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The University of Southern Mississippi

METAPHASIA: SHELLEY AND THE LANGUAGE OF REMOTER WORLDS

by

Michael Andrew Howell

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ABSTRACT

METAPHASIA: SHELLEY AND THE LANGUAGE OF REMOTER WORLDS

by Michael Andrew Howell

May 2011

The aim of this project was to trace the evolution of Percy Shelley's metaphasic narrative, or language of the dead, chronologically through the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, *Mont Blanc*, and *Prometheus Unbound*. Proceeding from Earl Wasserman's detailed map of Shelley's mythopoeic structure, I charted this evolution while identifying a fifth discrete entity within the mythological hierarchy of what Harold Bloom has characterized as a "mythopoeic trilogy" (36). Concurrently, I examined the ongoing debate concerning Shelley's influences, as well as the early formation of his personality, as it pertains to the poems in question, and his fascination with worlds beyond the grave.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is arguably no poet of the last three or four centuries that possessed a more earnest desire to be understood than did Shelley. His poetry unapologetically begs for an emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual apprehension. One might even comically imagine him as a mendicant, dressed in rags and standing on a beluted street corner imploring passersby not for alms but for someone truly to grasp what his poetry is suggesting. Even Byron pretended to more understanding and sympathy than he actually felt, no matter how productive the summer of 1816 might have been. In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock dated July of that same year Shelley writes, "Lord Byron is an exceedingly interesting person, and as such is it not to be regretted that he is a slave to the vilest and most vulgar prejudices, and as mad as the winds" (*The Letters* I: 491). We have no written record of their numerous conversations that fateful summer, but judging by this and other letters we can assume they were, to put it mildly, disappointing for Shelley.

One indispensable key to understanding his work lies in understanding his mythology. Unfortunately, this is not an easy task given its inherent complexity and oftentimes contradictory nature. Earl Wasserman, as insightful as his commentary on Shelley has been, spends what might be considered by some an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to explain away (and often successfully we must acknowledge) the numerous paradoxes and contradictions that are such a salient feature of his poetry. And more to his credit, Wasserman generally rejects (as Bloom outright denounces) the regrettably popular attitude (an attitude likewise shared by students of all levels toward Blake) of an unnamed editor who wrote, "It is likely enough that the poet himself was not

entirely clear on these matters" (in Wasserman 198). "These matters," here specifically refer to Shelley's understanding of the relationship between Locke and Godwin on one side and Berkeley and Plato on the other. I would hazard that Shelley deserves the benefit of the doubt in that he did, in fact, understand this relationship quite well, certainly more than this editor gave him credit. But is this level of philosophical complexity, free at times from contradiction, not endemic to many if not all the Romantics? The *Book of Urizen* and *The Prelude* should immediately spring to mind, both being as frustrating, at times, as they are accomplished. A reader might take a modicum of consolation in the fact that Shelley's pantheon is not quite as tortuous as is Blake's. Then again, the need for understanding would appear to be far less prominent in Blake than it is for Shelley.

There is, I think, no better starting point to begin understanding Shelley's mythos than in the shadowy language that informs it, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, *Mont Blanc*, and *Prometheus Unbound* in particular. Wasserman and Bloom both agree that they form a trilogy of Shelleyan thought. "[T]he 'Hymn' and 'Mont Blanc' are in a complementary relationship, and together they are the proper prelude to 'Prometheus Unbound,' positing that poem as Shelley's first mature mythopoeic creation" (Bloom 36). This final pronouncement may be harsh even for Bloom. While *Prometheus* may have yet stood as Shelley's most sophisticated "mythopoeic creation," one could hardly in good conscience characterize the *Hymn* or *Mont Blanc* as immature. It is also a point of concern that Wasserman should write: "Shelley never seemed to have faced the question of the relation among his three points of reference, the all subsuming One, which is Being, the One Mind, which is Existence, and the Power, or ultimate cause..." (222). The Power is explored in both the *Hymn* and in *Mont Blanc*, but *Prometheus Unbound* contends with

A Critical Reading, there is a conspicuous lack of attention given to his very notable fascination with death, especially considering this evident fact was so instrumental in forming his poetic as well as his personal consciousness. One of the few works that treats this topic at any length is Benjamin Kurtz's *The Pursuit of Death*. And as Kurtz points out, this imaginative, albeit morbid, fascination was not peculiar to Shelley. "...[I]t was profoundly characteristic of the romanticist to love mysteries, and for them death was the greatest of mysteries" (xi). And as Shelley was concerned, "If there be considered merely the absolute quantity of what a great variety of poets have said about death, few will be found to have written so much...upon the subject as did Shelley," but "there is in [his] poetry no example of terror, or even fear" (xii-xiv). He goes on, "If philosophy is the attempt to understand being, death is its great instigator; for death, having more than anything else made men aware of life..." (ix). At this point I think it necessary to distinguish between a longing for death and a genuine fascination with worlds beyond the grave and "hopes of high talk with the...dead." Shelley did not have a death wish, nor was he fascinated with the idea of dying but rather with the intangible, immaterial forces beyond normal human perception or awareness. Few poets exhibit a more frenetic awareness of what Kurtz proposes than Shelley (Yeats is the only modern poet that comes to mind). There is a restlessness that pervades his work, a restlessness only a man so keenly aware of his own mortality would possess.

Disappointed though he may have been by his youthful failures to capture ghosts or summon demons, however successfully horrifying they may have been to his younger sisters and his friends at Syon House Academy, Shelley's fascination with that which "[f]loats unseen amongst us" never diminished, even to the very last year of his life. In

fact, it only appears to have intensified as he grew older (93). This fascination that to a postmodern audience might easily be characterized as an unhealthy obsession stands as one of the fundamental pillars of his consciousness. It is present, however obvious or indirect, throughout much, if not all, of his work. His first mature poetic step into a “remoter world” (and the subject of the first chapter) began in the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*. Written in the summer of 1816 during his inspirational and Byron filled sojourn in Switzerland, the *Hymn* stands as one of the more linguistically controlled, yet philosophically complex, poems of Shelley’s career. It no doubt overflows with characteristically Shelleyan ideals and is haunted by the ever problematic specter of Plato—much to the chagrin of Bloom—but there is a matured restraint not seen in *Queen Mab* or *Alastor*. It is tempting to speculate as to whether or not the relatively serene and transitory period he spent at Bishopsgate with the young Mary Godwin prior to his sojourn to Switzerland prepared him for the philosophical rigors the Alps would later inspire, but naturally what is of special interest to this project is the incipient metaphasic narrative. There are shadows and spirits in abundance, but the dialogue between the living and the dead at this initial stage in the trilogy is noticeably absent. Shelley is here still formulating a means of communicating with the Intellectual Beauty for whom he vowed he would dedicate his powers with “beating heart and streaming eyes” (95).

It is not surprising then, that the series of questions posed in the third stanza are left unanswered. In fact, according to the speaker, “No voice from some sublime world hath ever / to sage or poet these responses given” and “the name of God and ghosts and Heaven / Remain the record of their vain endeavour” (94). And while there is certainly a language of the dead present, it has not yet become intelligible. As with *Prometheus*

Unbound Wasserman does not dwell too long on this otherworldly communication, but he nonetheless offers penetrating, if not impatient, insight. He suggests, in one sense at least, that the lines above are a reflection of Shelley's earliest failures of "high talk with the departed dead." But even if "[n]o voice from some sublimer world...hath ever these responses given," there is still a very subtle imaginative acknowledgement of an "awful shadow of some unseen Power" that moves through the world and at least attempts communication with sages and poets who have not, as yet, learned to comprehend and respond nor, perhaps, has the world beyond the grave.

This language (its echo at least) becomes so pronounced in *Mont Blanc* that it is, at last, audible to the speaker, even if he is still unable to comprehend what is being communicated. It is no longer a dim murmur only to be felt, but a cacophonous din not to be ignored.

Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,
 A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;
 Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,
 Thou art the path of that unresting sound—(30-33)

Now, clearly, what is being described here is the resonant sound of the natural world: the wind in the caverns, the bubbling brooks, the plodding ice, etc. But this too is the dark Intellectual Beauty, the "remoter world" encroaching upon the world of the living and the speaker recognizes, later like Prometheus, that a sentient force is attempting to communicate in spite of the apparent fact that it is still not sufficiently intelligible to the living. It seems apparent, in contrast to what Bloom and Wasserman have maintained, that what Shelley is suggesting is a slow imaginative progression towards a dialogue with

“awful shadow[s].” This ability to formulate and sustain this dialogue did not materialize fully formed in *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley has had to coax it, slowly, almost lovingly, into existence. In the *Hymn*, obviously, no metaphasic dialogue is yet possible. It is only hinted at. In *Mont Blanc* “the source of human thought” still flows from “secret springs,” but there exists a heightened awareness, however Platonically negative that awareness might be (97). Curiously, it has been assumed that the lack of communication represents, exclusively, a failure on the poet’s part, but perhaps what Shelley is also suggesting is that the “unseen Power,” the dark Intellectual Beauty—whatever we choose to call it—is itself at a loss as how to breach the communicative void; both are struggling to learn each other’s language, both are slowly moving towards a goal, the achievement of which is never promised and forever on the brink of collapse. Wasserman suggests:

The poem is the product of the poet’s urge so to reconstitute his available language that it will, not express, but inherently contain that philosophy and thereby open the otherwise closed doors to the dark corridors of thought that lie beyond ordinary conception. By creating the language of the Intellectual Philosophy the poet can think *with* it. (208)

And so the language itself, particularly its utterance and reciprocation, will open the gateway between the world of the living and the world of the dead, between these “dark corridors” and “ordinary conception.” Wasserman’s purposeful choice of italics is meant to emphasize this relationship. It is not enough that the poet think *about* this language, as the speakers of the *Hymn* and *Mont Blanc* do. He must think *with* it in order to utilize its full potential. Only in this sense can he then become fluent enough for any meaningful dialogue to take place.

This idea also helps to explain, in part, why Prometheus is able to comprehend the language of the dead even if only subtly, which is, naturally enough, the subject of chapter three. It is, in Bloom's own words "[Shelley's] most mature mythopoeic creation" and the metaphasic narrative that had so fascinated him even from his earliest childhood, is on full dramatic display. The poem, of course, has considerable resonance with western audiences for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the liberal and revolutionary sentiment so salient a feature of much of Shelley's work, a feature here accompanied by a rich mythological pageantry. Kurtz even characterized *Prometheus* as his, "greatest single poem and greatest single ethical appeal" (156). While this may be a greater flourish with which Bloom or Wasserman are comfortable, it is nonetheless a telling commentary on the continued fascination with one of Shelley's most complex and rewarding poems. However, what is of most importance to this project is the fact that Shelley's "high talk with the departed dead" becomes, at long last, an actualized, sustainable, and prominent feature of the trilogy in *Prometheus Unbound*. If, as I later argue, Jupiter is the dark embodiment of Prometheus, it is possible for him to access the doors of the "dark corridors of thought" in order to understand Earth, but it also suggests that the language of the "Intellectual Philosophy" or more importantly the key to decoding it has taken purchase within the poet, within Prometheus, and the world beyond the grave. "...[W]hat art thou / O melancholy Voice?" Prometheus asks. And his mother in reply, "How canst thou hear / who knowest not the language of the dead?" (213-214). But clearly he does hear--on a certain level--and for the first time the dialogue between these two worlds, though still not fully formed, has begun to coalesce into a meaningful and conscious exchange.

