian and Maddalo* is a poem for stoics rather than socialists.

Certainly other poems by Shelley fulfil Carnochan's requirements for a poetry of confinement. Like *Julian and Maddalo, Rosalind and Helen* and *Epipsychidion* clearly invoke literal images of social imprisonment, what Carnochan calls "chilling tributes to Victorian efficiency and the gospel of work". Lionel in *Rosalind and Helen* becomes something of a political prisoner, we saw, while Emily in Epipsychidion is reduced, in Geoffrey Ward's words, to "an object of exchange in the social stakes" (*EOS*, 204). But those poems also invoke, even more clearly, the metaphorical images of existential imprisonment described by Carnochan. Poor Lionel, for instance, is already deteriorating before he ever sets foot in prison and declines even more quickly after he has been released. Emilia Viviani is not quite a cause for bleeding hearts either. Describing a visit Shelley and he paid to the bella contessa, Thomas Medwin writes "Her cheek was pale, too, as marble, owing to her confinement and want of air, *or perhaps to thought*" (stress mine)[13]. That melodramatic afterthought ensures that Emily is not seen as merely the victim of sexist prejudice or familial scheming. Like Carnochan's oakum pickers, her isolation extends far beyond the brick walls of her cell. But *Julian and Maddalo* remains, I think, Shelley's most striking depiction of metaphorical, existential imprisonment. The Maniac's incarceration ends, as

[13]Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), 279.

Carnochan's criteria demand, in solitude and silence, a state which is ultimately seen as more expressive of the human condition than Julian and Maddalo's urbane conversations ever were. And what else is the poem's ending but a chilling emblem of what Carnochan calls "lives shut off from other lives in permanent silent solitude"? To truly test our theory that historical and political prisons must always have universal and existential implications, though, we must leave Carnochan behind us and turn to one of the most celebrated champions of the historical and political case, Michel Foucault.

The similarities between Foucault's account of insanity and confinement, in his epic *Madness and Civilisation*, and Shelley's, in *Julian and Maddalo*, are, at first sight, striking. In a way, both Foucault and Shelley seek to offer, in the former's words "A history not of psychiatry, but of madness itself, in its vivacity, before knowledge has even begun to close in on it"[14]. And if Everest is to be believed, then Shelley's poem anticipates the same kinds of rifts in bourgeois orthodoxy that Foucault himself would anatomize much later in *Madness and Civilisation*. We will consider some of the problems raised by both these accounts presently; but first let us hear what the madmen have to say:

> It is not immaterial that madmen were included in the proscription of idleness. From its origin, they would have their place beside the poor, deserving or not, and the idle, voluntary or not. Like them they would be suspect to the rules of forced labour...In the workshop in which they were interned, they distinguished themselves by their inability to work and to follow the rhythms of collective life. The necessity, discovered in the eighteenth century, to provide a special régime for the insane, and the great crisis of confinement that shortly preceded the Revolution, are linked to the experience of madness available in the universal necessity of labour. Men did not wait until the seventeenth century to 'shut up' the mad, but it was in this period that they began to 'confine' or 'intern' them, along with an entire population with whom their kinship was recognized. Until the Renaissance, the sensibility to madness was linked to the presence of imaginary transcendences. In the Classical age, for the first time, madness was perceived through a condemnation of idleness and in a social immanence guaranteed by the

[14]Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), vii.

> community of labour. This community acquired an ethical power of segregation, which permitted it to eject, as into another world, all forms of social uselessness. It was in this *other world*, encircled by the sacred powers of labour, that madness would assume the status we now attribute to it. If there is, in Classical madness, something which refers elsewhere, and to *other things*, it is no longer because the madman comes from the world of the irrational and bears its stigmata; rather it is because he crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic.[15]

Julian and Maddalo was written at the end of what Foucault calls above the Classical age or *episteme* of madness. So could we read the poem as an episode in the history of that great confinement? Readings like that must fit the following bill, perhaps. Firstly, a character, Maddalo being the safest bet, must be seen as the representative of an exclusive ruling class, or what Foucault above describes as the community of labour. Secondly, another character, usually the Maniac, must be seen as the representative of some sort of liberative potential, be it sexual, as Foucault might insist, or poetic and political as Kelvin Everest contends. Finally, the bourgeois type must be seen to confine this liberative potential, which is explicit in the Maniac and implicit in himself. So is it possible to make a case for Maddalo enslaving the Maniac in this way?

Well, Maddalo certainly does seem to embody the actions and rhetoric of an urbane and gentlemanly class. Equally, he monopolizes the most obvious forms of freedom in the poem: he is rich and powerful, his palace is, one supposes, imposing and spacious, he rides, he sails, he goes to Armenia, and so on. The 'Maniac', on the other hand, exists in at least quasi-subjection. We presume that his name/status are not self-imposed. And whilst he has voluntarily abandoned his old lifestyle in favour of Foucaultian "social uselessness" he is brought to the Bell-Tower by no less than the Venetian police. So far so good, then. But all this makes *Julian and Maddalo* sound as if were *A Philosophical View of*...Italy. And readers of all political persuasions might agree that this is not a very promising account of what is now one of Shelley's most admired poems.

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[15]Foucault (1967), 57-58.

There are good reasons, in other words, for finding Foucaultian interpretations of Maddalo and the Maniac's relationship to be rather one-dimensional. It is at once obvious, for instance, that Maddalo, like Julian, is in some way, bound to the Maniac. And that if this bind does not necessarily confine the Count, then it does at least start to encroach upon his own freedom. A revealing example of this encroachment emerges in the following conversation with Julian:

> he had no cash or land
> Remaining, - the police had brought him here -
> Some fancy took him and he would not bear
> Removal; so I fitted up for him
> Those rooms beside the sea, to please his whim,
> And sent him busts and books and urns for flowers,
> Which had adorned his life in happier hours,
> And instruments of music - you may guess
> A stranger could do little more or less
> For one so gentle and unfortunate; (249-258)

Maddalo is evidently disturbed by the 'Maniac's' condition and seeks to "please his whim" by refurbishing his rooms with the trappings of his former lifestyle. It is a generous gesture for someone who although not a stranger, seems never to have been much more than an acquaintance, "I knew one like you / Who to this city came some months ago / With whom I argued in this sort, and he / Is now gone mad, - and so he answered me - / Poor fellow!" (195-199). If the Preface is to be believed, such generosity for those outside his immediate milieu is not typical of Maddalo: "Count Maddalo is a Venetian nobleman of antient [sic] family and of great fortune, who, without mixing much in the society of his countrymen, resides chiefly at his magnificent palace in that city" (*SPP*, 112). Maddalo's inexplicable sympathy for the Maniac tends to undermine a Foucaultian reading of their relationship, then. It is hard to see the Count as victimizing the poor character when he is in fact his benefactor, and has, ironically, entered his 'service': "So I fitted up for him / These rooms beside the sea, to please his whim,". But if Maddalo is a funny sort of jailer, then the Maniac is an even odder prisoner. If he really is a representation of 'the people', poetry and all things subversive, for instance, then why do Julian and Maddalo both instantly recognize him as a member of their own class? "'Of his sad

history / I know but this,' said Maddalo: 'he came / To Venice a dejected man, and fame / Said he was wealthy, or he had been so;" (231-234). It may be true that "the loss of fortune wrought him woe" (235), but a member of the bourgeoisie who has fallen on hard times is still not a member of the proletariat. At least Julian does not seem to think so: "he had store / Of friends and fortune once, as we could guess / From his nice habits and his gentleness;" (534-536).

It is ultimately impossible, then, to read *Julian and Maddalo* as evidencing what Foucault calls "the ethical power of segregation". So how can we read it? The beginning of the poem tells us how Maddalo and Julian are drawn towards the Maniac; by the end, it has shown how they are rebuked, and effectively silenced, by his suffering. This is the simplest description of the poem, one with which most of its readers could agree. It might also be the most searching one. So putting the Maniac and his imprisonment to one side for the moment, let us pause over Julian and Maddalo's own ordeal. Unlike the Maniac, they are never literally imprisoned, of course. But after meeting him, it does become apparent that the freedoms they once enjoyed have ironically become a sort of sentence to which they are now consigned. Julian's whimsical desire for solitude at the beginning of the poem, "I love all waste / And solitary places; where we taste / The pleasure of believing what we see / Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be" (14-17) is fulfilled, in much more chastened form, as his isolation at its end. Likewise, Maddalo's heroic explorations of foreign lands end up looking more like flights from home: "But Maddalo was travelling far away / Among the mountains of Armenia. / His dog was dead..." (586-587). And as we said, his urbane conversations with Julian, with their pretension to a sort of perfect articulacy, "happy, high, majestical" (173), are ultimately humbled by the Maniac's far more compelling inarticulacies. Pointed though this rebuke is, I am afraid I cannot agree with Kelvin Everest's suggestion that it is targeted at the urbane Julian and Maddalo alone, and so, ultimately, at the gentlemanly status their urbanity indicates. For why then would Maddalo's daughter, whose way of talking is not urbane, but admirably neutral, feel it almost as strongly as her father and his friend? "The daughter is a positive and hopeful but silent figure in the poem" (*SR*, 86) Everest quite rightly tells us, but perhaps we need to ask why this poem silences its positive and hopeful speakers as well as its negative and repressed ones: "'And was this not

enough? / They met - they parted' - 'Child is there no more?'" (607-608). I think the answer is that the Maniac silences, not just the communications of a particular class, but human communication *per se.*

Our reading of the poem communicates just, and only, this. *Julian and Maddalo,* to press one of Carnochan's distinctions into service, prefers metaphorical prisons to literal ones. Although social and political prisons are real enough for Shelley, he characteristically thinks of them as standing metaphors for existence; for lives shut off from other lives in permanent silent solitude. Lionel's deterioration and death are only tenuously connected to his literal imprisonment. Emilia Viviani's isolation owes as much "to thought" as to her confinement in St Anna's Convent. And while the Maniac may well "with the poor and trampled sit and weep, / Following the captive to his dungeon deep;" that captivity is more like "a nerve o'er which do creep / the else unfelt oppressions *of this earth*" (447-450) (stress mine). By the end of the poem, not merely the Maniac, but all its characters have come to realize that they are in a prison of this earth, of existence itself. Perhaps imprisonment is too strong a word for Julian and Maddalo's condition but, as the poem progresses, we have seen how much more emphasis is surely placed on the limitations of their lives, their ageing, their loneliness, their inarticulacy, than their freedoms.

The sober emphasis Shelley places on such universal and existential predicaments also explains why we have found it so difficult to endorse the ironic, materialist reading of his poem advanced by Everest. He told us that Shelley "quite manifestly stands beyond his gentlemanly creations and places them for us within the limitations that prevent them from recognising themselves in the Maniac". But if this is true, if Shelley does stand beyond his gentlemanly creations in some position so privileged that he is able to recognise their limitations, then why does Everest not tell us precisely what this position is, where, in fact, Shelley does stand? The truth is that he cannot tell us, because to truly stand beyond Julian and Maddalo, Shelley would have to be free of two 'limiting gentlemanly creations' who do not in fact limit, but rather protect and care for their ungentlemanly counterparts. He would have to be freer, in effect, than free and freeing people! In fact, he would not only have to stand somewhere beyond freedom, but also somewhere beyond hope, which is markedly present in another one of his 'limited creations', namely, Maddalo's daughter. The

fact is that Shelley does not and can not stand beyond his limited, gentlemanly creations, because they are not simply gentlemen or even, in Maddalo's daughter's case, simply men. They are humans. So if they are limited, it is not because they are being subservient to the demands of their particular class or sex, but because they are being human. And not even Shelley, I think, wants to stand beyond humanity, however limited it is by its own existence. The dark estates and cold worlds of *Julian and Maddalo* are still preferable to some infinitely more ideal, yet infinitely more inhuman "better station".

Indeed it is the *absence* of human freedoms of any sort, I think, which gives *Julian and Maddalo* its haunting power, its poetic freedom. The same is true for *Epipsychidion*. Readers of that poem constantly have to remind themselves that Emily is imprisoned at all. She is exuberant, superabundant, free: "Thou Moon beyond the clouds! Thou living Form / Among the Dead! Thou Star above the Storm! / Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror! (*Epipsychidion*, 27-29). But this freedom is achieved without ever physically leaving her convent room. If anyone is constrained in *Epipsychidion* it is the physically free Shelley, a constraint that the poem magnificently articulates: "I measure / The world of fancies, seeking one like thee, / And find - alas! mine own infirmity." (69-71). Such paradoxical equations of imprisonment with freedom, and freedom with imprisonment, are already familiar to us in this chapter. "Our being is dependent because we do not make ourselves" Alain Cugno wrote of St John of the Cross, "But *being* is freedom itself". Mysticism also provides a possible answer to a question that has been puzzling us throughout this discussion. How, namely, can Shelley articulate the inarticulacy of his characters without reducing the violence of their inarticulacy, or turning it into something other than itself?

By choosing to see Julian and Maddalo's inarticulacy as simply a failing of the class to which they belong, and so capable of being articulated by someone from a superior class, Kelvin Everest falls, I think, into these last traps. But does a mystical view avoid them? *Julian and Maddalo* does not narrativize the incarceration of one social class by another, this view suggests. On the contrary, its prisons are open to all. But the question can be asked even more strongly of us in that case, namely, how are we made to know that *all* Shelley's characters are imprisoned? The advantage of Everest's terribly contextualized prison-house of language is that at least it does allow

room for another context, another language, which might be able "to rehabilitate this language, to use it in the communication of ideas to which it is inherently resistant" (*SR*, 74). But if *Julian and Maddalo*'s prison-house of language is not exclusive to a certain social or political context, being more a feature of human activity *per se*, then the language of another such context will not be able to unlock its door. So it is clear that if Shelley does use mysticism to unlock *Julian and Maddalo*'s prison, if it is used to articulate the language of inarticulacy, then it cannot do so by rehabilitating that inarticulacy, or escaping it, as Everest suggests. These options are not available. A third possibility suggests itself, though, and this is simply to *accept* one's imprisonment in the prison-house of language. For mystics this is not a failure, because as we know, the acceptance of imprisonment is paradoxically a form of freedom in mystical thought. Thus to accept one's imprisonment in the prison-house of language may not be just to accept the impossibility of articulacy but to make the very *absence* of articulacy conspicuous. So *Julian and Maddalo*'s project, we must speculate, may not be to write the language of madness itself, but rather the archaeology of its silence.

