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“New fires from antique light”:
Percy Shelley’s Anarchism and Its Relevance Today

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Introduction

On a crisp, bright winter day in February of 2023 I was visiting for the first time the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, and I came out of it with a sense of purpose I had no idea could be found in such a venue, despite the beauty and calm reverberating from the ancient trees and the ivy tombstones lying under their shades. Once there, I stood in front of an engraved stone under which have found rest the human remains of a man I had felt a connection with since my first encounter with his works during high school: the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

It was in that moment that an idea dawned on me, an idea which I would start pursuing with ever increasing intensity in the following weeks, until it became the seed for this academic research. The first thing that led me to the final epiphany was reading the verses set in the marble tombstone: “Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange” – powerful verses taken from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* which underline a key concept in Shelley’s vision, namely the fact that everything is connected and that we are all small parts in the same organic universe.

Recalling the reasons why I felt an immediate connection with Shelley while studying poems such as *Ode to the West Wind* and *Ozymandias* years ago, I started asking myself if the ideals he vocally promoted throughout his life could still be valuable in our contemporary world in some way. I started researching, and the more I delved into the complex structure of Shelley’s thought, the more I felt it was more than relevant compared to what is happening in the world today. It felt truly prophetic.

The gears of history always seem to turn over onto themselves, for it appears humankind does not learn from the past, and so I was witnessing once again the shallowness of people who did not care whether fellow human beings were living on the streets with nothing, I was reading on the news of new wars started for the old reason of greed and lust for power and of a planet destroyed by the idiotic recklessness of those who think the environment does not affect our existence, and I was looking at a numb political elite trying only to justify its position and status, guiltily unwilling or incapable of presenting a shared

vision for a better future. All these things were something Shelley had warned readers about and fought against with the weapons he had: his words and his passion.

The other, stronger link I glimpsed was how these themes appeared to be anticipating many of the key features of anarchism, a philosophy I always felt drawn to because of its uncompromising exposition of the deep mechanism of power, the great flaw of humankind. I decided that research was needed, to see whether or not Shelley's views were anticipating anarchism and if so, to what extent they could still represent useful warnings and wise guidelines in order to read contemporary society and act accordingly to change it for the better.

This research starts with an overview of Shelley's life and times in chapter one, where I try to underline the main political ideas influencing the poet, also in connection to the historical and personal events of his lifetime. The following chapters deal instead with my analysis of themes, symbols and anarchist features present in three of Shelley's most important works.

In chapter two I deal with the allegorical poem *Queen Mab*, the first organic presentation the poet gave of his utopian vision of humankind. Chapter three and four analyze in depth what is considered Shelley's masterpiece, the lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*, from Act I to Act III (which was originally the intended conclusion of the poem). Chapter five deals with the aftermath of a major historical event, the Peterloo massacre, which deeply affected Shelley and made his vision evolve, first into the heated and heartfelt poem *The Mask of Anarchy* and afterwards into the complex, obscure addition of Act IV to *Prometheus Unbound*—both of which are the subject of this fifth chapter.

Finally, I intended chapter six to be not only a mere summary of the anarchist themes found in Shelley's works, but mostly a journey through anarchism as a philosophy and through the ways in which Shelley's vision and anarchist values could help today's society improve for the better, if only making people aware of the power mechanisms around them. The goal was to draw the conclusions of my research while underlining one of my strongest beliefs, that we are all stories in the end, and because of this literature is an incredibly powerful and effective tool we have at our disposal to overcome our worst instincts and evolve into better beings.

During the time I have worked on this dissertation I have always remained aware of the fact that anarchism is considered utopistic at best, so I tried to present it under critical lenses and through the words of philosophers and scholars who were able to express it as the highest form of humanism and a celebration of the human capacity to improve. Nevertheless, a critical aspect I found is the lack of a relevant number of research papers and essays on this subject from the 1990s onwards, as if the academic world wanted to forget these themes and issues altogether. I feel the downward spiral into which our society has been plunged for decades now has also affected the academic world, which appears mostly stuck and closed in a self-referential bubble, incapable of having a significant impact on society as its purpose should be, especially in defending freedom and promoting critical and meaningful debate.

I wish my research will contribute in a very small way to ignite a new spark for debate and maybe even for a new wave of research into anarchism and literature, to inject new inputs into the discussion on the new paths human society could follow to evolve in the best interest of all its members, especially the most fragile and defenseless of them. For the most momentous thing I learned while I was writing this dissertation is that we are all part of the same whole, and it is the responsibility of every individual to preserve the whole from being shattered through their daily choices, however small or irrelevant they may seem.

Chapter One

Breathing rebellion: radical culture in Shelley's life and times

“And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane
by those who could not hear the music.”

Nineteenth-century German proverb

“Shelley the genius, the prophet”: with these words the revolutionary philosopher Friedrich Engels celebrated the English poet born on 4 August 1792, whom he regarded as one of the first literary giants to truly spend his life in radical departures from societal norms. Even if he was born in the ranks of upper-class gentry – his grandfather had built a fortune on land acquisition, and his father was a member of Parliament – Percy Bysshe Shelley lived his short and tumultuous life always rebelling against something.

Firstly, he rebelled against his father's politics and against his inherited rank and wealth – particularly as guarantors of political power –, although this revulsion was controversial because he assumed nonetheless that he had the right to inherit his due and that one day he would take his reserved seat in Parliament. Secondly, he strenuously challenged the hierarchical established order, something which prompted him to publish in his early years an inflammatory critique of religion in the pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*, an essay considered so blasphemous that it got Shelley expelled from Oxford and rejected by his father as the black sheep of the family. Nevertheless, he continued to look for ideals that might drive political and cultural change, supporting the Irish independence movement and getting interested in philosophy, especially in Plato and French philosophers such as Voltaire and Rousseau. He got to know William Godwin through his book *Political Justice* and started a dense correspondence with him, until he moved with his first wife Harriet Westbrook to London and met his mentor. Even this did not turn out as expected, since Percy fell in love with Godwin's daughter Mary and eloped with her, leaving Harriet and their children behind and making Godwin furious.

The following years saw Percy and Mary live, read, and write in various stages of harmony and disharmony with each other, passing through many travails that would darken their new union: the loss of children, Harriet Shelley's suicide, Mary's depression, and Percy's various erotic and philosophical attractions to other women. They befriended Byron and wrote some of their best works while trying to make ends meet after leaving England and settling with many difficulties in Italy, where the country's history, political and meteorological climate invigorated Shelley's writing as no other landscape had done. *A Defence of Poetry*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and *The Mask of Anarchy* all belong to this period of the poet's life, the most prolific, where his idealism desperately tried to find a way to impact reality and inspire a viable political reform. Until his untimely death on 8 July 1822, when he drowned after a storm sank his boat, Shelley kept polishing his style, refining his radical philosophy, and conjuring up powerful and cryptical images that continue to inspire today. Indeed, what strikes as particularly difficult in dealing with the understanding of a poet like Percy Shelley is the complex development his work underwent during his short but eventful life. To shed light on this, and to fully grasp the deepest origins of his thoughts and sensitivity, one must first examine the English radical culture the poet was part of.

1.1 The Pillars of Reform

First of all, it is paramount to have in mind that radical culture possessed a wide range of different perspectives between the 17th and 18th century, especially after the great watershed of the French Revolution. As Thompson (1963) and Foot (1980) have shown, in England radicalism soon became synonymous with parliamentary reform, and opposing views started to clash in 1790s when the first reform movements began to operate. Within that period, the English ruling class was drastically inflexible while at the same time it was pressed by reformist groups to remodel the existent system of laws. The imminent fear on the ruling elite's part was the spread - or even the validation - of democratic ideals. On the other side, reformers

brought demands based upon the exclusion of the Test and Corporation Rights¹, the periodicity of parliaments and an efficient representation for the middle class. Despite many failed attempts at becoming relevant, English reformers chose not to involve the lower classes in their actions, as was the case with the revolutionary events in France, but tried instead to involve tradesmen, intellectuals, and artisans through the organization known as the London Corresponding Society (LCS), founded in 1792.

At this point, two main groups were fighting for the transformation of the English political environment: LCS² and Foxite Whigs, with the relationship between these two entities being complex and nuanced, reflecting the political landscape in a period of historical upheavals. Foxite Whigs belonged to a faction within the British Whig Party - a major political party in Britain that later evolved into the Liberal Party. The term "Foxite" comes from Charles James Fox, a prominent Whig statesman and a key figure within the party. Their modus operandi involved working to change the system from within the preexisting political hierarchy, using its platform inside the Parliament to influence policy processes and direct action through institutional channels. However, the LCS would not accept such a moderate approach since the methodology they favored involved the use of direct and confrontational means to promote awareness and stir disquiet in the name of the cause. Eager to acquire broader spaces in public participation, the organization grew accustomed to arranging gatherings, distributing pamphlets, and organizing demonstrations that would spread radical culture to the British people, in this way distancing themselves from the Foxite Whigs ideals.

Nonetheless, differences and distinctions appeared inside the LCS itself, especially between the group led by radical political reformers Thomas Paine³ and John Thelwall, which

¹ The Corporation Act of 1661 stipulated that those who were elected to a corporation or those who served in public office were required to take communion according to the rites of the Church of England, while the Test Act of 1673 required the same of those who assumed any kind of civic or military office.

² The London Corresponding Society (LCS) was a federation of local reading and debating clubs that in the decade following the French Revolution agitated for the democratic reform of the British Parliament. In contrast to other reform associations of the period, it drew largely upon working men (artisans, tradesmen, and shopkeepers) and was itself organized on a formal democratic basis.

³ Thomas Paine later became one of the founding fathers of the United States of America, and he helped inspire the colonial era patriots through highly influential pamphlets which reflected Enlightenment-era ideals on human rights and political freedom.

maintained strong ties with the ideals of the French Revolution influence and sustained the necessity of staging mass demonstrations and an extra-parliamentary “convention” of the working class, and the ideas of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, which involved instead a gradual approach to reform based on a model of visionary radicalism grounded on a middle-class literary and cultural revolution (Foot, 1980: 88-90). This clash of ideals was sufficient to cause the cleave between those who supported Godwin’s ideas and the majority, who supported Paine-Thelwall republicanism and revolutionary strategies. However, Godwin strenuously defended his approach, based on the assumption that the effort required to the working class was useless since they did not possess the tools to even understand the system they lived in, due to a lack of cultural empowerment. In his requests, the focus was using moderate reform to bring about a cultural revolution. Indeed, according to Scrivener (1982: 6): “Considering the weakness of the left, Godwin’s moderate position was both prudent and realistic, despite the elitist nature of his argument.” What drew Godwin to believe in the optimistic possibilities of a cultural revolution, fueled by enhancing education and culture for the poor population, was the fact that among the great changes of his time even the number of literate people – also in the proletariat – was growing at lightning speed, and the almost religious reverence for the power of intellectual culture to humanize whomever it touched.

As Cameron (1950) and McNiece (1969) have shown, some of Shelley’s main influences derived from Paine and from the literature of the French Revolution, but it is Scrivener (1982: 8-10) who has underlined how Godwin and his wife Mary Wollstonecraft influenced Shelley’s political philosophy more than any other radical, thus positioning themselves as central figures in the effort to understand the poet’s vision. Indeed, Godwin’s own philosophy can be labeled as ‘visionary radicalism’, and it is precisely this that attracted Shelley in the early stages of his literary career, at the expense of Whig liberalism but also of moderate reform and Paineite republicanism. Regarding the latter, it is worth of notice that in at least three areas Godwin’s thought was even more to the left than Paine’s: on feminism, property, and perfectibility of humankind. On the first issue, neither middle-class nor working-class radicalism was much concerned with the rights of women and with the equality that Godwin and Wollstonecraft argued for, while on private property they were supporters of a kind of

socialism (Paine was not opposed to capitalism or inequality, but favored some kinds of welfare legislation and different taxation politics), and they also firmly believed in the infinite possibilities of progressive change, i.e.

Rejecting revolution, they put their hope in an evolutionary change directed by educational and cultural activity. By changing consciousness they hoped to alter institutions, which would pave the way for further improvement.

(Scrivener, 1982: 9)

Despite the unquestionable appeal their radicalism had on Shelley, it possessed at the same time some problems that he would find troublesome and that had to be investigated in a more thorough way. First of all, the individual with visionary radical beliefs is motivated by rational benevolence, but is not connected with any particular social group or class. Thus, the attempt to ground a utopian dialectic on an individualistic basis places a great burden on an ambiguous liberatory culture and, furthermore, Godwin's rejection of revolution or political struggle leads to a theory of social change that tries to dispense with ordinary politics.

All the reasons presented above clarify how important it becomes to examine Godwin's philosophy in order to fully appreciate the quality of visionary radicalism Shelley inherited. A key concept in this philosophy is the dialectic of stasis and flux, a theory that sees the individual self constantly torn between two opposite poles: at one pole we find *stasis*, or the arrest of the enquiry of the mind, where the self is in danger to be abolished, while at the other – the pole of *flux* – it is stasis itself, which in society stands for government and hierarchy, that is in danger of extinction. According to Godwin (in Priestley, 1946: 226-242), the war against stasis will be waged by “incessant industry, by a curiosity never to be disheartened or fatigued, by a spirit of enquiry to which a philanthropic mind will allow no pause” and nothing is worse than “an institution tending to give permanence to certain systems of opinions” by applying one of the biggest obstacles to fluxional enquiry, i.e. the authority of stability: if something is true, presumably it does not need to and will not change. Indeed, governmental stasis breeds revolutionary upheaval “by violently confining the stream of reflection”, wiping out critical thinking and imposing partial thoughts as universal truths. Furthermore, in Godwin's vision the same struggle between stasis and flux that can be

observed in society is not wholly external to man but rooted deep within the human condition, because Truth is something the individual has to constantly struggle to find using Reason – choosing flux over stasis in every single moment.

The epitome of William Godwin's vision can be found in *Political Justice*, his *summa philosophiae* and one of the works that had a lasting influence on Percy Shelley, even after he eloped with Godwin's daughter Mary and the relationship between them became hostile to say the least. The book played in fact a pivotal role in shaping what we will from now on refer to as Shelley's philosophical anarchism, or his belief in radical politics and in the power of literature to bring about equally radical changes in society. What Godwin provides in his dissertation is an in-depth analysis of his own utopian anarchism, a philosophical landmark he finds necessary to adopt in his search for Truth. Since Truth is not apparent, it becomes the goal of a project of enquiry, a democratic pursuit, a process of trial and error which ideally never ends and which would inevitably simplify or eliminate political structures before decentralizing as much as possible, until government ceases to be the overwhelming powerful source of prejudice it has become. It is striking to note that he started writing *Political Justice* with the intention of showing how government can benefit humanity, only to find in it the main agent of stasis, and that in the end only the absence of government could be truly beneficial. In this way Godwin aims at removing barriers between people, focusing his critique of society on three main targets: government and law, crime and education, and inequality.

In Godwin, law is no more than a set of opinions on what is proper social behavior that are subsequently transformed into a universal truth, used to cement and perpetuate the power of a ruling elite. He uses the term "wild beast" to describe government, a structure of power that uses law to freeze and immobilize the dialectic of reason. He then maintains that "delinquency and punishment are, in all cases, incommensurable" because "no two crimes are alike" (Priestley 1946: 347) and to try to classify and arrange them systematically is absurd, thus denying that there can ever be an impartial calculus of crime and punishment – something which puts Godwin directly against Bentham's belief that the legislator always knows what is best for the legislated. The anarchistic simplification of social structures that

Godwin recommends in order to replace the artifice of law and government has a parallel in his literary theory; he states that literary style should be “free from unnecessary parts”, “the transparent envelope of our thoughts”. In this way he emphasizes a pure and democratic humanism, which implies an educational theory, and indeed education and enlightenment are the cornerstones Godwin envisions to build a new society. But in the end the philosopher’s utopia is resolved in pessimism, partly because Godwin arrives to the conclusion that with the social premises he is witnessing social improvement is impossible, and partly because of his stern and resolute rejection of revolution. In this sense Godwin is indeed more accurately defined as a utopian rather than a revolutionary thinker because he can conjure up images of what could or should be, but he is not able to show precisely how these images can be translated into action.

Indeed, he never ceases to remind his readers that revolution is unacceptable, because it is not libertarian, it sets in motion passions unchecked by reason – such as revenge, hatred, fear, and selfishness -, and it is illusory. Moreover, revolutionary movements engender the illusion that just one grand revolution will solve every problem, thus frustrating the individual’s efforts for social improvement, which should be constant and perpetual. Instead of revolution Godwin pinned his hopes on progress, cultivation of truth, and sincerity, trying to narrow the distinction between politics and ethics at the expense of the former. Nevertheless, for him there is no necessary and inevitable march of improvement from primitive to modern times, and progress is in itself always precarious and reversible. Godwin’s pacifist and libertarian scruples did not prevent him from assenting to a violent revolution if such a thing could really create a much better world, but he really did not see how a revolution could succeed in performing what seemed like magic. In order for individuals to cultivate truth and sincerity, the philosopher urges that we as human beings “should remove ourselves to the furthest distance from the state of mere inanimate machines” (Priestley 1946: 68), uncovering a painful issue in the society he was so keenly observing: poverty and manual labor did not allow for the leisure and energy absolutely necessary in order to cultivate the mind. The solution would be to reduce the hours of labor, spread the work equitably through the

different social strata, and reduce the need for labor altogether through a diminution of luxury and the utilization of machinery.

Seen in this light, Godwin's utopian vision reveals his essentially conservative nature, in envisioning a simpler society based upon a federation of "parishes" and small communities in which each person does a small amount of labor, preferably without much technological innovation. Indeed, this integrates perfectly in the anarchist tradition, which usually distrusts economic enterprises so centralized and massive that they cannot be controlled by the community. However original and brilliant Godwin's critique of society, it leaves unresolved dilemmas which would be inherited by Shelley's philosophical anarchism. For example, Godwin does not accept general rules at all, only unique particulars, but how can there be commonality if so little can be taken for granted? And further, if leisure is necessary for truth-seeking, and the lower classes have no leisure, is it not an economic reorganization necessary? Godwin was unable to get out of a series of imperatives and conditionals, ultimately finding himself tangled up in extreme intellectualism and failing to deeper scrutinize all the possibilities inherent the concept of revolution. The real power of his thought – and what attracted Shelley the most – is negative, i.e. the ability to destroy the pseudo-rationality behind social concepts supportive of the established political order. From Godwin's merciless dissection of society Shelley will build his own vision for a better future.

1.2 A Heretic Philosophy

One might find strange that a poet rightfully belonging to the core of the Romantic movement might have consciously moved away from the reference points of his generation by displaying unusual philosophical affiliations, as Paul Hamilton notes:

Considered from a philosophical point of view, Percy Shelley's writings are most intriguing because they so signally look both backwards and forwards in the history of philosophy. First of all, they draw on materialist and empiricist traditions in philosophy from which Romanticism is usually thought to have distinguished itself. Secondly, Shelley's thought anticipates those

more modern materialists that displace the individual subject as the starting point for speculation, substituting instead the larger, impersonal vistas of our social and natural being.
(quoted in Morton, 2007: 166)

These affiliations include, as I have already mentioned, the French *philosophes*: Voltaire, Holbach, and Rosseau, who stand on the shoulders of Spinoza and Lucretius with their atheism, materialism, and republicanism. Shelley also shows a conspicuous awareness of their British contemporaries, the great empiricists Locke and Hume, in contrast with other Romantic poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth. For example, in *Queen Mab*, he surprisingly borrows from Holbach on the subject of necessity in order to present nature as a mechanical system emptied of human interest and belonging: the best way of explaining the attraction Shelley displays for the impersonal and apparently dehumanized version of nature offered by Holbach's philosophy might be its affinity with Shelley's own desire, from an early age, to escape from the ideological contamination he saw to be inherent in current cosmology. As we will see in later chapters, one of his principal targets remains Christianity, or, as he understood it, Christian interference in the strictly logical business of making sense of the world (Scrivener 1982: chapter 3). Only by shooting down Deism and its pernicious theological arguments for God's existence – derived from the design visible in nature – could the poet weave a new discourse with his words, taking as a starting point Spinoza's pantheistic identification of nature as the power of God and the identification of the divine with that 'sparkle' present in every living being – be it human, vegetable or animal – that makes us all part of a whole, something which Shelley liked to call "the One".