CHAPTER II

SHADOWS IN ETERNITY: *HYMN TO INTELLECTUAL BEAUTY*

While my current focus is on Shelley's own personal and poetic mythology—with specific regard to his metaphasic narrative—it would be difficult, even inadvisable, to approach the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*—or the second and final parts of the trilogy—without, at the very least, a cursory examination of the dueling schools of interpretation that contest the poem's influences. Such an examination sheds light on the personal and poetic mythmaking necessary to an understanding of what Shelley was attempting and therefore necessary to an understanding of his language of “remoter world[s].” Tracy Ware, in his article “Shelley's Platonism in *A Defense of Poetry*,” succinctly outlines this ongoing dispute. The older of the two schools, which includes, among others, Carl Grabo, J.A. Notopoulos, and Benjamin Kurtz, argues for strict Platonic parallels and maintains that Shelley was an avid, if at times selective, proponent. Another advocate of this school of thought is Joseph E. Baker, whose intriguing argument—if correct—spotlights one of the most palpably ironic acts in literary history. He insists that the very philosophical means employed by Plato—some would say infamously—to attack poetry, Shelley conversely and adeptly used to defend it.³ Consider, for example, the following and somewhat curious declaration from the *Defense*. “Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendor of his imagery and the melody of his language is the most intense that it is possible to conceive” (Reiman 514). It is tempting, upon a spontaneous reading, to suggest that Shelley is wagging his tongue at us, but the overall and impassioned sincerity of the *Defense*, as well as the breadth of his work, both prosodic and poetic,

³ See Joseph E. Baker's *Shelley's Platonic Answer to a Platonic Attack on Poetry*. Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1965.

strictly prohibit this. We can be certain that he was in earnest.⁴

Kurtz proposes rather straightforwardly that the underlying thought of the *Hymn*, as well as much of Shelley's later work, is irrevocably "Platonic, coming straight from the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. This 'intellectual beauty,' a phrase Shelley used...in translating the *Symposium*...is a happy naming of that supreme beauty...to the worship of which Diotima is supposed to have converted Socrates" (94). As will be mentioned shortly, Bloom warns against this kind of reading—largely holding Kurtz responsible for its introduction to modern Shelley studies—and suggests the poem is Shelley's own reevaluation, or refiguring, of a number of Christianity's core beliefs, with particular attention being given to the idea of divine grace. Nonetheless, a considered reading of the mythopoeic trilogy leaves one with the impression that whether poets are the "passive slaves of some higher and more omnipresent Power,"⁵ or the acolytes of a "supreme beauty" appears one and the same to Shelley (231). Personal antipathy aside, he found correlations in both. The two doctrines are porous enough for such fluid interchanges of ideas, at least to such an active imagination as he possessed. If so, could it not be argued that this refiguration of Christianity owes its creative impetus to Plato? Or at the very least, was tested against a Platonic whetstone, so to speak? Bloom's only concession has been to suggest that the *Hymn* has "Platonic coloring." I am not certain how that differs from "Platonic influence," but in either case it would not be inappropriate to accuse him of academic hair-splitting. So naturally enough the answer to these questions would depend entirely to which school of thought the questions were posed, but it is difficult to ignore the ostensible fact that the descriptions given of God in *Essay On Christianity* are

⁴ This assumption is disputed by Richard Cronin and will be discussed later.

⁵ For Shelley's prose I will here and throughout use the standard *Complete Works*, edited by Ingpen and Peck. Hereafter CW. Also, see Yeats' *Essays and Introductions* for obvious Shelleyan influences.

strikingly similar in tone and language to Diotima's discourse on love and beauty. (I do not here suggest that the older school of interpretation is correct, but I think it bears repeating that the parallels are not so easily dismissed, nor should they be). While *EOC* was not published until 1859, it was believed to have been written between 1815 and 1817, long after Shelley's first encounter with Plato. And while he did not produce a translation of the *Symposium* until July of 1818, his first encounter with the work—Floyer Sydenham's 1767 translation—would most likely have been in 1810 during his first year at Oxford, more than enough time for the dialogues to have left their mark. How deeply this mark goes continues to be the crux of the debate.

The idea of Shelley's Platonism is reinforced at length in James Notopoulos' seminal, and appropriately entitled work, *The Platonism of Shelley*, but he proffers a more measured reading and as such deserves to be quoted at length.

...Shelley's [Hymn] is personal and not derivative from Plato. The derivative element...appears more in the title, which reveals Shelley's awareness of the affinity of his experience with Platonism...It is very likely that Shelley had read Spenser's *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*, for the title of his own poem is, with the substitution of the adjective "Intellectual" for "Heavenly," the same as Spenser's title. Yet even Shelley's substitution is derived from the Platonic tradition rather than Plato himself. (196)

Notopoulos is here in agreement with Bloom in that he believes the *Hymn* constitutes part of Shelley's personal mythology, while still acknowledging an awareness of his "experience" with Plato, which, one can only speculate, is more quantifiable than

“coloring.” However, I think the most telling—and nuanced—line in this passage is the distinction Notopoulos makes between Plato’s own personal philosophy and the tradition of his philosophical thought, namely, that while there is derivation in the *Hymn*, as possibly elsewhere, the derivation is not from the primary source, but from the tradition of Platonic practice and interpretation, from Augustine to Nicholas Cusanus to Henry More to Shelley himself. However, to suggest it is only tradition, and a derivation at that, from which Shelley proceeds only underestimates his understanding of Plato, as well as the impact of his exposure to him. This is a charge Bloom has several times leveled against critics who have failed to give Shelley his appropriate due. While an accurate gauge of the level of influence may be a nebulous prospect, it must surely be acknowledged that Shelley owes, at the very least, an inspirational debt to Plato even as it bears on his own personal ontological system.

Realistically, however, such a concession may never fully satisfy those still invested in the debate. This is due in no small part to the fact that the more recent school of interpretation is altogether unsympathetic, and at times openly hostile, to the idea of Platonic revenants in Shelley’s work. Earl Wasserman writes, “Despite the obvious fascination the Platonic dialogues had for Shelley, it is both unnecessary and misleading in structuring his ontology to introduce Platonism, from which it differs in radical ways” (147). Certainly it does, as one might expect, but why discount completely the possibility that Plato’s ontology left a striking impression, as suggested above? What is to be gained by denying the considerable, albeit circumstantial, evidence to the contrary? If we are to follow Shelley’s own example—free of contradiction and a too generous use of

metaphor⁶—mediation seems the more profitable course. Bloom, as usual, is more emphatic still. “[To read] the title of the poem as being overtly Platonic...is to misread it from the start...the ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ is much more parallel in its ‘statement’ to the Christian doctrine of grace in its broadest outlines” (36). It is worth repeating that Plato never actually used the word “intellectual.” The original Greek is translated, simply, as “wide sea of beauty,” which Shelley rendered “wide ocean of intellectual beauty.”⁷ Bloom goes on to lament, in a tone of obvious exasperation that, “[Platonism is] the specter which hangs so heavily over Shelley criticism that one can despair of ever lifting it, even in part” (185). The urgency to exorcise this “specter” seems unwarranted, due in no small part to the fact that the ongoing contention is eminently profitable. It is only through spirited debate, however pedantic it may be at times, that Shelley’s subtle complexities and paradoxes are revealed. It is arguable that in their haste to sever—or at least diminish—the link between Shelley and Plato, Wasserman and Bloom have understated some obvious connections, however academically inconvenient, or personally bothersome, those connections might be. These very connections have allowed a not inconsiderable degree of insight into the personality and creative and intellectual processes of one of history’s most intriguing poets.

Richard Harter Fogle seems to offer a conciliatory response to this ongoing debate, suggesting that, “Investigations of [Shelley’s] Platonic orthodoxy are simply off the subject that should be to hand, while it would be unfortunate to establish a counter-orthodoxy of private myth. One should not have to choose between them” (744). As

⁶ Bloom would here take exception. See *Shelley’s Mythmaking*. “It is popular these days to accuse Shelley of a profusion of metaphors, of an inability or refusal to employ continuous and ‘organic’ metaphor in an extended fashion” (37).

⁷ The passage is at 210d in the *Symposium*, and the original Greek reads thus: τὸ πολὺ πέλαιο... τοῦ καλοῦ.

diplomatic as this reading might at first appear, I think Fogle misses the point, and suggests something quite counterproductive. His answer to the problem of the dueling interpretations is to choose neither—in other words—to pretend they don't exist. To follow this course is to retreat from the debate altogether and is tantamount to sticking one's head in the sand, as it were. As tempting as this course might be to some, it would be difficult to ignore the philosophical and even stylistic parallels so evident, for example, between sections of the *Hymn* and the *Phaedrus*. Consider the first two lines of stanza three: "No voice from some sublime world hath ever / to sage or poet these responses given—" contrasted with "[o]f that place beyond the heavens none of our earthly poets has yet sung, and none shall sing worthily" (Hamilton & Cairns 494). Whatever the ultimate verdict, one thing, I think, is certain. Even if Plato is not to be read into the *Hymn*, as Bloom has suggested, and even if it is a strictly personal mythology or critique of Christian doctrine, the dialogues did help to rekindle, from Shelley's earliest imaginings in the woods and gardens of Field Place, the half-formed idea of a language at once shadowy, eternal, and remote. We can agree with Bloom that Shelley was, "an original religious mythmaker rather than a secondhand philosopher," but to acknowledge his debt is not to accept a charge of vapid imitation (36). It is to recognize that Shelley's process of working his way through the philosophical superstructure of the dialogues was the means by which he became an original mythmaker.

In discussing Shelley's stylistic and linguistic difficulties, William Keach, in his book *Shelley's Style*, cites at length Frederick Pottle's "classic advocacy" in his essay, "The Case of Shelley." I reproduce the majority of the quote.

He employs pronounced, intoxicating rhythms that seem to be trying to

sweep the reader into hasty emotional commitments. He seldom uses a firmly held, developed image, but pours out a flood of images which one must grasp momentarily in one aspect and then release. He is fond of figures within figures...he starts with objects that are just on the verge of becoming invisible or inaudible or intangible and he strains away even from these. (601)

This sounds like a harsh reproach, but even if, as Keach suggests, Pottle “concedes too much too quickly,” what Pottle is here representing is the viewpoint of mid-twentieth-century criticism, particularly that of the New Critics. “Modern sensibility demands that poetry shall deal with the actual world...It wants no prophetic poetry...Modern criticism maintains that by these standards Shelley is a bad poet” (600-601). This idea may help to explain in part why Bloom and Wasserman have been so eager to rescue Shelley from Platonic interpretations. They may have felt the only plausible way to repair his reputation from the attacks of Allen Tate or F.R. Leavis was to reimagine him in a form more palatable to modern sensibilities. Therefore, the *perfect forms, supreme beauties, and worlds beneath worlds* have given way to a very complex and ornate antichristian sentiment. Yet this debate continues to be of central importance in achieving an understanding of the *Hymn*, as well as Shelley’s poetics in general, and reading the poem strictly one way or another is detrimental to this purpose. To firmly grasp the enigmatic—if at times irreconcilable—relationship of these two central ideas within the poem is to better apprehend Shelley’s complex mythological structure, a structure that may be devoid of traditional Christian hierarchies, but still suggestive of the existence of the, “mind of [a] creator, which is itself the image of all other minds” (Reiman 515).

More telling is the description towards the beginning of *EOC*. "There is a Power by which we are surrounded, like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is suspended, which visits with its breath our silent chords, at will" (Ingpen and Peck VI: 231). I think it is important to note that Shelley's description, here and elsewhere, is more characteristic of traditional concepts of the Holy Ghost than they are of the Judeo-Christian God. This subtle remove from something more quantifiable—if deities could even be quantified—helps to emphasize the mythical and mysterious nature of the Power as it visits "this various world with as inconstant wing / As summer winds that creep from flower to flower" (2-3). The essay was written in 1821, five years after the publication of the *Hymn*. Fragmented as it is, it possesses a slightly more refined visualization of the "unseen Power," but may nonetheless startle the uninitiated reader, especially given the fact that Shelley was expelled from Oxford in 1811 for the publication of his pamphlet, "The Necessity of Atheism." It is even more baffling still when compared to the antichristian hysterics evident in a letter to his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg dated January 3rd of 1811, two months prior to his expulsion. "Yet here I swear, and as I break my oath may Infinity Eternity blast me, here I swear that never will I forgive Christianity!" (*The Letters* I: 35). Historionics aside, this is a tell-tale symptom of Shelley's nascent desire to construct his own mythopoeic landscape, believing that "Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted" (Reiman 515). He would fashion the idea of a Power, freed from the constraints of orthodoxy, that was absolute, eternal, and immediate and he would do so based not only on the strength and will of his own imagination, "[that] great instrument of moral good," but on the equally intricate and mythic musings of Plato. Christopher Miller echoes this sentiment.