The advantages of such a project, taken on its own terms, are plain to see. An archaeology of silence avoids the narratival contradictions into which more straightforward articulations, or rehabilitations, of inarticulacy have stumbled. It does not "stand beyond" its subject, in other words, but works inside it. It does not seek to turn that subject into something else but to better understand what makes it itself. Before embracing this project wholeheartedly, though, I want to consider its structural, as well as its narratival, implications. One reason for doing this is that the possibility of an archaeology of silence was first floated by a structuralist critic, Michel Foucault again. Another is that it was then called into very serious question by Jacques Derrida, in his essay *Cogito and the History of Madness*. For these reasons, we need to consider, as briefly as possible, Foucault's project and Derrida's critique. Only then can we return to *Julian and Maddalo*.

In the Preface to *Madness and Civilisation*, Foucault explains, and refines, his notion of letting madness speak for itself:

> In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman: on the one hand, the man of reason delegates the physician to madness, thereby authorising a relation only

> through the abstract universality of the disease; on the other, the man of reason communicates with society only by the intermediary of an equally abstract reason which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity. As for a common language, there is no such thing; or rather, there is no such thing any longer; the constitution of madness as a mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, affords the evidence of a broken dialogue, posits the separation as already effected, and thrusts into oblivion all those who stammered imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between reason and madness is made. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason *about* madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence. I have not tried to write the history of that language, but rather the archaeology of that silence.[16]

It is perfectly understandable that Foucault would not want to write a history of madness, given that the discipline of history is part of that discourse, of reason and of meaning, which excluded madness in the first place. But Derrida has problems, too, with Foucault's real aspiration, which is to write an archaeology of madness's exclusion, or of the silence which indicates that exclusion. Firstly, it is not clear to him why the discipline of archaeology should be any less indebted to the discourse of reason than history is. And secondly, as Roy Boyne excitedly notes, "The silence of madness is brimful with meaning! How do we know that this absence of communication is so significant? We can know this only if the significance is somehow communicated to us. It must, in some way, be documented. The silence must be signified in such a way that we can read its significance. But what could be the language of such signs? Would it not have to be the language of reason?"[17]. Derrida makes the same point in his own, typically forensic, way: "Without taking into account that all the signs which allegedly serve as indices of the origin of this silence and of this stifled speech, and as indices of everything that has made madness an interrupted and forbidden, that is, arrested, discourse - all these signs and documents are borrowed, without exception, from the juridicial province of

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[16]Foucault (1967), x-xi.

[17]Roy Boyne, *Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 56.

interdiction"[18]. Foucault's archaeology of silence remains implicitly committed, then, to this province of interdiction or, in simpler terms, to the discourse of reason. And the trouble with the discourse of reason, as Foucault himself admits, is that it is not a discourse at all, but a monologue. Foucault falls into the simple trap, Derrida argues, of thinking that he can reach out and into madness by means of the very thing that had excluded it in the first place. This thought, says Derrida in all seriousness, is the "*maddest* aspect"[19] of *Madness and Civilisation*. *Cogito and the History of Madness* is clearly a powerful critique of Foucault's archaeology of silence, then; but what lessons can we learn from it for our own critique of Shelley's?

Several. Firstly, there is the fact that Derrida asks, in a structural way, what is by now a very familiar narratival question for us. The question of how a writer can articulate inarticulacy or, as Derrida submits, sanitize madness for his reader without making these things something other than themselves. Newey, Everest and Foucault all try to answer this question, with varying degrees of success. Everest frames *Julian and Maddalo* around the question of Shelley's political motives; Newey does not frame it at all, which itself becomes a sort of frame. Foucault gives an account of the historical necessities underlying the segregation of the mad and the silencing of madness. But all three, upon Derrida's reading, inevitably domesticate, and sanitize, the various madnesses they see before them. "To say madness without expelling it into objectivity is to let it say itself. But madness is what by essence cannot be said; it is the 'absence of the work' as Foucault profoundly says"[20]. Foucault's failure to realize that the silence of madness cannot be articulated by either history or archaeology has equally profound implications for us.

Our reading of *Julian and Maddalo* sought, just like *Madness and Civilisation*, to uncover, to dig up, meaningful silences. The meanings of lives shut off from other lives, as we put it, in permanent silent solitude. We may have been less eager than Foucault to offer a historical or political account of those suppressed voices, and so, too, the suggestion that they could also be historically or politically liberated. But siting their significance in mystical and existential notions of imprisonment, as we

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[18]Derrida (1978), 35.

[19]Derrida (1978), 34.

[20]Derrida (1978), 43.

did, still prompts serious questions. How can we ever be sure that this silence is significant, meaningful? That it is not a suppressed sound, in other words, but merely the absence of sound? Well, we might reply, as we have already begun to do, that Shelley signifies this suppressed silence for us, particularly in *Julian and Maddalo*'s enigmatic final lines "I urged and questioned still, she told me how / All happened - but the cold world shall not know" (616-617). But a simple problem emerges, upon Derrida's reading, with this account. If Shelley signifies, or better, *articulates*, that silence for us then how can it still be silence, which must be what cannot be said, what is not Shelley? In fact, how could his signification be anything other than a stifling, a silencing, of silence? "But, first of all, is there a history of silence?" Derrida asks. "Further, is not an archaeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organized language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax, a work? Would not the archaeology of silence be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the *repetition*, in the most irreducibly ambiguous meaning of the word, of the act perpetrated against madness - and be so at the very moment when this act is denounced?"[21].

So Derrida revives, in a structural context, a contradiction that the archaeology of silence once appeared to resolve. But the articulation of inarticulacy is not merely a contradiction in this context, it seems to be an actual *crime*. It is the repetition of an act which he revealingly describes as being "perpetrated" against madness. The crime itself, of course, is to confine or imprison the *other*. Before trying to respond to Derrida's accusation, though, it is well that we know exactly what he means by confinement and imprisonment in this context. What is the Derridaean prison-house? Two probable, and probably inseparable, levels of meaning present themselves. One level is spatio-temporal, perhaps, signifying the historical, political and ethical implications of this sort of imprisonment. The charges against us jailers, on this level, might be one of intolerance, xenophobia or, as Derrida himself puts it, totalitarianism[22]. Another level, the level on which Foucault chose to take Derrida's remarks, is rhetorical or textual. "Derrida feels that the text must be relentlessly 'deconstructed'", writes Peter Flaherty, summarizing Foucault's view, "so that its network of 'traces' can be better exposed as trapped within the 'prison-house' of

[21]Derrida (1978), 35.

[22]Derrida (1978), 57.

logocentricism"[23]. So for Derrida, it seems, the logocentred text also constitutes a form of imprisonment. In terms of our own larger discussion, this view of imprisonment is the more significant. For it seems to place Derrida in sympathy with Roland Barthes and his thoughts on the question of textuality and imprisonment, sketched at the beginning of this chapter. Barthes, you will recall, described the absence of fixed meanings as a liberation of literature; he fiercely opposed Fredric Jameson, who suggested that the absence of such meanings in fact produced the prison-house of language. We ended our consideration of Barthes and Jameson by asking whether mysticism could provide a more benign version of their relationship than either seemed willing to offer themselves. But Derrida, through his debate with Foucault, seems to offer the most vehement opposition to that endeavour. Even the most apparently permissive logocentric readings are coercive, he seems to imply; even Shelley's most sympathetic representations of silent, solitary lives are just another way of shutting them off.

If this were really Derrida's view then we would be as well to stop our mystical reading of *Julian and Maddalo* right here. But in fact he is not nearly as uncompromising as Foucault and Flaherty suggest. In a 1981 interview, he rejected the widespread misunderstanding that reads in post-structuralist thought "a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language...and other stupidities of that sort". By rejecting the maxims that had come to typify an opposition in post-structuralist thought, between the euphoric textuality of Barthes and himself on the one hand, and the nostalgic subjectivity of Jameson on the other, Derrida brings into view a more benign relationship. "To distance oneself from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying there is *nothing* beyond language"[24]. Mysticism, this thesis has suggested, actually performs a very similar role to deconstruction in this regard. The works of Pseudo-Denys challenge and complicate the habitual theological structures of reference, while the works of St John of the Cross find odd complicities between the commonly opposed states of imprisonment

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[23]Peter Flaherty, "(Con)textual Contest: Derrida and Foucault on Madness and the Cartesian Subject", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 16, (1986), 157-175.

[24]Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana Press, 1987), 144.

and freedom. But these projects do not end up by saying that there is no God, on the one hand, or that freedom is simply a fiction, on the other. Like Derrida, Denys and John reject absolute interpretations of the deconstructionist enterprise. Turning back to *Julian and Maddalo,* and its archaeology of silence, we will try to reflect this spirit of flexibility and compromise. In Shelley circles, perhaps, it is epitomized by this passage from Tetreault's *The Poetry of Life.* "Neither the imagination of the poet nor that of the reader is completely 'free' - both are caught in what Fredric Jameson calls 'the prison house of language' where we not so much possess a language but are possessed by it. Though freedom of consciousness may be a bourgeois illusion, that does not mean that we cannot achieve a certain authenticity through testing the rules that language imposes on us and perhaps from time to time pushing outward its envelope of limitation. It is in just such a struggle with the limits of language that Shelley is engaged as a writer, and in which he invites his reader to join[25]. If *Julian and Maddalo's* language is a prison, then perhaps it is an *open* prison.

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In the celebrated passage below, Julian finally chooses, even welcomes, a silence that Maddalo and he had long sought to resist:

> Ask me no more, but let the silent years
> Be closed and ceared over their memory
> As yon mute marble where the corpses lie.'
> I urged and questioned still, she told me how
> All happened - but the cold world shall not know. (613-17)

"What can be stated unequivocally" writes Michael O'Neill, "is that the suspended, withheld quality of the conclusion is impressively communicated through Shelley's

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[25]Tetreault (1987), 9.

language, a considerable achievement from a writer often thought of as hurrying towards certainties"[26]. O'Neill is rather more in love with relativism than Shelley's poetry is, I fear, and his reading suffers, like Newey's, from an eagerness to make unequivocal statements about its tendency to equivocate. His depiction of its ending as both "suspended, withheld" is weirdly brilliant, though. In an earlier passage, he elaborates a little. "It is an open-ended effect; yet if the entire ending is open in one sense (nothing is resolved), it is closed in another (nothing is revealed)"[27]. The opposition O'Neill describes here is familiar to us in other forms. We could just as easily say, remembering our discussion of *Madness and Civilisation*, that the poem's ending is both absent and silent. Absence suggests that the omission of meaning is insignificant, silence that it is significant, even intentional. Or, remembering the question we asked about reading generally at the beginning of this chapter, we could say that its ending is both structurally disseminative and recuperative. The suspended, open-ended play of meanings, that is one side of this equation, recalls Barthes; while the clenched, meaningful silence, that is the other, brings to mind no-one so much as Jameson. In the last two sections, we have mapped out these different oppositions and pondered, without much success, how to resolve them. O'Neill, though, suggests that not only does *Julian and Maddalo* support all these different sorts of oppositions but that, within it, they are weirdly unopposed. For as the above statement implies, there is no question of the reader *choosing* between its disseminative and recuperative, absent and silent or open and closed endings. Rather he becomes aware that these endings co-exist peacefully, if paradoxically, within the poem itself. I would like to explore this paradoxical co-existence of oppositions a little more deeply. So below, I continue my mystical interpretation of the poem's ending. Before concluding, though, I will contrast this seemingly closed, silent and recuperative interpretation with an open, absent, disseminative interpretation. Totally opposed in theory, my aim is to see whether these interpretations are also opposed in practice.

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[26]O'Neill (1989), 71.

[27]O'Neill (1989), 71.

Take, firstly, those deceptively rich last two lines: "I urged and questioned still, she told me how / All happened - but the cold world shall not know". The justification Julian gives for his silence here, that the outside world is cold, sits uneasily with our previous knowledge of him. For you would never really describe Julian and Maddalo's world as *warm*. Its physical coldness, in particular, is unrelenting. The first evening is "cheerful but cold" (34), the next morning is "rainy, cold and dim" (141), elements from which the Maniac's apartment offers no relief: "the ooze and wind / Rushed through an open casement, and did sway / His hair, and starred it with the brackish spray;" (275-277). More importantly, though, Julian and Maddalo's world is emotionally frozen as well. Their willingness to exploit real human suffering for rhetorical advantage betrays, to Richard Cronin, a certain frostiness of character[28]. Their emotional thaw, too, may be less complete than some think. While their argument is "quite forgot" (520) upon visiting the Maniac, the sense of detachment it produced is not, quite. Of course both look more sympathetically on the Maniac's suffering than they had before, but both remain just onlookers: "Stealing his accents from the envious wind / Unseen" (297-298). Sympathetic or unsympathetic, their presence makes no difference to the Maniac. He never knows they are there.

So the distinction that Julian implies in those last two lines, between his own passions and the public's indifference, seems paradoxical. Still more so is the fact that the poem's readers, who are very far from indifferent, should be implied as belonging to that cold world. Our exclusion from Julian and Maddalo's circle rankles rather less than our inclusion in this one. Michael O'Neill has argued that we readers are actually left somewhere *between* Julian and the cold unknowing world, but if we are, it feels like a very cold, unknowing between[29]. Julian's charge of coldness remains a surprising one, though. Taken in the sense of incomprehension or, worse, indifference, it seems particularly unjust, trumped-up. But in another sense, this coldness is colder than either incomprehension or indifference. Coming so quickly after "yon mute marble where their corpses lie" (615), it still retains, I think,

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[28]Cronin (1981), 120.

[29]O'Neill (1989), 72.

something of that line's funereal chill. The life of the cold world, our life, is actually a sort of death, it seems to imply. This implication, given the sort of character who draws it, is once again bewildering. After all it is *Julian* who is consumed by his past, whose future is superfluous, whose eyes are aged, cheeks wrinkled and voice silenced. So surely it is he, and Maddalo, who are consigned to a living death, not us? Objections like this are futile, though, in the face of that remorseless *fait accompli*: "but the cold world shall not know". There is no longer any question of asking why we have been excluded, of banging on the door. The door has already been closed. The poem is already over.