The philosophical characterization most often given to Shelley is that of Platonist, which is true enough, provided a wide enough view of Plato is taken. There is certainly idealism in Shelley, but never straightforward, and there is also the underpinning idea stemming from Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, i. e. the knowledge that humans – and especially artists, being usually the most sensitive among us – are confined to a world of Becoming while longing for a life of Being and eternity. In Shelley, however, there is a constant and always unfinished struggle to "produce a systematical history of what appear [...] to be the genuine elements of human society" (Hamilton in Morton, 2007: 168). In this light, the poet does not

set off for a Platonic heaven, an immutable world of archetypal forms where he too will be immortalized, but becomes instead the “unacknowledged legislator of the world”, a sort of Demiurge invested with the task of creating a new reality for humanity, a Prometheus himself, bringing the fire of knowledge as the ultimate gift. In other words, Shelley is never a pure idealist, a poet so vested in his own vision that he becomes detached from reality. He never longs for a bucolic retreat into a nostalgic past or natural landscape like Wordsworth, he never stops at the existing forms of society and rituals. Instead, what he does is thrusting himself forward, in a vital leap aimed at challenging the existing structures of power that inform our views and our understanding of the world. Drawing from all these philosophical sources, Shelley creates his own peculiar view of the world and human history.

In discussing Godwin’s influence on Shelley and the poet’s own political vision, critics have very often exclusively focused on his Platonism and skepticism, disregarding almost entirely Shelley’s anarchism and not perceiving it as existing in relation to an anarchist tradition. Indeed, before a self-consciously anarchist movement emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century, anarchism existed in two forms, one philosophical and the other millennial. The former one is defined by Scrivener (1982: 35) as a “movement of rebellious individuals who defied secular and religious authority”, while the latter can be described as “a tradition of mass movements of religious heretics who wanted to achieve a paradise on earth through direct democracy and the abolition of secular and spiritual hierarchies”. While Godwin’s principal contribution to anarchism was refining the philosophical tradition to a degree of consistency and inclusiveness it had not possessed before, Shelley opted to create one of the first syntheses between the philosophical and millennial traditions.

Shelley discovered millennialism in the literature about the French Revolution, but he also found within himself an extinguishable desire for a world far better than the one in which he lived. On this matter, Murray Bookchin identifies the intuitive aspects of an anarchist sensitivity in this way:

Viewed from a broad historical perspective, anarchism is a libidinal upsurge of people, a stirring of the social unconscious that reaches back, under many different names, to the earliest struggles of humanity against domination and authority.

(2004: 19)

Since words carry meanings and it is paramount to use them correctly, before delving deeper in this research I believe it is truly important to keep in mind that the term “anarchy” comes from the Greek *an-arkhia*, meaning “without a chief or ruler” – thus indicating a society which is not without rules, but without power structures that create and enforce the rules. Having settled this, it is now interesting to introduce other ways of defining anarchism, since they would come in handy to analyze Shelley’s vision and understand his sensitivity. One of such definitions is the one presented in a podcast discussion⁴ by archaeologist David Wengrow, for whom anarchy is “the theory and practice of human social life outside the State and outside chains of command and punitive systems of law”, and by anarchist scholar Sophie Scott-Brown, for whom anarchy can be described as “a way of seeing, being and acting [...], a way of thinking rooted in an ethical commitment to extending liberty to everyone”. Even though it might seem strange because of his social status, Percy Shelley developed his philosophical anarchism from insights like these, and at its core his recipe is so peculiar, with his willingness to use political means such as reform and political (rather than social) revolution to advance freedom and equity, that it estranges him from the main currents of what the nineteenth-century anarchism. Indeed, Shelley anticipates Marx and his ideals of a classless society attainable through political and indirect means, mediated rather than immediate, something which his mentor Godwin also did when he assumed that social consciousness can be educated progressively by philosophical radicals in order to inspire social change; this new consciousness can later be translated into political institutions. The critical difference between Shelley and Godwin is that the former is much more activist than the latter, more eager to intervene socially on the basis of philosophical insights, and especially more willing to risk the dangers of revolution.

Within Shelley’s own anarchism, however, two different emphases are constantly emerging, mediation and rebellion. When he is mediating the ideals of utopia, Shelley is closer

⁴ The podcast episode mentioned here is the BBC Arts & Ideas episode entitled “Anarchism and David Graeber”, aired on March, 7th 2023 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f7f89l>).

to Marx than to the anarchist Bakunin⁵, but when he is emphasizing the Ideal, trying to translate as directly and immediately as possible his Vision into language and action, his political style is rebellious. Shelley never fully resolved this tension, which is inextricable from his concept of the poet-prophet or philosophical reformer and exists between potentiality and actuality. He is at once a philosophical rebel, like Godwin, and a millenarian, impatient to drag heaven down to earth – or pull earth up to heaven, depending on the point of view. He comes out as both an enlightened rationalist, sensitive to the details of historical evolution, and a Dionysian anarchist, a profile that would fit perfectly in Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the Overman, if by using this term we decide to define to a New Humanity, enlightened enough to truly care about itself without the need for structures of power.

⁵ While Marx envisioned his utopia as an ideal society where the poor masses had finally conquered the property of means of production, Bakunin's ideal of utopia (which also coincides with the ultimate aim of history) is absolute freedom, to be intended as humanity's emancipation from any kind of power relationship. Their dispute and the implications of the First International are brilliantly analyzed in Wolfgang Eckhardt's *The First Socialist Schism* (PM Press, 2016).

Chapter Two

Queen Mab, the fire of youth

“Those who cannot learn from history
are doomed to repeat it.”

George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*

The story of *Queen Mab*'s redaction and publication mirrors that of a true anarchist pamphlet, even if Shelley had probably a very different a different idea of how things would play out in the printing and the circulation of his work, not to mention a different audience in mind than the one which ended up hailing the poem as a political manifesto for reform. Since it was written when the poet was only nineteen, I agree with Sperry that

[...] the poem has many weaknesses, from his mediocre verse to its derivative ideas. Shelley's first major work, however, is remarkably ambitious in design and scope—the vision of an attainable, indeed a preordained perfection that was alternately to inspire and haunt the poet to the end of his career.

(1988: 1)

Indeed, as the first major poem written by the author, it contains glimpses of all the themes that would become cornerstones of Shelley's vision and philosophy: a fiery critique of power – be it secular, judiciary or religious –, Godwin's philosophical anarchism, a pantheistic view of the universe, the reverence for Nature, the problem of the passing of time and the explicit condemnation of the chains that bind mankind to oppression. It is in fact imbued with so much passion that it can be described as a poem of ideas, or an “emulsion of anti-Christian, pantheistic, deistic, materialistic, and necessitarian principles” (Baker, 1948: 29).

The poem's style, albeit not at the height of Shelley's poetical skills, has already *in nuce* most of the literary devices he would employ and experiment with throughout his career,

such as blank verse, lyrical and dramatic forms, almost cinematic descriptions, and the theatrical quality of the dialogues. Ultimately, Shelley here shows how he developed into a writer and social theorist of remarkable maturity, a poet capable – as I will claim – of revising Godwinian anarchism in an original direction, so that he finally becomes a thinker and an activist fully on his own.

Conceived at the end of 1811, and composed primarily between April 1812 and February 1813, *Queen Mab* was printed in 1813 in 250 original copies but was seen by Shelley as too bold and radical to be openly published and distributed (Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 15). Instead, he set aside 70 of those 250 copies to be handed out to selected individuals he believed would be sympathetic with the contents and the ideas he put on paper. His target audience was a group of young aristocrats, that he believed would be open-minded enough to understand his vision, become enlightened and educated by his work, and make it the basis of political and societal reform. Indeed, the fairy queen who lends her name to the poem, Mab, was the title character in numerous collections of children's stories, so that the choice of this innocent-sounding name is perfectly in keeping with Shelley's directions to his publisher to have the poem printed "on fine paper and so as to catch the aristocrats: they will not read it, but their sons and daughters may" (in Frederick L. Jones, letter from Shelley to Hookham, March 1813).

What Shelley could not have imagined is that *Queen Mab* would later start to circulate in various pirated and illegal editions thanks to a couple of radical publishers until it became "a work of lasting importance to the nineteenth-century socialist movement" (Scrivener, 1982: 67), despite his own re-evaluation of this youth effort in a letter printed in *The Examiner* in 1821, where he characterized the work as "crude and immature" and "perfectly worthless in point of literary composition" (in Frederick L. Jones, letter to *The Examiner*, July 1821). Nevertheless, starting from that very same year, one year before Shelley's drowning, illegal editions of the poem were far more numerous than any legal editions, so much so that it ultimately turned into an important source for radical ideology and was wielded as a weapon in the battle of ideas during the golden age of English socialism in the nineteenth century.

The reason for this popular success lies in the plot of the poem itself, which is quite simple but contains complex philosophical themes. In fact, Shelley divides his dream allegory

into nine cantos and adds a total of 17 lengthy notes which constitute an integral part of the poem to help the reader navigate the meaning of the various scenes. It tells the story of lanthe, a character modeled on Harriet Shelley, who receives the visit of the Fairy, Queen Mab, while sleeping. The Queen welcomes lanthe on her chariot and takes her soul in an out-of-body, dreamlike journey through time and space, to her palace at the edge of the universe. Here the fairy discloses the evils of the present and the past of mankind – personified by kings, priests and judges – before revealing the portrait of a utopian future where full equality has replaced the evils of war, competition, greed, and superstition. In particular, two aspects of this utopian future are highlighted: fear of death no longer exists, replaced by the endless possibility of perfecting the future, and Man is coexisting in harmony with Nature. After leading lanthe’s spirit through this journey, Queen Mab brings it back to her body and the girl is ready to awaken beneath the adoring gaze of her lover Henry, filled with hope for the possibility of changing the present and building the future of her vision.

In the poem, Shelley presents a double perspective that envisions necessary changes for both mankind and the natural world, a perspective where Godwin’s influence is clear, in particular regarding the notion of necessity, but it is also combined with Shelley’s own idea of Nature as an ever-changing system. These concepts are apparently conflicting and mutually exclusive, but the poet tries his best to resolve the issue, as I will show later on. What is important to keep in mind while analyzing *Queen Mab* is that these two key concepts are employed by Shelley to demonstrate how the evils of society will eventually disappear naturally—something which also testifies to the poet’s belief that science necessarily supports the need for change. This conviction, combined with human virtues, would ultimately lead to a perfect society through a natural evolution of things. Indeed, as we have already pointed out in the previous chapter, Shelley’s early works still follow Godwin’s thought faithfully in distrusting revolution as a viable means to change society, so the preferred way to realize reform must lie in uncovering the signs of necessary progress hidden in man’s history.

2.1 The Evil that Men Do

Considering the purpose of this research, *Queen Mab* appears interesting from its very beginning, where three different quotations function as a programmatic manifesto to introduce the poem. According to Sperry, “the framework of *Queen Mab* is particularly revealing in the way it serves to focus and set off its visionary argument” (1988: 3), with three brief epigraphs from Voltaire, Lucretius, and Archimedes which relate directly to the poem’s core ideas, while at the same time testifying to different kinds of indebtedness.

The first epigraph, from Voltaire, points directly to what is usually the primary aim of many of Shelley’s fiery critiques, i.e. Christianity as a particular institutionalized religion, by labeling it “demon” (*infame* in the original quotation). The second is a Latin epigraph from Lucretium’s poem *De Rerum Naturae*, a sort of exhortation to walk on paths most people never dare to tread upon – or, borrowing another famous poetical line, to take “the one less traveled by” (Robert Frost) –, while the last epigraph is a famous quotation attributed to Archimedes which refers to Shelley’s enthusiasm for the power of the lever, a trope also “used by radicals of the day to link mechanical forces with revolutionary actions” (Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 16).

Following these introductory and programmatic presentations Shelley adds a short dedication in verse intended as tribute to his first wife, Harriet Westbrook Shelley. This tribute reveals, as Sperry noted, that “*Queen Mab* is a work of concentrated intellectual effort; but the emotional power that informs it springs from the poet’s relationship with his first wife” (1988: 3). Indeed, this heartfelt celebration of Love is typical of Shelley’s character, but it is also one of the main weapons the poet sees as fundamental in changing society, so much so that the theme of Love recurs in all of his works in many different forms, as opposed to the oppression exerted by institutions of power.

For all the reasons I examined, *Queen Mab* is truly a poem of ideas. But the way in which these often-conflicting ideas can find a place in a unitary philosophical vision and how they do

not mutually invalidate each other will be further developed in the following sections. For a work of such strong didactic purpose, the poem opens on a curiously tentative note:

How wonderful is Death,
Death, and his brother Sleep!
One, pale as yonder waning moon
With lips of lurid blue;
The other, rosy as the morn
When throned on ocean's wave
It blushes o'er the world;
Yet both so passing wonderful!

(*Queen Mab I, 1-8*)

There is an odd juxtaposition of two states here, one healthful and life-restoring (Sleep), the other life-denying (Death). It seems Shelley is setting the tone by hinting at some of the most famous existential questions in the history of mankind: is dreaming (i. e. sleeping) like dying? Is life a dream? If so, can dreams be life? Indeed, the states of Sleep and Death are so like each other that this establishes an aura of wonder and trepidation around the first view of the poem's sleeping heroine from the point of view of her lover Henry, an aura which is typical of fairy tales:

Will lanthe wake again,
And give that faithful bosom joy
Whose sleepless spirit waits to catch
Light, life and rapture from her smile?

(I, 27-30)

The lover waits but does not know if and when lanthe will wake again, the moment is one of uncertainty, and it becomes more memorable because the poem comes full circle returning to it at its close, when Mab takes leave from her newly enlightened pupil with the charge:

Go, happy one, and give that bosom joy
Whose sleepless spirits waits to catch
Light, life and rapture from thy smile.

Indeed, as Sperry argues, “the whole framework Shelley constructs for his central vision of the dawning of a brighter future seems calculated to produce the magic moment on which the poem hovers as it closes without ever quite achieving: the moment when lanthe reawakens and smiles” (1988: 4). The idea one is left with is that lanthe is about to wake up and share her enlightenment with Henry and the world, but will this happen for real? It is as if Shelley leaves the question open for his readers to answer, and most of all to make it happen: will I be able to wake up, to change what is around me? Otherwise, everything was all but a dream, a utopian hope that will remain in the realm of sleep. This is also the reason why lanthe stands as an allegory for the individual’s soul, at first without responsibilities for how the world works but unaware of the oppression of power, and at the end with her eyes wide open – both in dreams and in reality – to the horrors that surround her and the way they can be fixed. Baker reinforces this view:

Although Shelley has chosen to particularize his characters in *Queen Mab*, he is clearly thinking throughout in allegorical terms. It is only because the central figures of the poem are called by unusual proper names that their kinship with typical allegorical figures has been concealed.
(1948: 24)

Thus, if lanthe is the virtuous soul, for whose edification the veil of false propaganda is ripped and the underlying truth made plain, Queen Mab herself is the revealer of wonderful secrets, the hierophant for the Greeks. Along the poem others allegorical representations can be found, such as the fool “whom courtiers nickname monarch”, the personification of political tyranny, and most notably Ahasuerus, a character I will return to in the next section and which stands for “the spiritual essence of all those infidels who have been crushed under the heel of the Christian Church” (Baker, 1948: 24).

lanthe’s journey begins with her spirit disentangling from her sleeping body and following the Queen on her chariot, through which she is led to Mab’s magnificent sky palace. From the battlements of the palace they look down upon the little globe of the earth while the fairy elucidates the secrets of past, present, and future. The frame in which lanthe’s vision

takes place is of primary significance to understand the poet's own didactic intent, since all of Mab's teachings stem from the fundamental acknowledgment that man is just the tiniest particle in an infinitely wide universe:

The Fairy pointed to the earth.
The Spirit's intellectual eye
Its kindred beings recognized.
The throning thousands, to a passing view,
Seemed like an anthill's citizens.

(II, 97-101)

Seen from this perspective, all earthly preoccupations and established powers – along with their ghastly consequences – lose meaning, and they are finally revealed to be inconsistent like the ruins of the once great city of Palmyra, which has become a “memory / Of senselessness and shame” (II, 113-114), bound to turn to dust completely and eventually be erased even from memory. Indeed, through “time's unrelaxing grasp” (II, 190) such symbols of ephemeral glory are eventually revealed to leave no meaningful trace whatsoever in the great canvas of the universe.

Once this is settled, the vision can move forward and the only speakers beside the Queen and Ianthe's soul are two figures conjured up by Mab's wand, representing the primary targets of Shelley's attack, namely the evils of temporal power and religious tyranny, whose combined effects on humanity are summed up in a few incandescent lines:

Kings, priests and statesmen, blast the human flower
Even in its tender bud; their influence darts
Like subtle poison through the bloodless veins
Of desolate society.

(IV, 104-107)

The focus here shifts specifically on power, labeled as the poison which kills everything that is human, and then it moves to the various embodiments power can take. First of all, the figure of the king, symbol of an oppressive authority seeking total dominance over individuals. Moreover, in enforcing their authority, kings find an essential aid in the armed branches of their state, i. e. “guards, garbed in blood-red livery” (IV, 173) who “participate the crimes /

That force defends” (IV, 174-175), and reading these lines through contemporary sensitivity it is very easy to be reminded of the many horrors that happened in recent history because power could rely on people just blindly following orders.

Accordingly, the poet goes on and pictures the situations that power holders seek to reproduce over and over again in order to thrive and which represent the plagues of society. First of all, there is war, described as “the statesman’s game, the priest’s delight, / The lawyer’s jest, the hired assassin’s trade (IV, 167-168). In particular, the terminology employed here underlines how war is both a form of recreation and an occasion of profit for those who wield power, thus linking it to the second scourge that infests human relations which is the social practice of “commerce”:

Commerce has set the mark of selfishness,
The signet of its all-enslaving power
Upon a shining ore, and called it gold
[...]
But in the temple of their hireling hearts
Gold is a living god, and rules in scorn
All earthly things but virtue.

(V, 53-55 and 61-63)

Indeed, in Shelley’s radical vision an economy led by commerce and a society in which only profit is considered a manifestation of health and success is already the primary cause of inequality and disparity among people and social classes. In fact, even if he lived at the dawn of the industrial age, the poet appears fully aware of the downward spiral set in motion by the mad race where people are constantly trying to prevail on others in order to make their wealth grow continuously, a wealth which is built at the expense of the majority of the population and ultimately becomes “the curse of man” (II, 204) by creating a social space where “all things are sold” (V, 177), where “even life itself” (V, 181) and “even love are sold” (V, 189). Way ahead of his time, Shelley underlines how monarchy breeds a class of courtiers – placemen, royal bureaucrats etc. – who consume the wealth created by the exploited agricultural and industrial laborers, and to change this he “proposed a simplification of the economy in order to increase the leisure of the poor and to shorten the working day” (Scrivener, 1982: 73), and in his idea the new society has to be agrarian and cannot permit

farming for profit. The latter stance is easily explained knowing Shelley was also a strong advocate for vegetarianism, not only for ethical and physiological reasons, but for political and economic reasons as well. Indeed, although exaggerating a bit with respect to modern ecology's standards, he was dreadfully aware of the incredible amount of vegetable matter needed to produce a consumable piece of meat, compared to the amount required to feed people directly with vegetables – as is explained by Reinman and Fraistat:

[...] In Shelley's day comparative anatomists studying humans and apes concluded that man was naturally an eater of fruits and nuts—a vegetarian. Shelley was a vegetarian on both medical and moral grounds and remained one most of his life. His note states: "I hold that the depravity of the physical and moral nature of man originated in his unnatural habits of life. [...] All vice arose from the ruin of healthful innocence. Tyranny, superstition, commerce, and inequality were then first known, when reason vainly attempted to guide the wanderings of exacerbated passion. [...] The advantage of a reform in diet is obviously greater than that of any other. It strikes at the root of the evil."