Heaven [for Shelley] is only a limitless sky subordinated to an Invisible Power, not to God and the language of social regulation... This revisionary move is typical of Shelley's poetics: to retain 'heaven' as a signifier of the sublime while purging it of associations with hierarchy or orthodox piety. (578)

It would be difficult to overstate just how beneficial tracing these dueling interpretations ultimately is. Doing so helps in at least a couple of respects. Firstly, it helps to center the poem in its modern critical reputation and it illuminates the need for mediation, which, I continue to believe, is key in developing a deeper understanding of the poem. Secondly, it helps us better understand what the Power or the One Mind or Intellectual Beauty actually are, or at the very least, helps us to develop a closer approximation of what Shelley actually thought them to be and this approach should strike one as a much more faithful reading of the trilogy.⁸ We can safely assume they do not represent the traditional Judeo-Christian God, a conclusion with which both Bloom and Wasserman would readily agree. As Timothy Webb suggests, "Not only did [Shelley] not believe that Christ was the son of God; he was also convinced that Christ himself did not believe in the existence of God" (160). But whether or not the Power is a Platonic ideal or a refiguring of God or a hybrid (which strikes me as the most plausible explanation) or something altogether different, Shelley quite clearly envisioned an underlying consciousness that evolves and becomes more articulate, even more insistent, as the trilogy progresses. There is a process of awakening at work here, but not in the sense of a birth or emergence from a void, a concept with which, according to Shelley, man stands in opposition. "Whatever may be his true and final destination, there is a

⁸ Wasserman treats these distinctions at length, as will be discussed shortly.

spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution” (Ingpen and Peck VI: 194). This sentiment is revealing and suggests why Shelley could never fully embrace an atheism which posited the idea that consciousness dissipates after death. Such a conclusion would have been abhorrent to him. And so it was necessary to his imaginative and intellectual well-being to envision a world possessed of a spirituality that, while intangible and elusive, was nonetheless part of the “indestructible order” of things, governed no less by an “Intellectual Beauty” who presides over the One Mind. This is an order both constructed by and composed of an indeterminate number of individual minds, each capable of acting independently, but subject to a central collective consciousness.⁹ As previously discussed, Wasserman proposes that this “consciousness” constitutes only one element of a tripartite mythological hierarchy, “the all subsuming One, which is being, the One Mind, which is existence, and the Power, or ultimate cause” (222). He further suggests that Shelley’s attempt to keep these “points of reference” separate and distinct, principally in *Prometheus Unbound*, would lead one to believe that he was a polytheist. I think it more likely that this stands as another example of his refiguring of the Christian idea of the trinity. In any case, his mythopoeic landscape was anything but perfunctory or chaotic. It had a definitive order to it—representative of his belief that the universe itself was ordered—and was the result of cautious and willful reflection.

The process of recognizing this “order” is, for Shelley, manifestly an intellectual¹⁰ and imaginative one. It is a perceptual realization of what Wasserman has described as a “domain of mutability” that exists independent of the external world.

⁹ This idea is reminiscent of Native American mythology, finding parallels in both Northern and Central American cultures. It would be interesting to know if Shelley was aware of this.

¹⁰ I am here using the word “intellectual” in the traditional sense and not in the same manner that Shelley used it in the *Hymn*. As Reiman points out, “intellectual,” as it is used in the poem, means “immaterial.”

Intellectual Beauty is the governing deity of the 'intellectual philosophy,' which identifies existence with mind and rejects all distinction between world and thought. In the *Hymn*, the 'various world' visited by the 'awful shadow' of Intellectual Beauty is the domain of mutability, not external nature. (191)

Shelley himself makes the distinction between ideas and external objects in his very brief *Essay On Life*. This, along with the *Defense* and *EOC*, is one of the principle sources in which Shelley outlined the nature of his mythopoeic landscape. "The difference is nominal," he writes, "between those two classes of thought, which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and external objects" (Ingpen and Peck VI: 196). And Echoing Hamlet's pronouncement, he insists that, "Nothing exists but what is perceived" (ibid). The ideas expressed here derive largely from Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and Hume's *Essays, Moral and Political*,¹¹ but would later lead to a critique of the associationist philosophy from which they were born. Unsatisfied with what for him were rigid distinctions between mind/body, object/idea, internality/externality, Shelley characteristically sought to forge his own unique patterning of these relationships and the world in which they existed. His urge to restructure existing systems was overwhelming. It is interesting to note, as Richard Cronin has pointed out, that Coleridge was as interested in remapping the distinctions between words and ideas as was Shelley. In a letter to William Godwin written in 1800, Coleridge asked him to "write a book on language that would 'destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things'" (1). We can only speculate as to whether or not Shelley was

¹¹ For a detailed analysis see Mark J. Bruhn's essay, "Shelley's Theory of Mind: From Radical Empiricism to Cognitive Romanticism," *Poetics Today* 30.3 (Fall 2009): 373-422.

aware of Coleridge's interest in this debate, but if we can be certain that he shared sentiment.

Much as in *Prometheus Unbound*, the "dramatic action" in this "various world" of the *Hymn* takes place internally, within the imaginary¹² "domain" which we all share with the One Mind and is largely bound up in, if not exclusively dependent on, how these "events" are perceived by the individual mind. Mutability is therefore essential. In fact, it was of continual importance in Shelley's work and no less structurally or ontologically significant in the *Hymn*. It is the emotional marrow of his Skeptical Idealism in that it recognizes the continual possibility for and necessity of change even in the face of immanent disaster. It is, moreover, the cornerstone of the intensity and frenetic vitality inherent in his work, the delicate frame of which is always on the verge of utter collapse. This is arguably one of the most intriguing aspects of his poetry if for no other reason than it allows the reader a glimpse of Shelley's complex, often paradoxical and, at times, apocalyptic view of the world that in the end is yet imbued with hope.

The driving engine of the *Hymn*, and the main concern at hand is, of course, the "Spirit of Beauty." It is the encapsulating idea or "governing deity" of Shelley's entire mythopoeic landscape. A refined understanding of it is central to deciphering Shelley's philosophical system and, complementarily, the incipient metaphasic narrative. While Wasserman argues that the "Intellectual Beauty" and the One Mind are distinctly separate, Shelley appears, in regards to the *Hymn* at least, to use them interchangeably.¹³ To avoid confusion I will follow Wasserman's lead and while suggesting that a more

¹² Not to be interpreted as false or illusory. The imagination for Shelley was something altogether real and immediate.

¹³ All the entities within Shelley's mythological structure are separate, but as I argue later, they are so intimately linked that they often become transposed.

appropriate description of the relationship is that the Power acts in the capacity of an emissary or instrument of the “Intellectual Beauty.” There are earlier instances of this Spirit and its emissary—*Queen Mab* and *Alastor* for example—but nowhere prior to the *Hymn* are they so closely associated with sound or visceral feeling. Nowhere prior have they so closely been on the verge of sensory perception. Here is the well known opening stanza of the *Hymn*.¹⁴

The awful shadow of some unseen Power¹⁵
 Floats though unseen amongst us,—visiting
 This various world with as inconstant wing
 As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.—
 Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,
 It visits with inconstant glance
 Each human heart and countenance;
 Like hues and harmonies of evening,—
 Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—
 Like memory of music fled,—
 Like aught that for its grace may be
 Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery. (1-12)

But even here there is still intimation and mystery, insubstantiation and insistent metaphor, the only apparent path available to us by which this force may be apprehended or even described. The chain of similes in the final five lines only deepens the mystery

¹⁴ It should be noted that rather than provide a stanza by stanza explication of the poem I have included only those passages most relevant to my argument.

¹⁵ As Reiman points out, the Scropes Davies Notebook reads the line thus: “The Lovely shadow of some awful Power...”

and makes that which is immaterial even more so. Keach observes, "What is most arresting about the stanza is the way in which its entire figurative progression enacts the vanishing of . . . [the] . . . 'Power' named in the first three lines" (120). Indeed, the idea seems to vanish even as we attempt to contemplate it, as if the very act of attempted awareness only drives it more quickly from the perceptible universe. There is a spectral quality to the description of its interaction with us and the "various world" that is reminiscent of Shelley's earliest dabbling in spiritualism and the occult, an experience explicitly stated in stanza five.

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
 Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
 And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
 Hopes of high talk with the departed dead. (49-52)

Like the double worlds of life and death mentioned by Earth in act I of *Prometheus Unbound*, Bloom reminds us just how deep the rabbit hole goes. "The Power is unseen at a double remove, for its awful shadow is itself unseen by us, though we can know, beyond the senses, when it has come and when it has gone" (37). So on what we must assume is a subconscious level, we are aware of its passing, but can do nothing to affect its course or interact with it directly, at least at this initial phase. It visits each of us separately—and simultaneously we imagine—"like memory of music fled." We can only intuit the merest lingering impression, but consider it "yet dearer" because of it.

Of particular interest in this passage is no doubt the phrase "beyond the senses." It exists not only to punctuate the ineffable quality of the Power, but emphasizes the relationship between the One Mind and the Individual Mind. As previously mentioned,

Wasserman has insisted that the “various world” suggests not the external world but the “domain of mutability,” but I think he is only partially correct. As penetrating as his understanding of Shelley is, he has a tendency to understate these types of connections. The phrase suggests the link between the inner imaginative world, or “domain,” the external world we perceive, and the world beyond the grave, the world in which the One Mind exists and to which we are connected. It is this connection that allows us to know “beyond the senses” that the Power has moved “unseen amongst us.” It is much the same for Prometheus. He is—due to his immortality—paradoxically aware of the language of the dead because of the connection he shares not only with Jupiter, but with the One Mind. It is worth noting that regardless how transient the idea being conveyed actually is, there are a number of concrete images within the stanza: “wing,” “flower,” “mountain,” as well as light and shadow and sound. While they may be employed as the anchor points for the metaphors that describe the intangibility of the Power, Shelley’s own nascent sense of a proto-environmental system of ethics,¹⁶ or quite simply, his reverence for the natural world, suggest quite strongly that this connection between the Power and the natural world was not only real, but an integral part of the “order of things.” This would seem to support the idea that the “various” world is not limited to any one particular “domain,” but encompasses—at least according to Shelley’s mythic landscape—all the worlds that are, have been, or will yet be, whether perceived or not, whether on this side of the grave or the other.

In her book *The Lyrics of Shelley*, Judith Chernaik describes the poet’s initial experience within the poem, a description that iterates Shelley’s own professed notion of

¹⁶ See *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

what he believed possible through poetry and what he in fact attempted to do or, at the very least, embody. “Suddenly a vision of [the] ideal descends on him...he then becomes an intermediary between two worlds...His vision commits him to believe in the power of the ideal to transform the real” (33). She goes on to differentiate between the *Hymn* and *Mont Blanc* by characterizing the *Hymn* as, “positive, visionary, ecstatic, the record of the poet’s intuitive apprehension of truth” (ibid). Once again, this idea is repeatedly spelled out by Shelley in the *Defense*, *EOC*, and *On Life* as well as reverberated time and again in previous and subsequent poems. Shelley, like Yeats after him, explicitly cast the poet in the role of prophet or “hierophant of an unapprehended inspiration,” but if we can believe the descriptions of the “various world[s]”¹⁷ given by Earth in Act I of *PU*—which I will discuss at length in chapter III—there are at least four worlds between which the poet must act as mediator. “For know there are two worlds of life and death: / One that which thou beholdest, but the other / Is underneath the grave.” It then becomes even more imperative for the poet to understand the language of these worlds if he is to navigate them successfully, especially given the potential for their increasing plurality. The passage implies that this underlying world may itself be a reflection of yet another world and so on ad infinitum, a prospect Shelley, it seems, was unwilling to contemplate. Mutability is then key. As Shelley himself writes two years prior to the composition of the *Hymn*, “Man’s yesterday may ne’er be like his morrow, / Nought may endure but Mutability.” Equally important in this process is the poet’s ability to decipher what he hears during “extraordinary visitations.” To be specific, he must possess—whether by instruction, intuition, or a deep rooted connection or all three—the ability to decipher

¹⁷ This term is used only once in the *Hymn* and is not repeated in *PU*. I employ it here simply to emphasize the connection between the two poems and their subject matter.

these metaphasic dialogues or else the "Spirit" or "unseen Power" will forever remain the merest suggestion of a shadow and "vision[s] of the ideal" will be born ineffectually and void of meaning through this "dim vast veil of tears." There must exist a language that links each of these "domains," as well as and their shadowy counter-parts, even as it transcends them. The "vision of the ideal" would otherwise be rendered meaningless for in it the Spirit must necessarily speak to the poet. What other language is available to it than the language it brings with it, the language beyond the grave?

Wasserman may balk at the idea of too closely connecting the *Hymn* to the *Symposium*, but he quite clearly assumes the tone of the poem is sincere, even if it may, at times, strike some readers as overly self-indulgent or appear to ask for far too great of an imaginative concession.