Exclusion has its consolations, however. Chief among these is a rueful admiration for the excluder. One cannot help here but applaud the ingenuity of an author who, in one half-line, can completely subvert our accumulated judgements of his characters, and of their relation to ourselves. Carefully encouraged by Shelley, we had come to judge Julian and Maddalo as cold, ageing, confined, even dying in comparison to ourselves. But in that last half-line, we are shocked to find that Julian judges *us* in exactly these terms. His accusation of coldness is much more compelling than ours, I have suggested, because it claims an authority which we readers do not have the time, let alone the knowledge, to dispute: "I urged and questioned still, *she told me how / All happened* - but the cold world shall not know" (stress mine). That accusation is unanswerable, literally so, given that the poem ends immediately after it has been made. So we are forced to accept its paradoxical logic. Our warmth is really coldness; our freedom really confinement; our speech is silence, and our life, death. Crucially, I think, the opposite is also the case. What we thought was Julian and Maddalo's coldness must actually be warmth. Their incarceration in the prison-house of humanity must ultimately be a form of freedom. Their silence is the most articulate speech. And their lonely deaths, the gateway to life.

These paradoxical inversions are forced upon us not merely by the brutal decisiveness of the poem's ending, but also by its much-vaunted "ripples of suggestion, hinting at some ultimate revelation"[30]. As the keeper of a secret we wish we knew, the decrepit and deathly Julian is scrutinized, resented, envied - in short,

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[30]O'Neill (1989), 72.

privileged - by the poem's readers as utterly vital. For mystical readers like us, though, these inversions are not as paradoxical as they seem. "Our being is dependent because we do not make ourselves" St John of the Cross wrote, "But *being* is freedom itself". Faith inverts his every notion of confinement and flight. Sanjuanist inversions of this order predominate in Romantic literature. Byron's *Prisoner of Chillon* admits that "These heavy walls to me have grown / A hermitage" (377-378), while his *Sonnet on Chillon* still more frankly proclaims "Chillon! Thy Prison is a holy place, / And thy sad floor an altar..." (9-10)[31]. *Julian and Maddalo* chronicles Shelley's own gradual realization, I think, that the human tragedy of imprisonment may also be a mystical opportunity: "And those are his sweet strains which charm the weight / From madmen's chains, and make this Hell appear / A heaven of sacred silence, hushed to hear" (259-261). This is Maddalo's view of the Maniac, reminding us, in his Byronic way, of the *Chillon* poems. But for once the very unByronic, very Shelleyan, Julian does not dissent from it: "Nay, this was kind of you - he had no claim, / As the world says" (262-263).

A heaven *of*, rather than beyond, silence also offers a solution to the narratival dilemma we have been wrestling with throughout this chapter. Mysticism enables Shelley to perceive Julian and Maddalo's imprisonments, to archaeologize their silences, in other words, *without* standing beyond them. For it is the often quite understandable desire that the poet *should* "stand beyond", the prison-house of his poem that most confounds other solutions to this dilemma. Kelvin Everest gives way to this desire, we saw, without fully considering the question of what could lie "beyond" this poem, what could be freer than this prison. The fact that *no* human state actually lies beyond *Julian and Maddalo* is testament, I think, to just how much more compellingly the poem envisages confinement than escape. Granted, *Prometheus Unbound* is a more obvious example of this compulsion. In that poem, bondage exists only in order to be heroically defied. The Rock is an image of liberation *in potentia,* in other words. But *Prometheus* is not Shelley's only way of finding heroism in chains. For there is a heroic defiance of a different sort in Julian's "but the cold world shall not know". Not a Promethean defiance of bondage, but a mystical defiance of release.

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[31]Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-1993), iv, 3, 16. See also Victor Brombert's discussion of the *Chillon* poems, in eds. Thorburn and Hartman (1973), 68-69.

Julian and Maddalo are utterly, miserably, but in the end, *proudly* trapped. Shelley should have been proud, too. His poem is liberated, not by planning ideal escapes, as he might have preferred, but by imagining and uncovering the extent of imprisonment. Rather than speak what it knows to be "unspeakable" (526), that is, *Julian and Maddalo* makes a heaven of sacred silence.

This brings to an end our mystical reading of the poem's ending. It is a very closed, silent, recuperative reading, to use the vocabulary we developed earlier. All that remains for us now is to contrast it with a correspondingly open, absent, disseminative interpretation. What would this sort of interpretation look like, and what implications would it have for our prior mystical one? I will try to answer these questions, as briefly as possible, before concluding our discussion of *Julian and Maddalo*. Some open interpretations choose to emphasize the poem's thematic ambiguity, or its narratival inconclusiveness. Vincent Newey and Michael O'Neill's interpretations are of this order. "*Julian and Maddalo* is a poem that recognizes the powerful human impulse to construct patterns of understanding and value that offer coherent versions of reality;" O'Neill submits, "but it is, too, a work that brings out with vigilant scepticism the provisionality of these patterns"[32]. Our impulse to see the Maniac's death as a source of mystical life may not be a pattern of reality that the poem entirely rejects, this interpretation might hold, but it is not one that it obviously sustains, either. Other 'open' interpretations of *Julian and Maddalo* are not just thematically ambiguous or narratively inconclusive but structurally indecidable. These deconstructionist interpretations are even more sceptical of mystical patterns of reality. For even if the Maniac's 'death' really did herald his passage to new 'life', this passage would not be a profound, mystical journey from one essential state of being to another, deconstructionists would argue, but just a lateral, structural, shift from one signifier to another.

We are getting ahead of ourselves, though. The only really essential death in the deconstructionist *oeuvre,* of course, is the death of the author. Mention of his demise almost inevitably calls to mind Roland Barthes's essay, but a more circumspect obituary exists, in Jacques Derrida's labyrinthine text *Glas*. Considering

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[32]O'Neill (1989), 63.

his own role as author and signatory of that text, Derrida writes "the 'signature' event carries my death in that event"[33]. To sign a text, in Derrida's book, is to declare oneself an absent presence. "This does not, however, indicate merely a provisional absence, when one happens to be unable to stand by the text," writes Kevin Hart, "but a generalised absence, such as after one's death"[34]. The implications of this account are already familiar to us, but no less challenging for that. In reading *Julian and Maddalo* as mystical, we have appealed to someone outside the text who governs, or signs, our mystical interpretation of its meaning. But upon Derrida's reading, there is no authorial presence outside the text which can absolutely govern that text's meaning. The author's text is his or her tomb, upon which their signature is engraved. "*La signature tombe*", as Derrida famously puts it.

And yet there is also a tomb in our mystical recuperation of *Julian and Maddalo*: "Yet if thine aged eyes disdain to wet / Those wrinkled cheeks with youth's remembered tears, / Ask me no more, but let the silent years / Be closed and ceared over their memory / As yon mute marble where their corpses lie". Coincidence? Of course. The Maniac, whose tomb this is, is a character in the poem, not the poem's author. There is a coincidence here, too, though. For although the Maniac is only a character in the poem he is one who is privy to all its secrets, who struggles to detach himself from them, and who engages, self-consciously, in their articulation and determination: "How vain / Are words! I thought never to speak again, / Not even in secret, - not to my own heart - / But from my lips the unwilling accents start / And from my pen the words flow as I write, / Dazzling my eyes with scalding tears" (473-477). When Julian asks "How did it end?" and "Is there no more?" he turns into a fictionalized version of the poem's readership, we once said. But in verbal struggles like the above, though, the Maniac becomes a fictionalized version of its *author*. Which suggests a very interesting coincidence indeed. For fictionalization implies a measure of authorial control over fictions, a control which can be registered and recuperated by readers. Needless to say, deconstructionist texts like *The Death of the*

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[33]Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr, and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 19.

[34]Hart (1989), 19.

Author or *Glas* refute the possibility of this recuperation, that control. So it is interesting to note that *Julian and Maddalo*'s author dies a fictional death, so to speak, as well as a structural one. We might ponder, then, whether the fictional death of the Maniac has any bearings on the structural death of Shelley. The answer to this question, needless to say, will help us to answer our much larger question, of the relationship between disseminative and recuperative, or open and closed, readings as a whole.

In purely fictional terms, the Maniac's tragic death brings the realization that his relationship with the mysterious Lady and the suffering that resulted from it, will never now be explained for us. Only an abyss of futile interpretations and speculations remain: "And having stamped this canker on his youth /. She had abandoned him - And how much more / Might be his woe, we guessed not -" (532-534). In structural terms, of course, the death of the author is not a tragedy or even an accident. It is an essential component of language and thus an unavoidable effect of signification. But tragedy aside, the structural implications of the death of Shelley are actually not that different from the fictional implications of the death of the Maniac. *Julian and Maddalo*'s ending remains pretty much as we found it before. There may no longer be a proper authorial presence to govern interpretations of the poem's meaning, but then its ending leaves the reader in an interpretive, speculative abyss anyway: "And how much more / Might be his woe we guessed not". The conclusion is already decentred, by the Maniac's death, and by Julian's refusal to disclose its significance. Thus *Julian and Maddalo*'s ending can, I think, be said to conflate fictional and structural interpretations of its meaning. Or, accelerating that statement to its logical conclusion, to conflate both recuperative and disseminative, open and closed, reading strategies.

Thus we can confirm Michael O'Neill's paradoxical conclusion, that "if the entire ending is open in one sense (nothing is resolved), it is closed in another (nothing is revealed)". But, unlike O'Neill, we can also go some way towards explaining *why* this paradoxical state of affairs should exist. Why, to return to our own terms, a mystical recuperation of *Julian and Maddalo*'s conclusion should not be so adversely affected by its own dissemination. For we are now in a position to see that these open and closed senses are really only two ways of interpreting the same

thing. Whether structurally unresolved or mystically unrevealed, *Julian and Maddalo*'s conclusion negates the possibility of its absolute determination. The cold world shall not know. The *nature* of this negation is, granted, open to interpretation. Upon a deconstructionist view, the text of *Julian and Maddalo* is, in Roland Barthes's words, "a neutral, composite, oblique space, where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost"[35]. Absolute determination of this space is simply impossible. Upon a mystical view, *Julian and Maddalo*'s text may well be another example of what Timothy Webb, in his essay about *Prometheus Unbound*, calls "an energy unquenched or a potential not realized, perhaps not even recognized" (*SR*, 57). But the negative predicates described by Webb here are not the "negative where all identity is lost" from Barthes's text. Unlike Barthes, they do not signal that absolute determination is impossible, merely that it is inscrutable. Unlike Barthes, too, they do not herald an eternal indeterminacy or an infinite negativity, but a very finite one where "if we peel away the veil of seeming negativity we will find the potentiality slumbering within" (*SR*, 57). Barthes would be sceptical, of course, that this slumbering potentiality could be any more determinate than the mystical negatives which veil it. He would doubt, in other words, that *Julian and Maddalo* could really reveal "how / All happened" and thus control absolutely its own meaning. This revelation, too, he would feel, would have to be negated, deconstructed. But the fact that deconstructionist and mystical readings of *Julian and Maddalo* might ultimately part company should not be allowed to obscure the extent to which they initially come together.

This chapter has tried to illuminate that extent. We need only now recapitulate its arguments. Shelley's poem tries to persuade us that it apprehends a heaven of sacred silence, our mystical reading argued, a hush that exposes the hollow centre of Julian and Maddalo's brilliant talk. Exposing the hollow centre of all talk, the poem's deconstruction connives with this exposure to a certain extent. Connivance may seem unlikely, but no other word adequately captures the role played by deconstruction at this juncture. It cannot really be said to bankrupt *Julian and Maddalo*'s thematic interests, for the simple reason that bankruptcy *is* one of the themes of Shelley's poem. Bankruptcy of language, knowledge and all the human

[35] Barthes (1977), 148.

spheres: "'And such,' - he cried - 'is our mortality / And this must be the emblem and the sign / Of what should be eternal and divine!'" (120-122). Of course the emblems and signs of which Maddalo's famous speech is composed are vulnerable to deconstruction. But does the deconstruction of that speech really discredit it? A little later on Maddalo predicts the coming of the "night of death", which will "severeth / Our memory from itself, and us from all / We sought and yet were baffled!'" (128-130). Far from discrediting this prediction, deconstruction might even be said to vindicate it. For what else will deconstruction do but sever us from what we seek, which is Maddalo, Julian, and *Julian and Maddalo*? What else will the night of the death of the author be, but a hastening of the night of death itself?

It is in moments like this that *Julian and Maddalo*'s different oppositions coalesce. Where the similarities between recuperation and dissemination, absence and silence or deconstruction and mysticism become clearer than the differences. Where we can imbue, with Fredric Jameson, a little affective, human significance into linguistic structures while avoiding, like Roland Barthes, the worst accusations of logocentricism and humanism. "Though freedom of consciousness may be a bourgeois illusion," Ronald Tetreault wrote, "that does not mean that we cannot achieve a certain authenticity through testing the rules that language imposes on us and perhaps from time to time pushing outward its envelope of limitation". *Julian and Maddalo* struggles to make us feel that the limitations which language imposes upon it are only part of a much larger range of human limitations, imposed by God. It may be that it never ultimately succeeds. That even its most strenuous efforts to signify this life beyond language, such as "the heaven of sacred silence" or the "night of death", end up being incorporated into language. But from time to time, as Tetreault says, Shelley pushes outward language's envelope of limitation. And it is in these moments, when Shelley manages to signify a reality imprisoned by more important things than language, that *Julian and Maddalo* finds its freedom.

Chapter Five

Dying Words:
The Triumph of Life

The fear that there are no new words strikes most writers occasionally, but it struck Shelley regularly and with a rare force. "We do not attend sufficiently to what passes within ourselves" he once wrote, "We combine words, combined a thousand times before. In our minds, we assume entire opinions; and in the expression of those opinions, entire phrases when we would philosophize. Our whole style of expression and sentiment is infected with the tritest plagiarisms. Our words are dead, our thoughts are cold and borrowed" (*TOP*, 184). Shelley wrote those words when he was twenty-one, before he had written *Alastor*, before he had written any of the hugely original poems for which he is now justly admired. But his anxiety that it had all been said before did not diminish even when faced with this abundant evidence that it had not. That anxiety surfaces again at the end of his career in a famous passage from *A Defence of Poetry*. The language of poetry, he wrote, is "vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for proportions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse" (*SPP*, 482). That a twenty-one year old poet who has written nothing of consequence should feel daunted by the past is understandable, perhaps, but that a twenty-eight year old poet, apparently at the height of his creative powers, should feel likewise is rather less so. We can begin this final chapter by asking the following simple question, then. Why does such an effortlessly original poet as the later Shelley live in constant fear of unoriginality?