(2002: 65, note 2)

The array of horrors upon which past and present human society appears to be built is presented in the poem through a clear anarchist perspective, a philosophy surely indebted to Godwin, even if the poet shows the first signs of a personal, deep re-elaboration of the concepts he drew from his sources of influence. A paradigmatic example can be found in the lines Shelley uses to tear apart the foundations of power by presenting an alternative ethical behaviour for the enlightened soul, in which there is a complete and total rejection of the idea of power itself:

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

(III, 169-178)

According to Scrivener, Shelley presents “a conflict between ‘spirit’ and ‘sensualism’, in this way differing from Godwin’s dialectic of stasis and flux. Human spirit follows the laws of nature and obeys the authority of reason, whereas ‘sensualism’ is the logic of exploitation and domination” (1982: 70). The exercise of tyrannical power is shown to be the pursuit of a merely illusory pleasure, a vain attempt to procure lasting happiness and immortality. But the oppressor, violating nature’s laws, can never be happy and will never achieve the immortality granted to the virtuous, decaying and ultimately disappearing like the material symbols of his presence.

Indeed, what gives true meaning to human life is not mere existence, but the spirit in which people live their lives. The virtuous individual “commands not, nor obeys”, i. e. has the will to resist domination and not be seduced by its siren song. Ultimately, as Scrivener argues, *Queen Mab* provides thus an ethical argument against monarchical society and in favor of rational anarchy:

The critique of monarchy in Canto III is not just a protest against absolutism, but an attack on Old Corruption and its foundations. [...] Using Godwin’s critique of luxury, Shelley laments that the creative potential of the laborer is sacrificed to the “wealth of nations”. With the totality of society infected with the commercial spirit, he proposes a new god, “virtue”, to replace the old one. The libertarian rebel escapes the cash nexus by transcending self-interest and acting on the ideals of humanity. Virtue requires no “meditative signs” and generates a new kind of commerce—love, or what one would call symbolic reciprocity.

(1982: 71-72)

2.2 A Wanderer through Time

If the first target of Shelley’s youthful fire is the State, personified by king, judges and courtiers, soon after – but not second in order of importance or for the violence of the attack – comes the Church. Shelley’s revulsion for the Christian religion was never hidden between the lines, and in his younger days it was “often enunciated in the phraseology of the callous fanatic, or sometimes in the cool accents of an eighteen-century rationalist” (Baker 1948: 30). In the poet’s view the whole teaching of Christianity, meaning the original ethical thought of Jesus Christ, has been utterly perverted and falsified by successive generations of

theologians. Indeed, hatred of oppression was a fixed idea with him from his school days onwards, and by the time he was at Oxford and published his notorious pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* he had decided that the Christian church was the most oppressive of social institutions. On this matter Baker poignantly notes:

From January to June, 1811, he devoted much time and effort to an attempt to show by logical argumentation what he felt to be the basic difficulties with the Christian position: that the existence of God could not be proved; that Christian dogma required an entirely irrational acceptance of scriptural testimony, including miracles and prophecies; that, historically speaking, Christianity had sanctioned “murder, war, and intolerance”, and that the institution of the Christian church had conspicuously failed to produce happiness among men. (1948: 30)

Shelley’s rationalist approach was the reason he refuted the belief in Christ’s divinity, while on Jesus’s value as an ethical teacher he was somewhat torn. “Let this horrid Galilean rule the *canaille*”, he cries desperately at one point, and by the time he was writing *Queen Mab*, where he makes an attempt to draw together all his accusations against Christianity, his views on Jesus have not yet solidified. In the notes to the poem he speaks of Jesus as one of “those true heroes who have died in the glorious martyrdom of liberty, and have braved torture, contempt, and poverty in the cause of suffering humanity”. Then, in a footnote to this very same note, he records his suspicion that “Jesus was an ambitious man who aspired to the throne of Judea”.

The rejection of revealed religion and of Christian theology led Shelley to “search for a religious position which would be acceptable to both his reason and his feelings and this he evidently found in a kind of pantheism” (Baker 1948: 31), thus proving once again that to ‘have faith’ should mean to always be ‘in search of’, and that the outcome of this search is peculiar to every individual and not bound to a specific religious institution or to certain religious dogmas.

At Oxford Shelley had defined the Deity as “the Soul of the Universe, the intelligent and necessarily beneficent activating principle” (in Frederick L. Jones, letter 285), but would not call this Deity by the name God, on the grounds that this substantive had too many associations with the wrathful divinity of the Old Testament and with the anthropomorphic

Being of those whom Shelley called the ‘canaille’. But while he was searching to detect and expose “the impudent and inconsistent falsehoods of priest-craft”, he was also ardently wishing “to be profoundly convinced of the existence of a Deity” and he was exclaiming: “Oh, that this Deity were the soul of the universe, the spirit of universal, imperishable love! Indeed I believe it is...” (in Frederick L. Jones, letters 43-44). Following his expulsion from Oxford in March, 1811, he even told his father that he wrote the *Necessity of Atheism* pamphlet with the serious intent of discovering whether some “proofs of an existing Deity” could not be obtained only from men who professed religious beliefs (in Frederick L. Jones, letter 59).

On a further note, Shelley’s opposition to institutionalized religion had led him to embrace certain deistic principles: a desire to simplify the dogmas of ancient faith, the refusal to accept miracles and prophecies, hatred of superstition, a pronounced anti-ecclesiastical prejudice, and a tendency to give more weight to Christian ethics than to Christian metaphysics. But Baker notes that “the poet’s deism was probably in the main the result of his opposition to revealed religion. His basic personal inclination was towards pantheism” (1948: 32), and so Shelley’s ardent search for a God in which he could believe, the Soul or essence of the universe, reveals him as fundamentally a pantheist rather than an atheist, a pantheist who seems once again to be ahead of his times in believing that we are all part of the same Whole and that we are all connected⁶. In his own words:

I may not be able to adduce proofs, but I think that the leaf of a tree, the meanest insect on which we trample, are in themselves arguments more conclusive than any which can be adduced that some vast intellect animates Infinity [...] I confess that I think [Alexander] Pope’s “all are but parts of one tremendous whole” something more than Poetry; it has ever been my favourite theory.

(in Frederick L. Jones, letter of December, 20, 1810)

Indeed, various apostrophes to the spirit of Nature in *Queen Mab* reflect this pantheistic sensitivity: for example, the poet describes how “Every grain / Is sentient both in unity and

⁶ “Everything is connected” is known today for being the fundamental theoretical assumption of string theory, as exposed by the Italian physics Gabriele Veneziano, which stems directly from the pantheistic insight that Shelley and other Romantics had already glimpsed and paves the way for the recent attempts at defining a “theory of everything” (see Gabriele Veneziano’s research articles and Thomas W. Campbell’s works).

part, / And the minutest atom comprehends / A world of loves and hatreds [...]" (IV, 143-146) and also how "[...] the trees, / The grass, the clouds, the mountains, and the sea / All living things that walk, swim, creep, or fly, / Were gods" (VI, 75-78).

Particularly revealing of Shelley's attempt to push through to its conclusion his attack upon religion – and, more specifically, Christianity – is Canto VII of the poem, especially the episode when the fairy Mab conjures up the phantom of Ahasuerus to testify before Ianthe. The character of Ahasuerus, also known as the Wandering Jew, had long exercised a fascination for Shelley and had already been the subject of an earlier poem, as the one who spurned Christ bearing the cross on the way to the Calvary and for this condemned to wander the earth until Judgement Day. In *Queen Mab*, Ahasuerus appears still youthful and defiant, yet singularly subdued:

His port and mien bore mark of many years,
And chronicles of untold ancientness
Were legible within his beamless eye:
Yet his cheek bore the mark of youth;
Freshness and vigor knit his manly frame;
The wisdom of old age was mingled there
With youth's primaevial dauntlessness;
And inexpressible woe,
Chastened by fearless resignation, gave
An awful grace to his all-speaking brow.

(VII, 73-82)

As opposed to the spirit of conformity, the Jew "represents everything vigorous, brave and forthright that Shelley could identify with" (Sperry, 1988: 15). He is summoned to testify before the soul of Ianthe in a question-and-answer examination on the problem of evil that anticipates the way Asia interrogates Demogorgon in the second act of *Prometheus Unbound* (see chapter 3). Mab asks if there is a God, and the Jew answers: "Is there a God!—aye, an almighty God / And vengeful as almighty!" (VII, 84-85). He then proceeds to describe a murderous, tyrannical divinity who has created a paradise and a tree of knowledge precisely so that man might be tempted to fall, and then has sent his own son into the world to bear all the sins of mankind of which he was the primary cause. It is the inconsequence and inhumanity of such an act that are central to Shelley's criticism of the Christian ethic, yet the middle

section of the Canto is pervaded by ambivalence, a clear sign of Shelley's tormented realization that spiritual search is an inherent quality of man's nature, even if religious power needs to be taken down due to its essence of oppressive institution.

I have already shown that an ambivalent attitude can be found in the treatment of Christ, when the reader is told that he "humbly came", a man "scorned by the world" (VII, 163-165) and compelled by his father to endure his dreadful agony, nevertheless he comes as "a parish demagogue", teaching "justice, truth, and peace" only "In semblance" (VII, 167-169). But it is in the climactic confrontation between Christ and Ahasuerus that said ambivalence is all the more apparent. The exhausted Jesus groans beneath the weight of the cross he bears, but Ahasuerus taunts him impatiently, aware only of the greater miseries that suffering is bound to produce in the world:

Indignantly I summed
The massacres and miseries which his name
Had sanctioned in my country, and I cried,
"Go! go!" in mockery.
A smile of godlike malice reillumed
His fading lineaments.—"I go", he cried,
"But thou shalt wander o'er the unquiet earth
Eternally."

(VII, 176-183)

As Sperry noted, the scene "derives its power from the terrible, unexpected smile of malice that breaks from Christ's features, a smile all the more terrifying by contrast with the traditional expression of long suffering and forgiveness in innumerable depictions in paintings and in scripture" (1988: 16). Indeed, the curse Christ utters is totally un-Christian in its vindictiveness, and I argue that Shelley seems to consciously warp conventional images of Jesus's martyrdom to show that the question of his divinity merely disfigures the man and renders him similar to the vindictive God that is believed to be his father. At the same time, there is the impression that he would never have been moved to utter the withering curse were it not for his agony and the gratuitous scorn, however historically justified, headed upon him by Ahasuerus. The powerful scene seems designed to convey "the complex interplay of guilts and sympathies that reveals Shelley's ambivalence" (Sperry, 1988: 17) towards

spirituality and religion, but also towards those people “ordained by the greater powers of social evil and conformity to play the role of oppressor” (Sperry, 1988: 17) like Shelley’s own father, who disinherited him and thus brought down upon him a curse that can be compared to Ahasuerus’s one. In the end, Shelley seems to have devised a wake-up call that still rings sadly relevant today, stressing how hate and violence – from any side – only beget more hate and violence in a circle as cruel as it is useless, like the numerous religious wars in the previous centuries have demonstrated:

Earth groans beneath religion’s iron age,
And priests dare babble of a God of peace,
Even whilst their hands are red with guiltless blood,
Murdering the while, uprooting every germ
Of truth, exterminating, spoiling all,
Making the earth a slaughter-house!

(VII, 43-48)

On another note, it is interesting to note how Shelley’s Ahasuerus also represents a kind of Romantic hero, the eternal rebel fighting helplessly yet relentlessly against an omnipotent tyrannical power, closely modeled on the most famous example in Christian poetry, i. e. Milton’s Satan, and already prefiguring Prometheus, epitome of the Shelleyan rebels. For example, Satan is clearly in Shelley’s mind when Ahasuerus says that he learned to prefer “Hell’s freedom to the servitude of Heaven” (VII, 195), echoing Satan’s remark “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven” (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I, 263). Ahasuerus then concludes by saying he has withstood the tyrant’s curse “with stubborn and unalterable will” (VII, 258), while Milton’s Satan proposes to his fallen comrades that they continue to oppose the tyrannous dictates with “unconquerable will” (*Paradise Lost*, I, 106).

Unlike Queen Mab, Ahasuerus is a victim, and therefore passionately involved in the struggle against injustice. His being cursed with eternal life puts him on the margins of society that are remote from Mab’s placid throne, from where he can portray God as a sadistic bully whom only the feeble-minded could wish to worship: as an existential rebel, the Wandering Jew defies an authority he cannot overcome and refuses to grant any ethical legitimacy to the divine power of which he is a victim. The poetry here derives its energy from the language,

not from the ideas alone. The self-objectification of Ahasuerus in the oak metaphor is an excellent way to demonstrate his peaceful serenity and complex immobility, through which he can counter God's curse of eternal life with perpetual defiance and anticipate the stationary defiance of Prometheus. Ahasuerus refuses to accept God's judgement; he, in turn, judges God, thus his power is appropriately drawn with the image of a sturdy oak.

Another interesting source of excitement is the fire imagery: there is "Heaven's fierce flame", destructive and sadistic, and Ahasuerus must endure the fire of tyranny – the misuse of fire. Another torture is the absence of fire, the "Midnight conflict of wintry storm" which represents the withdrawal of light and warmth, but despite this in the end there is a promise of rebirth and deliverance, in the images of sunlight and summer's noon which represent the hope of fire's return as a healing and nurturing presence. Neither Milton's Satan nor the Ahasuerus of the legend ever had hope of liberation as Shelley's Wandering Jew has, making him the perfect embodiment of an anarchist rebel even before anarchism was organized into an organic philosophical system and a radical existential movement.

2.3 When Dream and Day Unite

In Canto V Shelley spells out the utopian purpose of his poem. When the old God of religion and the new living god, Gold, have killed sympathy between people, poetry will revive it. In fact, against the tyranny of gold and the selfish ego, the poem enlists the will and the imagination of the poet. In Scrivener's words:

Since Shelley believes that neither the tyrants nor their victims can initiate the movement toward utopia, it will have to be the outsider, the poet with strength and benevolence, who will point the way.

(1982: 76)

First of all, Shelley starts to paint an alternative by reviving the idea of God with new meaning after having de-constructed it, until it ultimately coincides with Nature. Indeed, in the poem there is an un-Godwinian emphasis on "nature", a concept which Shelley derives

from the French atheist, materialist, and necessitarian Baron Holbach⁷, but which he subsequently interprets in a personal way so that it actually ends up complementing Godwin's ideas. Godwin himself started from the premise that nature not only presents no insuperable obstacles to reason, but is itself rational, thus displaying a typical eighteenth-century belief in the goodness of nature. The rationality of nature was an ideological weapon with which the *philosophes* and French revolutionaries delegitimated monarchy, aristocracy, and the Church: once God is dislodged as the center of the universe, so too, at the secular level, are the King, the bishops, and the nobility. Primarily for these political reasons Shelley turns to Nature in *Queen Mab*. If the anthropomorphic God of Christianity is the "prototype of human misrule" (VI, 105) and the spiritual image of despotism, then the poet can offer an alternative to this misrule by substituting Nature to God.

The rationality of Nature serves many purposes in the poem. The cyclical transformation of matter – "There's not one atom of yon earth / But once was living man" (II, 211-212) – serves to emphasize that we are all part of the Whole, of a common humanity, and to demystify the artificial distinctions of social hierarchies. Nature also provides images worthy of imitation: "The universe, / In nature's silent eloquence, declares / That all fulfil the works of love and joy,— / All but the outcast man" (III, 196-199). If joyous self-fulfillment is the lesson of Nature, then Shelley is urging the outcast man to act accordingly.

Another of Nature's voices bids humanity to change society; as the seasons change every year, undergoing a cycle of death and rebirth, so should social institutions decay and be reborn purged of injustice. Scrivener notes:

As in "Ode to the West Wind", the natural power that transforms autumn into winter, and winter into spring is a revolutionary force: "the imperishable change / That renovates the world" (V, 3-4). Still another lesson from nature derives from the contrast between natural innocence and corrupt institutions. The innocence of children is undermined by militaristic toys, war games, and religious superstitions (IV, 103-120). There is a Rousseauistic dichotomy

⁷ Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), was a Franco-German philosopher, encyclopedist and writer, and a prominent figure in the French Enlightenment. He was best known for his atheism and for his voluminous writings against religion which reject any vision of an otherworld or a spiritual reward after death, the most famous of them being *The System of Nature* (1770) and *The Universal Morality* (1776).

between natural goodness and institutional corruption: if institutions are so structured as to reflect natural innocence, then social suffering can be definitely abolished.

(1982: 69)

Finally, there is one last use that Shelley assigns Nature in *Queen Mab*. Drawing upon pastoral and millennial mythology, he portrays his future utopian society as a renovated, erotic nature. Indeed, after having exposed the horrors of man's predicament both in the past and in the present and having pulled such an effort in dismantling the old pillars of power in society, Canto VIII and IX are occupied with the vision of a future Golden Age. In particular, as will happen in *Prometheus Unbound*, in Canto VIII Shelley precedes the description of a utopian future with the description of renewed nature: "The habitable earth is full of bliss" (VIII, 58), frozen wastes become "heaven-breathing groves" (VIII, 59-69), and deserts become teeming "with countless rills and shady woods / Corn fields and pastures and white cottages" (VIII, 75-76). Moreover, every creature is now a vegetarian and predatory violence has been banished from the world. This attitude is easily explained noting that by this time, as Sperry observes, "Shelley was deeply interested in the notion that there might be a close connection between man's spiritual well-being and his dietary habits and climatic environment" (1988: 33), so it is not a coincidence if among the blessing of this new Golden Age there is the complete absence of disease and a change in the climate of the Earth, which has become a temperate zone. This new Nature, from which all loathsome traits have been eliminated, is the same one that will appear in *Prometheus Unbound*. The entire earth "becomes a loving, nurturing mother, at whose breast her 'children' not only receive love, but act out of the essence of maternal utopia, which is love-making and play" (Scrivener, 1982: 69).

Although at first glance the doctrines of materialism and necessitarianism present in the poem would seem to have little connection with such utopian dreams, Necessity has a prominent place in the substructure of *Queen Mab*, and in the notes Shelley seems to have accepted, at least for the time being, certain of the leading doctrines of the French materialists – primarily, as I have already underlined, after reading Holbach's work. Indeed, Sperry points out that, though he was

[...] unwilling to agree with Holbach that utilitarian self-interest could serve as the basis of ethics, Shelley tacitly accepted Holbach's theory of knowledge, and the assumption that the universe is reducible to the concept of matter in motion. Further, he would agree with Holbach's anti-Christian fulminations. What seems to have impressed him most, however, was the possible connection between his idea of Deity as "the mass of infinite intelligence" and Holbach's necessitarian doctrine.

(1988: 35)

Even though by 1815 Shelley had rejected materialism, he still clung to necessitarianism as late as during the writing of *Prometheus Unbound* – albeit with increasing unwillingness and although by that time this concept had receded considerably in importance, because the idea of the priority and power of the mind had taken the prominent position in the poet's thoughts. But in *Queen Mab* the problem of Necessity is evident and had to be tackled, since an explanation was needed regarding the possibility of coexistence of man's free will and the necessity of progress I have previously examined. Shelley resolves both his problem and his poem by supposing that, in due time, there is in store for man a future Golden Age through the workings of natural law – thus blending the two. This resolution had no counterpart in Godwin or Holbach's rather gloomy work, but to Shelley eradication of evil seemed possible. "That which appears to be a taint of our nature" he wrote in a letter "is in effect the result of unnatural political institutions" (in Frederick L. Jones, letter 228), so that Good will naturally ensue upon the elimination of all the outworn political and religious establishments.

On the question of free will, Shelley appears to think that the human mind is at least partially subject to what should now be labeled as 'psychological determinism'; but he cannot be content without adding that if the mind's eye can penetrate the fog of superstition it can discover the path of true virtue, and that he who sees it will inevitably follow it, whatever his other blind companions may do. In the end, Shelley uses reason as far as it will take him, but he never hesitates to make the leap of intuition when it is needed.

It appears clear how in *Queen Mab* the ethically ideal realm is closely identified with nature's laws, and how the new ideal world becomes in turn the ethical standard by which society is judged and accordingly restructured. Although it is unlikely that the social world will ever coincide exactly with Shelley's utopian vision, the poet still believes that one must try the hardest to approach such perfection. After all, this is precisely the function of utopia, i. e. to

incessantly strive to achieve the unattainable by changing small pieces for the better, one at a time, an effort which is primarily a never-ending yearning for universal freedom, and which works as the polar star for the improvement of human society.