In effect, [the *Hymn*] is Shelley's effort to locate life's worth exclusively in moments of extraordinary visitations of perfection, to come to terms with the intervening vacancies in life as a necessity imposed by sublunary mutability, and to define a possible immortality. (190)

These "extraordinary visitations" of "human heart and countenance" are carried out not by perfection itself, but by a perfected spirit in the aspect of the "Intellectual Beauty." It is the manifestation of all that it symbolizes, revealing itself in an instant to the visionary poet. The immortality it hints at is not necessarily achieved through the poet's legacy, but through a union with the One Mind, made possible by this "visitation of perfection." It bears repeating that the One Mind is only a single element of Shelley's pantheon. As mentioned previously, the One Mind is subordinate, in a manner of speaking, to the "Intellectual Beauty," in that it is the "governing deity" of Shelley's mythological

structure, a structure that like Christianity, has a trinity at its core. “The all subsuming One, which is Being, the One Mind, which is Existence, and the Power, or ultimate cause...” (222). Yet this hierarchy remains more flexible, or mutable, than its Christian counterpart, but as so, its “visitations” can be arbitrary and unreliable phenomena—as Bloom points out—and this nature is reinforced by the very language of the poem: “unseen,” “various,” “inconstant,” etc. This language also once more emphasizes the gravity of the entire experience and the insistent need on the part of the poet to achieve metaphasia, even if, “No voice from some sublime world hath ever / To sage or poet these responses given.” I will return to this stanza in moment, but the sincerity of the *Hymn* deserves to be addressed further.

Given the complexity of this system and the decade or so it took Shelley to map it—if indeed this process was ever really completed—it would indeed be surprising to promote the idea that Shelley was in jest, but Richard Cronin has done precisely that. He has argued that the divinity of the “governing deity” is largely parody. He points out that the *Hymn* is in actuality an ode and written in the “conventional eighteenth-century practice” of giving the title “hymn” to any poem which addresses the divine or has it as its subject. He includes such examples as Thomas Parnell’s *Hymn to Contentment* and Mark Akenside’s *Hymn to Cheerfulness*. I do not dispute his designation of the convention, but what I do take exception to is Cronin’s assertion that Shelley is simply having us on, or that what is regarded by Bloom and others as a serious critique of Christian theology, is to him simply a perfunctory, even callow, jibe. He insists that the reader is asked to regard the *Hymn* with an “unacceptable gravity” in that “Shelley’s God remains a rhetorical device” at once rendering Shelley, and the poet in general, as

prophets of little more than “rhetorical figures,” a far more vapid and insignificant role than Shelley would ever have had the poet play. He continually iterates his vision of life, particularly the embodiments of Truth and Beauty, throughout the greater part of his opus. Cronin’s reading strikes me as uncharacteristic of Shelley. Shelley was many things, but he was not a poetic prankster. He took his work much too seriously for that. Cronin even goes on to argue that, “[t]he status of the Intellectual Beauty seems to be reduced to that of a personification [and this] technique seems to act as a reminder that Shelley expects us to take the divinity of Intellectual Beauty not much more seriously than Akenside expected his reader to take the divinity of ‘Cheerfulness’” (225-226). In one brief passage Cronin seems content to dismiss Shelley’s entire pantheon and reduce the complexity of his vision to poetic lampoon and an imitation of a trite convention.

He does concede that the “poem is an address to a deity who is designed to be consistent with Shelley’s skepticism, and who is related antagonistically to the Christian God” but almost comically so (229). He further seeks to render impotent the vitality of the poem by arguing that the third stanza—one of the most pivotal in the poem and certainly to the task at hand—is not only inherently skeptical, even hostile, which Shelley certainly was at times—particularly toward rigid spiritual hierarchies—but also that the “Intellectual Beauty” is mere hypothesis, or worse yet, a transient fancy of an overactive mind. He bases this assumption in part on the often quoted lines “No voice from some sublime world hath ever / To sage or poet these responses given,” interpreting this to be an admission of the futility of ever answering the questions posed by the poem. When compared to the insistence in the *Defense*, for example, as well as his letters, we must regard Shelley’s Spirit as far more than base personification and technique. We may

regard it the way Shelley would, at least in the *Hymn* itself, as the potential for a “concrete manifestation of Beauty” in otherwise imperfect states of “vacancy.” Moreover, if the *Hymn* is the first part of Shelley’s great mythopoeic trilogy, as Bloom suggests—and with whom I quite agree—then it is perfectly understandable if the language being described exists in a rudimentary and even incoherent state. Cronin also argues that the language being employed in the description of the “unseen Power” is a hybrid, a synthesis of three varied traditions. “The poem contains three languages; a religious language borrowed from orthodox Christianity, a declamatory language borrowed from the eighteenth-century ode, and a language borrowed from Wordsworth” (230). In this instance I think Cronin is correct, but what he fails to take note of, and what is of special interest in the poem, is not the descriptive language Shelley uses, but the language that he is describing. This is due in no small to the fact that Cronin appears entirely oblivious of the *Hymn*’s connection to *Mont Blanc* or *Prometheus Unbound* or that Shelley even constructed an overarching mythical structure. He simply treats it as a lone specimen and analyzes it based on this inaccurate assumption, and in so doing his analysis fails to hit its mark. He follows a similar tactic to combat the contentious argument of Platonic influence following, in part, Richard Fogle’s advice and simply pretends the argument doesn’t exist.

Let us turn once again to the third stanza

No voice from some sublime world hath ever

To sage or poet these responses given—

Therefore the name of God and ghosts and Heaven,

Remain the records of their vain endeavour,

Frail spells—whose uttered charm might not avail to sever,
 From all we hear and all we see,
 Doubt chance and mutability. (25-31)

If we read this lament as Shelley's suggestion that a metaphasic dialogue with the "Spirit of Beauty" is possible, even immanent, then we can easily obviate an overtly skeptical or antagonistic interpretation without completely dismissing at least a modicum of antichristian sentiment which is certainly present, just not to the extent Cronin suggests. What is being implied here is not that a "voice from some sublime world" will never cross the barrier between our world and the next to offer the poet a "perfect visitation" or that answers to these questions will never be forthcoming, but that it simply hasn't happened yet. The possibility still exists. In fact, the optimism in stanza six implies this quite strongly as the poet admits that "...even now / I call phantoms of a thousand hours / each from a voiceless grave" (63-65). And while the grave may still be "voiceless" at this point, when compared to the evolution of this language of the dead so evident in *Prometheus Unbound*, we understand that it is here only in its most inchoate form and that the poet, in the guise of Prometheus, at last experiences the "perfect visitation." But the *Hymn*, of course, is but the prelude, the first part of a trilogy and the first step in the construction of Shelley's metaphasic narrative.

CHAPTER III

THE MURMURING GRAVE: *MONT BLANC*

Although 1818 may be regarded as Shelley's *Annus Mirabilis*, his achievements up until that point nonetheless deserve more approbation than Stuart Curran has been willing to bestow. He has suggested that the day Shelley left England for the continent he had written, with regard to Keats, "little of comparable magnitude" (4). As he does not elaborate on this comparison one can only speculate as to why he would underestimate the poetic accomplishments reflected in the *Hymn* or *Mont Blanc* or cite specifically which of Keats's poems ostensibly eclipsed them. The amount of scholarship that exists regarding *Mont Blanc* alone is reason enough to consider Curran's declaration with suspicion, and while the poems of 1816 may not generally be regarded as Shelley's most mature work, their subtle philosophical complexities, intricate mythological structures, and scope and beauty of language are just a few of the reasons why he is still discussed today. Moreover, as already mentioned in the preceding chapter, the *Hymn* and *Mont Blanc* are the forerunners of Shelley's greatest mythopoeic creation, and while they may not display the sophistication of *Prometheus Unbound*, it hardly seems justifiable to characterize them as lacking in "comparable magnitude" when placed alongside poems by Keats. We may assume that Curran is comparing Shelley's work thus far to such notable poems as *On Looking Into Chapman's Homer* and *Endymion*, among others (both of which are extraordinary specimens of English Romantic poetry), but tracing this line of speculation—if it is even valid—can only lead to litigious arguments encumbered with personal taste.

I do not here put Curran's otherwise thoughtful criticism on trial any more than he

puts Shelley's legacy on trial—this has all too often been done by far less sympathetic critics¹⁸—but it is important to address his lackluster endorsement of the poems in question because it cuts to the heart of some of the historically prevailing attitudes toward Shelley's work. His reputation has enjoyed periods of critical acclaim and has suffered equally from periods of inattention and even open hostility. This is nothing unique in the field of literary studies, but the tendency (exhibited above) to underestimate Shelley persists, due in no small part to the image of him as some kind of poetic snake-charmer, or worse, an ideological and philosophical charlatan given to hyperbole and fanciful visions that not only fail to illuminate Truth and Beauty, but obscure and even despoil them. Blake before him and Yeats after him have, at times, likewise suffered from these same myopic characterizations. There is fodder enough to feed these views as stories of Shelley's youthful exploits at invoking fell spirits and "poisonous names" abound. Richard Holmes's seminal biography provides numerous such examples. "On [one] occasion, he became [so] obsessed with the idea of finding the secret hiding-place of one of his apparitions in the upper floors of Field Place" that he repeatedly drove a stick into the ceiling, an act for which he was sternly "rebuked" (3). On another occasion he was rumored to have set fire to the family butler, Mr. Laker, presumably in retaliation to a ban on some of his more questionable and even dangerous antics in the kitchen, which for him often served as his own personal laboratory and séance chamber. It was episodes just like these that ultimately led the baffled but determined Sir Timothy to pack him off to Syon House in the hopes that his character and education would draw benefit and cure him of his penchant for mischievous intrigues.

How great was his father's disappointment we can only speculate, but Shelley's

¹⁸ See I.J. Kapstein for example.

tempestuous nature was not in the least bit constrained by his time away at school. If anything his experience at Syon House only exacerbated it and fed his violent imagination all the more, with particular regard to authority—his temperament being naturally opposed to it—but also with regard to the unrelenting torments of many of his fellow classmates who thought him a curious figure indeed and an easy target because of it. He bore these and other affronts with all the casual aplomb of an accidental and poorly trained diplomat as “[t]he least circumstance that thwarted him produced the most violent paroxysms of rage”¹⁹ (ibid 4). Shelley’s abhorrence for naked aggression was equaled only by his hatred of injustice and personal indignity, but whenever he felt slighted or threatened he would violently lash out at his tormentors, even launching at them whatever was to hand, including some of his smaller classmates. He continued to exhibit behavior that only encouraged his antagonists and fueled the hackneyed image of the brilliant but tortured artist. Tom Medwin, the son of his father’s legal agent and perhaps his only friend the first few years at school, recalls, “[h]e was subject to strange, and sometimes frightful dreams, and was haunted by apparitions that bore all the semblance of reality” (ibid 6). It was here, in the halls of Syon House and in the presence of resistance outside the confines of his family that Shelley’s personality truly began to assert itself. His recalcitrant, ever curious, and insatiable nature we see manifest in the *Hymn, Mont Blanc*, and especially in *Prometheus Unbound* have their origins in these emotionally painful episodes. His youth and precocious imagination might be an adequate defense in instances like those mentioned above, but his fascination with the macabre, a fact that later surprised the enigmatic Polidori, retained much of its zeal in adulthood. At a

¹⁹ The quote cited by Holmes is of Sir John Rennie which is in turn quoted in Kenneth Neill Cameron’s *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical*, 1951, p. 7.

gathering at Byron's newly rented Villa Diodati on June 18th of the famous summer of 1816, Byron, almost as fascinated with ghost stories as Shelley, recited a few lines from Coleridge's lurid poem "Christabel." His recital was no doubt dramatic as much hair pulling and breast beating ensued, the chief supplier of the hair and breast being of course Shelley. Much to the consternation of his companions, he shrieked in horror and fled the room in a great passion, having imagined, as he stared at the unsuspecting Mary, a woman whose breasts "had eyes instead of nipples" (ibid 329). It was Polidori, acting in his professional capacity as a physician, who "managed to calm him, and with considerable tact succeeded in extracting the story of [his] hallucination" (ibid).

These striking aspects of his Shelley's personality are not an idle curiosity nor are they of singular concern to biographers. They are of central importance to any attempt to study his poetry as they illuminate the origins of his mythopoeic landscape, or more specifically, the temperament and vital imagination that gave birth to them. The imaginings that lay at the heart of these episodes also established the rudimentary framework for the subsequent, but necessary language of the dead. Both are born from his own fascination, even obsession both as a child and an adult, with "remoter worlds" and all their attendant panoply. It is a great temptation to those new to Shelley to dismiss these episodes, or even his poetry, as mere eccentricity or the desultory thoughts of a fitful mind, but if we are to attain a firm grasp of his overarching philosophical and mythological structure then we must come to terms with these less than flattering images of him and recognize that without them the rest would not have been possible. I would argue that they are just as important to an understanding of him and his work as are his experiences with Plato or Locke, Berkeley or Hume, Wordsworth or Godwin. As Kurtz

has so eloquently stated, “the artist places in a poem concerning death his understanding of reality . . . what a poet says about death critics may discover much of his attitude toward life” (ix).²⁰

After first arriving in Chamonix on 22 July 1816, Shelley wrote to his friend Thomas Love Peacock about his initial impressions of the Alps and their equally ominous glaciers. Exhausted from the trip and unsettled by the “unearthly thunder of an avalanche” heard from the Hotel de Ville de Londres where he, Mary, and Claire Clairmont were staying, he still managed to be characteristically impassioned in his descriptions (Holmes 339). The passage has been quoted numerous times, but justifiably so, considering what it reveals about Shelley’s state of mind prior to the composition of the second part of his mythopoeic trilogy.