A different passage from *A Defence of Poetry* helps us to answer this question. In an extended celebration of the power of poetry, Shelley writes "It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. It justifies that bold and true word of Tasso - *Non merita nome*

di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta" (*SPP*, 505-506). We already know a little about Shelley's fear of unoriginality but this passage is interesting because it also contains his ambitious aesthetic of poetic originality. We might expect that, as a radical thinker, Shelley would not put too much stock in traditions, but his denigration of them here is surprisingly vociferous. Traditional forms of expression are deadening and destructive, he suggests, and the poet must break from them completely if he is to be truly creative. Like God, he must create *ex nihilo*, literally out of nothing. Now Shelley's fear of poetic unoriginality largely descends, I think, from this uncompromising conception of originality. Freeing poetry completely from the influence of its past is an extremely difficult, many would say impossible, task to accomplish. Certainly, Shelley's own poems do not even try to accomplish it. *The Triumph of Life*, for example, contains echoes of Ezekiel, Lucretius, Petrarch, Dante, Calderón, Milton, Goethe, Wordsworth and a popular Brescian air of the day, amongst others. So what is by any other standard a massively original poem is, by Shelley's own standard, an unoriginal one. This does not justify the poet's fear of unoriginality, but it goes some way towards explaining it.

Reading *The Triumph of Life* again, in the knowledge of that fear, is an intriguing prospect. For Shelley's last poem has often been thought to deal with the loss of poetic originality and individuality, albeit in a rather generalized way. *The Triumph of Life* "is a poem about poets and poetry, their relation to one another and to the light and life of everyday, as well as to another life and light contrasting to that of everyday" writes Harold Bloom[1]. But Shelley's own fears about being constrained by the light and life of everyday perhaps introduce a personal dimension into his poem, which is missing from Bloom's rather abstract account of it. *The Triumph of Life* may not be about just any old poets and poetry, in other words, but about this poet and his poetry. It may not just be about the creative constraints placed upon Rousseau, for example, but also the creative constraints that Shelley feared were placed upon himself, in writing about Rousseau and in writing generally. These are the possibilities that I want to explore in this chapter which I have entitled, with

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[1]Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 227.

apologies to Christopher Ricks, "Dying Words"[2]. *The Triumph of Life* is Shelley's dying words, of course, because it is the last major poem the poet attempted before his death. But it is also his dying words because in it, I shall argue, Shelley addresses, and ultimately comes to terms with, his fear that language itself is dying. Mysticism will help us to see exactly how he does this.

(ii)

Searching for Shelley-doubles in *The Triumph of Life* is a tantalizing prospect. Did Shelley put something of his own character into the character of the Poet, for instance, or the players in Life's pageant, or even into Rousseau himself? The first of these possibilities, at least, is not incredible. The defiantly optimistic Poet is Shelleyan, reminding us of similar poet-figures in *Epipsychidion*, *Adonais*, *Laon and Cythna* and *Julian and Maddalo*. But whether we can also recognize aspects of Shelley's own personality in the poem's ambivalent portrayal of Rousseau, say, is a more fraught question. The ambivalence in that portrait is almost immediately obvious. "(O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)" (*The Triumph of Life*, 181) is the Poet's reaction when he is first confronted by the character, which could be interpreted as an expression of pity for what Rousseau once was or of horror at what he now is. But which interpretation is correct? The answer to this question could be connected to the question of how much Shelley himself finally sympathizes or empathizes with the character and his creative predicament. For this reason I would like to consider these differing interpretations, and the evidence on which both can call, in a little more detail in this section. The most persuasive argument for the Poet pitying Rousseau, which suggests that we should consider that interpretation first, must be his unwillingness to outrightly condemn the character, either here or at any point in the

[2]Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

character's lengthy ensuing narrative. To see why the Poet cannot bring himself to condemn him, we need only take a look at Rousseau's narrative.

"'Their power was given / But to destroy,' replied the leader - 'I / Am one of those who have created, even / If it be but a world of agony.'" (292-295). To anyone other than a Shelleyan Poet, the distinction Rousseau draws here would be no distinction at all. What does it matter that his power was creative when even he admits that it had the same destructive consequences as the inherited power of the political and ecclesiastical leaders of the Roman Empire and medieval Europe? But the fact that Rousseau feels able to distinguish himself in this way, and the fact that the Poet lets him get away with doing so, shows us once again just how attractive the prospect of creative originality is to Shelley. Being a creator, it seems, means never having to say you're sorry. And so Rousseau is allowed to take pride in the fact that he, alone, managed to break free of inherited expressions of power and create the world anew, even if it did turn out to be a world of agony. His belief in the essential deadness of traditional forms of expression comes through even when he is supposedly praising them. Classical lyrics, for example, subdue the emotions both of the poet who writes them and the audience who reads them, according to Rousseau: "See the great bards of old who inly quelled / The passions which they sung, as by their strain / May well be known: their living melody / Tempers its own contagion to the vein / Of those who are infected with it" (274-278). The contrast with his own writing is ostensibly self-deprecating but it has all the swagger of a boast: "I / Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain! - /'And so my words were seeds of misery" (279-280). "The classical achievement (or failing, if you are with the still-unchastened Rousseau in regard anyway) is that their words contrived to be more impersonal" writes Bloom, noting the ambivalence[3]. It is a failing that Rousseau goes to great pains (both his own and others) to avoid.

So in many ways, then, Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life* embodies the uncompromising creative aesthetic described by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* and this is why the poem is as sympathetic as it is towards him. The philosopher's words attain (or attained) the marvellous state of life that the poet was striving for with his

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[3]Bloom (1959), 261.

own. And if the price of their life was the death of many of the people who read them, then Shelley might have been tempted to think that this was a price worth paying. Better destructive creativity, perhaps, than no creativity at all. His Poet certainly seems to think this: "'And so my words were seeds of misery - / Even as the deeds of others.' -'Not as theirs' / I said" (280-282). Yet Shelley himself was rather more ambivalent about Rousseau and the ideal of creative freedom that he represents than he made out, I think. He worried about its destructive effects in a way that Rousseau does not; and this worry creates a sense of detachment from the character which is present as a possibility at the beginning of the poem, and which we shall see becoming more and more certain as it goes on. But although Shelley worried about his creative ideal becoming a bloody reality, he also worried about it not becoming reality at all and this worry explains the degree of pride that we have suggested *The Triumph of Life* takes in Rousseau's triumphs. It might also explain what pity it feels at his ultimate defeat, a defeat Shelley himself knew only too well. For if Rousseau's words are fleetingly alive, in the way that Shelley hoped his own could be, they are ultimately cold and dead, in the way that the poet feared his own always were.

That death is vividly depicted, I think, in the following exchange between the Poet and the increasingly chastened Rousseau:

> 'Let them pass' -
> I cried - 'the world and its mysterious doom
>
> 'Is not so much more glorious than it was
> That I desire to worship those who drew
> New figures on its false and fragile glass
>
> 'As the old faded.' - 'Figures ever new
> Rise on the bubble, paint them how you may;
> We have but thrown, as those before us threw,
>
> "Our shadows on it as it past away. (243-251)

The act of writing or drawing is literally a way of leaving a mark and metaphorically a way of leaving *one's* mark. It is the distinctive record of a distinctive consciousness, in other words. But the above passage clearly appears to challenge this concept of

writing. It is not simply that the inscriptions left by Life's historical players are transient, although they are. For even while they are there, they are strangely impersonal, being only "figures" in the Poet's account, instead of the rather more distinctive "signatures", for instance. This sense of impersonality is heightened by Rousseau's reply to the Poet. His description of the historical players themselves, as "Figures ever new", strikingly echoes the Poet's description of their writings, as "New figures". This echo blurs the distinction between writers and their writing. Individual personalities are reduced to the level of language, and a cold, transient language at that. But what is the significance of this reduction?

J. Hillis Miller has given one, typically deft, answer. A card-carrying deconstructionist, Miller is particularly adept at reducing seemingly independent acts of consciousness to forms of writing. *The Triumph of Life* both allegorizes this reduction in scenes like the above, Miller argues, and actually exemplifies it for the reader. This last point is true because the poem is itself a form of writing, Miller finds, a new figure drawn by Shelley upon Life's false and fragile glass which will never be able to express its author's original thoughts: "However hard the reader tries to stay awake, his brain becomes as sand. It is washed clean, or almost clean, by a great wave of light. The reader then gets the next vision, the next writing on the screen or shore or bubble of the next shadowy figure, the next sand-script replacing that just effaced. The new writing is inscribed in palimpsest over what has almost been effaced, as each episode replaces the last in *The Triumph of Life*, or as this essay is written over the text of the poem and repeats its serial structure"[4]. I agree with Miller that *The Triumph of Life* does allegorize the loss of a creative, originating author but his scarcely concealed exhilaration at the "inexhaustible" and "unending"[5] creative opportunities which that loss grants him as a reader is derived more from his own theoretical beliefs than from any such inference in Shelley's poem. The drawing of "New figures" upon Life's false and fragile glass may well be an unending process, for instance, but I am less sure that it is an inexhaustible one. Where Miller finds an

[4]J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 178.

[5]Miller (1985), 167, 179.

increasing number of figurative possibilities in that process, as his description of it as "serial" in the above passage perhaps indicates, the poem itself finds only an increasing uniformity and deadness. The process of drawing new figures where the old have faded is not a progression or a succession, but simply an unwitting repetition of the old figures. The sort of unconscious borrowing of a cold, dead language that Shelley feared he himself engaged in as a younger poet. "We do not attend sufficiently to what passes within ourselves" he had written, "We combine words, combined a thousand times before". The scene we have been discussing allegorizes this failure to "attend sufficiently", as Shelley puts it, and the loss of authorial creativity and originality that ensues from it. That this is a genuine loss and not, as its deconstructionist readers often seem to think, a cause for celebration, is evident from the irretrievably sombre tone of Rousseau's narrative at this point. When he tells the Poet that it does not matter what he writes about the figures of history, for instance, he is not seeking consolation in the freedom of interpretation but recognizing, mournfully, that the death of language limits even this small freedom too: "paint them how *you may*" (stress mine).

So it is clear that if Rousseau embodies Shelley's dream of poetry creating the universe "anew after it has been annihilated by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration", he also enacts the poet's nightmare that the poetry of his own time will simply not be able to perform this deed. As a creator who is ultimately forced to trace over old figures rather than draw totally new ones, the character allegorizes Shelley's doubts about his own creativity. Indeed those doubts are allegorically confirmed in the terrible concluding passages of Rousseau's narrative. "But all like bubbles on an eddying flood / Fell into the same track at last and were / 'Borne onward. - I among the multitude / Was swept" (458-460). Having gone to such great pains to distinguish himself from the multitude, as "one of those who have created", there is a special horror for Rousseau in finding himself left amongst them in the end. The uniqueness he had so confidently asserted earlier on is now replaced by a more chastened recognition of his essential sameness: "me sweetest flowers delayed not long, / Me not the shadow nor the solitude, / 'Me not the falling stream's Lethean song, / Me, not the phantom of that early form / Which moved upon its motion,- but among / 'The thickest billows of the living storm / I plunged, and bared my bosom

to the clime / Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform" (461-468). The life which Rousseau is finally bound to lead is the one which poetry exists to create anew in *A Defence of Poetry*, except that here creativity is no longer possible. It has finally been annihilated by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration: "I became aware / 'Of whence those forms proceeded which thus stained / The track in which we moved; after brief space / From every form the beauty slowly waned, / 'From every firmest limb and fairest face / The strength and freshness fell like dust, and left / The action and the shape without the grace / Of life" (516-523).

What, crudely, Shelley *feels* about Rousseau's loss of creativity, as a creator himself, is something that I am trying to determine in this section. The character's fate so closely mirrors what the poet feared to be his own that it would hardly be surprising to detect some implication of sympathy for him or empathy with him in the poem, and I think we have. The Shelleyan Poet, we found, is certainly unwilling to condemn Rousseau and at one point in his narrative even goes out of his way to console him: "'And so my words were seeds of misery - / Even as the deeds of others.' - 'Not as theirs' / I said". That gesture of sympathy becomes more understandable as Rousseau's narrative continues. The excuses and recriminations of earlier give way, in the scenes cited in the paragraphs above, to a meek, and certainly more pitiable, acceptance of his fate. As real as this pity is, though, and for Shelley it is uncomfortably close to self-pity, something stops us and the poem from yielding to it entirely. Perhaps it first happens when the Shelleyan Poet recognizes that the mandrake Rousseau "Was indeed one of that deluded crew" (184) rather than someone like himself, or earlier when the crew themselves are said to be as "Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam" (46) and "Like moths by light attracted and repelled" (153), but at some point *The Triumph of Life* begins to alienate Rousseau from us, and in a way which no amount of pity we subsequently feel for the character can ever quite overcome.

The reasons for that alienation become clearer if we look once again at Rousseau's narrative. We noted earlier that Shelley grants the character a lot of time and space to tell his story, which could be interpreted as an act of generosity on his part, towards a kindred spirit, perhaps. But my own feeling is that if the Shelleyan Poet never outrightly condemns Rousseau it is not so much because he cannot bring

himself to do so as because he has no need to do so. The character's own blatantly self-serving narrative condemns him far more eloquently than the Poet ever could. And Shelley's poem carefully reveals the unreliability of that narrative without ever explicitly judging it. Its delusions are silently but duly noted. The practical differences between its numerous verbal distinctions collapse almost as soon as they are drawn: "'I / Am one of those who have created, *even* / 'If it be but a world of agony" (stress mine). The poem finds something admirable and yet terrible about that "even", I think, which acknowledges its tendentiousness but tends none the less. Rousseau does not want to apologize for the results of his creations, and Shelley does not want to make him, but he is always careful to imply that he has something to apologize for. "'If I have been extinguished, yet there rise / A thousand beacons from the sparks I bore.'" the character boasts, to which the Poet replies: "'And who are those chained to the car?'" (206-208). The question itself is innocent but cannily placed by Shelley because one of its answers exposes just how little Rousseau actually has to boast about. For amongst the thousand fires which he lit is the fire of the French Revolution, which in turn, the poem contends, led to the destructive reign of Napoleon. Gently, but insistently, the Poet's question reveals Rousseau's indirect responsibility for the horrors of Shelley's present. Timothy Clark would question this reading, but his suggestion that *The Triumph of Life* actually sees Napoleon as the "heir and the distorter of Rousseau's legacy"[6] is based more on a letter written by its author eight years previously than on the poem itself, in which the tyrant is quite clearly Rousseau's heir alone: "'Who is he with chin / Upon his breast and hands crost on his chain?' / '*The Child of a fierce hour*; he sought to win / 'The world, and lost all it did contain / Of greatness, in its hope destroyed" (215-219) (stress mine). Clearer still is the implication of that inheritance for Rousseau. Better no creativity at all, perhaps, than the creator of Bonaparte.