To conclude, the most remarkable feature of *Queen Mab* is that Shelley was able to bring so many ostensibly contradictory notions within the compass of a single poem without their seeming antithetical or immiscible. His strategy to achieve such unity relies on the use of an allegorical framework and on the device of surveying past, present, and future from a supra-historical plane, and his ideological argument is already teeming with anarchist themes and ideas he will develop along his literary works. The argument presented in the poem includes, as I have analyzed, a historical survey of human misery and crime; a series of allegations against established power, superstition and Christian dogma as the source of much of said misery and criminality; a rejection of the concept of God as an anthropomorphic Being and as the kind of vengeful ruler who must be satisfied by sacrifice, prayer, and yielding; and a pantheistic argument for the existence of a Nature-Spirit which ultimately becomes Shelley's substitute for the Christian deity, but without the tyranny he had previously connected to it. Finally he indulges in an optimistic and progressive – even idealistic – supposition that in the future the Nature-Spirit, let free to operate in men's lives, will produce radical changes in society, and that these changes will be reflected in the realm of moral and general human welfare, with mankind exercising reason in order to rid itself of superstitions, bigotry, and all the power institutions by which its progress had been abnormally inhibited in past ages.

Even if Shelley arrived at the point of rejecting *Queen Mab* some years later, dubbing it “perfectly worthless” and regretting its publication due to the fact that he believed it “better fitted to injure than to serve the cause of freedom” (in Frederick L. Jones, letter 278), the poem remains nevertheless important as a first, imitative, experimental step towards the finest works of the poet's maturity. Indeed, it shows the blooming of the formula and the belief which inform Shelley's best work, which is built on a basic anarchist contrast: the world as it is against the world as it ought to be.

Chapter Three

Prometheus Unbound, the fire of resistance

“Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it moves on two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it.
What, then, is the purpose of utopia?
It is to make us keep advancing.”
Eduardo Galeano, quoting the film director Fernando Birri in an interview

While he was writing *Queen Mab*, Shelley firmly believed that the reform of political institutions and the elimination of religious superstitions would effectively put into practice the changes he hoped for. Accordingly, he preached the necessity of reform. By 1817 he had become convinced of the necessity of a leadership formed by the wisest and most righteous and by 1819, though his faith in the proper kind of leadership had not at all diminished, Shelley had reached the conclusion that evil was essentially - though not entirely - a deficiency of spiritual vision. As Stuart Sperry argues:

[...] his first great poem, *Prometheus Unbound*, was written to show men what kind of world they might have if their deficiency of vision were overcome. Throughout his life, Shelley's appreciation of the power and pervasiveness of evil steadily deepened, though at every step he carefully outlined his views on the means of combating it. He concluded that the universal human tragedy was moral deformity, not innate, but induced by the conspiracy of society against the integrity of its individual members.

(1988: 39-40)

Furthermore, in the most interesting section of her notes on *Prometheus Unbound*, Mary Shelley declares:

The prominent feature of Shelley's theory of the destiny of the human species was that evil is not inherent in the system of the creation, but an accident that might be expelled. [...] Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none.
(in Reiman & Fraistat, 2002: 205)

Shelley himself regarded *Prometheus Unbound* as his masterpiece, and by all means it appears to be the most deliberately composed of all his major works, to the point that Sperry can affirm that “it is, with the possible exception of some of Blake’s prophecies, the most ambitious attempt at visionary creation in literature, even in the light of Dante and Milton” (1988: 70).

Begun in the autumn of 1818, it occupied Shelley for over a year at the height of his career. He carefully revised and added parts to the whole of the drama and in the winter of 1819-20 he finally extended the play with a fourth and final act. The drama is a work of great intellectual and psychological subtlety that has much to say about the mind of its author. Shelley, however, did not intend it as self-revelation, but as a deep and thorough investigation of the mind and the spirit of humanity. Although one can read the poem as a reflection of his unconscious drives and fantasies, a serious study demands to start with his conscious aims and intentions, beginning with his *Preface* to the poem, which expresses in detail many different concerns—social, historical, and aesthetic—that prevent an easy summary.

Over the years critics have differed in what they chose to emphasize, but in many respects I believe Shelley’s most revealing declaration is near the end, shortly after he has confessed to “a passion for reforming the world” and then asserted, rather paradoxically, that “Didactic poetry is my abhorrence.” “My purpose,” he states “has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness” (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 209). These words reveal both the originality and the difficulty of his intention. Shelley had arrived at a point in his career where he had come to see the necessity of taking a large step forward to dramatize a grand visionary hypothesis, a task that, as he wrote in a letter to Peacock, involved him “with characters and mechanism of a kind yet un-attempted” (in Frederick L. Jones, 1964: 94).

For some time he had been committed not just to social and political reform, but to the ideal of the millennium to which that change might lead. But how was it possible to move

men rationally towards such a goal without first recovering the elemental sympathy and trust from which all rational conduct must necessarily proceed? To answer this question, one needs first to consider that Shelley believed men to be susceptible to impulses of both good and evil. The elimination of evil through a simple act of will does not lie, however, in the power of any person or group of people, since individuals are conditioned by their time, their age, and their state of cultural and social evolution.

At the same time the poet believed, contrary to the doctrine of original sin, that evil enjoys no necessary authority or substance and that it would inevitably give way once the superior attractions of virtue were realized. Indeed, for Shelley evil possesses no positive attributes of its own, but rather derives its reality from the denial or repression of man's virtuous instincts. He characteristically views evil in terms of negations as discord, disaffection, injustice, indifference, disappointment. In his view even such active forms of evil as hate and fear arise from the rejection of love and trust, because human beings were created to love, to trust, to admire, to sympathize, to contribute, to assist, to rejoice... in short, they were intended to fulfill their best potential. I will argue that this sensitivity is closely linked to ideas and visions that anarchist movements and thinkers will put forward in the twentieth century, and so my study of *Prometheus Unbound* will be focused on bringing these libertarian ideals to light and envision how they could have tangible effects on our society.

Proceeding by logic, if men were intended to become the best version of themselves, why then do people find a world in which these impulses, if not totally rejected, are nevertheless continuously inhibited or made out to seem impracticable and naive? Shelley saw that the fault lay in an ingrained cynicism, thick with a habit developed over time, which maintained the unshakable hegemony of human fear and self-interest and the difficulty of ever imagining the triumph of our higher impulses. As a keen student of history, Shelley well knew the repeated cycles of victory and defeat, of anticipation and disappointment, that marked the chronicles of the past. Above all, the ever-present example of the French Revolution weighed heavily: the poet was familiar with the arguments made by observers of his time that such ill-judged experiments in idealism only served to unleash man's destructiveness and created a situation more horrific than any they set out to improve. Seen

in this light, one might argue that the accumulated examples of history confirmed such a pessimistic fatalism. History appeared to condemn man to repeat the endless cycle of known errors, for the lessons it taught were pragmatic and discouraged the possibility of a fundamental change in human nature. Yet, putting aside the record of history, if one stepped back to look at humankind with scientific detachment, free from bias and superstition, one had to agree with Godwin that there was no apparent cause why our reason should not ultimately prevail to free us from our tragedy and direct us toward an ultimate perfectibility.

As I have discussed in the first chapter, Godwin and his followers argued that the proper course to take lay through quiet discussion, argument and persuasion, and then through legislation, a slow and gradual process that could be accelerated only at the cost of great danger. However, Shelley knew that if the change were ever to come, it would come as an emotional realization, spreading like a chain reaction, allowing individuals to recognize in the eyes of their fellows the knowledge avowed by their own hearts, i. e. precisely the way through which an ideal anarchist society should be envisioned (refer to chapter 6).

It would be like a mask suddenly fallen, or Schopenhauer's veil of Maya lifted to reveal human beings free of the suffocating weight that all the pessimisms and cynicisms had inflicted on them. Additionally, it is important to note that Shelley authored another significant work, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, which advocated for peaceful and gradual social change. Throughout his life, the poet emphasized the need for specific reforms and recognized the signs of political change both in Britain and abroad as indicators of possible future developments. This perspective qualifies his true radicalism without contradicting it, for a committed idealist welcomes every minor indication of change while understanding that only a complete overhaul of society will be satisfactory. Furthermore, once such a transformation is realized, people will question why they were so reluctant to embrace a truth that would appear so obvious in hindsight.

Social reformers and legislators, Shelley among them, might argue about the feasibility of such a change and the best means for its accomplishment, but was it preeminently the role of the poets – seen as the “unacknowledged legislators of the world” in Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* – to prefigure it through the faculty of imagination and to anticipate its distinctive

qualities. Indeed, in Shelley's vision, when poets put on the mantle of the prophets, they somehow perceive the future, but they also help creating what they foresee – if only by rendering that future vividly visible more accessible. To sum up, poets help bring into being what they describe because of the evoking power of their words.

Shelley's daring and originality can be glimpsed in his determination to reverse the priorities expressed by Wordsworth, who "set his heart upon the earthly realization of the aims of the revolution in France, and when the revolution failed, he lost faith in its ideals or, rather transferred his humanitarian ambitions to a more conventional, private, and Christian sphere of endeavor" (Sperry, 1988: 70). For Shelley, however, what matters most remains utopia, something which explains his determination to reaffirm the validity of revolutionary and imaginative ideals even in the wake of the disaster unfolding in Europe during his lifetime. This does not mean that Shelley was heartless or uncaring of the current historical developments and their significance: on the contrary, he would assert that poets are and must remain politically active and socially concerned. Yet if in their role as poets they are, to quote the conclusion of the *Defence of Poetry*, "the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not" (in Reiman & Fraistat, 2002: 535), then their primary allegiance is by definition not to the things of this world but to what may become, and their eye is not on earthly objects but on the imaginative and the ideal.

On the other hand, such priorities immediately suggest a difficulty of realization that Shelley's early critics were quick to recognize, a difficulty that questioned the poet's effectiveness and raised many doubts about the poem itself: even granted the ultimate perfectibility of man and the need to represent it as an achievable ideal, was it really possible to depict in a convincingly and movingly way such an unfamiliar state of being? How was it possible to develop the compelling sense of conflict and struggle on which great dramas are traditionally built? Such problems would have been enough to intimidate any poet less aspiring than Shelley. In obeying his conviction that the time had come, both in his career and in the larger tide of human events, for advancing a vision of a daring and apocalyptic scope, he was acting on a faith of the only kind he could ever truly tolerate. He was acting on the

untamed convictions of his own heart and on the truly libertarian belief that they were the ties that united him most closely to his fellow beings.

As a prototype for this humanitarianism, having donated knowledge and the sparkle of fire to mankind, Shelley had been interested for some time in the figure of the mythical Titan Prometheus in order to employ him as the hero of his drama. In the poet's final vision, his protagonist would have needed to be something in between Milton's Jesus Christ and Milton's Satan – the latter having already been used as a model for Ahasuerus in *Queen Mab* – since both prototypes taken alone presented certain difficulties. First of all, for Shelley the example of Christ had been appropriated and irrevocably distorted by religious orthodoxy. Moreover, Milton had already employed the Christian savior as the hero of his *Paradise Regained*, a poem that, however different, presented important similarities to Shelley's intention. On the other hand, the character of Satan possessed remarkable attraction for his unyielding defiance in the face of overwhelming tyranny, but at the same time it was flawed, as Shelley observed in his *Preface to Prometheus*, by “taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement” (in Reiman & Fraistat, 2002: 207). However brave and resourceful, Satan lacked those traits of suffering and self-sacrifice that belonged to the Christian savior, with which Shelley fully sympathized.

As a third solution between Christ and Satan, Prometheus represented the difficult and possibly contradictory balance between militancy and submission, between self-affirmation and dedication to others that Shelley was struggling to describe. Prometheus, of course, brought with him the great but also intimidating example of Aeschylus' drama *Prometheus Bound*, even if Shelley's own ingrained extremism could never permit him to agree with the political moderation and compromise of the older dramatist's resolution, in which the competing claims of Jupiter and Prometheus were finally reconciled. Nevertheless, through Aeschylus's play he began to see certain deeper implications of the myth itself, the kind of reinterpretation that any significant reworking of the myth would require. On this matter, Reiman and Fraistat aptly observe that

Shelley's additions to the original three-act play broadened the scope of his most ambitious work from a myth of the renovation of the human psyche to a renewing of the whole cosmos.

Given Shelley's ethics and his theory of knowledge (epistemology), it seems likely that he believed that when human beings viewed the universe correctly, it would appear to be beneficent rather than hostile.

(2002: 203)

Also Byron had been haunted by the Promethean figure for some time, and he had already written one of his most powerful lyrics on the Titan, but Shelley could hardly agree with his older friend's depiction of the hero as a symbol of man's gloomy destiny, who can find his purpose and identity only in the act of defying his tormentor without the possibility of ever changing his condition (Duffy, 2005: 158-160).

As he mulled over these problems, Shelley began to see a major analogy between the enduring human dilemma and the Promethean situation as he interpreted it. He had come to view the human position on Earth as a striking anomaly: on one hand there existed no real impediment to our responding at any given moment to the urges of our true and better nature and overthrow misrule, oppression, and injustice in order to summon a new golden age – short of mutability and death, the givens of human condition – while on the other hand the toll of fear, mistrust, and self-concern was so heavy that it seemed impossible for any reformer or movement to break through the barrier of falsity and self-interest protecting the status quo and to capture people's imaginations and hearts.

At this point, either side of the paradox could be emphasized. One could stress the ever-present availability, even the imminence of the change if humankind could only once see its way through to a just and full realization of its own potential, or one could equally fall back in despair at the evidence of the way our best desires and intentions had repeatedly been crushed by the tenacity and treachery of those established powers that ruled the world along with the legion of accomplices they seduced into serving them. Either extreme was perilous, for to emphasize the one view was only in the end to accentuate the other. The danger lay in moving wildly back and forth between the two options. After all, this turned out to be the lesson of the French Revolution: the initial surge of triumphant optimism, once unmet, led intellectuals like Wordsworth to feelings of dismay, withdrawal, and a loss of faith not just in the cause of political radicalism but in human nature itself.

Looking at the whole dilemma through the lens of contemporary history, I would argue that not much has changed, thus Shelley's words are ever more relevant and needed. It is precisely in this light that the poet's reinterpretation of the myth assumes major relevance, since the choice of his hero was hardly casual. As the poet himself states in the *Preface*, Prometheus is "the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noblest ends" (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 207). For this reason Carlos Baker can assert that "Prometheus represents mankind, or more specifically, the mind of mankind", because Shelley's drama "has everything to do with what man allows, or does not allow, to exist in his mind" (1948: 92), and the furtherance of good is entrusted not to a superior power, but entirely to man, who can fulfill the obligation only by eliminating hatred from his mental process and admitting love or sympathy in its place.

In its final form, *Prometheus Unbound* exhibits Shelley's preferred symmetrical structure. Placed at the beginning and at the end, Act I and Act IV each consists of a single scene with three clear-cut divisions, and these acts flank the other two which are divided into nine scenes, with the central one – Act II, scene V – depicting the journey and transformation of Asia as she moves backwards through time, reversing the gyres of history to make "the world grow young again". There is also another structural parallel in the drama which comprises the dialogue of mythological characters in Act II, scene II and Act III, scene II, while on a thematic level Acts I and III deal primarily with conditions in the human world – the psychology of tyranny in the former and of freedom in the latter – and the other two acts explore the metaphysical implications of human bondage—how a slave psychology distorts the human view of the universe.

In Act I of Shelley's version, after Prometheus' opening speech, his curse of Jupiter is repeated to him, he repents it and then resists the psychological torments sent by the tyrant, before being comforted by human hopes and ideals. In Act II, Panthea communicates to Asia two dreams she has had that foresee the release of Prometheus from his chains and the renewal of the world; Asia and Panthea are then called away and raw down to the realm of Demogorgon, where Asia questions him on the nature of things. Demogorgon ascends the chariot of the Hour in which Jupiter is destined to be overthrown and directs the Oceanides

to the car of the following Hour, the one that will redeem Prometheus. Act III sees Jupiter awaiting the offspring of his forced union to Thetis and this proves to be Demogorgon, who drags Jupiter down into the abyss of chaos. Hercules releases Prometheus, and – after directing the Spirit of redemption to spread the good news around the world and having heard the spirit’s report of the effects of such proclamation – the reunited lovers Prometheus and Asia retire into a cave to cultivate the arts. The action itself having come to an end, Act IV is a hymn of rejoicing, first by the chorus of Spirits of the Hours and the Spirits of the Human Mind and then by the Spirits of the Earth (male) and the Moon (female). Finally, as Prometheus in his opening speech had described his situation in relation to past events, so Demogorgon, addressing the spirits of all creatures in the Universe, summarizes the present joy and tells how it is possible to recapture freedom, should it be lost again.

At the center of the whole story lies the image of Jupiter and Prometheus, locked in a totalizing struggle of wills in which the tyrant sought to break his adversary through the most dreadful torments, while the hero tried to maintain his resistance waiting for the arrival of the promised hour of deliverance. For Aeschylus, who visualized the drama as a struggle between the legitimate claims of vested authority and the demands of innovation or dissent, a resolution in the form of compromise was possible and desirable. However, for Shelley, who visualized the evil embodied in Jupiter as residing in the absence of the true and good, any compromise was inconceivable because it would lead to the ultimate perversity, the recognition and confirmation of the unreal and inessential. What lay behind the poet’s choice was, borrowing Sperry’s words, “a thorough reassimilation of the myth as a major revelation of the perennial human situation, a situation that for Shelley had come to assume contemporary significance in strengthening and extending human hope”, a reassimilation that saw the poet “committing himself to a visionary work that strained the very limits of poetical conception, a work that was arguably more daring and original than any other poet had yet attempted” (1988: 75).

3.1 Happiness in Slavery

From the beginning of the first act, with Prometheus's long opening speech, the reader is aware that he is witnessing the Titan's transformation and release. Yet that change is at first so imperceptible, inexplicable and seemingly unmotivated, that one must wonder how and why, after so many years of terrible suffering, it is coming about precisely now. So gradual is the change, latent even in Prometheus's opening declarations, that it might almost be imagined having begun, as some critics have suggested, offstage, before the drama had started. Granted that the act describes the hero's change of heart from hatred towards love, why is this movement so halting and unfocused?

The reader first sees unrepentant Prometheus, "eyeless in hate" (I, 9), although a closer look at this passage suggests that the description actually refers to the Titan's vision of his former self, and is therefore already a thing of the past. The first decisive indication of a change comes through the anticipation of his foe's downfall, when

these pale feet . . . might trample thee
If they disdained not such a prostrate slave.
Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee.

(I, 51-53)

Pity, one may argue, is only a first and imperfect approach to the higher love Prometheus can achieve only through his reunion with Asia. Still, it is curious to find a love born out of its opposite, contempt. Moreover, the larger change, which is revealed almost immediately thereafter, comes with the abruptness of an imperious declaration:

I speak in grief,
Not exultation, for I hate no more,
As then, ere misery made me wise. —The Curse
Once breathed on thee I would recall.

(I, 56-59)

As one critic has rightly observed, "Prometheus cannot be said actually to will his pity. Rather, he seems to discover it, almost as a sign of grace, within himself" (Flagg, 1972: 71). If

this really is the turning point of a terrible impasse that went on for centuries, why did Shelley not take greater pains to effectively dramatize the source and growth of his hero's reclamation? The answer lies in several different aspects of the problem.

First, it was Shelley's intention, as I have previously underlined, to press forward with a radically visionary and transforming work, a work above all exemplary in intention and effect, as the only way of breaking through the dilemma constraining humankind. Secondly, Shelley was unwilling – limitations of his own knowledge aside – to specify when or under what conditions the longed-for change might come about. But most of all, he was somehow unable to conceive the change as simply the result of an act of human will. The common belief that, shortly after completing *Queen Mab*, Shelley rapidly abandoned the necessitarian ideas that pervaded his early thinking for a philosophy of free will and free love has gained influential support in recent years. However, the truth seems to be that Shelley retained the concept of necessity as one of a series of often conflicting premises within his later thought. The point can be reaffirmed by quoting from the prose works of the poet, composed shortly after *Prometheus*. Indeed, in his *Defence of Poetry* Shelley writes:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure.