Mont Blanc was before us but was covered with cloud, & its base furrowed with dreadful gaps was seen alone. Pinnacles of snow, intolerably bright, part of the chain connected with Mont Blanc shone thro the clouds at intervals on high...The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of extatic wonder, not unallied to madness . . . (*The Letters I*: 358)

Like Coleridge before him and his own experience with the transcendent power of the “dread and silent Mount,”²¹ Shelley likewise felt an, “overall impression...of overwhelming power, gigantic but infinitely remote” (Holmes *ibid*). He later famously described the poem as, “an undisciplined overflowing of the soul” (Ingpen and Peck VI:

²⁰ It bears repeating that Shelley’s fascination was not with death or dying, but with the worlds to which such a gateway could possibly lead and the truths of mind and external reality they might subsequently reveal.

²¹ See “Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni” l. 13

88). I think we can agree with Charles H. Vivian when he suggested that Shelley was simply being “somewhat unkind to his poem” (65). Though the length of a mere summer separated the composition of *Mont Blanc* and the *Hymn*, the growing sophistication of Shelley’s vision is evident. This perhaps above all others is the reason considerably more scholarship has been generated about *Mont Blanc*. The ideas are not necessarily more complex than they are in the *Hymn*—we could certainly never characterize the poem as simplistic—but they do point toward a more refined, slightly less recondite mythopoeic vision. However disparate in their degrees of sophistication the two poems may be, they are both beset with radically divergent interpretations, *Mont Blanc* even more so. While the principle question surrounding the *Hymn* seems to be how much, if any, Shelley’s experience with Plato influenced the poem, the debate surrounding the sources for *Mont Blanc* have only proliferated with time. As Wasserman points out, some critics have continued to trace a Platonic influence beyond the *Hymn* and examine its course through *Mont Blanc*, as Peter Butter does.²² One of the key lines that arrests his attention is the “still cave of the witch Poesy,” and the passing shadows that, we must assume like those in Plato’s cave, are reflections of the external or real world. It is tempting to make this connection, but in this case I think it is a stretch even for Shelley. I think it more likely that these “Ghosts” and “shadows” are reflections cast by the “remoter world” beyond the grave from which the poet seeks answers to the nature of mind and reality.

Others continue to argue for Wordsworth’s imprint, as D.G. James does, or Locke’s influence, like any number of critics (I.J. Kapstein being one) or Hume’s skepticism or Godwin’s radicalism. But rather than spend time tracing these continually proliferating interpretations and their attendant sources. I think it would be more

²² For the complete argument see his book *Shelley’s Idols of the Cave*.

profitable to adhere to the poem itself and trace Shelley's own emerging philosophical and mythical vision. We must still bear in mind its potential and numerous sources, but simultaneously recognize that at some point, his vision exists independent of its antecedents. Moreover, we would do well to heed Wasserman's caveat by avoiding, "[i]nstances of critical distortions through forcing a work of art into the shape of some philosopher's system..." (197). According to him Butter, Kapstein and even Spencer Hall do precisely this, although Hall traced Shelley's sources for *Mont Blanc* after Wasserman voiced such concerns. I think Wasserman's warning is a good general rule to follow when examining any work of art, but I strongly object to his suggestion that the poem is immune to philosophical speculation. "The parts of the poem" he suggests, "...are not available for philosophic analysis, since they are not discrete entities but agents whose energies are complexly engaged in the creation of a new entity" (198). While it is definitely true that *Mont Blanc*—the entire trilogy for that matter—is engaged in the "creation of a new entity," it did not achieve this feat through isolation, but through synthesis and mediation. We can also agree that "Shelley is calling into being not a fragment of reality but a total cosmos," but as mentioned above Shelley's visionary superstructure can and does stand on its own without unnecessarily chaining it to its possible sources, which is a nebulous project anyway (ibid 199). However, suggesting that it exists as some kind of solipsistic entity cordoned off from the external world of ideas is asking far too much of an intellectual sacrifice. We can recognize its potential antecedents and its own independence simultaneously.

Numerous line by line explications of *Mont Blanc* exist, some with considerable merit, such as Bloom's and Wasserman's. Both are enlightening and patient—

Wasserman perhaps more so—but one of the most straightforward is Charles H. Vivian's, which along with the others will be discussed shortly. Others, at least according to Bloom and Wasserman hold less intrinsic value and I have to agree. Kapstein, for example, and even Wasserman's own protégée, Spencer Hall, accuse Shelley of far too many ambiguities, though in all fairness to Hall his is a more penetrating and sympathetic reading. Kapstein appears to lay the blame squarely on the shoulders of Shelley's travelling companions. "Had Shelley composed the poem in tranquility, he might not have permitted the tensions that disrupt its logic and obscure its meaning" (1046). We might also add to Kapstein's list of culprits the thunderous avalanches or the incessant bleating of sheep. It is certainly true that the natural, external world had an enormous impact on the poem's development even as the "summits excited . . . a sentiment of extatic wonder, not unallied to madness," and so it might only be appropriate to assume that his day to day domestic affairs may have had their impact as well, but to suggest this is the reason his logic is confused is to skirt the issue of the poem's complexity—a complexity all too familiar with Shelley—or to give in to fallacies of questionable cause. Shelley's poetry undeniably has its problems—and some may well be lapses in logic—but the solutions are never so facile as Kapstein avers. I will attempt to produce my own reading of the poem with regard to the subject at hand while supplying, when necessary, the explications I have found most useful and the most relevant to my argument. I am not proposing a completely new interpretation of Shelley's vision—in fact I agree to a large extent with Wasserman and Bloom—but a new perspective on the form of communication within his "total cosmos." The first chapter dealt more with the dueling interpretations of Shelley's source material in that his language of the dead was still in its

most inchoate form. This chapter up until this point has been concerned primarily with Shelley's own personal imaginative development as it bears on the development of his mythopoeic landscape. As mentioned earlier, while barely a summer separated the composition of the first and second parts of the trilogy, the metaphasia is nonetheless more prominent—though still not fully formed—in *Mont Blanc* than it is in the *Hymn*.

By necessity *Mont Blanc* is more complicated, but if it is ambiguous, as Kapstein has argued, even paradoxical, it is intentionally so. There is a definitive artistic tension in the poem, but not because Shelley was distracted or lacked a serene environment in which to work. In fact, had *Mont Blanc* and the River Arve not so dramatically stimulated his imagination the poem would not be what it is. Moreover, we have no evidence to suggest that his stay at Chamonix was any tenser than were his accommodations while composing his other major works. Shelley doubtless apprehended what he believed to be the physical and natural manifestation of an "unseen Power" and it pervades the poem. As Bloom suggests, "The subject of *Mont Blanc* is . . . our 'affrighted sense of the great world,' our awe before creation, and more particularly our fear of some of its aspects" (Bloom 22). As prone to trepidation before these aspects of the world as anyone—arguably even more so—Shelley nonetheless realized that to truly understand the relationship "between the human mind and the external world" one had to be willing to probe even the deepest and darkest of ravines (Ferguson 335).

As in chapter one, I will limit my analysis here to the passages most relevant to the emergence of Shelley's metaphasic narrative and such an analysis must necessarily begin, for a number of reasons, with the opening stanza. It is undeniably one of the most complex in the poem and it is precisely here where Kapstein is most concerned with

Shelley's ambiguities and ostensible failures in logic.

The everlasting universe of things
 Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
 Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
 Now lending splendor, where from secret springs
 The source of human thought its tribute brings
 Of waters,—with a sound but half its own,
 Such as a feeble brook will oft assume
 In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
 Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,
 Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
 Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves. (1-11)

The syntax is a cause for some degree of confusion, and it is at moments like these that the temptation to underestimate Shelley or attest the failure of his language is the greatest. Kapstein contends that while the "its" in line five refers to "the source of human thought," the "its" of line six is an ambiguous referent that points both to the "source of human thought" and the "everlasting universe of things." The question then becomes: what has a "sound but half its own?" The "everlasting universe of things" or "the source of human thought?" No other critic has read the poem with such an eye for the mechanics of the language and it must be conceded that Kapstein's objections are valid to a point. Shelley's syntactical structure can be somewhat abstruse, but again it is intentionally so and we can be fairly confident that he intended for us to read the opening lines in a variety of ways. The puns identified by Frances Ferguson are evidence of an obsessively

meticulous arrangement that defies haphazard construction or unintentional ambiguity.

F.R. Leavis has voiced concerns regarding this first stanza and the poem as a whole that are even more emphatic than Kapstein's. "The metaphorical and the actual, the real and the imagined, the inner and the outer, could hardly be more unsortably and indistinguishably confused" (212, 235). The key to distinguishing between these pairings, which is understandably elusive, will become evident shortly. Leavis is certainly no fool, but I think he, like Kapstein and other noteworthy critics, simply mistakes the complexity of what Shelley was attempting to convey for a lack of understanding of his own subject. This is ironic, considering the cosmos in question is of Shelley's own design, but perhaps Kapstein and Leavis's confusion is simply the result of a lack of forbearance on their part. In responding to this characteristic dismissal Bloom writes,

We must assume the Arve river and the ravine it rushes through, in order to comprehend that we are dealing with metaphor, albeit inverted metaphor. What compounds the reversal, and angers Leavis, is that Shelley is not content to describe the second term of his metaphor in its own particulars, but rather alternates its presentation by extensively looting the components of the suppressed first term...At worst he is liable to the charge of purposeful obscurity . . . (23)

The charge of "purposeful obscurity" is decidedly more palatable than "indistinguishably confused," but given Shelley's sincere desire to be understood, I think it more likely that the confusion is simply an unintentional side effect of the mapping of his mythopoeia. Once all these intricate trappings are boiled away, we will find that the truth is far simpler, though not simplistic, than we can at this stage imagine. So the

simple answer to the question posed above is that the “its” refers both to the “everlasting universe of things” and the “source of human thought,” but this is not mere coyness. It punctuates the interdependence of Shelley’s mythological structure and the transient, but proximal relationship between all the referents *of* that structure. The phrase “but half their own” further emphasizes this interdependence because it suggests an almost symbiotic ideational relationship between the corresponding source and recipient. In other words, the train of ideas does not simply flow in one direction. As Ferguson points out, when confronted with the difficulty of answering whether or not the brook, as the individual mind, remains a brook even when it is overtaken by a river that is the sum total of all thought and all objects—perceptually speaking of course—the question,

...seems like a bad riddle, [and] forcibly demonstrates Shelley’s procedure throughout the poem of insisting on the changeableness of the identity of any individual entity. For the brook, in becoming a part of the river, both loses its identity as a brook and transcends itself, gaining access to a forcefulness it never had as a “feeble brook.” (337)

The “domain of mutability” identified by Wasserman resurfaces and urges us to acknowledge Shelley’s notable refusal to define exclusionary agents of externality and internality. As has been suggested, the only true permanence within Shelley’s mythological structure is the “everlasting” flow where the eternally transient charts at least a part of its course within the stationary and the finite, both of whose values are subject to transposition. If the “everlasting universe of things,” the sum total of thought and object, is “now dark—now glittering,” rapid in its wavelike movements and mutable as it “flows through the mind,” something so potentially abstract and variously

representative, it must follow that the designators and their referents will by nature or necessity shift and become transposed in their relationship to one another, precisely in the same manner as the careful, albeit recondite, arrangement of the syntax, a syntax that “loot[s] the components of the suppressed first term.” In this light we can imagine a shifting or phasing of sorts between all the components present, between “the universe of things” as the One Mind and the Individual Mind, between “secret springs” and “the source of human thought,” even between the “wild woods” and “mountains lone.” One cannot help but imagine this system as an ontological algebra equation where the transposition and substitution of values changes the results, not by compounding the metaphor, so to speak, but by inverting it, as Bloom suggests, in order to emphasize this process. In speaking about what he suggests is a vulgar distinction between ideas and external objects (the lingering specters of Locke and Hume no less) Shelley writes, “the existence of distinct individual minds . . . is likewise found to be a delusion” (Ingpen and Peck VI: 196). So it is in this way that Jupiter may act in the capacity of the dark shadow of Prometheus²³ in that these forces, these identities, are likewise inextricably linked at a truly fundamental level. “The view of life,” he writes, “presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy, is that of unity” (ibid 196).