That it should be Rousseau's uncompromising creative aesthetic which finally alienates Shelley from the character is something of an irony. For as we know, that aesthetic is one which the poet himself expounded in theoretical essays like *A Defence of Poetry*. In *The Triumph of Life*, though, Shelley is confronted by the embodiment of

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[6]Clark (1989), 236.

his theory, and does not much like what he sees. He no longer recognizes himself, or anything like himself, in its blindly defiant visage: "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" (185-188). And for all his expressions of sadness at its defeat, "Struck to the heart by this sad pageantry" (176), we get little sense that this defeat has anything to do with him. Shelley's alienation from the things he describes is most obvious, however, if we consider much more closely *the ways* in which he describes them and this is what we shall do in the next section. For by distancing himself from Rousseau, and the exacting creative aesthetic that character represents, it is my contention that the poet is able to put his anxieties about his own creativity into a larger practical perspective. Poets do not always have to find new forms of expression to create the universe anew, he recognizes, but can work with the old ones, even the dead ones. Instead of shunning these dying words, *The Triumph of Life* meets them imaginatively, and triumphantly.

(iii)

"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". This was how William Hazlitt once stated the difference between himself and the author of *The Triumph of Life*. So it is strange to find, then, that his most famous remark upon that poem should apparently contradict this statement. "The poem entitled *The Triumph of Life*," he wrote "is in fact a new and terrific 'Dance of Death'"[7]. In seeing Shelley's poem as contributing to an artistic and literary tradition that originated in the middle ages, Hazlitt departs from his earlier view that its author was "the maker of his own poetry - out of nothing". Instead he aligns the poem much more closely with his own

[7]ed., Barcus (1975), 335, 342.

view of poetry as creating a world of its own out of "existing materials", a view which he had earlier contrasted with Shelley's. These discrepancies go unexplained in Hazlitt's account, but perhaps this chapter has been able to suggest a reason for them. To create poetry out of nothing was part of Shelley's aesthetic *theory*, to be sure, but I have been less sure than Hazlitt that he was ever able to put it into practice in his actual poetry. Indeed so disenchanted by this theory had he become by the time of *The Triumph of Life*, that I am uncertain he was even willing to practice it in that poem. In Shelley's last major work, as Hazlitt rightly detects, poetry is obviously created out of something rather than nothing. This section will explore the poem's imaginative use of what the critic intriguingly calls "existing materials" in a little more detail.

Numerous excellent studies of this kind are, of course, already in existence. That *The Triumph of Life* borrows and revises material from secondary sources has been axiomatic since Bloom first argued that the "triumphal procession of Life is a mockery, a diabolic *parody* of the triumphal procession of Ezekiel's Enthroned Man, Dante's Church, Revelation's and Milton's Christ, Blake's Divine Man (this last unknown to Shelley)" nearly forty years ago[8]. What follows will be largely in sympathy with arguments like these, but it also has a few reservations about them. Bloom and subsequent scholars certainly deserve our gratitude for pointing out that, despite his protestations to the contrary, Shelley can not and does not reject past sources out of hand. But to my own mind their suggestion that the poet can revise those sources 'just like that' still underestimates the degree to which Shelley's writing and indeed writing *per se* has been proved by the literary theory of intertextuality to be permanently submerged in the past. In the end, Shelley's originality is much harder won, I think, than Bloom and company are prepared to acknowledge. To give substance to these speculations, I would like to turn firstly, not to *The Triumph of Life* itself, but to a mystical poem which is surprisingly analogous to Shelley's, the *Spiritual Canticle* by St John of the Cross. Like Shelley, I shall argue, St John never succumbs to the illusion that you can simply banish old sources, or even revise them in his own way, yet still manages to secure originality for his poetry.

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[8]Bloom (1959), 244.

"All mystics, and Saint Teresa as much as any of them, complain of a want of new words (*nuevas palabras*) with which to praise the works of God as they experience these in spirit" Denis de Rougemont writes[9]. But like Shelley, St Teresa of Avila and her friend St John of the Cross, were frequently compelled to make do with a vast range of old words. The work of the latter in particular draws upon a number of different influences, of which only a few can be traced back to their original source. There is the popular influence of contemporary love songs and songs of rural life, for instance, the prosodic and pastoral influence of Garcilaso de la Vega and Renaissance Italy, the theological influence of the western mystical tradition, but perhaps most significantly of all the erotic and religious influence of Solomon's *Song of Songs*. St John regarded that literal celebration of human sexuality as an allegory written by Solomon on the subject of the quest of the soul for God and the mystical union with God. It is impossible to exaggerate the influence of the *Song of Songs* upon John's *Dark Night of the Soul* and especially upon his *Spiritual Canticle*. That work does not simply allude to Solomon's book, it lifts entire verses out of it. Yet while unable to find any precedent in literary history for one text being so completely suffused by another, Gerald Brenan notes a curious fact. "Milton's poetry is saturated with classical and biblical reminiscences" he writes, "yet these are brought in mainly as learned references to confirm the fact that he is writing at the end of a long and complex tradition. Eliot's quotations in *The Wasteland* are there to provide a contrast between the sordid present and the lost world of beauty and significance that lies in the past. San Juan's poem on the other hand rises out of another and distinct poetic plane, bearing a number of deeply suggestive yet elusive meanings with it. Yet in doing so its tone has been totally changed and sublimated"[10].

This is quite true, as anyone who has compared the *Song of Songs* and the *Spiritual Canticle* will know. Firstly, Solomon's song is an erotic poem concerning sexual love, whereas in St John's poem everything is pure and delicate, most of all the acts of the lovers. Secondly, the allegorical status of the sex in the *Song of Songs*

[9]de Rougemont (1956), 160-161.

[10]Gerald Brenan, *St John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 123.

is rather ambiguous, especially if we read it out of its Biblical context. If the sexual union of the lovers is supposed to signify something besides sex, in other words, it is not exactly clear what that is. But even without a knowledge of St John's accompanying commentaries, the allegory in the *Spiritual Canticle* is obvious. The betrothal of the bride and bridegroom unmistakeably signifies the spiritual union of the Christian and God. So for all its reliance upon the *Song of Songs*, the *Spiritual Canticle* still manages to become an original artistic creation in its own right. John manages this by translating, adapting but most often by wholly revising his irreverent source material to suit his own reverent purposes. Colin P. Thompson describes that revision process in more detail. "He was not interested in preserving the sequence of images he found in the *Song*," Thompson suggests, "but in the evocative quality of each, and where he thought it right he reshuffled them and altered them. Certainly his is a borrowed language, but he has made it his own, because he controls the images and re-directs their tremendous power into the channels he has prepared for them"[11]. Now this is all very interesting in itself, but how are the writings of a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic comparable to those of an early nineteenth-century Romantic poet?

Well it would be perfectly possible to argue that *The Triumph of Life* is a religious and even a mystical poem. The opposing argument to this one is still usually that Shelley retains his humanist credentials by indicting all those who fail to meet, in Kenneth Neill Cameron's words, an "absolute humanitarian standard"[12]. But the vision of human failure in what survives of this poem is so universal that it is difficult to see how it could emerge from any perspective within humanity. The humanitarian standards which would normally permit readers like Cameron to pass judgement upon the players in Life's pageant are always and also represented amongst those players, perhaps not in Gregory, Voltaire and Napoleon but surely in Plato, Aristotle and Kant. Perhaps if he had been able to complete *The Triumph of Life* Shelley would have gone on to establish "the sacred few who could not tame / Their

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[11]Colin P. Thompson, *The Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the Cántico Espiritual of San Juan de la Cruz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 69.

[12]Kenneth Neil Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 460.

spirits to the Conqueror" (128-129) as an honourable human alternative to the indignities of the common life, but there is nothing honourable about their flight in what exists of the poem and no hope that we could ever join them in their remote asylum: "but as soon / As they had touched the world with living flame / *Fled* back like eagles to *their native noon*" (130-131) (stresses mine). The only perspective which enables us to see the limitations in even the very best humanity has to offer is an extra-human or religious perspective, and this is the perspective from which *The Triumph of Life* is perforcedly written, I suspect. But rather than follow through this suspicion of *thematic* similarities between Shelley and the mystics, as I have done in earlier chapters, in this final one I would prefer to concentrate upon the *stylistic* similarities between them. For not only do the authors of *The Triumph of Life* and the *Spiritual Canticle* share an anxiety about the originality of their style, they also share a means of stylistically overcoming that anxiety.

"Certainly his is a borrowed language" Thompson wrote of St John of the Cross, "but he has made it his own, because he controls the images and re-directs their tremendous power into the channels he has prepared for them". As he became increasingly unwilling and unable to sustain his aesthetic of poetry as creating the universe anew, I think, so Shelley became more willing and more able to create from the old in the way that St John did in his poems. Implicitly, it may be that he had always created in this way, irrespective of his aesthetic theory, but it only becomes explicit, I believe, in the latter stages of his poetic career. Only then did he truly begin to acknowledge *to himself* that he could use "borrowed language" without being used by it. Others had done it before him, as the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* understood: "The Greek tragic writers, in selecting as their subject any portion of their national history or mythology, employed in their treatment of it a certain arbitrary discretion. They by no means conceived themselves bound to adhere to the common interpretation or to imitate in story as in title their rivals and predecessors. Such a system would have amounted to a resignation of those claims to preference over their competitors which incited the composition. The Agamemnonian story was exhibited on the Athenian theatre with as many variations as dramas. I have presumed to employ a similar licence" (*SPP*, 132). That late poems like *Prometheus Unbound* employ a great deal of artistic licence in their use of traditional imagery and verse forms is

a view that has been expounded far too frequently to require justification here. "Broadly, his procedure is to draw heavily upon Æschylus's play but to reassign the 'borrowings' and re-establish them in a contrary ethical and theological context so as to transform their meanings radically" writes Earl Wasserman of the famed lyrical drama[13]. In the same way, *Hellas* recruits Æschylus, Virgil, Sophocles, Euripides and Milton to the republican struggle in contemporary Greece, Wasserman argues, while *Adonais* adapts the Classical elegies of Bion and Moschus to mourn a contemporary poet. A somewhat less familiar and even more radical example of Shelley's increasing willingness to exploit what he would previously have considered to be dying words is the *Letter to Maria Gisbourne*, however, which entertains some of the deadest words of them all: clichés.

"To use a cliché is to take a risk" suggests Christopher Ricks in an essay upon those worn-out expressions, and a risk which poets who value the originality of their work often fear that they cannot afford to take. But can poets who also value an informal conversational idiom, as the author of the *Letter to Maria Gisbourne* patently does, afford not to take it? Without its liberal sprinkling of clichés, that charming celebration of friendship and intimacy might well have become inappropriately aloof and *outré*. The clichés used in the poem's description of Leigh Hunt, for example, help to endear us both to Hunt and to Shelley himself: "You will see Hunt - one of those happy souls / Who are the salt of the Earth, and without whom / This world would smell like what it is, a tomb" (*Letter to Maria Gisbourne*, 209-211). The risk in using optimistic clichés like "happy souls" and "the salt of the Earth", of course, is that while they make the feelings that the poem expresses more accessible, they also make them more banal or, indeed precisely more 'clichéd'. But the *Letter to Maria Gisbourne* never uses clichés in this unthinking way. The above passage in particular resists the invitation that clichés habitually extend to us, which is to hold something unknown or unpalatable at bay with a thoughtless phrase. Instead, the reasons why we do not want to think, the despair that unthinking optimism often tries but never quite manages to conceal, are penetratingly thought: "You will see Hunt - one of those happy souls / Who are the salt of the Earth, and without whom / This world

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[13]Wasserman (1971), 284.

would smell like *what it is*, a tomb" (stress mine). Shelley uses the very clichédness of the clichés here to unveil the melancholy mindset of those who use them. "To use a cliché is to take a risk" Ricks says. "But then nothing is more dangerous than playing safe"[14] he adds.

The main point to be drawn from all this, however, is simply that the *Letter to Maria Gisbourne* charts Shelley's increasing tendency to exploit different kinds of unoriginal writing for his own original purposes, a tendency which he shared with St John of the Cross. The means of this exploitation differs from poem to poem, but the end result is usually the same. Like the spirit of Adonais, Shelley's late poetry "Sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there, / All new successions to the forms they wear" (*Adonais*, 382-383). Of course I am far from being the first reader to argue this point. That accolade probably belongs to Harold Bloom, who arrives at a similar conclusion albeit by a psychological rather than a mystical route. In *Shelley's Mythmaking* and several subsequent books of poetic theory, Bloom develops his idea of Shelley as a poet who achieved originality by revising and, to use Bloom's distinctly Freudian vocabulary, repressing, the work of certain key precursors. The influence of those precursors is inescapable, but Shelley still manages to unconsciously protect his sense of imaginative independence by drastically distorting their poetry beyond his own conscious recognition. For Bloom, the last and greatest example of this distortion is *The Triumph of Life*, in which "Shelley struggles more with Wordsworth than with Milton, and the struggle is in one sense more successful, in that *The Triumph of Life* manages to transume the *Intimations* Ode in the way earlier Wordsworthian poems by Shelley could not, as a comparison of the *Triumph* with the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* would show"[15]. I cite Bloom's theory about *The Triumph of Life*'s relationship with its sources at this length simply because, Freudian nuances aside, it has proved remarkably influential. Many subsequent studies of that relationship have followed its line that Shelley's poem mostly obtains originality by revising those sources in a distinctive way, as we shall now see.

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[14]Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 362.

[15]Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 98.