(in Reiman & Fraistat, 2002: 532)

For Shelley, the act of poetic creation was more than the happy discovery of the proper metaphor or rhythm to convey the emotional effect of his design. The power of inspiration was not only aesthetic, but also profoundly moral, guiding the work from the first germ of idea to its last implications. However discontinuous, the wind of inspiration was compelling and pervasive, directing the course of the poet's work from beginning to end, so that its integrity as a whole was nothing less than a divine mystery.

In this sense, I argue that the change *Prometheus Unbound* dramatizes from its beginning is the reflection of Shelley's hope that spring will follow winter, that the reign of

mercy and peace will someday succeed to the dominion of hatred and oppression. Shelley trusted that, if only through the laws of probability operating in the immensity of time, the golden years must return, and that there was just the need for someone to become aware and interiorize a spark of that hope – through poetry, i. e. culture and the arts – to consequently spread the fire of rebirth and freedom all around. This strong belief reveals once again a deep trust in the fundamental essence of human nature, an aspect that directly connects his utopia to anarchist philosophers and that I will better examine in the last chapter.

Even if for several reasons it was important to Shelley to concentrate his attention on the nature of the change that overcomes his hero rather than on its determining conditions, nevertheless there was still the need for some poetic mechanism to reflect the character of the transformation, if only to show the difference between the “then” of an earlier Prometheus and the “now” of his liberation. In Prometheus’s first speech in the play, immediately after his anticipation of Jupiter’s coming downfall, the Titan is determined to recant the curse he had uttered upon his tormentor so many years before: “The Curse / Once breathed on thee I would recall” (I, 58-59).

In response to his declaration, the voices of the natural elements describe the plaguing effect of the imprecation but “dare not” recall something which, for hopeful mortals, has been “a treasured spell” (I, 184). It is ironic that such curse, marking the birth of the divided soul and at the origin of the current terrible state of things, is seen as some kind of sacred text, too awe-inspiring to speak aloud. However useful the curse has been in sustaining hope, it has also perpetuated an idolatry of words and a hierarchical reliance on an external deliverer.

The spirits are followed by Prometheus’s mother, Earth, who refuses to repeat the curse for fear of further punishments the tyrant may call down upon her, and urges her son to summon up the phantasm of Jupiter to repeat the awful words instead. One cannot ignore the negative connotation of certain words in Earth’s speech, words like “spell”, “secret”, “dreadful” and “dare not” which are typical of the language linked to religious subjugation and underline once again the negative effects of the hateful speech.

The appearance of the ghost of Jupiter and his repetition of the curse have the effect of dramatic irony because they force Prometheus to recognize the 'Jupiterian' aspects of his own words, so that the Titan's next action is to cease hating and start pitying Jupiter. Until that moment, he realizes, his hope had been based on hatred and revenge, knowing that Jupiter's reign had to end someday. Suddenly, however, Prometheus realizes what he needs to do is break the cycle, because if Jupiter falls by means of his hatred, then they will simply exchange roles: to trample and enslave Jupiter is to resurrect tyranny in a new form, thus perpetuating the long history of hierarchical domination. In Scrivener's analysis:

The curse, performed and enacted by the ghost, forces Prometheus into a moment of traumatic recognition, as he disowns his words. [...] Prometheus is now trying to heal. He recalls in order to cancel and obliterate, to wipe the slate clean.

(1982: 164)

Indeed, the Titan's new words do not generate power and hierarchy, but produce instead an anti-curse: "I wish no living thing to suffer pain" (I, 305). The anti-curse is presented as an unprivileged statement, a gift freely given to every living being and a subjective restructuring that withdraws energy from the Jupitorean world.

That Prometheus is the one who elevated Jupiter into his position of power is a very important assumption of Act I. As I have explained, Jupiter the tyrant was created by the hero in the moment the human soul divided itself, installing a powerful deity to worship and fear but maintaining hope in the eventual downfall of the dictator. In Scrivener's words, "Prometheus "bound" himself once had alienated a part of himself as Jupiter, who then imprisoned the liberator of humanity for uttering the curse" (1982: 156), so Shelley seems to suggest that the true enemy lies within us and that we ultimately create our own demons.

The act of the Titan's reintegration is thus necessary not only to measure the distance between "then" and "now", but also to connect the hero consciously with a part of himself essential to his present mastery. The impulse or the power to recall the curse operates like the final stage of a long psychological healing process. Although Prometheus is a fragment, detached from the power he gave to Jupiter and separated from Asia's love, he is able to start a process which will lead eventually to his liberation.

Hating tyrants has, up to now, sustained the hope of overcoming tyranny; without question such hatred is preferable to the submission practiced by Mercury, Jupiter's agent. Nevertheless, even though hatred has been necessary for these many years, it has not been enough to extirpate tyranny itself. As Scrivener explains, to break the wheels of hate Prometheus must perform a heroic deed of the imagination:

From hate to pity is a movement away from privilege and certainty, because one is no longer in the role of totally innocent victim. As innocent victim, one can justify any act of retribution against the tyrant, who is defined solely by his tyrannical behavior. When hate turns into retributive action, however justifiable in ordinary terms, the victim turns victimizer, replacing the tyrant at the top of the hierarchy.

(1982: 163)

No longer hating Jupiter, Prometheus wants to recall his curse because he no longer identifies with those words, in fact he cannot even remember them. Indeed, in the first Act Shelley explores the way in which the Promethean spark can retain a vital power after the fires of hatred and resentment that kindled it until that moment have consumed themselves. Hence the hero's words on hearing the repetition of the curse, so often quoted as the moral turning point of the drama:

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, 303-305)

This is the event that sets the stage for the remainder of Act I: the arrival of Mercury and the Furies and their temptation of the hero, followed by the chorus of celestial spirits who comfort him after his ordeal. Carlos Baker has likened everything that follows this event in the drama to the operation of a great machine set in motion by Prometheus's change of heart (1948: 89-118), as if to say that, since we are all connected, once the change truly begins there is nothing that can stop its effects from spreading everywhere.

Indeed, Asia's transformation, her descent to the cave of Demogorgon, his ascent to the throne of Jupiter, the tyrant's futile resistance and downfall, the unbinding of

Prometheus, and so on—all follow from the hero's initial decision to change. It is no wonder that critics have seen Prometheus's determination to recall the curse as the crucial act in the entire play, and that many of them have interpreted the retraction of the infamous curse as a required act of moral recognition and repentance.

In portraying a hero that chooses not to hate and exact vengeance on his enemy, Shelley was aware of his radical departure from traditional rebellious models to the point that the anti-curse seems to indicate that Prometheus has given up the struggle. It is then to clarify the nature of Promethean resistance that Shelley arranges the following scenes of temptation and psychological torture at the hands of Mercury and the Furies, who dramatize radically different possibilities for the development of the human intellect and spirit since Prometheus is really forced to confront “the Furies of his own mind” (O'Neill and Howe, 2013: 293).

Mercury, Jupiter's servant, offers the Titan a deal: in exchange for the 'secret' Jupiter thinks Prometheus possesses, the tyrant will not only liberate Prometheus but will provide him with every imaginable sensual pleasure. What the Titan must do in exchange is to surrender his will like Mercury himself has done. The irony of the situation is that there is no secret Prometheus owns, because all he knows is that Jupiter's reign must end, that there is nothing Jupiter can do to save himself (“I know but this, that it must come”). To sum up, the hero can stoically reject Mercury's temptation because he knows the tyrant will fall, that Justice, when it comes, will not be in the form of terror and ruthless repression:

For Justice when triumphant will weep down
Pity not punishment on her own wrongs,
Too much avenged by those who err

(I, 403-405)

Scrivener can therefore sustain that “Prometheus rejects the legal procedures of punishment, none of which, as Godwin illustrated, can change society in a lasting, salutary way” (1982: 165), which is the same contention put forward by anarchist thinkers about the established forms of legal systems and crime punishment procedures adopted by society, i. e. that laws are not written in stone and can be challenged or changed, that re-education is

always preferable to punishment and that depriving prisoners of their dignity is a sure recipe for disaster as it starts a vicious and possibly endless cycle of resentment and retribution.

Surviving one temptation, Prometheus then faces another, the temptation of despair brought by the terrifying black shapes that are soon revealed to be the Furies. They present the Titan with discouraging images of human incapacity and evocations of historical efforts at libertarian reform that turned into tyrannical catastrophes with the intent of besieging the hero in his isolation, make his only certainty falter and his faith crumble. Firstly, they urge that the love of merciless destruction is just as ingrained in the human soul as the thirst inspired by beauty, that the two impulses are reciprocal in strength:

The beauty of delight makes lovers glad,
Gazing on one another—so are we.
As from the rose which the pale priestess kneels
To gather for her festal crown of flowers
The aerial crimson falls, flushing her cheek —
So from our victim's destined agony
The shade which is our form invests us round,
Else are we shapeless as our Mother Night.

(I, 465-472)

The Furies are trying to point to the propensity of self-torture, the “dread thought” and “foul desire” that vex “the self-content of wisest men” (I, 487-489). Taunted by them and aware of the pain humans inflict on themselves and on their fellow beings – evil is, after all, a banal choice – Prometheus cannot deny human vulnerability hides the potential for self-torture, but he can only claim to rule the conflicting impulses within him, once again revealing Shelley's personal doctrine of free will and his anarchic spirit:

Yet I am king over myself, and rule
The torturing and conflicting throngs within
As Jove rules you when Hell grows mutinous

(I, 492-494)

Having failed to overcome the Titan with the psychological evidence of their perpetual presence, the Furies seek to crush his spirit by moving from the individual to the social plane.

Collecting themselves into a chorus, they present him with several historical visions, adding taunts that claim for the spirit of evil the same invincibility that Shelley claimed for the good. Cruelty and fear, the two great principles of the Furies, multiply and reinforce each other as rapidly as love and beauty. Indeed, beneath the devastation of ruined cities

Fire is left for future burning, —
It will burst in bloodier flashes
When ye stir it, soon returning.

(l, 507-509)

When the Furies tear the veil that separates the past from the present and future, the examples of Christ and the French Revolution that break upon Prometheus validate a dreadful lesson:

Behold, an emblem—those who do endure
Deep wrongs for man, and scorn and chains, but heap
Thousand-fold torment on themselves and him.

(l, 594-596)

Worse than useless, dedication to the cause of relieving the ignorance and suffering of humanity only aggravates the evils it would remove. Twisted in language and institutionalized as faith, Christ's message and intent have been converted to tyranny and superstition: the Savior's very name is now a curse, his lesson of mercy has been converted by orthodox Christianity to the morbid worship of the horrors of suffering. In a similar way, the enthusiasm and dedication of the French revolutionaries only paved the way for a more oppressive tyranny. The two historical perspectives make their mark upon Prometheus. Yet he endures and struggles for self-control:

Hark, sister! what a low yet dreadful groan
Quite unsuppressed is tearing up the heart
Of the good Titan.

(l, 578-580)

Having reinforced their analysis of the human psyche with the examples of history, the Furies now sum up their lesson in terrible aphorisms, which take on the power of a nightmare:

The good want power, but to weep barren tears.
The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.
The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;
And all best things are thus confused to ill.

(I, 625-628)

The Furies do not need to deny the prevalence of wisdom and love, they deny only that they can ever free man for long from the fear and habit that oppress him (Webb in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 698-699). Nor does the Titan in his final rejoinder deny their assertion: “Thy words are like a cloud of winged snakes / And yet, I pity those they torture not” (I, 632-633). This latter passage indicates that,

although Prometheus endures the torture of his tormentors, he nevertheless agonizes over the pictures of human folly: the self-hatred of sense-enchanted youth ; war; famine; the desire for knowledge exceeding the capacity to learn; Christ’s liberating words turning into the poison of institutionalized religion; the failures of the French revolution.

(Scrivener, 1982: 166)

Despite this bleak portrait, the liberating implication underlying this ordeal is that if humanity created this tortured world, then it can also unmake it. Indeed, perhaps all that Jupiter consists of is a misused creative principle that turns the human soul against itself. According to Scrivener, this final torture (I, 618-631) is “a portrait of the modern intellectual who cannot act, think, or feel beyond conventional parameters” (1982: 166). The moral world is in fragments, good qualities exist but not in such a way as to generate a harmonious society. Once again, it is pity who delivers Prometheus from despair, pity for those who are not tortured by the anguish of human incapacity. Rather than define human evolution as fixed and already concluded, the hero – and with him the poet – continues to imagine the possibility of further growth by acting with sympathy to those less open-minded than himself. The last Fury’s final line, “Thou pitiest them? I speak no more!” (I, 634) and their vanishing right after suggests that the voices of despair and darkness have attained the limits of their power when,

deprived of ground for confidence, Prometheus is reduced to compassion. On this matter, Sperry suggests that “it is just Shelley’s point that pity, the last residuum of desire and hope, affirmation in its most primitive form, is sufficient, like the Promethean spark, to rekindle the rehabilitating energies that now enter the drama” (1988: 88).

After the last Fury vanishes, Prometheus contemplates death, the only thing that can bring a certain kind of “peace” (I, 634-645), even if death can end the painful activity of idealistic hope, it also “hides all thing beautiful and good.” It is “defeat” and not victory, an escape and not a realization, so even if Prometheus could, he would not seek death. The Titan then summarizes for Panthea the deadly truths his tormentors have presented him:

Names are there, Nature’s sacred watchwords—they
Were borne aloft in bright emblazonry.
The nations thronged around, and cried aloud
As with one voice, “Truth, liberty and love!”
Suddenly fierce confusion fell from Heaven
Among them—there was strife, deceit and fear;
Tyrants rushed in, and did divide the spoil.
This was the shadow of the truth I saw.

(I, 648-655)

According to Sperry, the sad perversion to which the good is exposed is represented as a travesty of the Pentecost, as Shelley uses once again a symbol of the Christian faith to underline the perversion it has operated on Christ’ real message – thus contributing to the corruption of humanity.

The bright ideals the nations hail “As with one voice” are suddenly obliterated in the confusion that falls from heaven. The appropriation of the sacred watchwords into various tongues and modes of understanding is the first step in the process by which their meaning is wrenched and misapplied by self-serving tyrants, a process the Furies have depicted as the endlessly recurring pattern of history.

(1988: 89)

To console the hero, his mother Earth summons up “those subtle and fair spirits / Whose homes are the dim caves of human thought” (I, 658-659). Closely associated with the spring, these spirits are the antithesis of the Furies and represent the virtuous instincts that

exist spontaneously and seemingly indestructibly in human consciousness. After the opening chorus, which assures Prometheus that someday human creativity will achieve self-determination, individual spirits console him with a more constructive view of human destiny. The First Spirit, for instance, assures the Titan that now is not the time for the destruction of free nations but for the overthrowing of tyrannical “creeds outworn” (I, 697) because now the various ascending outcries—“Freedom! Hope! Death! Victory!”—do not break out into confusion but are harmoniously reconciled: this confirms that the revolutionary tool can work for good as well as evil, and as always with any tool it is up to each individual to choose what is worth fighting for.

Scrivener interestingly notes how “each comforting image presents the mind with human agency overcoming determinate factors: the revolutionaries against the tyrant’s party; the benevolent sailor; the disinterested sage; the idealistic poet; the forces of love and hope against despair and disappointment. If and when human agency reaches a point of self-determination, then Prometheus will be delivered” (1982: 167).

Prometheus’s final words to the spirits in the face of their positive predictions take the form of a question: “Spirits! how know ye this shall be?” (I, 789). To answer, in their departing chorus the spirits point to the signs “the wandering herdsmen know” (I, 794) of a coming spring: their voices fade away as Prometheus and Asia’s sisters – Panthea and Ione – strain to retain them. We are left to sense the importance of the first act mainly from the mood in which it leaves the hero:

How fair these air- born shapes! and yet I feel
Most vain all hope but love
[...] alas! How heavily
This quiet morning weighs upon my heart;
Though I should dream, I could even sleep with grief
If slumber were denied not... I would fain
Be what it is my destiny to be,
The saviour and the strength of suffering man,
Or sink into the original gulph of things...
There is no agony and no solace left;
Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more.

(I, 807-808, 812-820)

Prometheus's mood is indeed one of emotional exhaustion, as his speech leaves us with a sense that, with all the evidence for both sides fully offered, there is nothing more that either the hero or the reader can learn of the potential for human good or human evil in the world. The conflicting claims have been made and the rival positions argued, and in the end there is no clear rational basis to know with certainty which one of the two opposite visions of human destiny will prevail. Faced with this ultimate indeterminacy, Prometheus falls back on his resolution to remain faithful to his hopes for suffering man, to "Be what it is my destiny to be."

The hero's last thoughts point to his lover, Asia, and his desire for reunion. At this point he feels it is necessary for him to fully withdraw from the phenomenal world in order to set the world of potentiality in motion: he has done all that was in his power. He accomplishes this by desiring Asia and inspiring Panthea's dream, which she relates in Act II. The hero's final deed is "to desire so intensely that he provokes in turn a dream of desire, for now it is the subterranean, ghostly and unconscious world of dreams that must perform the work of liberation" (Scrivener, 1982: 167).

Finally, I would like to underline how the first act of *Prometheus Unbound* serves as prelude to the unbinding of the hero and his reunion with Asia in the acts that follow, but also as self-justification, even apology. The act prepares the way not for a simple triumph of human wisdom and virtue over negation and despair, but rather for a vision of a possible perfection so tenuous and insecure that it must be fostered and promoted in every way possible. Sperry also adds that Act I "is Shelley's justification for writing a drama that he knew might prove worse than futile, even dangerous, but that nevertheless embodied, as he saw it and in spite of the views of his leading contemporaries, the only practical hope for mankind" (1988: 92).

Chapter Four

Prometheus Unbound, the fire of rebirth

“Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”

Percy Shelley, *Ode to the West Wind*

At the end of the first act of *Prometheus Unbound* the mood of Shelley's hero is quiet resignation, a state that is primarily the outcome of the Titan's effort in renouncing his curse and resisting the temptations of the Furies. He resolves to reject hatred and endure his pain, knowing that a day will come when his deliverance and the end of Jupiter's reign will finally become a reality. It is easy to agree with Scrivener's analysis to account for the contrasts between the different moods in the first two acts of the drama, when he states that “Will is a quality that Prometheus exhibits strongly in the first act, but relaxation of the will characterizes the second act” (1982: 167). The problem lies in the complexity of the Shelleyan version of the myth, where nothing is as straightforward or clean-cut as it seems. Indeed, the beginning of the drama presents an apparently linear and consequential plot, but it is from the following piece that the complexity of Shelley's vision begins to appear. At a closer scrutiny, one realizes how everything in the play exhibits a double nature, and it is in the light of this notion of ‘duality’ that Shelley's work reveals its ambiguities, but also its deepest and most interesting meanings.

Going back briefly to the events presented in Act I, it is my contention that the poet certainly intended his lyrical drama to “educate [...] in the dynamics of the political change,

to caution against desperation and violence, and to extol the benefits of a long-term revolution in opinion” (Duffy, 2005: 149), but that he built it on the concept of duality because he always remained aware of the double nature of human behavior and instincts, and he was conscious of his own nagging anxiety in the choice between violent revolution and gradual reform. Most notably, it is interesting to notice how the poet, interpreted by Shelley as “unacknowledged legislator” of the world, is also a Promethean figure even if it is not perfectly juxtaposed to the titular character of Shelley’s opus. In fact, poets have the ability to transcend their individual existence and their historical setting to present universal truths, but at the same time they cannot fully participate to these truths since they are “all instinct”, endlessly condemned by their sensitivity to live in the middle, to strive and endure like the chained Titan in order to find words powerful enough to convey those truths they glimpse—while at the same time knowing, as I will discuss later in the chapter, that “the deep truth is imageless” because it cannot be explained, but only perceived and experienced (hence the need for powerful and evocative poetic visions). This reading, which conflates humanity’s struggle for change and the poet’s strife for meaning, is backed up by Merrilees Roberts in a recent seminal essay:

Prometheus Unbound explores Shelley’s interest in the individual psychology of the poet who feels they must encompass a multiple, collective subjectivity. This is why the Promethean poet who must transcend his own emotional particularity in order to successfully bring poetic language to life is not straightforwardly represented by the dramatic persona of Prometheus. The depiction of the Promethean poet is shared between various personae, and is immanent in the moral and emotional developments described by the drama as a whole.