Coming from any number of other poets one might think this an elaborate ruse, but considering the source we can only recognize it as yet another palpable irony. The guiding principle and ultimate goal of this ornate and exceptionally complex structure is nothing more than unity, unity between complex and sometimes paradoxical structures, between the phenomenal and the noumenal, and between that which is perceived and that which can only be intuited. Of course one of the primary goals at stake here is to move

²³ This idea is discussed at length in Chapter III.

beyond mere intuition and into direct apprehension and communication. It is a revelation that is elegant for its simplicity. Leavis and Kapstein would no doubt jeer at such a notion, but how else are we to characterize the confession of the attempted invocations of the dead in stanza five of the *Hymn*? How do we characterize its cautiously hopeful echo in stanza three of *Mont Blanc* if not as another attempt to bring about a convergence of the external observable world and the unobservable world that exists, we are reminded, “beneath the grave?”

Some say that gleams of a remoter world
 Visit the soul in sleep,—that death is slumber,
 And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber
 Of those who wake and live.—I look on high;
 Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled²⁴
 The veil of life and death? Or do I lie
 In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep
 Spread far around and inaccessibly
 Its circles? (49-57)

The fact that death is here equated with sleep is, of course, nothing new. This convention is quite old, but just as in stanza one the prevailing metaphor is inverted. This repetition not only continues to stress the importance of convergence and unity as it bears on the incipient metaphasia, it further refutes the charge that Shelley was hopelessly lost in his own confused metaphors, if for no other reason than the inversion is repeated with

²⁴ As a side note, there has been some debate as to whether or not “unfurled” is to be read as “upfurled.” I think the problem can be solved simply enough if we realize the poet is asking whether or not he is still asleep in the “remoter world” where the “veil of life and death” has been removed, or if he has awakened and the barrier has been reestablished.

identical precision. The duplication underscores the interconnectedness of the elements within the poem. They do not confuse them. And so too like the first stanza there are here a couple of possible interpretations that rest on the very particular but characteristically inverted metaphor. Fortunately, I don't think there can be any confusion as to the referent of the "its" in line 51. It clearly refers to death. The question that concerns us is what the referent of "shapes" is: death or the "busy thoughts" of "those who wake and live"? If we read the passage as the shapes of death outnumbering the thoughts of "those who wake and live," it would suggest a nearly infinite number of "remoter worlds," each with the potential for duplication. As mentioned earlier I doubt even Shelley was prepared to accept this. His mythological structure is too precarious to support such a possibility.

Perhaps the solution lies in reading the shapes as representing not the worlds themselves, but the various means of accessing the more manageable double, treble, or as suggested by Earth in *Prometheus Unbound*, quadruple worlds. Conversely, we can read the passage as intending the "busy thoughts" of "those who wake and live" to outnumber the possible shapes of death. Shapes may simply refer to the ways in which "those who wake and live" may die or the various personal manifestations of their lives "beneath the grave." This may further reinforce the eternity of the "source of human thought" if these "busy thoughts" do indeed outnumber the possible shapes of death. This can lead to endless speculation and I do not wish to dwell too long on this because it is, for my purposes, only a secondary concern. What is important is that both these readings are possible. Referencing the years between the composition of *Queen Mab* and *Mont Blanc*, Lloyd Abbey writes that, "Shelley forged a new confidence in imaginative power. The key to this new assurance was a concept of imagination as a faculty of intuitive reason,

transcending the uncertainties of phenomenal illusion and intuiting a noumenal reality inaccessible to the senses” (13). But Shelley was not content with mere intuition as the trilogy quite clearly demonstrates. He was obsessed with the idea of pushing beyond intuitive reason and making direct contact with “noumenal reality.” And while this reality may have remained inaccessible in the *Hymn* and to a large extent in *Mont Blanc*—although the cracks in the barrier between phenomena and noumena do begin to appear—the barrier is fully breached in *Prometheus Unbound*. It was his hope that the persistent evolution of the language of the dead would allow for much more than indistinct gleams that come to us in sleep. It was his hope that this newly constructed language would, “open the otherwise closed doors to the dark corridors of thought that lie beyond ordinary conception” (Wasserman 208).

I have continued to rely on Wasserman’s detailed map of the relationships in Shelley’s mythopoeic structure, and I see no reason to complicate matters by proposing a completely different one, though I will shortly propose an appropriate addition. After all, my entire argument concerning the language of the dead rests on the belief that his is the correct one and that by consulting this map we begin to see even more clearly the interconnectedness of Shelley’s ideas. We begin to see that even if they are, at times, purposefully obscure, they do not represent a lapse in logic or the ramblings of a conflicted mind, as Kapstein has argued. Quite the contrary, the very complexity of this structure suggests a definite order, and it is this order that not only allows for the possibility of a language of the dead to exist, but for its meaningful exchange to take place. The key to understanding this idea is twofold. Firstly, we must recognize, as argued above, that the overriding principle and goal of Shelley’s “Intellectual

Philosophy” is unity. This, according to Shelley, can only be truly achieved by building a bridge between the phenomenal and the noumenal and by unfurling (or upfurling) the “veil of life and death” to witness that which has previously been beyond perception. In this light we can see that Shelley’s repeated invocations of “remoter worlds” and “ghosts” do not represent an idle or juvenile fascination with the occult.²⁵ This may certainly have been the case when he was the mischievous child of Field Place or the indignant firebrand of Syon House. Nonetheless, this previously ungoverned passion ultimately gave way to a thoughtful and genuine desire to prove that “[s]ilence and solitude” are more than mere vacancy. Secondly, the key to understanding these complexities also lies in Wasserman’s convincing outline of the relationships in the first stanza. He posits that the river itself represents the “everlasting universe of things” that flows through the ravine of the One Mind, while the brook in line seven represents the Individual mind. Let us consider this relationship and the overall mythological structure more carefully.

The hierarchy of the “Intellectual Philosophy” can be mapped as follows: the “Intellectual Philosophy” itself, or rather its spirit, as it is both system and agent, is the presiding deity that is permeated by the “everlasting universe of things.” Beneath that is the trinity of the “all subsuming One [being]...the One Mind [existence] and...Power [ultimate cause].” Beneath this exists the Individual Mind as the “feeble brook.” The “everlasting universe of things,” as the river, flows through the ravine of the One Mind, which is itself connected to the Individual Mind. The One Mind, as ravine, in turn connects the brook to the “source of human thought” that is brought about by the continuous and everlasting flow of the river. The river simultaneously represents

²⁵ Nor does it singularly represent, as I hoped I have demonstrated, anti-Christian sentiment.

mutability and change, even as it is eternal, even as it flows ceaselessly. The “unseen Power” (ultimate cause) is synonymous with the “Intellectual Beauty,” which is distinctly separate from the “Intellectual Philosophy.”²⁶ The Power as Beauty or Permanence is represented within the poem as Mont Blanc itself. This seems fairly obvious, but I believe it bears repeating if we are to see the structure in its entirety. It is this Power as Permanence, specifically, that facilitates the continuous flow of the “everlasting universe of things.” The mountain “yet gleams on high:—the power is there,” while the river rushes onward “ceaselessly” as it “bursts and raves” reflecting the dark and terrible Beauty of the mountain. It is a “still and solemn power of many sights, / And many sounds, and much of life and death” (127-129). We have to read this as a gross understatement, indeed, if the very river is a universe in and of itself; either that, which seems too crude for Shelley, or it is meant to convey our own limited perception of that universe. If the river is truly eternal, then the mountain, both as Power (Ultimate Cause)²⁷ and Permanence, is its manifestation. It is the embodiment of this element which has risen to the level of discrete entity. This may seem counterintuitive because if the Power is also Ultimate Cause, then it should precede the “everlasting universe of things” and in fact it does, but only perceptually. We must assume that the adjective “unseen,” which is attributed to Power in the *Hymn*, has the equivalent meaning of shapeless. It has, up until this point, not only been inaudible, but formless and impossible to describe. It preceded the river, but the Individual Mind can only become aware of it after the connection to the One Mind and the “universe of things” has been established. The Power as the Ultimate

²⁶ There has been some confusion on this point, but it is easily clarified when we realize that the former is entity or agent and the latter is system or structure.

²⁷ I here and afterward diverge from Wasserman and capitalize Ultimate Cause in that it is simply another name for Power, a principle entity of the “Intellectual Philosophy.”

Cause of the “everlasting” flow can now be apprehended even if it was, initially, “[r]emote, serene, and inaccessible.” The river, moreover, is the natural extension of Ultimate Cause. It originates from the mountain to become all thought and all object. It cannot by nature be contained within the Power as Ultimate Cause. It must flow ceaselessly outward to avoid annihilation by that which brought it into existence. In other words, its permanence depends exclusively on its ability to forever be in motion.

We may finally add to this mythological hierarchy²⁸ the discrete entity most essential to my argument: Unity as Ultimate Consciousness. Wasserman does not choose to identify it, at least not as something distinctly separate or equal in importance to Power or the all subsuming One. The reason for this may be that it is not so much a distinctly separate entity as it is the cohesive force that allows the structure and its connections to exist. So in a sense Wasserman was correct not to make the distinction, not because it is not a separate entity, but because its existence depends entirely on the overall structure. The link defines its separateness. This separateness is further emphasized by the fact that there exists a consciousness, in varying degrees, within each entity. How could there not be if, as Shelley insists time and again, that they are all connected? The One Mind and the Individual Mind are certainly conscious, as is the Power, and so too we must assume is the “everlasting universe of things.” If this holds true, then there must be a language that transcends each entity and each connection, remembering that the “Intellectual Philosophy” abhors exclusion. As Wasserman points out,

Since mind can be neither the cause nor basis of all things and can only perceive, each mind is a center to which all things in the surrounding

²⁸ Shelley naturally despised hierarchies and would have refuted this designation, but I use the term for the sake of simplicity.

circle of existence must be referred for their existence; but since nothing exists except in the perception, each mind is the circumference "within which all things are contained." (141)

We must be careful not to confuse containment with exclusion. Even as Shelly describes the inaccessible circles of sleep, we can take comfort in the knowledge that the characteristically inverted metaphor, the ostensible paradox, is our very means of escape.

I have limited my analysis to the first and third stanzas for very particular reasons. The first stanza is, arguably, the most pivotal moment in the entire trilogy. It is here that the link between the three poems is the strongest, born out in the simple but effective identification of the five principle mythological entities: Intellectual Beauty, the All Subsuming One, the One Mind, Power, and Unity. Moreover, it encapsulates the relational pairs with which Shelley was most concerned: the One Mind and the Individual Mind, objective and subjective reality, all knowledge and personal knowledge, permanence and mutability, and so forth. And, as I hope I have demonstrated, it has led us to the discover of the very entity that allows for the very possibility of metaphasic communication. We witnessed its invocation in the *Hymn* and its incipience in *Mont Blanc*. We can now direct our attention to its subtle actualization in *Prometheus Unbound*.

CHAPTER IV

A SOUND OF VOICES: *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

Like much of his work--*Mont Blanc* and *Alastor* stand as two of the most salient examples--Shelley's first inspirations for what would later become his masterpiece were topographical in nature. The staggering cliffs and frozen summits of the Alps and Apennines excited his imagination on more than one occasion. His attempt to escape the "nasal and abbreviated cacophony of the French" in March of 1818 provided one such inspiration that would lay the foundation for his Promethean epic (*The Letters* II: 4). Delayed by an officious censor near Les Echelles²⁹ he wrote, "Under the dominion of this tyranny the inhabitants of the fertile valleys bounded by these mountains are in a state of the most frightful poverty and disease" (95). The simplistic dualism of this initial reaction, however, would never manifest itself simplistically within the poem. Its starkly complicated paradoxes, skeptical idealism, and—arguably—Platonic revenants have accorded it understandable, if intermittent, attention. Naturally enough, *Prometheus Unbound* continues to be the subject of contentious debate. David Bromwich has suggested that the "modern prejudice" toward Shelley has all but disappeared, but even as his once tarnished reputation has benefited from the reevaluations of Bloom and Pottle, his work has continued to present enormous challenges. One such challenge, and the subject of this chapter, is the actualization of the language of the dead, particularly significant in acts I and III. While still in its most incipient form in the *Hymn* and although more audible, but still inchoate in *Mont Blanc*, the metaphasia is undeniably apparent in the final poem of Shelley's great mythopoeic trilogy. The culmination of this

²⁹ A fuller account of the episode can be found in Richard Holmes' *Shelley: The Pursuit*. New York: Penguin Books, 1975. (414-415).

progression is found in two scenes in particular. The first is found in the exchange between Prometheus and Earth in act I. Wasserman has argued that the coherency of the narrative between the two is an accidental and dramatic feature of the poem, but the “paradox” he identifies is, in fact, resolved by his own reading of the relationship between Prometheus and Jupiter.