While acknowledging the extent to which it is modelled upon *The Divine Comedy* and *The Triumph of Love*, for instance, Richard Cronin has argued that *The Triumph of Life* divests those models of their moral and ethical certitudes. Where Dante and Petrarch give us answers, crudely, Shelley's poem can only ask questions: "'Then, what is Life?' I said" (544). "*The Triumph of Life*, as we have it, is Shelley's most beautifully articulated expression of the watery chaos that alone sustains any constructed faith. It may seem that nothing could be more hostile to the ordered, definite worlds of Dante and Petrarch, but one is not conscious when reading *The Triumph of Life* of any fierce rounding on the poem's tradition. The certainties of Dante and Petrarch are dismantled, but the dismantling is achieved quietly, unaggressively"[16]. In an essay entitled "The Re-working of a Literary Genre: Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*", Miriam Allott concurs with Cronin: "Shelley's response to the most influential of his 'presiders' - Dante, Petrarch, Milton, Rousseau, and the Goethe of *Faust* - is finally one of oblique, largely dissenting, debate. He works with remarkable individuality within his chosen genre, forcing its disciplines to command a vision which is totally at variance with the basic assumptions of his major antecedents" (*EOS*, 253). And although his preferred interest is in the autonomy of Shelley's imaginings, Michael O'Neill finds some cause to agree with Allott: "*The Triumph of Life* reworks material from writings by a number of authors, including Ezekiel, Dante, Petrarch, Calderón, and Wordsworth" he writes. "Yet what is fascinating is the way so echoic a poem goes about its business as if its imaginings were primary"[17].

Bloom *et al* hardly need me to recommend their work. That much, if by no means all, of *The Triumph of Life*'s originality is dependent upon Shelley's ability to revise the poems of his precursors will not be seriously questioned here. After all, this is a chapter which has already compared Shelley to St John of the Cross, a poet who borrowed liberally from his own precursors but who "controls the images and re-directs their tremendous power into the channels he has prepared for them". Yet while I have freely acknowledged the merits of what we might christen the

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[16]Cronin (1981), 207.

[17]O'Neill (1989), 191.

'revisionary' case, you may recall me noting too that there must also be some reservations about it. These are not simply concerning Cronin and Allott's suggestion that *The Triumph of Life* rejects the religious assumptions of the Dantescan and Petrarchan tradition, although this is part of it. Allott, who contends that the poem revises the image of the triumphal procession to include simply "the accepted conventions of power and authority, the agents of 'blood and gold' who are Shelley's targets here as always" (*EOS*, 254), fails, like Kenneth Neill Cameron, to credit the many participants in that procession who are neither sort of agent. As I said earlier, the procession of Life actually includes every sort of person, of every sort of persuasion: "Old age and youth, manhood and infancy, / Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear" (52-53). Shelley's vision of the universality of human corruption is much closer both in form and intention to the medieval and Renaissance *contemptus mundi* than the 'revisionaries' admit. If and when it does depart from those sources, it is not because it has revised them, I think, but because it has updated them, attached them to a modern context. In this respect, Hazlitt was right to describe *The Triumph of Life* as "a new and terrific 'Dance of Death'". Shelley's poem remains authentically "Bosch-like" (*EOS*, 274), as even Allott concedes, but it empties Bosch of his animating colour and passion, leaving only the greyness and emotional numbness that characterizes modern and especially modernist visions of corruption. "The earth was grey with phantoms, and the air / Was peopled with dim forms" (482-483) Shelley writes of some, while others "Were lost in the white blaze" (490) and others still "like discoloured flakes of snow / On fairest bosoms and the sunniest hair / Fell" (511-513). As a numbed abstraction of suffering, *The Triumph of Life* even anticipates *Guernica.*

These are perhaps sufficiently specific reasons for doubting whether Shelley's poem can ever wholly revise its sources, then, but there is a far more compelling general reason for that doubt. We have already seen that, as far as their readings of *The Triumph of Life* go, Cronin, Allott and, to a much lesser degree, O'Neill have taken on board Harold Bloom's theory that Shelley mostly achieves originality by revising the poems of his precursors. But a different group of theorists have called into question even the fairly limited degree of originality with which the 'revisionaries' are concerned. I am referring, of course, to Julie Kristeva and Roland

Barthes and their post-structuralist concept of 'intertextuality'. The implications this concept holds for 'revisionary' readers of Shelley are best explained by Barthes himself: "any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognisable forms: the texts of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations" he writes. "Bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc. pass into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text. Intertextuality, the condition of any text whatsoever, cannot, of course, be reduced to a problem of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located, of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks" (stress mine)[18].

The disastrous implications of intertextuality for the general humanist notion of the author as the originator of textual meaning hardly need spelling out. Our interest is in its equally serious implications for the specific notion of authorial originality favoured by 'revisionary' Shelley scholars, which the above passage makes abundantly clear. For scholars like Bloom, Cronin and Allott, we have said, Shelley's originality depends mostly upon his ability to revise material from certain recognizable sources. But for Barthes, the significance of intertextuality clearly cannot be "reduced to a problem of sources or influences". Even if a poem like *The Triumph of Life* were able to revise and thus escape the influence of the texts of Dante Petrarch, and so on, it would still remain inescapably indebted to a multitude of other unnameable texts, linguistic, literary and cultural. In this light, the hint of a compromise in Barthes's remark that "Any text is a *new* tissue of past citations" (stress mine) seems rhetorical. For him, even revisions of quotations are quotations. Now if this is true, and of course only a great deal of reading around could ever persuade us that it is, then our reservations about 'revisionary' interpretations of *The Triumph of Life* will have been justified. For if all texts are going to turn out to be simply sites of an intersection of numberless other texts, then the idea that Shelley's poem could revise those texts in its own way must be as nearly as big an illusion as the idea that it could somehow banish them altogether.

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[18]Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text", in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young, trans. Ian McLeod (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 31-45, 39 (first publ. in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 11 (1973), 1014-1017).

Shelley himself appears to have shared Barthes's view of authorial originality as always and already transected by the multifarious texts of the culture into which he is born: The Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* argues that "Every man's mind is in this respect modified by all the objects of nature and art, by every word and every suggestion which he ever admitted to act upon his consciousness; it is the mirror upon which all forms are reflected, and in which they compose one form. Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors and musicians, are in one sense the creators and in another the creations of their age. From this subjection the loftiest do not escape" (*SPP*, 135). The intertextual subjection mournfully described by Shelley is in many ways a familiar one to readers of this thesis, which has spent much of its time trying to get the poet out of it. Our problem has been that although an authorial presence may be said to *institute* a text, it can never function as the *origin* of that text's significations. Reading Shelley negatively has provided a way around this difficulty because, crudely, the mystical presences such readings locate in Shelley's texts appear to be the only such presences that do not directly function as the origin of those texts' significations. The success of these readings will be pondered more fully in the *Conclusion*. But in the final section of this chapter I would like to consider if reading Shelley negatively might still enable us to rescue some degree of originality from the web of texts that comprise *The Triumph of Life*. It may be that Shelley's poem is unable to eschew or even revise those texts, but mysticism can suggest a way in which it can still revivify the dying words from which it is constituted.

(iv)

From what we have seen of mysticism so far in this chapter, this might seem unlikely. You will recall that the *Spiritual Canticle* by St John of the Cross was cited to support the view that while *The Triumph of Life* could never simply shun dying words, it could and did achieve originality by revising those words: "Certainly his

is a borrowed language but he has made it his own" Colin P. Thompson argued, "because he controls the images and re-directs their tremendous power into the channels he has prepared for them". But, as we have since seen, the emergence of intertextuality has rendered arguments like this increasingly redundant. Supporters of intertextuality would argue that even the texts that St John has supposedly made his own are still in some sense unoriginal. So far from helping us to extricate Shelley from the intertextual web, it must seem from what we have read of him thus far that St John cannot even extricate himself from that web. But reading his mystical poem again, my impression is that we have perhaps been underestimating the range of his responses to the problem of originality. St John of the Cross extracts some measure of originality from the web of texts that comprise the *Spiritual Canticle*, I think, without ever succumbing to the twin fantasies that he could either write a totally new text or revise the old ones so much that they become as good as new. Seeing precisely how John attains this measure of originality for the *Spiritual Canticle* might cast some light on Shelley's own struggle for originality in *The Triumph of Life*, so this is what we shall do.

I said earlier that the *Spiritual Canticle* is unmistakeably an allegory for mystical experience, but this was, if not an inaccurate, then perhaps a rather reductive description of what is actually a very elusive poem. Although not as ambiguous as the *Song of Songs*, for instance, many critics have noted a certain vagueness and mysteriousness at key moments in the *Spiritual Canticle* which liberates it from the sort of precise allegorical interpretation provided by St John in his commentaries. Indeed St John himself is at pains to stress that no commentary can wholly explain his poem and that no reader should feel bound to accept the explanations he offers for it. "I do not now think of expounding all the breadth and plenteousness embodied in the fertile spirit of love, for it would be ignorance to think that sayings of love understood mystically, such as those of the present stanzas, can be fairly explained by words of any kind" (*JC*, ii, 23). Reading St John's own commentaries upon those stanzas again it is easy to see what he means. Frequently more concerned with Biblical exegesis than with the poem ostensibly under discussion, they are detached for even an allegorical level of meaning. And even when allegorical meanings are provided they are not singular but often

multitudinous and seemingly conflicting[19]. St John's most poignant confessions of his difficulty in putting his mystical visions into words do not occur in his commentaries upon the *Spiritual Canticle,* however, but in the poem itself. "Through the *Cântico* runs a pervading sense of mystery. It is present in its meaning and its extraordinary structure" Thompson argues. "Through the mystery come hints of the inexpressible, for the poem itself confesses that some experiences are beyond the power even of poetry to capture. It can only hint at them, through the vaguest of paraphrases, or by a desperate attempt to pile up image upon image and thereby approach the unapproachable"[20].

Perhaps the best example of what Thompson calls "the pervading sense of mystery" is the haunting concluding stanzas of the *Spiritual Canticle,* in which the Beloved begins by beseeching her Lover to show her "The breathing of the air, / The song of the sweet philomel, / The grove and its beauty in the serene night, / With a flame that consumes and gives no pain. / For none saw it, / Neither did Aminadab appear, / And there was a rest from the siege, / And the cavalry came down at the sight of the waters" (*JC,* ii, 30). Nowhere in these lines is the exact nature of the union that the Beloved envisions defined. "For none saw it" we are told, but we are not told exactly what "it" is. There are lots of nouns and adjectives but there is no main verb, no action, no union of the Beloved and the Lover, just a succession of beautiful and vaguely familiar images. The reasons for their familiarity are perhaps worth exploring. The image of the breeze blowing almost inevitably has theological associations, through the wind/spirit ambiguity of the Greek *pneuma* and the Hebrew *ruah;* the sweet philomel singing and the beautiful grove in the serene night derive from the conventions of sixteenth century Spanish and Italian pastoral poetry; the

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[19]In fact St John of the Cross inherited the Judaeo-Christian tradition of Scriptural exegesis which accepted that the Bible could be interpreted in many mutually complementary ways. First came literal or historical exegesis, then the moral sense, then the allegorical and finally the anagogical or mystical. The eighty-six sermons on the *Song of Songs* by the Medieval mystic St Bernard of Clairvaux gave fresh impetus to the three non-literal forms of exposition, and St John follows this example. See St Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs,* trans. K. Walsh (Shannon: Indiana University Press, 1971).

[20]Thompson (1977), 116.

flame that consumes but gives no pain descends from the rhetoric of medieval courtly love poems, and the characters of Aminadab the enemy and his accompanying militia seem to have been introduced at this impossibly late stage of the poem for no better reason than the fact that they are also characters in the *Song of Songs*. Both Thompson and Gerald Brenan, for instance, believe that their last minute introduction contributes nothing to, and indeed almost destroys, the carefully created atmosphere of mystical peace and intimacy. Reading in this intertextual manner, then, it becomes clear that none of the images in these lines are entirely original. And neither are they particularly original revisions of unoriginal images. Far from taking liberties with his sources, in the case of Aminadab St John goes to great lengths to be faithful to them, even to the point of putting the success of his own poem in jeopardy. But while the extent to which intertextuality problematizes St John's originality in these ways should not be underestimated then neither should it be exaggerated, I think, because it is precisely by surrendering himself so completely to unoriginal imagery that the poet paradoxically manages to protect the originality of his mystical vision.

"So, even without a knowledge of the commentaries, it is clear enough from the poem itself that even when it has exhausted the limits of language it has not exhausted the experience which that language has been pressed into service to convey"[21] Thompson continues. That the images in the final lines of the *Spiritual Canticle* are exhausted is, as Thompson says, "clear enough", but the reasons for their exhaustion are slightly more obscure than he makes out. Some of those images were looking distinctly worn out, I think, before they were ever called upon to do the arduous job of expressing an inexpressible mystical vision. But far from endangering the uniqueness of that vision, as I said these unoriginal images paradoxically make it more safe. By using rather ordinary, conventional symbols like the breeze blowing and the nightingale singing to describe its extraordinary nature, for example, St John of the Cross makes the point that its nature is beyond verbal description much more directly than his use of less conventional images can. By allowing characters from the *Song of Songs*, like Aminadab and his horsemen to intrude into his poem, St John

[21]Thompson (1977), 116.

does not so much ruin the atmosphere of mystical intimacy, as Thompson and Brenan argue, as expose the illusion that a text, which is always liable to intrude and be intruded upon by other texts, can ever achieve such an intimacy. And by advertising the unoriginality and artificiality of his text in ways like this, I think, St John manages to create a conspicuous gap between it and the original mystical vision it purportedly describes. "Similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" writes Barthes in a remark that comes close to encapsulating my view of the mystic, "His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them"[22]. Mixing, countering, but never resting in unoriginal writings, St John of the Cross negatively signifies the originality of his mystical vision.

St John can be called an original writer, then, if only in the sense that originality is something that is significantly absent from the *Spiritual Canticle.* But can the absence of originality be seen to be equally meaningful in Shelley, and specifically, in *The Triumph of Life*? The answer to this question must surely help us to determine how far we can extricate that poem and its author from the intertextual web. To consider it, I would like to turn to the famous autobiographical passages of Rousseau's narrative. There are some general similarities between St John's struggle to describe the mystical visions in the *Spiritual Canticle* and Rousseau's struggle to describe the mysterious "shape all light" (352) here. Like St John, Rousseau can only hint at the elusive properties of that shape, through the vaguest of paraphrases, such as the phrase "shape all light" itself, or by a desperate attempt to pile up image upon image and thereby approach the unapproachable: "And her feet ever to the ceaseless song / 'Of leaves and winds and waves and birds and bees / And falling drops moved in a measure new / Yet sweet, as on the summer evening breeze / Up from the lake a shape of golden dew / Between two rocks, athwart the rising moon, / Dances i' the wind where eagle never flew" (375-381). But there are seeming differences from the *Spiritual Canticle* too. Only a stridently intertextual reader like

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[22]Barthes (1977), 147.