(2020: 179)

The duality was already present in Act I, most notably in Prometheus’ rejection of his curse against Jupiter, and even before in his inability to repeat it. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Willam Ulmer (1990) read this incapacity of the Titan as a doorway which would open the possibility for emancipation in the subsequent acts, while Roberts understands the refusal to iterate the curse as “a form of [...] self-reconstitution enacted by giving a linguistic profile to the original emotional conditions that first inspired his anger” (2020: 180). In this light, refusing the curse becomes rejecting old, linguistic models—rejecting the language of

oppressive power itself. It is in this moment that the Prometheus Shelley inherited from Aeschylus' myth becomes a "second Prometheus", supposedly perfected by transcending hate but also "acknowledging the inauthenticity of his position as saviour of mankind, when his actions have thrown humanity in the thrall of Jupiter" (Roberts, 2020: 181). This poses a major problem, since the apparent hero of the drama, who has endured unspeakable pain while patiently waiting for deliverance, reveals himself insecure and incapable of fully transcending the language and the machinations of tyrannical power (a power he has indirectly helped). After having come to his epiphany and having resolved to pity instead of hating, Prometheus attempts to overcome his limitations but, as I will show in the following paragraphs, he will be able to do so only by relying on someone else's help.

4.1 A Dream of Spring

The last speech presented in Act I had Panthea clairvoyantly perceiving that Asia's vale, once frozen and desolate, was now already "haunted by sweet airs and sounds" (I, 830), and the feeling reveals itself to be true when, at the opening of the second act, spring has finally arrived. Asia greets it with enthusiasm, with verses that echo Shelley's famous *Ode to the West Wind*, through which the poet portrays the resurgence of spring as the recollection of a dream which is momentarily sad, since until moments before the sweetness it recalls had seemed so distant, lost, and irretrievable (it is useful to remember how melancholy and the memory of the past are two favored recurrent themes in Romantic poetry):

[...] thou dost wake, O Spring!
O child of many winds! As suddenly
Thou comest as the memory of a dream
Which now is sad because it hath been sweet [...]

(II, I, 6-10)

There is no explanation for this sudden change for the better, other than the renewal of the year, an event which is deeply rooted in the natural order of things and yet never ceases

to strike humans with wonder and surprise. Indeed, Shelley's analogies convey a sense of the miraculous in the most common elements of everyday experience. Asia greets the returning spring claiming that it is a sign that the hour of Prometheus's deliverance has arrived, as if she were watching the last minutes of the Titan's endurance expire. Her depiction of the beautiful prospect unfolding before her eyes deepens in significance with the description of the new day dawning, as Shelley employs a device commonly found in his mature works and "marks a spiritual or psychological transformation by analogy with a familiar diurnal occurrence. [...] Prometheus's release takes place with the exactness of an astronomical conjunction" (Sperry, 1988: 94), thus clearly signaling the ultimate inevitability of the change coming.

Far from being a simple secondary character, Asia deserves close attention, being "one of the most elusive of Shelley's conceptions" (Steichen, 1904: 46). Indeed, the poet employs a mystical description in shaping her, defining her as the "lamp of earth" or "light of life / Shadow of beauty unbeheld" (III, iii, 7-8), because Asia can be interpreted as an ideal which represents all that humankind hopes and longs for. In a more recent reading, she is defined as "the last of Shelley's great female revolutionaries, the most sophisticated statement of his concern to feminise the revolution" (Duffy, 2005: 173), since her role in Jupiter's downfall is fundamental: it is Asia who activates the inevitable and necessary historical outcome of all tyrannical rules, i. e. the oppressor's defeat.

Furthermore, the division between her and Prometheus, dramatized by their physical isolation from each other at the beginning of the second act, represents Shelley's view of the fallen state of humankind and can be analyzed in many ways. For instance, a first interesting examination is the one presented by Stuart Curran, who has emphasized the contrast between the intellectual propensities of the hero and Asia's more emotional, intuitive way of understanding (Curran, 1975: 99-100). In another view, according to Frederick Pottle (1965: 133-143), Asia is tasked with descending into Demogorgon's realm to attain self-awareness. Symbolically, wisdom (represented by Prometheus) needs to embrace love, while love (personified by Asia) needs to gain wisdom; such transformation is essential for reorganizing and transcending the moral disorder present within fragmented humanity. Scrivener notes that, although Asia does obtain wisdom inside the cave,

her movement toward Demogorgon prefigures a utopian logic quite distinct from the movement of Act I. [...] Allegorically, Asia is returning to the beginning of all things, the source, in order to remember an original state prior to the separation from Prometheus. She listens to the language of desire which leads her to Demogorgon's realm.

(1982: 167)

On another level, Rieder (1985) and Duffy (2005) underline how the dual theme is also present in the relationship between Asia and Prometheus. After the Titan (humanity) is purged of hatred and guided by Love, Asia (the Ideal) moves to meet him, leaving her far Indian vale to be reunited with him. Thus, her activity is the inevitable response to the change occurred in Prometheus, and it is at the same time its necessary complement: like light and dark, one cannot exist nor be complete without the other.

Purification appears to be the key concept informing Prometheus' change, giving shape and reason to his suffering. The process starts with the rejection of the curse in Act I, which certifies the cure of the Titan's twisted obsession with Jupiter and the substitution of this object of perverse love with Asia. As soon as he drops out the master/slave relationship with the tyrant, Prometheus turns to Love, but his transformation and the reunion with Asia are hardly simple or direct, as they depend on a complex intermediation_involving Asia's younger sisters, Panthea and Ione, both of whom have witness firsthand Prometheus' ordeal. Shortly after the opening of the second act, Panthea journeys to Asia to relate her experience. According to Rieder, Panthea's mediation between Prometheus and Asia [...] is a crucial moment in the action" (1985: 783), where she describes to her sister the one dream she can recall, her vision of the transformed Titan, intensely infused with eroticism. The vision is "one of purification and transformation" (Rieder, 1985: 783), during which Prometheus undergoes a metamorphosis which triggers Panthea to feel a euphoric climax, much like an orgasm:

his pale, wound-worn limbs
Fell from Prometheus, and the azure night
Grew radiant with the glory of that form
Which lives unchanged within, and his voice fell
Like music which makes giddy the dim brain
Faint with intoxication of keen joy.

(II, i, 63-67)

It is certainly worth of notice how the scene of Panthea's mediation is almost entirely one of passive remembering. After the reporting of the first dream, Asia reads in her sister's eyes a second dream which she could not recall, a dream that contains the command to "follow" (an imperative which will be also repeated by the following chorus of echoes) and that urges her submission to an enchantment which will soon be revealed as historical necessity. In this way, the narrative desire inspired by Prometheus in Panthea acts like an electric current and passes to Asia, but at the same time it is transformed into an inevitable impersonal process: Asia passively connects desire and necessity, as in her "the lack of resistance to Jupiter becomes submission to a necessity which actively overthrows him" (Rieder, 1985: 784).

Another important aspect in Panthea's dream is the way in which Prometheus, who was only moments before juxtaposed to the pale, suffering Christ of the crucifixion, finally reveals his glorious inner form, recalling the triumphant figure of Christ the Savior. Or, perhaps, the agonizing features akin to the Christian martyr fall away to reveal the figure they have been concealing all along—the joyous pagan god ready to take his place beside Asia, whose chief archetype is Aphrodite, the goddess of spring and love born from the sea waves. Indeed, Shelley closes the love scene (II, i, 83-97) by using water cycle imagery as a literary device, to underline the cyclic aspect of an existence now imbued with Promethean characteristics, where the result will be Asia's own transformation in the fifth scene of the second act.

It was only natural that Shelley should portray the effects of Prometheus's transformation through the renewal and expansion of physical desire. Indeed, Sperry reminds us that

he believed, as the first act of his play demonstrates, that the repression or perversion of the sexual drives is one of the surest indications of social evil. He also saw that these same drives are paradoxically the most ingrained and tenacious. Like the unextinguished spark of hope, they preserve the flame of higher human renewal.

(1988: 97)

Panthea's journey to Asia dramatizes love as a rejuvenating impulse, growing from its roots in sisterly affection to the mature sexual responsiveness that Asia embodies, a view of love and sexual desire that will be resumed in the twentieth century by writers like George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Margaret Atwood, who understood that the control and repression of sexuality are the first aims of totalitarian governments. Interestingly, unlike Shelley they will choose to present their vision through the negative mirror of dystopia.

In conclusion, through Panthea's dream Prometheus has successfully instilled in others a longing which is devoid of a specific description, and which sets in motion the necessity for change and for new creation. Furthermore, this indicates that while Prometheus himself is physically absent from the second act, his deeds undeniably manifest and influence others. On the other hand, the purified Titan's revolution necessarily needs help in order to become reality: through the actions of the drama's characters Shelley once more presents his belief that everything is connected, and everyone must play their part. To use Roberts' words:

The second Prometheus [...] symbolizes the new world of Love and reciprocity that will result from Jupiter's overthrow. But for this to be the case he must allow others – and the human Love embodied by Asia, Panthea and Ione – to carry on the collective Promethean work for him.

(2020: 186)

4.2 A Light in A Dark Cave

The opening of Scene III finds Asia and Panthea where a chorus of echoes has led them by repeating the second dream's command to "follow", which is at the stony portal leading down to Demogorgon's cave. The most difficult and obscure figure in Shelley's allegory, Demogorgon has often been identified with the principle of necessity. Moreover, Timothy Webb maintains that "if man's potential for evil is embodied by Jupiter; his potential for goodness is associated with Demogorgon" (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 705). The original name of the character actually derives from a mistake in copying the word 'Demiourgos', and in Shelley's play is connected to the possibilities of human creativity.

Indeed, Sperry argues that he is “more properly Shelley’s image of infinite potentiality, a power limited only by the laws of nature, beginning with those of physical existence, and by the force of love” (1988: 99). In this interpretation, he is the final repository of the forces and events that have shaped the universe, and contains the potential for all that may occur in future. This makes Demogorgon not just an oracle, but “a voice unspoken” which lives “In the world unknown” (II, i, 190-191), i. e. an unrealized potential that needs to be activated. He carries within “Shelley’s conviction that political change is necessary” (Duffy, 2005: 173), but without the intervention of Prometheus and Asia it would just remain “unremoved” (IV, 380) and would never become a reality. In other words, humankind can free itself from tyranny first of all through an act of the will (Prometheus) and then through the exercise of Love and the other Shelleyan virtues (Asia), which together would set in motion the necessary historical changes capable of destroying tyranny and oppression.

At the entrance of Demogorgon’s cave, Asia and Panthea come to a halt. The location is set at the border between reality and the realm of potentiality, and it is compared by Panthea to a volcano emitting an “oracular vapour” which can be dangerous and overwhelming. Following G. M. Matthews’ interpretation in his seminal essay (1965), Demogorgon’s mountain itself could be seen as a volcano, wherein the Oceanides (i.e. Panthea and Asia) venture to undergo transformation amidst the magmatic flames. The images of volcanic fire and intoxicating smoke are in tune with Cian Duffy’s reading, when he underlines how “troubling questions about the nature of political action [...] are repeatedly couched in terms of Shelley’s engagement with the discourse in the natural sublime” (2005: 149). Indeed, Demogorgon’s realm has the features of a majestic natural landscape, with “the mighty portal, / Like a Volcano’s meteor-breathing chasm” (II, iii, 2-3) and a throne in the middle from which the magmatic vapors rise. Demogorgon himself (or itself?) is suggested to be a sort of personification of “molten magma” (Matthews, 1965: 215).

Panthea accounts for the “maddening” effects of the volcanic gas serve to successfully portray the relationship between the overwhelming powers of the natural landscape and the power of necessity which, according to Shelley, is manifested in the natural sublime. Asia

becomes concerned that these gases may affect Panthea's brain, as they resemble those "vapours"

Which lonely men drink wandering in their youth
And call truth, virtue, love, genius or joy —
That maddening wine of life, whose dregs they drain
To deep intoxication, and uplift
Like Maenads who cry loud, Evoe! Evoe!
The voice which is contagion to the world.

(II, iii, 5-11)

In this passage Asia voices Shelley's concern that the reaction to the natural sublime might be closely similar to the impetus of violent revolution, like a "maddening" intoxicating gas which transforms radical ideals to change society for the better into blind violence and bloodthirsty vengeance (Duffy, 2005: 177-178). The idea the poets want to convey is that men need to strive and go beyond the intoxicating ideas of violent revolution, recognizing that the trumping of oppressors is a historical necessity which can be brought into being by a radical change in the "cultivated" imagination. Furthermore, the "vapour" has thus far been maddening due to the suppression and restraint of life-force enacted by Jupiter; once allowed to flow freely, nature's vitality will emerge again as a utopian force of emancipation. Such vapor is the source of dreams and prophecies, but also the source of poetry, and of Shelley's own *Prometheus Unbound* in particular.

On the question of nature and its importance for man's liberation, the third scene of Act II also presents an interesting contrast with Shelley's earlier poem *Mont Blanc*, as Scrivener has keenly underlined:

Whereas in "Mont Blanc" the perspective is from the ground looking up, here Asia and Panthea are at the summit of the volcanic mountain, looking down, about to descend into Demogorgon's realm. The mountain peaks in the earlier poem represent the remoteness and amoral necessity of nature, but nature here is intimate and reassuring. Viewing the beautiful scene around her, Asia says she could "fall down and worship" nature (II, iii, 16). Before passing "through" phenomenal nature, they realize nature's beauty. By going to the Source of all things, they do not elevate the Source at the expense of things, but almost like the Free Spirit pantheists, they marvel at the divinity of nature.

(1982: 168)

But the kind of mutability described by Asia in the third scene (II, iii, 19-42) does not make her think of death, which was so dominant in *Mont Blanc*. On the contrary, what is valued in the second act of the drama is the implicit vitality of nature. Even nature's ferocity, which was intimidating in the earlier poem (consider, for instance, its depiction of the devastating avalanche), takes on symbolism representing human liberation.

The vale is girdled with their walls—a howl
Of cataracts from their thaw-cloven ravines
Satiates the listening wind, continuous, vast,
Awful as silence.—Hark! the rushing snow!
The sun-awakened avalanche! whose mass,
Thrice sifted by the storm, had gathered there
Flake after flake, in Heaven-defying minds
As thought by thought is piled, till some great truth
Is loosened, and the nations echo round
Shaken to their roots: as do the mountains now.

(II, iii, 33-42)

In a deliberate moment of confusion, the avalanche and social revolution appear as intertwined process rather than distinct entities, since the power of nature is now a beneficial force in the journey of human emancipation and not just an external phenomenon. For instance, the sun is depicted as “a libertarian force working in conjunction with Promethean consciousness” (Scrivener, 1982: 169). To elucidate the connection between nature and consciousness, Spirits emerge from the natural landscape Asia and Panthea had been observing, urging them to delve into the realm of tangible reality “to the Deep, [...] / Through the shade of Sleep, / Through the cloudy strife / Of death and of Life” (II, ii, 54-58).

The song of the spirits which guides Asia through her transformation and rebirth is both incantatory and seductive. The direction is downwards because Demogorgon's cave is situated at the center of the volcanic fire, which is also the source of all experience. The effect of the descent is dizzying, like being drawn steadily deeper into a vortex:

While the sound, whirls around,
Down, down!
As the fawn draws the hound,
As the lightning the vapour,

As a weak moth the taper;
Death, Despair; Love, Sorrow;
Time both; to-day, to-morrow;
As steel obeys the Spirit of the stone,
Down, down!

(II, iii, 63—71)

The lines accelerate the sense of dislocation, and it is worth pausing for a moment to examine what Ellsworth Barnard, among others, identified as an inversion of the grammatical order in the fourth and fifth lines (1944: 138). Shelley was fond of inverting the usual sense of cause and effect, but the confusion here is relevant to the disorienting effect of the passage as a whole. Was it possible for Shelley to intuit that within the rational mechanics of Newton's universe such processes as time and motion are not unidirectional but reversible? It may be difficult to accept the notion that Shelley anticipated the attack of modern physics on the conception of time seen as a straight arrow, going in just one direction. Yet I agree with Sperry when he sustains that "the inversion of our commonly accepted notion of causality, and with it the reversibility of time, seem to be exactly what Shelley is suggesting through the logic (or illogic) of his poetic figures" (1988: 101).

Considered within the larger context of the play, Shelley saw that the conviction of a unidirectional time brought with it the notion of irreversible process, the idea, as it is in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, of some original sin setting in motion a degeneration that could be redeemed only by expiatory suffering or by the intervention of a God. As I have discussed earlier, this general notion pervades to some degree the first act of the drama, yet it was Shelley's purpose to outline the possibility of a totally different human intervention in the more visionary acts that follow. The dizzying disorientation that Asia, and with her the reader, undergoes in the presence of Demogorgon represents Shelley's attempt to loosen the grasp of some of the common assumptions concerning the nature of life and human development, as the necessary initiation into a new awareness of human potential. Indeed, at the climax of the act is Asia's journey back through time toward the source of potentiality, where the symbolism conveys the most original aspects of Shelley's vision: with the arrival of the two sisters before Demogorgon's throne in Scene IV, the stage is set for Asia's celebrated confrontation of the awesome power.

Before undertaking an examination of Asia's important speech, I believe it is paramount to reflect further on the character of Demogorgon. In Act I readers are presented with Jupiter's world, the empire of chaos and emptiness, where things are defined by their absence – for instance, the Furies are “Hollow underneath, like death” (I, 441). But ironically enough, in the end the tyrant and his ministers are defeated by a being which bears a close resemblance to them: Demogorgon is in fact described as “a Mighty darkness / Filling the seat of power” (II, iv, 2-3), a darkness “ungazed upon and shapeless—neither limb, / Nor form, nor outline” (II, iv, 5-6) which can only be found in an abyss without light or color. Even the malicious Jupiter mistakes Demogorgon and realizes only when it is too late that he is not his ally but the “tremendous Gloom” (I, 207) which will execute him. Duffy believes this moment is the moral pivot of the play, because the close resemblance between Jupiter and Demogorgon is revealed to be part of the poet's ironical purpose when he shows Jupiter, the epitome of nothingness, being destroyed by a shapeless and undefined form:

Nothing returns to nothing. Yet Shelley insists that we distinguish between Jupiter and Demogorgon, that we learn to peer through the darkness until we recognize that Demogorgon is ‘a living spirit’.

(in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 704)

In the end, the question can be reduced to a matter of perspective: depending on the way in which one observes things, darkness can be understood as negation and death (Jupiter) or as potentiality, the possibility of a better future (Demogorgon).

As I have already related, after managing to avoid intoxication from the volcanic gases, Asia and Panthea descend into the crater and enter Demogorgon's cave. Once she finds herself in his presence, Asia converses with the intimidating being, as their encounter replicates Shelley's preoccupations with the natural sublime. In this light, Demogorgon (the force of nature) can be correctly interpreted by the “cultivated” imagination (Asia) in order to enlighten the mind with powerful truths that reveal society's destructive power dynamics while also outlining the possibilities for political reform (Duffy, 2005: 179).

This is precisely the reason why Asia presents Demogorgon with a series of inquiries, leading to the most important query regarding who governs the universe. As she delves into

this question, she paints a long and detailed portrayal of human progression (II, iv, 32-124): initially, there was elemental concordance, with the primigenial society overseen by Jupiter's father, Saturn, whose rule was benevolent albeit warped by his restrictions on freedom and enlightenment. Implicitly, Edenic innocence is here equated to ignorance, blind obedience, and trust, a condition which ideally corresponds to the mythological Golden Age and psychologically to childhood. The things Saturn refused to grant stirred discontent because people wanted

knowledge, power
The skill which wields the elements, the thought
Which pierces the dim Universe like light,
Self-empire and the majesty of love,
For thirst of which they fainted.

(39-43)

As an enlightened tyrant, Saturn is like Milton's God – who also oversees an Eden imposing well-determined limits on knowledge – and his rule is inadequate, primarily due to psychological rather than material concerns. At this point Prometheus appears:

[...] Then Prometheus
Gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter
And with this law alone: 'let man be free,'
Clothed him with the dominion of wide Heaven.