The poem begins, of course, with Prometheus having already been chained to a precipice in the Caucasus for three thousand “sleep-unsheltered hours” and who only now “hate[s] no more.” The impetus for his change of heart is obscure, but he nonetheless wishes “the Curse once breathed on...[Jupiter]...recall[ed],” both in the sense of remembrance and recantation. Necessarily he asks, “what was that curse? for ye all heard me speak,” but not to anyone in particular. The question is addressed to the incorporate spirits, which Shelley happily provides in the forms of mountains, air, whirlwinds, and water. He conspicuously leaves out any manifestation of fire; denied, perhaps, sympathetic access to Prometheus since it was fire which got him into such a position in the first place. Unsurprisingly, the Voices of the elements respond, but in a language Prometheus ostensibly cannot understand and to which he only replies, “I hear a sound of voices---not the voice / Which I gave forth.” Thus follows an exchange between Prometheus and Earth that Wasserman describes as a, “complex and paradoxical dramatic hypothesis” (266). He goes on to suggest that, “the reader must accept the explicit statement that Earth’s language is really different from Prometheus” and moreover, “the reader must assume that Prometheus is in fact speaking a soliloquy which, quite by chance, happens to form a coherent dialogue with the Earth” (266). There is a second and equally “paradoxical” exchange--which I will discuss later—between Earth and Asia

towards the end of act III. Wasserman contends that the answer Earth gives is identical to the following one, but there is a subtle difference he does not identify and is only revealed when compared to her recounting of the myth of Zoroaster in act I.

Prometheus

Obscurely through my brain like shadows dim
Sweep awful thoughts, rapid and thick.--I feel
Faint, like one mingled in entwining love,
Yet 'tis not pleasure.

The Earth

No, thou canst not hear:
Thou art immortal, and this tongue is known
Only to those who die...

Prometheus

And what art thou,

O melancholy Voice? (I. i. 146-151)

As detailed and profitable as Wasserman's overall explication of the poem is, his explication of this particular feature seems incomplete. The blind acceptance he proposes is patently uncharacteristic of the kind of imaginative freedom Shelley so scrupulously attempted to convey in much of his poetry; a kind of freedom that could only be achieved by following such paradoxes to their inevitable ends. What Wasserman is proposing is that the paradox is a singularly dramatic convention, but if the function of the language of the dead is examined more closely, it reveals far greater imaginative and specific intent for which Wasserman gives Shelley credit. In this instance, I think, he fails prey to what

Bloom has described as the “contemporary danger” of the poem; namely, “readers [who credit] a very subtle poet with too little awareness of what he was doing” (95). Assuming, however, that Wasserman is correct in his reading of Jupiter--and I think he is--Jupiter is, in fact, “not a being or autonomous power, but only the dark shadow of Prometheus” (258). And herein lies the very answer to the paradox. Consider the opening of act III:

Jupiter

Rejoice! henceforth I am omnipotent.
 All else has been subdued to me--alone
 The soul of man, like unextinguished fire,
 Yet burns towards Heaven with fierce reproach and doubt
 And lamentation and reluctant prayer,
 Hurling up insurrection, which might make
 Our antique empire insecure . . . (3-9)

If we read Jupiter as the enslaved, bifurcated mind of Prometheus, the manifestation of “mind-forged restraints” which Prometheus has imposed upon himself, then he is symbolic of imaginative death-as-mental-enslavement. Jupiter in this sense is not immortal. He exists only because Prometheus has willed him into existence. He is “only what Prometheus has resigned” (Wasserman 258). Consequently, Jupiter is able to hear the language of the dead precisely because he *is* the death-as-enslavement of Prometheus. The “lamentation and reluctant prayer” is the language of mortality raised in “fierce reproach” to a now doomed monarch, a language Jupiter so clearly understands that he recognizes in it his “empire insecure.” The “insurrection” fomented by mankind is not what destroys Jupiter, but the audible “reproach” stands as a necessary foreshadowing of

his immanent destruction, a destruction brought about by Prometheus's redemption and imaginative renewal. Fifty lines later the Car of the Hour arrives bearing Demogorgon, the anomalous and self-proclaimed child of Jupiter, who quickly pulls his terrified "father" down into the expectant abyss where they must "dwell together in darkness." Begging, at last, for mercy, Jupiter mistakenly proclaims that even Prometheus "would not doom me thus," but he has, in fact, done precisely that. Jupiter is doomed the very moment Prometheus renounces his curse.

It doth repent me: words are quick and vain;

Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine.

I wish no living thing to suffer pain. (I. i. 303-305)

Bloom has suggested that the process of renewal begins earlier, before Prometheus has even heard the curse, but this seems premature. Prometheus clearly knows that he has cursed Jupiter and expresses remorse for having done so, but until he actually hears it spoken again and knows precisely *how* he cursed him he can never fully understand for what it is he asks forgiveness. If the crime, in this sense, *is* the curse, he cannot receive absolution until the charges, so to speak, are read back to him. Only then can the process of renewal begin.

The fact that Jupiter hears the language of the dead argues quite compellingly that Prometheus, at least on some imaginative level, hears it as well. He does not know what he hears for, the language to him is only "shadows dim" and "awful thoughts," but the fact that he hears anything at all reveals that the dialogic paradox is not something formed "quite by chance" nor is it even paradoxical. It is altogether an intentional conceit that at once reveals the truly disastrous potential of the poem. The language spoken by

Earth is simply coherent to Prometheus on a subtler imaginative register. Relating the Shelleyan dialectic present here to that of Blake's Orc cycle, Bloom argues that, like Blake, Shelley was attempting a "more refined dialectic...in which progression through contraries gives way to a vision of finality in which the unceasing creation of the artist is seen to be a type of individual revelation, of an apocalyptic salvation open to all" (93). The overriding theme of the poem, after all, is one of--and I use this in every sense of the word--a titanic struggle towards overthrow and renewal. The poem is not lacking in dramatic action, despite the traditional lament that it is limited to act I, however internalized and imaginative that action might be. Revolution and renewal, in a very real sense, invariably begin as thoughts in conflict with opposing ideas. Consequently, the bulk of the dramatic action takes place within this narrow imaginative register to which Prometheus has been bound, the precipice itself being symbolic of the totality of his imaginative will in conflict with its own potential for tyranny. As a result of this rupture, the majority of the poem is narrated from the perspective of "Earth and her elements," who choose only to speak in the language of mortality, a language which represents, more fatally, Prometheus's potential for total imaginative collapse. The reason we are given for this choice on the part of Earth and her counterparts, despite considerable protest by Prometheus, is for fear of Jupiter's wrath. "I dare not speak like life," Earth declares, "lest Heaven's fell King / Should hear, and link me to some wheel of pain / More torturing than the one whereon I roll" (I. i. 140-142). Yet her trepidation is the result of her ignorance. It is not only belated, in a sense, but ultimately misdirected. The word "life" has, for Shelley, a number of meanings as Wasserman has pointed out. "Life" in this particular instance refers "not to human existence," or even to "unity of mind," as

it does elsewhere in the poem, but simply to those who do not die, among them the immortal Jupiter and his immortal and better half. Jupiter's immortality, however, is contingent upon the immortality of the Promethean will and the duration of its lack of cohesion. Nonetheless, Earth believes that by speaking the language of the dead Jupiter will not hear her, but this "dark embodiment," Prometheus' penchant for self-destruction through tyranny, already distinguishes what to Prometheus are only "awful thoughts" both because he is irrevocably linked to Prometheus and because he is already fated to die. Earth's saving grace is not her gift for language, but Jupiter's vanity. His every thought is consumed with the "soul of man . . . [that] burns towards Heaven with fierce reproach and doubt." In his mind, the threat represented by Prometheus has already been subdued.

"Prometheus as a poem," Bloom continues, "is complex enough, and quite ironic enough...to anticipate the defeat of its own myth. Prophetic irony, constantly aware of the 'contrast between expectation and fulfillment,' is a basic element in all of Shelley's mythopoeic poems" (93). "Defeat," at first glance, is a curious, but appropriate choice of words. The expectation, of course, is that tyranny will be destroyed, the world "will heave, unstain'd with blood," and Prometheus and Asia will "talk of time and change / As the world ebbs and flows, [themselves] unchanged." But even as Jupiter is dethroned and Prometheus finally released, the tone of anxious expectation is not diminished. The "dark shadow" is not lifted, nor even torn away, but, we must assume, is returned, not *to* but "*underneath*"³⁰ the grave."

The Earth

For know there are two worlds of life and death:

³⁰ My italics.

One that which thou beholdest, but the other
 Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
 The shadows of all forms that think and live
 till death unite them, and they part no more. (I. i. 195-199)

This is a complicated teleology to which Wasserman and Bloom, unfortunately, devote insufficient attention. In spite of the current trend to prove otherwise, Prometheus is, I would argue, the only truly autonomous being in the poem. He is the only one that actually has a choice. Unlike the giant Antaeus, invincible so long as he remains in contact with the earth, Prometheus draws no such strength from his mother. Three thousand years chained to a rocky precipice have not sustained his powers in the least. The earth of this myth cycle is an essentially helpless entity who can only watch as her son is brutally tortured over the course of three millennia. She cannot even effectively communicate to him her despair at his suffering. Apollo and Ocean exist only to carry out Jupiter's terrible but short-lived will or to bear witness to his downfall. And Asia seems to exist purely for the ultimate benefit of her tormented lover to whom even the "foul tyrant both of Gods and Humankind" owes his very existence. Prometheus himself revealed the limits of his tormenter's power when he first spoke the curse. "O'er all things but thyself I gave thee power, / And my own will." Of course, we as readers only learn this after the fact. In actuality, it is the Phantasm of Jupiter that repeats the curse. And it is only here that we discover that Jupiter, himself a "dark shadow," also has a shadow in the form of the Phantasm and, if we can believe him, a "detested prodigy" in the figure of Demogorgon. "All the Gods / are there," Earth assures us. "And Demogorgon...And he, the Supreme Tyrant." So naturally enough, how do all these shadows and forms fit

together? With whom is Jupiter reunited? Demogorgon or his own "other" self "beneath the grave?" And, perhaps most significantly, if Jupiter already possesses a shadow in this double world, where is the original phantasm of Prometheus? Earth declares:

. . . one of these shall utter

The curse which all remember. Call at will

Thine own ghost, or the ghost of Jupiter . . . (I. i. 209-211)

The reader must take further pause at this statement. If Prometheus' shadow is already above the grave and has been so for, at the very least, thirty centuries, why then does Earth bid him to "Call at will / [his] own ghost?" We are, as Wasserman has suggested, being asked to entertain a great deal. As soon as one paradox is resolved, another seems to take its place. However, the mythic hierarchy the Earth claims to exist--her own failure notwithstanding--does not contradict itself, at least not in conventional terms

I would like to pause and address the current trend mentioned above; namely, the concerted opposition to the idea of the Prometheus' autonomy. While the preceding interpretation of the specific relationship between Prometheus and Jupiter may be regarded as traditional in this respect, my main concern here is, of course, the function of the language of the dead. However, John Reider, in his essay, "The 'One' in Prometheus Unbound," offers an alternate reading of this relationship. "There are two major categories of interpretation . . . those which grant Prometheus primary responsibility for Jupiter's overthrow, and those which do not" (776). He argues that the first view is "demonstrably inaccurate" in that "one must recognize that the disunity of the 'One' makes the issue of responsibility irresolvably ambiguous" (776). The issue at stake here is not purely one of responsibility, but of dialectical comprehension. However, one

cannot assert the autonomy of Prometheus without also addressing the responsibility Reider calls into question. And while Reider never directly disputes Wasserman's reading of Jupiter as the dark embodiment of Prometheus, he does, at the very least, fire a shot over his bow. "Assuming that Jupiter is not a mere epiphenomenon of Prometheus," he contends, "the poem's better readers conclude that some kind of alliance must exist between Prometheus' moral will and historical necessity" (778). Stuart Sperry, in his article, "Necessity and the Role of the Hero in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*" goes even further. Responding to Frederick Pottle's essay, "The role of Asia in the Dramatic Action of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*," he argues that Pottle, in his attempt to contravene the prevailing opinion that there is only one action in the whole of the play, "approaches the problem from the wrong direction. In claiming parity for Asia, Pottle--like virtually every critic before him--assumes the autonomy of Shelley's hero" (243). Reider cites Sperry's essay in direct relation to this idea, but that fact that the poem's "better readers" acknowledge that Prometheus has a moral will to begin with would suggest that assuming "the autonomy of Shelley's hero" is, in fact, not the wrong approach. Reider seems to confirm this, at least in part, by continuing to emphasize a very distinct Promethean will. "Purification is Prometheus's project," he writes. "The project of purification founds the alliance of free moral will and necessity on the opposing senses of the 'One' as individual and totality" (782). And while the question of responsibility for Jupiter's overthrow and the unity of the "One" mind may still present a challenge, one can only conclude that Reider must ultimately disagree with Sperry's contention that Prometheus' autonomy has ever truly been in doubt.