Barthes would profess to find *all* Shelley's images to be unoriginal images, or even revisions of unoriginal images, in the way that I have found St John's to be. It needs stressing that in passages such as the above, Shelley comes close to fulfilling the aesthetic dream of *A Defence of Poetry,* later so vilified by William Hazlitt: to create his own poetry, out of nothing. For one recent critic, at least, he actually succeeds in this aim. "The writing is, for the most part, impressively independent of sources and analogues; it seems to come out of nowhere but the poet's imagination"[23] writes Michael O'Neill, and in passages like the above it is easy to agree with him. But in some other passages from Rousseau's autobiography, *The Triumph of Life* is neither able to create a poetry of its own, as O'Neill suggests, nor even to significantly revise the poetry of its precursors. And it is in passages like these that Shelley's poem most resembles the *Spiritual Canticle.*

That Rousseau's autobiography, from the account of his awakening into a sublime landscape to his ultimate surrender to the chariot, stems largely from the poetry of one of its precursors has been argued by Bloom, for instance. Typically, his argument begins by suggesting that Shelley is able to revise and repress the poem of a precursor, in this case the *Intimations* Ode by Wordsworth: "Rousseau's vision describes a Wordsworthian process of imaginative rebirth or restoration, but a process that ends in a catastrophe. He awakens first into the earlier world of 'there was a time,' by way of a parody of the *Intimations* Ode. In this awakening, he still beholds the visible trace of a greater imaginative anteriority, 'a gentle trace / Of light diviner than the common Sun.' In the synaesthetic splendour of a 'confusing sense' he sees and hears 'A shape all light,' whom we may describe as a sublimating metaphor for everything that Wordsworth called 'nature'". Bloom's argument certainly seems to rebut Michael O'Neill's idea that *The Triumph of Life* comes "from nowhere but the poet's imagination" but this is not the only reason why I have quoted it at such length. For as that argument proceeds so Bloom also comes close to rebutting his own cherished idea that poets like Shelley could obtain originality by revising the work of poetic precursors like Wordsworth. For all its parodies and sublimations of the *Intimations* Ode, Bloom wonders, what does *The Triumph of Life*

[23]O'Neill (1989), 191.

ultimately say that is not already said by that Ode's: "At length the Man perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day" (*Intimations of Immortality* 75-76)[24]? "Very strong poet that he was, Shelley nevertheless had the wisdom and the sadness of knowing overtly what other poets since have evaded knowing, except in the involuntary patterns of their work" Bloom concludes. "Wordsworth will legislate and go on legislating for your poem, no matter how you resist or evade or even unconsciously ignore him"[25].

By finding that Shelley is ultimately unable to resist, evade or revise Wordsworth, Bloom comes closer (although still on his own distinctive psycho-rhetorical terms) to Barthes's intertextual view that "the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original". Of course Barthes would have gone on to argue that in writing Rousseau's autobiography, Shelley imitated not merely the texts of Wordsworth but an infinite number of identifiable and unidentifiable texts. As we know, the identifiable ones range from Dante's *Divine Comedy* when Rousseau says that he beholds "a wonder worthy of the rhyme / Of him who from the lowest depths of Hell / Through every paradise and through all glory / Love led serene" (471-474) to the likes of *Stanco di Pascolar le Peccollere,* a pastoral air which Mary Shelley said was the "dear lament / The Brescian shepherd breathes" (421-422) to which Rousseau refers. But many more of the texts that contribute to Rousseau's autobiography will never be identified, either because their origins have been lost or because they have no specific origins, being simply the cultural texts of the age. And while it may be conjecture to say that his autobiography is *entirely* composed of such texts, their invisible nature ensures that rival claims for it being totally original, or an original revision of visible sources, must also remain somewhat speculative. So like the mystical encounter in the closing stanzas of the *Spiritual Canticle,* the originality of Rousseau's encounter with the "shape all light" in *The Triumph of Life* can be, and by no less an authority than Harold Bloom has been, imperilled. But like St John, too, I think, Shelley is still able to retain some degree of originality for his poem by making its very perilousness manifest.

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[24]Wordsworth (1984), 299.

[25]Bloom (1976), 107-108, 111.

Consider, for example, the frightening conclusion of Rousseau's vision of the "shape all light", which is one of the passages that Bloom has suggested is most influenced by Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality* Ode:

> '*And still* her feet, *no less* than the sweet tune
> To which they moved, *seemed* as they moved, to blot
> The thoughts of him who gazed on them, and soon
>
> 'All that was *seemed as if* it had been not,
> *As if* the gazer's mind was strewn beneath
> Her feet like embers, and she, thought by thought,
>
> 'Trampled its fires into the dust of death,
> *As* Day upon the threshold of the east
> Treads out the lamps of night... (382-390) (stresses mine)

Despite finding this Shelley's "cruellest parody of the Wordsworthian 'O Joy! that in our embers / Is something that doth live'" Bloom is still able to ask how much, exactly, "had Shelley added to Wordsworth here?"[26]. His implied answer, of course, is nothing. But what fascinates me in this passage is not so much Shelley's inability to add anything to the *Intimations* Ode as his very obvious ability to, if you will, subtract things from it, crucial things like its poetic authority. The immediacy and assuredness of the Ode's imaginings of the sublime look tentative and provisional when borrowed by Shelley, like a big suit on a slim man. His constant reliance upon Wordsworthian analogies is mitigated by an equally constant doubt about whether those analogies are fitting, as the words I have stressed above indicate. The succession of similes such as "seemed", "seemed as if", "as if" and "like" actually widen rather than narrow the gap between Wordsworth's vision and the vision of the "shape all light" to which it is supposedly comparable. Things often only seem to be in Wordsworth's vision too, of course, but never so radically and sceptically as they do here. There "Is something that doth live" in *Intimations of Immortality* that never seems to be quite so alive in *The Triumph of Life*, for instance. None of this makes Bloom's contention that Rousseau's autobiography adds nothing to the *Intimations* Ode, that it is in fact unoriginal, any less true. Rousseau's original vision

[26]Bloom (1976), 108-109.

of the "shape all light" is never seen in itself because it has no 'self' to see. But I am arguing that like the mystical vision in the *Spiritual Canticle* it can still be appreciated in its obvious *difference* from its father-texts, and the numerous other texts to which it is compared. The briefest look at one or two of those other texts will help to clarify this argument.

"*And as* the presence of that fairest planet / Although unseen is felt by one who hopes / 'That his day's path may end as he began it / In that star's smile, whose light is *like* the scent / Of a jonquil when evening breeze fans it, / '*Or* the soft notes in which his dear lament / The Brescian shepherd breathes, *or* the caress / That turned his weary slumber to content" (416-423) (stresses mine). I cited this passage earlier to prove how *The Triumph of Life* must inevitably imitate other texts to be a text itself, but I cite it now to show just how much it can still manage to distance itself from its acts of imitation. There is no question of escaping those acts altogether, of course, for as you can see pastoral analogies dominate this passage as much as Wordsworthian ones did earlier. But as was the case with Wordsworth, the appropriateness of these pastoral comparisons are called into question even as they are being drawn. How, for instance, can a light be "like" a scent? The vehicle of this synaesthetic comparison is totally unrelated to the tenor. Perhaps it is only to be expected that a Brescian peasant's song would fail to explain the sublimity of Rousseau's experiences, but the poem's professedly more "worthy" sources can only repeat this failure.

"As little flowers, which in a frosty night / Droop and shut tight, when the sun shines on them / Stretch and look up, erect upon their stalks, / So I recovered from my failing strength" (*Inferno*, ii, 127-130)[27] wrote the poet whose rhyme Rousseau claimed to "behold a wonder worthy of". Michael O'Neill has spotted that Shelley borrows the simile of the shut flower from Dante for *The Triumph of Life*. "And as a shut lily, stricken by the wand / Of dewy morning's vital alchemy, / I rose" (401-402) is how Rousseau relates his response to the shape's command that he should drink from her cup. But while Shelley retains Dante's simile, he expunges his

[27]Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C.H. Sisson (London and Sydney: Pan Books, 1981), 55.

explanation of its relation to its subject. The sense in which the shut lily is actually comparable to Rousseau becomes lost, in other words. The isolated image might still be "defensible, indeed enriching", as O'Neill rightly suggests[28], but it is so because, like the pastoral images mentioned above, it is no longer the vehicle for a comparison. The rhyme is no longer worthy of the wonder.

And what is true for the *Inferno, Stanco di Pascolar le Peccollere* and *Intimations of Immortality* is also true for *Comus, Faust* and many of the other sources for *The Triumph of Life.* All must be relied upon to provide a comparison but individually those comparisons can only signal their difference from the object they are supposed to be like, while collectively their sheer number and diversity forbids any one idea of that object. The very most that they can signify, in other words, is the unoriginality and inadequacy of their own significations in the face of the "shape all light". I must concede that even this negative form of original significance might be considered suspect by someone such as Roland Barthes. Like *Julian and Maddalo*'s efforts to make its inarticulacy significant, *The Triumph of Life*'s attempt to make its unoriginality meaningful must necessarily involve a linguistic meaning of sorts and yet according to Barthes all linguistic meanings are by their very nature unoriginal. For readers like him or, more specifically, J. Hillis Miller, it is unlikely that Shelley's unoriginal texts could refer even negatively to some original vision beyond itself: "The shape all light is the manifestation in Shelley's poem of the incompatibility between pure seeing or pure theory, and that instant interpretation of the light that names it, gives it a shape, makes it a sign, a figure, or an allegorical person" Miller argues[29]. But less ideologically intertextual readers might want to credit Shelley with a little more self-consciousness of this incompatibility than Miller, in particular, does. They might think that he uses unoriginal signs, figures and allegories as knowingly as a painter to whose work we have already compared *The Triumph of Life* in this chapter. For like the space between the images in Picasso's *Guernica,* I think, or even more appropriately, between and beneath the *objets trouvés* in his Cubist collages, the negative space surrounding *The Triumph of Life*'s numerous found texts becomes

[28]O'Neill (1989), 196.

[29]Miller (1985), 168.

almost palpable, almost 'there'. The imposing presence of Shelley's various *trouvailles* deliberately calls attention to the absence from his poem of anything that is not found, just as it does in the *Trompe L'œil* school of painting. But this chapter has also compared *The Triumph of Life* to a much earlier artistic manipulation of negative space and this provides an even more fitting riposte to the most stridently intertextual readers of Shelley's poem.

I am referring, of course, to the *Spiritual Canticle* by St John of the Cross. Shelley had similar fears to St John about the originality of his poetry and in *The Triumph of Life* he strived to come to terms with them in similar ways. Like St John, he complained about the lack of *nuevas palabras*, or new words, with which to write his poem. Like St John, he tried to overcome that lack by revising the old words until they became as good as new. And like St John too, perhaps, he recognized that in the end even those revisions could never achieve the originality he desired for them. This last point is simply another way of saying that, like the *Spiritual Canticle*, I think, *The Triumph of Life* is highly sensitized to the modern theoretical possibility that writing is by its very nature a form of quotation: "We have but thrown, *as those before us threw*" (stress mine). As sensitive as he was to the possibilities of intertextuality, however, St John was still able to resist its most apocalyptic implication, namely, that if all writing is quotation then the originality of the writer must be an illusion. By the end of the *Spiritual Canticle*, we saw, he was no longer trying to eschew quotations, or even to revise them much, but simply to mix them together, playing them off against each other in such a way as to never let the originality of his mystical vision rest in any of them: "For none saw it". But even here, I have contended, St John of the Cross is paralleled by Shelley. For by emphasizing the unoriginality of *The Triumph of Life* in a similarly self-conscious way, Shelley manages to signal negatively the originality of its vision of the "shape all light". That vision *is* new, if only in the sense of being the opposite of what is patently old, or as Rousseau puts it "a new Vision *never seen before*" (411) (stress mine). In general terms, reading Shelley negatively has enabled this thesis to mystically locate the presence of poetry and even a poet working within the confines of textuality. Here it has also enabled us to see how that poet extracts a striking degree of originality from the unoriginal texts which comprise his poetry without succumbing to the dangerous illusions that he can

either revise those texts or somehow escape them altogether. That last illusion leads inevitably to the terrible disillusionment experienced by Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life* and which Shelley himself had experienced intermittently throughout his short life. "Our words are dead, our thoughts are cold and borrowed" he had written as a younger poet. With his dying words, though, Shelley avoided the creative death he had once so feared.

The Conclusions of the Enquiry

In the introduction to this thesis, I proposed three ways of reading Shelley negatively. The first reading would labour to expose the presence of Christian intentions and experiences in Shelley's poetry. The second reading would strive to deconstruct the belief implicitly held by the first one that, whether Christian or otherwise, Shelley's intentions and experiences could ever be a determining presence in his poems. The third and most significant reading would attempt, in some limited capacity, to resolve the dispute between Christian and deconstructionist readings of Shelley's poetry through the *modus operandi* of mysticism and specifically negative theology. In the chapters since the introduction, I have read a number of poems by Shelley in one, two and increasingly all three of these ways. In this conclusion, I would like to summarize the findings of each of these negative readings in turn, beginning with the first one, and evaluate both their success and the success of reading Shelley negatively in general.

Shelley was not a Christian. This is generally the first response to any attempt to expose the presence of Christian intentions or experiences in Shelley's poetry and in a slightly different sense, as we shall see, it should also be the last. For there are a number of obstacles, some of which are seemingly insurmountable, in the path of those who would seek to read his poetry in a Christian way. These obstacles are already familiar to us, from our first attempt to read Shelley negatively, but they are worth recounting one last time. Even the most cursory reading of prose essays like *The Necessity of Atheism, A Refutation of Deism* and *On Christianity*, we said, reveals Shelley to be an atheist and what would later come to be known as a humanist. And while there is always a danger in reading his poems in the light of the comparatively less subtle and imaginative prose, when those poems were considered in isolation we found that they remained visibly anti-Christian both in form and content. No-one disputes that Shelley's poems use the forms of Christianity, for example, but the fact is that they use them in an ironic and subversive way. Moreover, the thematic concern of those poems is to assert the primacy of man, an act which for Shelley

necessitates the defiance of the institutions of Christianity and ultimately the denial of the existence of the Christian God. These last two points are the seemingly insurmountable obstacles, mentioned above, which lie in the path of the sort of Christian reading first attempted by this thesis. But reading negatively in that original sense helped us see that both Shelley's subversion of Christian forms and even his denial of the Christian God still contained Christian elements.