(43-46)

Once more, his choice to elevate Jupiter to authority draws parallels to Milton's depiction of God creating Adam and Eve. However, the irony lies in the similarity between Jupiter and Prometheus: while Jupiter wields arbitrary power, Prometheus is similarly guilty for bestowing such authority in the first place. The era of Jupiter also coincides with poverty, famine and disease, not to mention "Strife, wounds, and ghastly death unseen before" which represent the estrangement of the soul, all unfolding so rapidly that it becomes difficult to discern their sequence (49-52). Following the hardships of a life marked by scarcity, humanity seeks solace in Prometheus' offerings:

Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes
[...] That they might hide with thin and rainbow wings
The shape of Death; and Love he sent to bind
The disunited tendrils of that vine
Which bears the wine of life, the human heart

(60-65)

The suffering inflicted by Jupiter and the hope instilled by Prometheus are ultimately revealed to be interdependent; each loses significance in the absence of the other.

After hope and love, Prometheus gave humanity a fire which “tortured to his will / Iron and gold, the slaves and signs of power, / And gems and poisons, and all subtlest forms / Hidden beneath the mountains and the waves” (68-71). Some readers argue that this kind of ‘fire’ is quite ambiguous to interpret (Scrivener, 1982: 160, Keach, 1984: 136-137 and Duffy 2005: 154). As it stands, it embodies qualities which appear to be both Jupiterian and Promethean, because of the words it is linked with. Indeed, within Shelley’s body of work, if one is to point a word consistently laden with negative connotations, it is ‘gold’—a symbol of selfishness and greed (refer to chapter 2 for the imagery of gold in *Queen Mab*). The Promethean fire gifted to humanity, described as “Most terrible, but lovely” (67), significantly differs from the erotic, creative fire depicted in Acts I and II. Prometheus’ transformation becomes particularly striking upon reading these lines, as one realizes that the hero’s role in liberation had long been intertwined with domination, albeit through a tyranny justified in the name of humanity’s welfare and best interests. Here is also evident the dualism of the Promethean figure already described by Roberts (2020) as one of the main features in the drama, this time involving the concept of fire, which could be both destructive and creative.

On a further note, the gold symbolism is also dual, in that it makes evident that technological science embodies both Promethean and Jupiterian aspects. Can the pursuit of a scientific truth be disentangled from the pursuit of a specific authority? Despite the nagging doubt, one also observes that, although wealth and science are certainly morally ambiguous tools (depending on their use), other Promethean remedies are less so: language, thought, prophetic poetry, music, medicine, astronomy, navigation and sculpture all exemplify the self-determining power of creativity employed in a liberating manner (Roberts, 2020: 182). Scrivener also observes that once Prometheus is unchained he finds with Asia a home within

a cave, where the reunited soul, symbolizing boundless aesthetic power, enables them to dedicate themselves to the only activity which is truly worth something, i. e. forever creating new forms of the beautiful (1982: 160).

Following the extensive catalogue of Promethean ‘remedies’, Asia has propelled human evolution to a higher stage, where the adversities presented by nature appear to be managed, disease has seemingly been mastered, and death resembles more sleep than a definitive passage. The last image of nature Asia leaves readers with is one where the natural world has been turned into an object of aesthetic appreciation, complementing the anthropological environment of the city: “Cities then / Were built, and through their snowlike columns flowed / The warm winds, and the azure aether shone, / And the blue sea and shadowy hills were seen [...]” (94-97). Notwithstanding such victories, humanity is still plagued by an incurable affliction, “The wreck of his own will, the scorn of Earth, / The outcast, the abandoned, the alone” (104-105). By forcefully taming nature, scientific technology has also shattered humanity into disconnected fragments unable to reconcile harmoniously, while the psychological frameworks once necessary to assert dominance over nature persist even after its taming and are now employed to subjugate individuals.

Asia’s conversation with Demogorgon “represents the effort of the imagination to figure the power that ‘reigns’ over the ‘living world’, the power manifested in the landscape of the natural sublime” (Duffy, 2005: 180), and she finally comes to the realization that Jupiter is not the master of domination himself. Indeed, as Demogorgon affirms, “All spirits are enslaved who serve things evil” (110). Even the oppressors are not free, as they are compelled to conform to the demands of their hierarchical position, enslaved by the inherent necessity within structures of dominance. When Asia asks, “Who is the master of the slave?” (114), Demogorgon answers indirectly, by saying that everything is enslaved except “eternal Love” (120). Indeed, it is only in the condition of love – free, unrestricted and unprivileged – that the self can enjoy freedom. According to Shelley, only when the self is complete, unified, and balanced can it engage in a relationship characterized by unconditional love and mutual enjoyment, devoid of power dynamics and submission. In the poet’s worldview, this principle extends to human relationships as well.

—If the Abyss
Could vomit forth its secrets:—but a voice
Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;
For what would it avail to bid thee gaze
On the revolving world? What to bid speak
Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? To these
All things are subject but Eternal love

(114-120)

John Rieder claims that “Demogorgon’s speech [...] appeals to an ideal but inexpressible truth” (1985: 786), but I believe Roland Duerksen is right when he writes that Demogorgon’s statement that “the deep truth is imageless” refers “not to epistemological skepticism, but to love; that is, the deep truth which can overcome the master-slave relationship is love, which has no prescriptive language, no images” (1988: 25-27). There is no inherent principle of domination in the universe, akin to an eternal Jupiter, but neither exists a corresponding principle of love. Instead, these structures are products of human ingenuity, because “Each to itself must be the oracle” (123) and is allowed to create either a Jupiter-like figure or a relationship based on empathy. In other words, everyone can find the truth within themselves, since in Shelley’s view everyone is part of the same whole and therefore share the same basic truths. The ultimate realization is that only individuals have the power to liberate themselves from oppression, as oppression is a human construct and not an eternal reality. Once the individual self ceases to fuel Jupiter with the energy of Promethean hatred, and once Asia acknowledges that Jupiter’s rule is upheld by human will, the conditions are set for the reunion of Prometheus with Asia and for Jupiter’s downfall. Scrivener intelligently underlines that

Although Prometheus and Asia can create the preconditions of liberation, they cannot automatically produce liberation, because Jupiter, once created, is subject to the mortal processes of necessity: a tyrant that has been established in power has to self-destruct. To hate and plot revenge against a tyrant is to keep breathing life into the tyrannical relationship. With the retraction of the curse, Prometheus has stopped giving life to Jupiter, thus allowing him to perish by means of his own inner contradictions. At a certain point these contradictions engender the tyrant’s destruction, carried out by “necessity”—that is, Demogorgon.

(1988: 162)

However, there is another level of interpretation for the idea of an imageless truth, and it has to do with the sense of man's "limitation of phenomenal experience and the awareness of the inadequacy of language" (Webb, in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 707). Indeed, Shelley explores the relationship between language and thought. Since the former has its limitations, his poetry seeks to explore the gap between thoughts and their imaginative conceptual expansion. The poet emphasizes the importance of poetic language in altering the boundaries of the mind, thereby contributing to real ethical and political change. Through his 'reconstitutive poetics' (Roberts, 2020) Shelley aims to create a vision that transcends historical limitations and inspires social progress, exploring the potential of language to convey imageless truths and evoke emotional responses.

When Asia ultimately understands that freedom can only be achieved by the individual, she also finds the answer to her own question: "Prometheus shall arise / Henceforth the Sun of this rejoicing world" (II, iv, 127). She asks when the hour will arrive, and Demogorgon reveals then the first signs of Promethean deliverance, by just inviting her to "Behold" (II, iv, 128). It is almost as if she had precipitated the emergence of the promised hour through the force of her desire, as immediately after she witnesses a multitude of cars emerging through the rocks before her, each driven by a frantic charioteer urging his flight with impetuous speed, and Demogorgon educates her that she is in the presence of the host of immortal Hours.

The conclusion of the second act is marked by a sequence of lyrics that bring Asia's psychological journey of descent and recollection to its culmination. Her duet with the Voice (most probably Prometheus' voice) occurs after she has gained knowledge in Demogorgon's cave (II, v, 48-110). Similarly to Panthea's narrative of Prometheus' transformation in her recollected dream, the Voice's depiction of Asia's metamorphosis contains the telling image of an erotic fire reaching a dazzling luminosity: she is described as a "Child of Light" whose "limbs are burning" (54), and as a "Lamp of Earth" that engulfs every shape with her brightness (66-67). The Voice is stunned and amazed by Asia's beauty, and in turns her soul follows it like a boat or a swan floating upon the waves. An intricate and extended metaphor intertwines the water cycle, music, and sleep inside Asia's song (72-110), and given Asia's

association with the Oceanides and her identification with Aphrodite (the goddess emerged from the sea) the emphasis on the water cycle is more than fitting. As Asia descends to the ocean, she indeed undergoes a rebirth:

We have past Age's icy caves,
And Manhood's dark and tossing waves
And Youth's smooth ocean, smiling to betray;
Beyond the glassy gulphs we flee
Of shadow-peopled Infancy,
Through Death and Birth to a diviner day,
A Paradise of vaulted bowers
Lit by downward-gazing flowers
And watery paths that wind between
Wildernesses calm and green,
Peopled by shapes too bright to see,
And rest, having beheld—somewhat like thee,
Which walk upon the sea, and chaunt melodiously!

(98-110)

The winding river emptying itself into the sea represents one of Shelley's favored images to describe the unity connecting all things. It passes between mountains and woods, once more through verses that reproduce the awe of the sublime in a natural landscape (Duffy, 2005: chapter 5). Asia's vessel is guided to the ocean as in a trance, drifting down "Into a Sea profound, of ever-spreading sound" (84), and continues her journey downward. Surrendering herself to the music and to a complex tapestry of metaphors, she allows it to transport her on a passage from multiplicity to unity, from river to ocean, from wakefulness to sleep. Immersed in the same music, she loses herself to find rebirth, and finally dreams herself back to a realm where she can awaken to a "diviner day".

I agree with Sperry when he argues that Asia's transformation and the song depicting it mark the real climax of Shelley's drama, instead of the later and somewhat anticlimactic deposition of the tyrant Jupiter. Indeed, the two lyrics together distill what is most powerful and original in the poet's vision:

Shelley had become convinced that humankind was bent upon a path that led only to its own destruction and from which it could be recalled only by the most radical of appeals. In working to reopen channels of feeling and perception all but lost in the unhesitating forward march of

intellect of his time, he was seeking to project a vision of a possible beatitude from which humanity, with a kind of Promethean irony, was ever moving further but could never be altogether alienated. It remained a vision humankind would one day have to rediscover in order to be saved.

(1988: 107)

In the light of this interpretation, the ultimate intent of the poet seems to be not to sharpen modern consciousness, so keen on self-destructing, but the return to an earlier state of awareness and knowledge that has been obscured and yet somehow, at the same time, still remains within us like a recollection of half-forgotten dreams. I would also like to underline how the thrust of Shelley's visionary impulse is not forwards, but rather backwards to those "shapes too bright to see", i. e. images that return us to a realization of human potential that life once held out and has never abandoned, despite the dark turns of history. Rather than making the poet a nostalgic of old, empty traditions – like, for example, some contemporary conservative and nationalist fanatics – this sensitivity brings him closer to the supporters of the concept of 'healthy degrowth', developed in the field of economics by the likes of Serge Latouche in *Farewell to Growth* (2010) and Tim Jackson in *Prosperity without Growth* (2009): since it is impossible to imagine a continuous, infinite growth that endlessly points forward and at the same time makes life better (after all, in nature growth for the sake of growth is the driving impulse of cancer cells), what is truly needed for mankind's improvement is to look back and look within in order to recover the most valuable principles and practices.

4.3 Unchaining Utopia

Shelley's need to compose a third act for his drama raised special problems in a play already rife with difficulties. To begin with, he had already virtually represented all the elements essential to his vision, and with Asia's reawakening and transformation at the end of Act II he had achieved the climax of his drama. Nevertheless, there remained elements of the myth he could hardly ignore, like the dethronement of Jupiter, the unbinding of his hero, and the

reunion of Prometheus with Asia. Given Shelley's dedication to nonviolence, and that in his view the evil Jupiter represented was a mere negation, the possibilities for dramatic confrontation in the deposition scene were limited. Hercules might appear at the unbinding (although his presence is limited to a stage direction and a few lines), but rather than any particular individual it would have to be Demogorgon, acting as the force of a larger destiny, the one who overthrew the tyrant.

Shelley's handling of the deposition scene "draws its effectiveness from the powerful sense of hubris it creates" (Sperry, 1988: 109), something which is given in great part by Jupiter's presumption that Demogorgon's car bears the child destined to succeed him and who will confirm the eternal triumph of his reign. Because misunderstanding is so close to the root of Shelley's conception of evil, it is only fitting that Jupiter misconceives the significance of the approaching car, misinterpreting the revolutionary thunder that surrounds it as the sign of his own victory. When the tyrant, at last realizing the danger, attempts to launch his dreaded thunderbolt, he finds to his dismay – which is the nightmare of all atomic powers – that his most destructive weapon has been neutralized. As he falls from his pinnacle of power, the tyrant takes Demogorgon with him into the abyss:

Sink with me then —
We two will sink in the wide waves of ruin
Even as a vulture and a snake outspent
Drop, twisted in inextricable fight,
Into a shoreless sea.

(III, I, 70-74)

But in his fall Jupiter seems to be absorbed back into the eternity that Demogorgon represents, as an aspect of potentiality that is now deprived of his effectiveness but that may nonetheless reemerge to dominate and tyrannize again at some future time. As it clearly appears, not even in what should have been the most clean-cut scene of the drama the poet manages to do without the dualism which lies underneath the whole play, and for this reason I believe the notion of duality needs further analysis.

As some critics have noticed, the deposition scene presents Shelley with the problem of violent revolution (Rieder, 1985: 786), something which his mentor Godwin had totally

rejected in *Political Justice* in favor of an anarchy ruled by the supreme principle of Truth, an ideal society where “government gradually fades away as all men, guided by reason, learn to govern themselves” (Rieder, 1985: 788). On his part, Shelley was perfectly aware that this conception could not account for the struggles between different social classes and for the need to radically change a system where rule and inequality are maintained by violence. For this reason, he was painfully caught between a revolutionary aspiration that would probably entail violent mass resistance and the possibility of an oligarchical path of reform. This dualism makes Shelley’s stance towards violence problematic, for however anticlimactic Jupiter’s overthrow may appear, it is still violent. Rieder observes how “Jupiter’s attack on Demogorgon reminds us that one cannot take the violence out of a relationship simply by renouncing it on one’s own behalf” (1985: 791). For this reason, Demogorgon’s victory also cannot be confused with Shelley’s urge of nonviolent resistance in the later poem *The Mask of Anarchy* (refer to next chapter).

I maintain that violent revolution and gradual reform are ultimately conflated by Shelley in the drama, where the readers experiences violence in Prometheus’ recanting of his curse and in Jupiter’s downfall, but the birth of the new earth in Act III and the realization on Utopia are described as “unforced”, like gradual, natural, and peaceful processes. It appears the poet is suggesting that the revolution within (namely, Prometheus against himself and Demogorgon against Jupiter’s tyranny) can be most likely violent, but that after this struggle the reform and rebirth of society should be quiet and gradual, leaving thus the reader without a clear, resolving stance and with a possible double solution, an attitude which will continue to be present in Shelley’s work. This particular dualism can ultimately be traced back to Shelley’s belief that “each man is “king over himself” and, therefore, the biological individual is the “One” unassailable point of resistance to Jupiter” (Rieder, 1985: 791), from which the logical conclusion is that each man bears an individual responsibility for the possible, necessary change to become real.

Despite the intense description, the genuine dramatic climax of the act is not Jupiter’s demise (scene I) or Prometheus’ release (scene III), but rather the Spirit of the Hour’s monologue heralding humanity’s deliverance (III, iv, 131-204). Before delving into the verses,

though, it is essential to consider the character of the Spirit of the Hour. As I have already mentioned, it first appears in Act II, scene IV, after Asia has interrogated Demogorgon. Indeed, two Spirits of the Hour are depicted in the text: one manifests as a masculine figure, described as a “Ghastly charioteer” (144) tasked with conveying Demogorgon to face Jupiter and strip him of his authority. Asia characterizes this spirit as possessing a “dreadful countenance” while he is navigating its dark chariot near a rugged precipice (142-143). Responding to Asia, he proclaims:

I am the shadow of a destiny
More dread than is mine aspect—ere yon planet
Has set, the Darkness which ascends with me
Shall wrap in lasting night Heaven's kingless throne.

(146-49)

At a first glance this dark Spirit seems to be an allegorical representation of death, but Scrivener goes further in the interpretation and states that it represents most of all “the revolutionary force necessary to dethrone the Jupiter-principle from society and consciousness” (1982: 173). Indeed, the Spirit is a power strong enough to keep Jupiter wrapped in everlasting night. Demogorgon is compelled to ride with this particular Spirit, while a distinctly contrasting entity, the other Spirit of the Hour, awaits Asia and Panthea.

This second Spirit of the Hour's chariot has “An ivory shell inlaid with crimson fire”, while “the young Spirit / That guides it, has the dovelike eyes of hope!” (157, 159-160). The new character, so unlike the previous one, is a feminine and gentle Spirit who is part of the new world created by the long-awaited collapse of tyranny. The Spirit's chariot is so fast that it can transport Asia and Panthea around the earth and moon before “the cloud piled on Atlas can dwindle” (171). Interestingly, he evokes again the image of the goddess Aphrodite being born in the sea (line 157), which is once more connected to Asia, a daughter of Ocean. Furthermore, the fusion of Aphrodite with the sea explicitly emphasizes the theme of rebirth, setting the stage for Asia's transformation in the subsequent scene and her eventual reunion with Prometheus. Consequently, it becomes conceivable to interpret the benevolent Spirit of the Hour as the embodiment of the life principle, linked with an erotic and utopian notion of

rebirth and in contrast with the revolutionary violence represented by her counterpart who is aiding Demogorgon in overthrowing Jupiter.

This benevolent Spirit of the Hour makes a reappearance in Act III, scene III, transporting Asia and Panthea to the site of Prometheus' liberation where the hero, already unbound by Hercules, assigns her an important task. Specifically, she must take a "curved shell" (III, iii, 65-67) which was Proteus' nuptial gift to Asia and serves to produce a voice. Once more, the Spirit is linked with a thing of the ocean (the shell), and with it she is to "Go, borne over the cities of mankind" and "breathe into the many-folded Shell, / Loosening its mighty music; it shall be / As thunder mingled with clear echoes" (III, iii, 76, 80-82). Scrivener provides a clear interpretation of the task assigned by Prometheus, through which the Spirit will

[...] "breathe" into the prophetic shell her own voice, which will liberate the Utopian music to usher in the millennium. Once this mystic music is released into society, then individual humans will "accomplish" the "voice" by speaking the new language and singing the lyrics of emancipation.

(1982: 174)

The language of the new world is un-created, waiting to be given life by men and women finally emancipated from the horrors of history. It is the language of utopia, not a language from a new dictionary, but a "voice to be accomplished", a process, something that can come into existence only by means of the individual "breath" which makes the potential rebirth and social renewal finally become a reality.

Going back to the hero's fate, following his release at the opening of Scene III, Prometheus is reunited with Asia and the two withdraw towards a cave "All overgrown with trailing odorous plants" (III, iii, 11). The vines "curtain out" the light of day while a fountain provides an ever-changing shield of shifting sounds, lights, and textures. As the apotheosis of Shelley's hero, Prometheus's withdrawal with Asia to the cave has drawn fire from hostile critics, disturbed by Prometheus's behavior once he is freed by Hercules. The actual liberation of humankind is not explicitly addressed until line 64, where the Spirit of the Hour's mission is described as a "toil". Prior to this, Prometheus tenderly depicts the cave where he, Asia, and other spirits will dwell for eternity, and some readers find it puzzlingly peculiar that the

champion of humanity swiftly withdraws from reality into a purely aesthetic state of contemplation. However, it is essential to acknowledge the dramatic challenges confronting Shelley in Act III following Jupiter's deposition: if the poet were to portray a violent overthrow, the transition from the old to the new would actually change nothing, and Prometheus would just replace Jupiter on the throne, ruling in a 'Promethean' fashion. Nevertheless Shelley

is writing an anarchist poem; he is concerned with the abolition of domination and hierarchy. Prometheus cannot "seize power," because power has been abolished and does not exist as something that can be seized. Therefore, Shelley has to create images and dramatic actions that embody authentically Promethean values, not a new code of laws.