Consider again the complex relationship of shadows: Prometheus's own "dark

shadow," the product of his "abdicated mental powers" is not created, necessarily, but is drawn forth from a vast and unseen necropolis. Jupiter is born into life through death. The Christian symbolism is undeniable, but it makes perfect sense given the conflation of Pagan and Christian myths observed in the vision given to Prometheus by the furies in act I. Consequently, the shadow that takes Jupiter's place is not bound to Prometheus, but doubles instead as a phantasmal version of the "Supreme Tyrant" himself. We must remember that the hierarchy Earth is describing represents the mythic structure of the poem as it is, not as it was or how it could be, at least so far as she perceives it. In fact, the paradox--and I continue to use Wasserman's term--is not limited to the miraculous coherency of the dialogue, but extends to Earth's description of this shadow world, its relationship to the living world, and the role of the personae in both. And even though Earth continues to insist that the language she employs is incomprehensible to Prometheus, the assurance is plagued by doubt and amazement. "How canst thou hear / Who knowest not the language of the dead?" she asks. The "dramatic paradox" that we as readers are supposed to accept on faith is quite lost on her. The long deferred resolution lies in understanding what Earth fails to understand: the dialogic and imaginative registers accessible both to Prometheus and Jupiter. By telling Prometheus that he may call on his own ghost Earth is, in fact, telling him that he may call on Jupiter. The "Supreme Tyrant," the "ghost of Jupiter," and the Phantasm mentioned in the passage are one and the same.

Demogorgon alone is unique in relation to this hierarchy. He has no shadow because he *is* shadow. He is the "tremendous gloom" and the vehicle whereby Jupiter is returned to his proper place "underneath the grave." He is the "detested prodigy" of

Jupiter in the sense that he is the manifestation of his downfall and, more specifically, the inevitable outcome of the traditional mythic structure. "I am thy child," he says, "as thou wert Saturn's child." Uranus was overthrown by Saturn and Saturn in turn was overthrown by Jupiter, who being the corrupted and resigned imaginative offspring of Prometheus, is himself overthrown by his own offspring. The power struggle is a predictable and very Oedipal mythic sequence. Demogorgon, however, has no shadow precisely because he is only function. He is only a part of the "One" mind of Prometheus. He is Prometheus's imaginative will reasserting itself. The "irresolvably ambiguous" problem of responsibility is, ultimately, resolved by recognizing Demogorgon's limited, but necessary role.

Bloom has maintained that the ultimate goal of the mythopoeic poem is to defeat itself and this inherent potential for self-defeat is the core of Shelley's skeptical idealism; an idealism far more skeptical than many critics have noticed, let alone been willing to admit. "The play has too often been read," Reider suggests, "as if it simply overcomes the problems of revolutionary violence and freedom for which history has produced no solution. I think Shelley's 'idealisms of moral excellence' portray the truth, perhaps in spite of themselves, of the beautiful illusion of freedom" (776). While Reider is correct to raise an eyebrow at the idea of "moral excellence," I think, on this point, he too falls prey to the "contemporary danger" of underestimating the level of Shelley's awareness. Any responsible reading of Shelley quite naturally compels us to distrust some of his more improbable declarations. His belief, for example--like Milton before him--that only the virtuous can produce great poetry is an idea that strikes modern sensibilities as patently unsound, to say the very least. Even Yeats, mystic that he was, eventually surrendered his

hierophantic robes in disgust. But for all of Shelley's lapses into self-indulgent apotheosis and all his dubious proclamations of the divine power of poetry, particularly in his *Defence*, there is an undeniable and exquisite despair that haunts every line of *Prometheus Unbound*. Such despair is nowhere more evident than in the poem's potential for communicative and imaginative disaster. The dialogue between Earth and Prometheus represents this failure of which Shelley was so transparently frightened. The poem is forever on the verge of collapse, the ideas themselves being but, "footsteps...of a wind over a sea, which the coming calm erases." Nonetheless, a modicum of imaginative transference does take place. There is "transmission." Prometheus hears the rumblings of his nearly intractable mother and the "torch of hope" is passed along, but not without difficulty. Those "who [would] bear [this] untransmitted torch of hope...to [the] far goal of time," are advised to heed the warning signs. Wasserman interprets "untransmitted" as "unassisted," but the possibility for catastrophe is implicit. This carefully chosen word offers both possibilities: the "unassisted" and courageous transmission of an imaginative hope, but also its failure. Such failures can, of course, only be adequately described by the language of "those who die."

Likewise, the possibility of resolution through union is plagued by doubt and potential misfortune. Ironically, the union of all "forms that think and live" above and beneath the grave the Earth promises is precisely what Shelley hopes to avoid. Naturally enough, the mythic structure of the poem--its attendant idealism--suggests the more preferable alternative: no such union is inevitable and should be avoided at all costs. Jupiter's descent is only an act of a rebalancing of the "natural" order in the sense that catastrophe has, in fact, been avoided if only narrowly so. The unification has been

deferred and will continue to be at least as long as the mythic structure remains intact, as long as the imaginative will survives. Its "defeat" is not immanent, as it is only kinetic. Nonetheless, the kinesis continues to resurface and stands as a harsh reminder of the ever present possibility of imaginative ruin. Despite the immutable and unchanging nuptial bliss Prometheus and Asia will supposedly enjoy when Prometheus' freedom has at last been gained, there is a darkness that waits at the edges of their "simple dwelling," threatening to devour it. The poem insinuates, quite dramatically, that if the imaginative will to freedom ever burns out, it will be united with its "dark shadow," never to be parted. There is no hope of renewal or return. In the narrative of mortality it will be fated to dwell among the

Dreams and the light imaginings of men
and all that faith creates, or love desires,
Terrible, strange, sublime and beautiful shapes.
[and] There thou art, and dost hang, a writhing shade.

(I. i. 200-203)

This is one of the darkest passages within the poem; certainly the darkest image provided to us by Earth and commensurable to the stark vision of a world in which "all best things are thus confused to ill." Prometheus's final temptation to despair at the end of Act I is a caveat against the dangers inherent in any lasting hope for freedom. The declaration that, "in each human heart terror survives," courts no illusion, beautiful or otherwise. This is, as Shelley himself averred, one of the "genuine elements of human society."

The final sequence in which the narratives of life and death achieve an insubstantial but nonetheless coherent dialogue takes place in the middle of Act III. This

time, however, the speakers are Earth and Asia. In response to Prometheus's blessing of her and the promise of a world "drain[ed] of despair," Earth proclaims:

. . . men and beasts in happy dreams shall gather
 Strength for the coming day and all its joy:
 And death shall be the last embrace of her
 Who takes the life she gave, even as a mother
 Folding her child, says, "Leave me not again!" (103-107)

And Asia, herself immortal, provides the unexpected answer, unexpected at least to her continually baffled mother.

O mother! wherefore speak the name of death?
 Cease they to love and move and breath and speak
 Who die?

Earth

It would avail not to reply:
 Thou art immortal and this tongue is known
 but to the uncommunicating dead.--
 Death is the veil which those who live call life:
 they sleep--and it is lifted . . . (108-114)

Undeterred, the Earth continues her description of the blissful life that awaits Prometheus and his bride, but the passage suggests a number of things. Foremost among them, is that if the reader is to accept the possibility that, despite Asia's immortality, the language of the dead has an imaginative register with her as well, then she not only lacks autonomy--suggesting that Sperry's critique of Pottle is correct in that she has no parity

with Prometheus--Asia is only another dimension of Prometheus's imaginative will. Consequently, each manifestation within the poem is merely a constituent element of the "One" mind, which could be no other than the mind of Prometheus. The entire poem is a record of internal conflict and dialogue between these interrelated components. The question of who dies "that love and move and breath" is answered by all those subject to the Promethean will, Asia included. Secondly, the answer given by the Earth is not identical to her previous response as Wasserman has suggested. There is a subtle difference that is easily missed. When the two passages are compared to her description of the structure of life and death, they reveal an interesting series of dialogic frames. In her initial response in act I, Earth maintains that the dead possess a tongue known only to themselves. However, the phrase "uncommunicating dead" in the second response seems to exclude the very possibility of the dead even having a language. We have to assume that "uncommunicating" simply means unintelligible, but if there are two worlds of life and death, then we must also assume that there is a language of life and of death above the grave and a language of life and death beneath the grave. And if there is to be any true unity between the "mind and the universe, [between] subject and object" then Prometheus's imaginative existence must encompass each of these worlds and all their attendant languages, suggesting even more emphatically that it is his mind alone which is the subject and object of the poem. "Clearly," Wasserman writes, "life here does not refer to human existence...as Earth explains...Mortality lives a death; and what it calls death is really its removal" (268-269). Once again, we are only being presented with the imaginative "life" of Prometheus. Adjusting the lines in question: what those who live (the fractured elements of Prometheus's imagination) call life is merely a veil, they sleep

(i.e. are born into life through fragmentation) and the veil (Prometheus' unity of mind) is lifted (or penetrates) each world, speaks each language of both cycles of life and death. Being the "One Mind" not only gives Prometheus access to both the language of "life" and "death," but control over and responsibility for the fate of each element that comprises the structure of the poem.

In many ways *Prometheus Unbound* may be read as a cautionary tale both to the revolutionary and the revolutionized. One cannot, of course, read the poem without bearing in mind the disastrous French Revolution and the ensuing atrocities during the Reign of Terror. Three decades after the poem's publication, the brutality witnessed during this period and the subsequent military tyranny of Imperial France still stood as a powerful reminder to those who would learn its lesson that armed conflict which has as its goal the removal of one tyrannical system is quite often replaced with something even more terrifying. The lesson learned by the court of George III and the British Aristocracy was quite different, however, as they prayed such revolutionary zeal would never take seed among the English populace and the chaos in France spread across the Channel. Although still a small child when the failure of Revolutionary France became immanent, the period in which Shelley lived and gained political consciousness continued to be an extremely violent one. And while the French Revolution may have eclipsed the minds of most Europeans, the desperately ill-timed and equally ill-equipped Irish Revolution of 1798, the protracted Napoleonic Wars, and the nascent Industrial Revolution and its simultaneous creation and suppression of the English working class created a tone of almost dire apprehension in much of Shelley's work. By the time he began composition of *Prometheus Unbound*, England had survived a quarter of a century of nearly

continuous warfare, and the country had become spiritually and emotionally insolvent, let alone economically. Reflections on the success of the American Revolution must have given Shelley some hope, as they did Blake, but it proved to be the exception to the rule. In consequence, the idealism within the poem is far more restrained than many critics believe or that its introduction would seem to suggest; an introduction which is, after all, an extreme response to an extreme position. Peacock's essay, "The Four Ages of Poetry," argued that poetry was, at best, an impractical pursuit and that men of intellect were better served by devoting themselves to science. It is no small wonder that Shelley felt personally attacked and chose to respond in the most flamboyant and incendiary manner possible.

The existence of Shelley's skepticism and political acuity, however, is not without its advocates. Citing Charles Robinson's belief that "Shelley borrowed from Byron's Promethean poems only to subvert their metaphysics," James Chandler writes, "I believe this is exactly right, so long as the subverted 'metaphysics' can be understood to include Byron's attempt to offer his representation of the Napoleonic or Promethean will as itself representative of an idealized national will" (192). Moreover, "Shelley's account of the 'spirit of the age' is resistant to . . . idealist reduction" (182). Chandler is not, however, advocating a purely political reading of the poem. Its complexity forbids this. While Byron's Promethean poems may have concerned themselves with an "idealized national will," as Chandler suggests, Shelley's subversion of them manifests as a description of an idealized, but still very skeptical, *imaginative* will and the process of the separation and reunification of mind and the universe it perceives. The answer ultimately rests within the particular distinction between *idealism*, as a belief in the power of human ideals, and

idealization, as an acquiescence to the possibility of salvation without the possibility of risk. The risk presented to us throughout the poem is one written in a fatal narrative from which only an act of concerted imaginative will can deliver us. This is no idealization, however, and skeptical to the last, Shelley provides us with a description of such a will from the mouth of the "tremendous gloom" himself. It is a will, "to defy Power which seems omnipotent; / To love, and bear; to Hope, till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates."

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