While he subverts and ironizes Christian forms, for instance, it is not usually Shelley's intention to entirely reject their religious meanings. For as we saw he simply re-routes those meanings, taking them away from their Christian origins and towards what he obviously deems to be more fitting objects, like the pagan goddess in *Alastor* and the atheist revolutionary in *Laon and Cythna.* The fact that *Alastor*'s great Mother is not the Christian God should not be allowed to obscure the extent to which the atmosphere of mystery and awe which surrounds her is derived from Judaeo-Christian images of veils and veilings: "and, though ne'er yet / Thou hast unveiled thy inmost sanctuary, / Enough from incommunicable dream, / And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought, / Has shone within me". And likewise the fact that *Laon and Cythna* uses a familiar Christian idiom to venerate Laon instead of Christ should not be allowed to divert the question of why an atheist poem feels it necessary to venerate anyone at all: "thro' the air / Sobs were then heard, and many kissed my feet". In both these subversions, we found, Christian forms are not so much de-mystified as *re*-mystified. Indeed in the case of Laon and Cythna's eventual martyrdom, which brings *Laon and Cythna* to a close, they are not even re-mystified. Where we might expect their death scene to exploit the idiom of Christian martyrdom for its own specific political motives, for instance, you will recall that in fact it remains strangely faithful to its source material. For while Laon and Cythna do clearly martyr themselves in order to inspire a people persecuted by Church and State to seize power, their deaths paradoxically serve to remind those people that "All power and faith must pass, since calmly hence / In torment and in fire have Atheists gone". To understand the paradox of why Shelley should so often reproduce Christian assumptions in the very act of denying them, our first reading went on to consider more closely the philosophical nature of that denial, and of the denial of God generally.

On what grounds did Shelley deny the existence of God? We saw that he was fond of attacking Christians for believing in something for which there was no proof: "When will the vulgar learn humility? When will the pride of ignorance blush at having believed before it could comprehend?". But we also saw that he was not averse to doing this himself when it suited him. He admitted, for example, that his Godwinian belief that man's good inclinations will eventually triumph over his evil ones was not rationally defensible: "The supposition that the good spirit is, or hereafter will be, superior is a personification of the principle of hope and that thirst for improvement without which present evil would be intolerable". By far the most ironic example of Shelley believing in something for which, by his own admission, there is no proof, however, is his atheism. For while he is keen to stress that there is not enough evidence to strongly affirm the existence of God, Shelley is also forced to confess that there is not enough evidence to strongly deny it either: "We see a variety of bodies possessing a variety of powers; we merely know their effects; we are in a state of ignorance with respect to their essences and causes" (*POS*, 384) the *Notes* to *Queen Mab* admit. So Shelley's atheism, we saw, is as groundless an explanation for the mysteries of the universe as the Christianity it rejects. His continuing denial of God, in the confessed absence of any conclusive proof one way or the other, is as much a faith as a Christian's continuing affirmation of Him. The character of Shelley's atheism helped us to explain why his rejection of Christianity still contains some residue of Christian assumptions. Indeed this tendency is not simply particular to Shelley's atheism but is characteristic of atheism generally. "Everywhere otherwise, where the mind is at work seriously, powerfully, and without counterfeiting, it dispenses altogether now with an ideal (the popular expression for this abstinence is 'Atheism') - *with the exception of the will for truth*" Nietzsche told us. "But this will, this *remnant* of an ideal, is, if you will believe me, that ideal itself in its severest and cleverest formulation".

Nietzsche's definition of atheism as the ascetic ideal itself only formulated in a different way was not only justified by *Alastor*, *Laon and Cythna* and *Queen Mab*, we found, but by *Julian and Maddalo* and *The Triumph of Life* too. The Christian God may be absent from those last two poems but what Nietzsche calls the Christian will for truth, and even some of the intermediate truths that Christians pick up along their

way to God, are present. Both *Julian and Maddalo* and *The Triumph of Life* have faith in their ability to access a universal truth about humanity, in other words, which, despite the presence of superficially hopeful characters like Maddalo's daughter in the former poem and the sacred few in the latter turns out to be that humanity is by its very nature incomplete, unfulfilled, fallen. Incapable of redeeming itself, the human existence depicted in both these poems can only be redeemed by something or someone outside itself, someone in whom their author does not quite believe, of course, but whose failure to intervene, in *The Triumph of Life* particularly, nevertheless seems to appal him. None of this meant that our first negative readings of *Julian and Maddalo, The Triumph of Life, Queen Mab* and so on were any more able to surmount the obstacles mentioned at the beginning of this conclusion, of course, or the simple fact that, as we said, Shelley was not a Christian. But perhaps they did manage to uncover the very real extent to which the poet's atheist beliefs are only negations and negative versions of Christianity, rather than affirmations of something completely different. The simple fact that Shelley was *not* a Christian, in other words, over and above anything else.

So our first way of reading Shelley negatively argued that Christian intentions and experiences are made present in his poetry, albeit obliquely and fugitively so. But our second negative reading sought to deconstruct this argument and, more generally, the presumptuous philosophy of language's relation to presence upon which it rests. Indeed that philosophy is so presumptuous, Derrida suggested, that it is better understood as not being a philosophy at all but a theology: "The difference between signified and signifier belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics, and in a more explicit and more systematically articulated way to the narrower epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism when these appropriate the resources of Greek conceptuality" he wrote. The presumption that language represents a prior presence ultimately derives from the Christian conviction that theology is guaranteed by first God and later Christ, as the Word of God. Derrida did not contest the historical importance or even necessity of seeing language in this way, but he did argue that it could not be justified. The finer points of this argument, which were discussed at length in the conclusion to *Part One,* need not be recapitulated here: its gist alone will suffice. Christian

theology's reliance upon God as the guarantor of its validity is ultimately illusory, Derrida argued. After deconstructing what he took to be the original and most explicit attempt to establish a presence which is prior to language, Derrida went on to deconstruct further and more implicit attempts to do this, such as the philosophical presumptions that the Platonic Forms are the true references of general terms, or that there is a *telos* into which Hegelian differences are ultimately resolved or, as our first attempt to read Shelley negatively presumed, that the intentions and experiences of an author are immediately and fully present in the texts he writes. To read Shelley negatively in this second deconstructionist sense, then, was to sink the possibility, floated by the first reading, that Shelley's Christian intentions or experiences could in some sense be present in his poems. Indeed it seemed to sink the possibility not simply of intentional or experiential Christian readings, but of Christian exegesis altogether, for if Christianity ultimately depends upon a God whose presence is thought to precede language, as Derrida argued it does, then it falls within the scope of his critique. In mysticism and negative theology, however, we found a branch of Christian experience and a Christian exegetical vocabulary which was not *simply* indebted to what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence. Perhaps, we wondered, mystics like Pseudo-Denys could offer a Christian reading of Shelley's poems which was to a certain extent compatible with deconstruction.

Our third way of reading Shelley negatively argued that they could. Insofar as they claim to refer to a mystical or negative theological presence which is prior to the language system, of course, mystical texts remained vulnerable to deconstruction. The nature of textuality insisted that, like the texts of Shelley, Denys's texts could not ultimately represent the mystical experiences and intentions they appeared to suggest. But if Denys's texts *were* metaphysical to the extent that they claimed to be preceded by presence, we said, this was not to say that they were *only* metaphysical, that there were not elements within them which denied, in John D. Jones's words, "all affirmative theology and, hence, metaphysics". For the presence of God did not simply precede his texts, Denys argued, but utterly transcended even their most negative attempts to describe Him. While God did reveal Himself to him through his texts, Denys continued, what He revealed of Himself, paradoxically, was that He was utterly concealed from those texts. So if a text like the *Mystical Theology* was

metaphysical, in the sense that it claimed to represent its author's experience of the presence of God, it was so only in order to confess that it could not *ultimately* represent Him, or use any representation of Him to metaphysically guarantee its validity. Even the word 'God' had to be taken back. Far from being a target of deconstruction, then, mysticism and especially that aspect of it called negative (mystical) theology is in certain respects a version of deconstruction, we argued. Of course there are still fundamental causal differences between mystical and deconstructionist textuality. The *Mystical Theology*, for instance, is a destabilized text because the experience of a transcendental presence to which it answers is "itself beyond all position / and denial / - beyond privation", yet the texts deconstructed by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* are destabilized, not so much because they refer to a transcendental presence which is mystically inaccessible, as because there is no transcendental prèsence or, as he put it, nothing outside the text. But mysticism's *causal* differences from deconstruction should not obscure the similar dampening *effect* that it has on the referential capacity of its texts. Even if there is something outside the text, in other words, it is not something which the text itself can signify in any more determinate way.

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that in some passages of his most recent and most considered critique of mysticism, Derrida himself has come closer to endorsing this view. While *Sauf le Nom (Post-Scriptum)* does reiterate his original point that, in a certain sense, "the negative movement of the discourse on God is only a phase of positive ontotheology" it also contends that, in a different sense, negative theology does deny all affirmative theology and the metaphysical philosophy to which those affirmations give rise: "In this sense, the principle of negative theology, in a movement of internal rebellion, radically contests the tradition from which it seems to come. Principle against principle. Parricide and uprooting, rupture of belonging, interruption of a sort of social contract, the one that gives right to the State, the nation, more generally to the philosophical community as rational and logocentric community"[1].

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[1]In Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr, Ian McLeod (California: Stanford University Press, 1995), 67. Unfortunately *Sauf le Nom (Post Scriptum)* appeared when this thesis was largely

So it seems that Derrida himself is becoming more sympathetic to our notion that attributing mystical intentions or experiences to mystical texts does not wholly determine the meaning of those texts. This conclusion enabled us to advance a mystical interpretation of Shelley's poetry which was perhaps less susceptible to deconstruction than more orthodox Christian ones: a third way of reading Shelley negatively. The poet was not a mystic, our reading of *Alastor* detected, in the same way that he was not a Christian generally. He rejected unknowing and embraced knowing almost in spite of himself, a fierce ambivalence which marks even his earliest letters: "Thus does knowledge lose all the pleasure which invol[un]tarily [ar]ises, by attempting to arrest th[e] fleeting Phantasm as it passes - vain al[most] like the chemists æther it evaporates under our observation; it flies from all but the slaves of passion & sickly sensibility who will not analyse a feeling". Our reading of *Queen Mab* attempted to confirm this suspicion that the poet was a sort of mystic *manqué*. Although often hostile towards the existence *of* God ("There is no God!"), that poem was read as being equally if not more hostile towards discourse *on* God, "the veils woven by philosophical conceit" to hide the ignorance of theists like Ahasuerus and atheists like Mab even from themselves ("is there a God?"). *Julian and Maddalo* and *The Triumph of Life* were seen as exploring still further the difficulties we have in saying the things we want said ("but the cold world shall not know"), in the ways we want to say them ("Our words are dead, our thoughts are cold and borrowed"). All these readings worked in some part from the assumption that mystical intentions or experiences were present in Shelley's texts, and to that extent they could still be called metaphysical. But that assumption did very little, we suggested, to determine the meanings of the texts themselves. Like Pseudo-Denys's *Mystical Theology*, Shelley's *Queen Mab*, *Julian and Maddalo* and *The Triumph of Life* ultimately find what *cannot* be said about the universe to be more meaningful than what can. And while it is clear that this silence must be determined in some sense if it is to be meaningful, of course, it is also clear that it is the only thing about those texts that is. That what Maddalo calls the "heaven of sacred silence" renders every meaning indeterminate with the exception of its own.

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completed so I am unable to consider it in the detail it deserves.

This conclusion would not satisfy deconstructionists that the third way of reading Shelley negatively ever entirely escapes what they feel to be the illusions of metaphysics, of course, but nor was it ever intended to. Questions of experience and intention almost inevitably arise when deciding whether a text is mystical, but the nature of textuality ensures that such questions can never be answered with certainty. We have confessed this difficulty several times, as you will recall. But you will also recall us stressing that even if deconstruction does challenge the belief that mystical texts could ever be determined by the mystic's experience of God, or his intention to describe God, this does not necessarily constitute a challenge to mystical or theological faith *per se*. Spivak's contention that deconstruction "is not 'mystical' or 'theological'", and Eco's argument that it is "atheistic" were mistaken in this respect. For as *Part Two* has also shown, deconstruction is not a critique of theology itself so much as the metaphysical aspects within theology, such as its claim that its experience of God guarantees and grounds its discourse upon Him. "If we take 'God is dead' to be a statement about the impossibility of locating a transcendent point which can serve as a ground for discourse, then deconstruction is indeed a discourse on God's death" Kevin Hart told us, "But if we take 'God is dead' to be a formula for unbelief or disbelief, then there is no reason at all to link it with deconstruction". Deconstruction may well mean that God cannot be present in someone like Shelley's texts, in other words, but it does not mean that He could not be present in his life or, somewhat less speculatively, in our own.

This thesis began with a real sense of urgency. The need for a critical discourse which appreciated both what is particular to Shelley's poems and what is common to poetry and indeed language *per se* was pressing. In my opinion, mysticism and negative theology come closer than almost any other discourse to fulfilling that need. By finding Shelley's own intentions and experiences to be in some basic sense represented in his poetry, our mystical reading was able to achieve a degree of the particularity which distinguishes classical or humanist interpretations of his work. But the intentions and experiences our reading found were so particular that they enabled us to resist some, if by no means all, of the metaphysical illusions of presence to which such interpretations normally succumb. For although we did find those mystical intentions and experiences to be in some basic sense represented in Shelley's

poems, in another and more sophisticated sense, we saw, they transcended and therefore destabilized even his most negative attempts to represent them. In this sense, our mystical reading was able to achieve something close to the generality, or structurality, which distinguishes deconstructionist interpretations of Shelley's *oeuvre*. Although significantly close to deconstruction, however, we also conceded that this mystical reading was still not quite compatible with it or invulnerable to its interventions. And conceded, too, that deconstruction was still less compatible with mysticism, even if its interventions into it could no longer be seen as a simple recommendation for atheism. This thesis has not quite been able to resolve the conflict between mysticism and deconstruction, then. But reading Shelley negatively has enabled us to consider their relationship much more positively.

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