(Scrivener, 1982: 174-175)

The extensive depiction of the cave (III, iii, 10-63) serves both as a static image representing human imagination now freed of any constraints (since Jupiter no longer strangles and distorts consciousness) and as another example of the awe-inspiring natural sublime, only this time deprived of the destructive power inherent in the volcanic fire presented earlier (Duffy, 2005: 178). Indeed, now the verdant and lush nature represents the never-ending principle of rebirth and renewal, which is mutually passed from mankind to the natural world when tyranny is overcome, and then back from nature to men once they start living in harmony again. Shelley's cave also symbolizes divine creativity and embodies the process of constructing and deconstructing language and meaning underlined by Merrilees Roberts (2020). It is a return to childhood's innocence and playfulness, marking the ultimate reconciliation of the tragic divide between emotion and intellect.

4.4 Brave New World

I have previously anticipated how the Spirit of the Hour, as her final action in the play, blows the music of change from a carved mystic shell at the command of Prometheus. At the end of the act, the Spirit reappears and describes to Prometheus and Asia the effect of the music on

the world, which they feel but cannot see. Her long speech (III, iv, 98-204) is “delivered like that of a messenger in classical drama to report an action that has taken place offstage, and it has the effect of a visionary promise rather than an account of something which has just occurred” (Sperry, 1988: 114). The Spirit of the Hour’s speech is both poetically and philosophically fitting, and although it begins casually, offhand – all of which is tonally correct, since the utopian vision has already been achieved – it concludes with the dramatic power one expects. The poet extensively explores the psychology of power and domination, yet the peculiar political structures of Jupiter’s tyranny are also depicted and then forthwith invalidated by the new anarchist society, which lacks any fixed ‘code’ or collection of definitive, static images.

In the renewed society, among kingless thrones (131) no man is “fawned” or “trampled” (133), implying that the domination of one individual by another, regardless even of gender – “And women too, frank, beautiful and kind / [...] Looking emotions once they feared to feel” (153-164) –, has ceased to exist because individuals now possess the self-confidence and self-awareness required to avoid engaging in compensatory practices of sadism or masochism within power dynamics. The symbols of power – “Thrones, altars, judgement-seats, and prisons” (164) – stand just “unregarded” (179) instead of overthrown because once the psychological link with power has been severed these symbols themselves become inconsequential, void of any significance, therefore their iconoclastic destruction also becomes unnecessary. The old Law, forged in oppression, lies neglected and ignored, as new social relationships emerge to replace the hierarchical ones. Certainly, in the absence of instruments of coercion such as “swords and chains”, even laws – the “tomes / Of reasons wrong glossed over by ignorance” (166-167) – have become incomprehensible relics, representations of a perverse manipulation of language into a brutal code long overcome. During the dark times of tyranny, individuals sought to appease what they feared and endeavored to gain concessions from Jupiter by submitting to his authority. Now, however, these “shrines” are abandoned.

The final fourteen lines of the act are particularly relevant since they represent a passionate celebration of the new anarchist community. In these verses Shelley intensifies the

rhythm, eschewing static images and elaborate similes while the casual, relaxed tone gives way to a frenetic pace that mirrors the violent acts of revelation—tearing aside the veil, letting the mask fall, leaving the icons of power in ruins. Enjambement, dashes, and repeated words are ultimately employed to hasten the language towards its conclusion:

The painted veil, by those who were, called life,
Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,
All men believed and hoped, is torn aside—
The loathesome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man:
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree,—the King
Over himself; just, gentle, wise—but man:
Passionless? no—yet free from guilt or pain
Which were, for his will made, or suffered them.
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance and death and mutability,
The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended Heaven
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.

(III, iv, 190-204)

Even while he imagines the earthly fulfillment of his vision of perfection, Shelley acknowledges the existence of certain fundamental human limitations, an awareness that reemerges, significantly, at the very end of the Spirit's account of the new golden age (193-204). Like Prometheus tormented by the Furies in Act I, men cannot hope to escape the force of passion because passion is one of the things which make them human, and they do not need to feel fear or guilt for what they experience: what men can do, like the Titan, is live and govern their emotions. Likewise, there is no escaping all the casualties of a destiny humans cannot command or foresee, as death and mutability remain the inescapable givens of their condition. Like the Stoic philosopher, one must in fact attempt to discriminate between those things which they can and cannot control, hoping for the eventual triumph of the good while seeking through their own wisdom and determination to promote it.

Shelley painstakingly redirects the poem's focus back onto the reader, to the reality where an anarchist process of change could authentically unfold. Much of the Spirits' speech embodies a contradiction, the duality once more showing itself between the lines, blending

elements of the Jupiter-world with utopian ideals and thereby presenting readers with a purportedly perfect world while simultaneously exposing the crude reality of the world as it exists. Despite Shelley's attempt at presenting himself as a herald of positive change for humanity, he has a strange, "extraordinary predilection for the negative" (Webb in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 694). Indeed, words with negative connotation are frequently found both in his prose and his poetry to convey tons of different meanings, such as expressing a concept or an emotion that defies limitations, acknowledging forces greater than man's understanding (see, for instance, the natural sublime analyzed by Duffy, 2005: chapter 5), posing problems of definition or reversing the reader's expectations.

Negatives are present especially in *Prometheus Unbound*, and they are certainly not only used as a stylistic device. Indeed, as Webb points out, they "may lead us to the very centre of his thinking and illuminate areas of his work which have been neglected or inadequately understood" (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 695). It is my contention that one of the most prominent of these neglected or misinterpreted aspects is the utopian anarchy Shelley envisions in his most ambitious lyrical drama, for the vision presented in *Prometheus Unbound* is aptly defined as an "unascended heaven" and retains all the features of the duality and (in my opinion, apparent) ambiguity which many scholars have detected in the play. In fact, the constant use of negatives to attempt at expressing such a distant, seemingly unattainable dream, bears witness to the double nature of visionary utopia itself. It represents something which is *not* here, which in truth seems so far, but at the same time something that might be realized at any moment under given circumstances—like Prometheus' deliverance, which arrives so suddenly after a painful, apparently never-ending suffering, that the reader is left to ponder why it did not arrive sooner.

In order to better grasp the powerful use of negatives in the drama it is useful to go back briefly to the first act, where readers are presented with a world entirely built on negations (Webb in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 695-697). Jupiter himself is actually *nothing*, but he is nevertheless a force to be reckoned with and which represses humanity: it is very much the same process that often takes place when people let their lives be influenced or determined by something which is *not* really there and therefore should have no power.

Indeed, this is the same realization Prometheus comes to once he hears his curse repeated and realizes the emptiness behind his own words. Once it is acknowledged that the repressing principle and vengeance are void, meaningless, then they really have no more power to affect reality. In other words, the moment of Prometheus' realization is the very same moment in which Jupiter loses his power, because it is just by becoming conscious of the power dynamics in society that one also starts to become free from them altogether:

If Jupiter is dependent for his existence on the collaboration of Prometheus, on our collaboration, he represents all the same a real temptation and a dangerous tendency of the mind.

(Webb in Reman and Fraistat, 2002: 698)

In the same way, negatives also proclaim the success of the Promethean revolution in the Spirit of the Hour's speech. The ideal society freed of Jupiter is described mainly through words which emphasize what is *not*: the icons of power "unregarded", religion as the "ghost of a no-more-remembered frame", man "sceptreless", "uncircumscribed", "unclassed", "tribeless", "nationless", "exempt from awe, worship, degree". It would seem the poet is presenting the new world through a mere reversal of the previous situation, but as Webb has demonstrated "Shelley imposes a moral burden on his readers and his interpreters. He recognizes how easy it is to mistake one kind of darkness for the other" (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 708-709). Thus, he is asserting the presence of some concepts which cannot be expressed directly without the assistance of their mirrored negative ("the deep truth is imageless") and asking readers to discover that many negatives are in fact positives and are just waiting for the potentiality to be discovered within them. Ultimately, Shelley leaves the task of defining these alternatives to the reader. For instance, what does the term "unclassed" (195) stand for? The state of being unclassed, without a nation or a tribe, is something one can only envision and strive to actualize at present. Indeed, this is precisely what the poet urges his readers to do: to imagine and work towards realizing the ideals he has suggested.

It is my contention that Shelley's conscious stressing of negatives and duality hides what Callaghan (2015: 485-487) has called the "ambivalence of idealism", which is a strong

'call to arms' to his readers in order to underline their moral responsibility in avoiding apathy or complacency and entice an effort on their part to make them discern and decide critically. It is also aptly represented in the play when, even after the revolution, the Spirit of the Hour's chariot bears the symbol of the amphisbaena, the double-headed snake (III, iv, 119-121). This symbol was partly inspired by a statue Shelley saw in the Vatican's Sala della Biga (Paley, 1999: 269) and it is used not for a decorative reason, but specifically to substitute another snake symbol, the ouroboros—a snake depicted as a circle, eating his own tail. Where the latter represents a cyclical time which endlessly risks returning onto itself (thus, possibly trapping humanity in an endless repetition of history's mistakes), the former is a more hopeful image, as it carries within the possibility of going in either direction, like the snake has a head at each end: enacting a Promethean revolution, choosing between tyranny or freedom, is ultimately a responsibility of each individual.

It is, of course, also quite difficult to imagine some kind of practical realization for Shelley's vision. Indeed, humankind appears so conditioned by the notion of original sin and by the ideals of struggle, progress, and evolution that it is all but impossible to conceive of any approach to human salvation that does not allow for them. The objections to Shelley's vision can be rapidly summarized: how is it possible to imagine men deprived of every trace of evil? Looking within themselves, people may recognize traits like greed and envy as common inclinations. Moreover, they might become conscious that the evil and self-serving instincts of human nature cannot be eliminated, in fact they must rather be tempered and directed by empathy and reason to the service of larger human ends. As Sperry argues,

Prometheus Unbound is above all imaginative and visionary, a work that describes not what humans are but what they might be. The major problem confronting us is that we have become so inured to struggle and competition as abiding facts of experience that we cannot visualize a culture without them.

(1988: 112)

I believe the advancing dimensions and the accelerating dangers of this struggle are becoming ever more apparent today, and that *Prometheus Unbound* is of value not so much because it prefigures the means for changing humanity as because it preserves the aspiration

to do so, and it is certain to become increasingly relevant to the controversy over humanity's need to transform itself in the face of self-annihilation.

The famous concluding lines of Act III, "The loftiest star of unascended Heaven / Pinnacled dim in the intense inane" (III, iv, 203-204) can be considered in many ways the most memorable in the drama, and they have always held a special fascination for Shelley's admirers and detractors in the light of his position among Romantic poets. The powerful effects of assonance and consonance culminate in the single word, "inane", a substantive through which Shelley tried to signify the formless void of infinite space—a vacancy full, however, of unlimited potentiality. Sperry notes that

He was clearly using the word as a substantive and with a sense of its physical and scientific denotation. Yet he uses it elsewhere in its adjectival and more common sense as "empty", "senseless". In this line the two senses of the word flow rapidly into each other. Indeed, the alternation between the positive and negative connotations creates a dizziness, a terror of the abyss which, as suggested by "Pinnacled" and "dim", characterizes the mind's encounter with the unfathomable and constitutes a major aspect of the Romantic conception of sublimity.
(1988: 116)

Indeed, the passage that closes the third act of Shelley's *Prometheus* can be seen as one of the most remarkable evocations of the sublime in Romantic literature, a consideration which reminds the reader of the impetuous and tormented knot of feelings, emotions and visions the poet struggled with his all life. Indeed, as Merrilees Roberts (2020) has clearly indicated, Shelley's portrayal of Prometheus also embodies the modern poet's dilemma, between the desire to assert a clear, final sense of self while at the same time recognizing the fluidity and possibility of reinterpretation inherent in existence. Ultimately, the drama emphasizes the transformative potential of poetry, urging poets to imagine beyond what is known and to act upon those imaginings. It is a call for continual self-reconstruction and generosity both in imagination and action, recognizing poetry's role in shaping collective consciousness while grappling with the poet's personal emotional progress.

I have attempted to demonstrate how *Prometheus Unbound* marks an important stage of Shelley's poetic development. In fact, if in *Queen Mab* Shelley endeavored to build myths, images, and dramatic scenarios employing a revolutionary language purged of the

shortcomings that plagued existing revolutionary movements, in *Prometheus Unbound* he brings his earlier effort to fruition. For Scrivener, the poem “describes the process of breaking out of history and into utopia”, a dramatic journey from “a limited realm of existence to a realm where unnecessary and arbitrary restraints have been abolished” (1982: 152). Centering on the psychological preconditions for such a profound transition, Shelley delves into the moment when consciousness is no longer bound by past influences but instead asserts its autonomy under conditions of liberty. This conviction that human consciousness can ultimately attain self-determination and create itself spaces of freedom in the face of oppression also characterizes anarchic philosophies.

Moreover, *Prometheus Unbound* can be considered philosophically anarchist because it presents a hero who goes beyond the Byronic rebel’s defiant but hopeless response to oppression. Indeed, in Byron’s pessimistic view as it is presented in Canto IV of *Childe Harold*, the present is seen as a mere ‘rehearsal’ of the past, human aspirations repeatedly prove to be futile, and the only meaningful – albeit useless itself – action left to perform is the dignified defiance presented by Byron’s version of the rebel. On his part, Shelley fiercely refuted this ideal and was deeply unsatisfied with Byron’s vision, and for this reason he portrays Prometheus as a rebel capable of enacting real change first within himself and then inspiring others to do the same—therefore setting in motion the necessary revolution he saw as inherent in human history (Duffy, 2005: 161-164).

It is also interesting to note how Shelley carefully avoids some heavy contradictions which seem to be an integral part of most utopian writing. Indeed, surveying utopian thought from Plato onwards, Marie Louise Berneri (2019) discloses a recurrent pattern: an initial humanitarian impulse to reduce human suffering becomes a blueprint for establishing a totalitarian regime. Frequently employing the metaphor of the diseased or corrupted body, utopists arrange their concepts with the aim of cleansing it, and once the objective shifts towards purity it becomes effortless for them to assume dictatorial roles in the new society, as they consider themselves more knowledgeable than others regarding what needs purification. Furthermore, in utopia the sexual impulse is strictly controlled, as individual

allegiance must be solely directed towards the 'flawless' state for the pursuit of efficiency and conformity.

On his part Shelley, who denied the transcendental existence of a God outside of and superior to man, also felt that heaven was something man himself could create on earth. And because of this belief he anarchically rejected any authority constituted outside the subjective experience of the individual. For instance, in *Prometheus Unbound* sexual pleasure is celebrated as a triumph of liberated humanity, and pleasure itself – not ascetic purity – is the ruling idea of the poem. Scrivener acutely argued that

Shelley is a fundamentally atypical Romantic poet. Anarchistic, libertarian, pleasure-oriented, not eager to dominate and control, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* avoids the unsavory aspects of Utopia in its traditional forms. Despite the unequivocal statements on politics, economics, and social relations, Shelley's Utopia does not have a ruling class, a philosopher-king who makes sure everyone is "free."

(1982: 155)

I argued that *Prometheus Unbound* delves into the prerequisites and the outcomes of the abolition of the tyrannical principle in society, trying to provide readers with an experience and a vision through which they can participate in the process. In this sense the drama is essentially an anarchist poem, since it depicts a successful social anarchy, delineates an ideal objective process for anarchist transformation, and puts the reader through a pathway of discovery by which one can recognize an inner authoritarianism that can be overcome. The poem could have definitely ended with its third act, finished in April 1819, but the winds of history once again changed the tide of events in August of the same year. While in Italy, Shelley learned about the terrible events of the Peterloo massacre through newspapers and letters, and instantly felt the obligation to answer in some way. His immediate and mediated responses gave birth to *The Mask of Anarchy* and to the conclusive act of *Prometheus Unbound*, Act IV, the two works I will focus on in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

The Mask of Anarchy and Prometheus Unbound Act IV, the fire of justice

“The system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms before we shall find anything but disappointment in our intercourse with any but a few select spirit [...] I wish to ask you if you know of any bookseller who would like to publish a little volume of popular songs wholly political, & destined to awaken & direct the imagination of the reformers. I see you smile but answer my question.”

Percy Shelley to Leigh Hunt, May 1, 1820

The event recorded in history as the Peterloo massacre gets its name from a bitter mockery of the British army’s victory at Waterloo 4 years prior and happened in St. Peter’s Field, near Manchester, on August 16, 1819, when an orderly, non-violent demonstration of 80,000-100,000 men, women and children that had gathered to hear reformist orator Henry Hunt urge parliamentary reform – specifically, greater representation for the working-class population of Manchester – was savagely attacked with sabers by drunken local Yeomanry (a militia of property owners) aided by regiments from the national Army, leaving about a dozen people killed and hundreds more brutally wounded⁸. It is still unclear whether the London Home Office collaborated in advance in order to suppress the reform movement, or, with the Prince Regent, found it irresistible to “make themselves accomplices after the fact” (Thompson, 1964: 684). It is also unclear, as Robert Walmsley sustains in his anti-leftist inquest⁹, if the crowd began to attack the Yeomanry in response to their arresting the main speakers or if the Yeomanry charged the crowd first and then proceeded to arrest the leaders of the protest. What is evident, though, is that Peterloo was more a class conflict than a police riot and that it “suggests that some workers were beginning to fight directly against their oppression” (Scrivener, 1982: 197).

⁸ For detailed accounts of the event, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 681-689, and Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, pp. 529-531, also listed in the bibliography.

⁹ See Robert Walmsley, *Peterloo: The Case Reopened*, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969.

The Peterloo events occurred within the period during which Shelley was composing *Prometheus Unbound*, at midpoint between the creation of the first act and the publication of the entire poetry collection. For several months while he was living in Italy, Shelley kept reading about the situation boiling up and then he learned about the massacre from the *Examiner*, a radical newspaper, sent by his friend Peacock on September 5, 1819 (Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 315-316 and Crisafulli, 2021: 128). Writing to his publisher soon afterwards, he stated that “the torrent of indignation has not yet done boiling in my veins” (in Frederick L. Jones, 1964: vol. 2, 191), and then he drafted in a rage *The Mask of Anarchy*, reworked it into a fair copy and mailed it to Leigh Hunt to be published in the *Examiner* on September 23, 1819. Unfortunately, Hunt – fearful of prosecution because of the new repressive legislation of the ‘Six Acts’, which was passed in late 1819 and in 1820 – refrained from publishing the poem until 1832, after reformers gained control of Parliament and succeeded in passing a softened Reform Bill (Kuiken, 2011: 96). Indeed, by that time “the poem’s hotter rhetoric could be read with some historical distance and its cooler rhetoric admired as a sensibly prophetic recommendation of passive resistance, the means by which (shallow) parliamentary reform had been brought about” (Wolfson, in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 725).

Following the Peterloo massacre, Shelley strongly believed that England was on the brink of revolution, and he frantically set on composing works across various genres, striving to make his own contribution. Indeed, E. P. Thompson noted that in 1819 “a revolution was possible [...] because the Government was isolated” (in Crisafulli, 2021: 127) and in a letter to his publisher Charles Ollier, Shelley himself expressed his will to act by writing that “Something must be done... What yet I know not!” (in Frederick L. Jones, 1964: vol. 2, 191). These contrasting emotions, combined with the underlying ambivalence caused by the realization that a violent reaction might be inevitable in the aftermath of Peterloo, are mirrored in the poem itself (Paley, 1999: 249 and Crisafulli, 2021: 128-129) and their implications will be taken into consideration later in the chapter. However, despite Shelley’s resolution to act, most of the pieces inspired by Peterloo were never published during the poet’s lifetime due to repression enacted by governmental countermeasures—such as the Gag Acts of December 1819. While compiling the *Prometheus Unbound* volume, Shelley also realized that

repression, rather than reform or revolution, was the prevailing political agenda. *The Mask of Anarchy* can thus be viewed as rebellious reaction to this oppression, conveying Shelley's acrimony towards it and his indignation over the impossibility to openly publish all his writings.

His works related to Peterloo can be fittingly considered part of what Crisafulli called the "culture of resistance", arising from the revolution in the radical free press as a response to the events of Manchester. Some of the best productions of the period are a great number of pomes, pamphlets and satirical cartoons printed to urge the people to react, among which are certainly worth mentioning *The Political House that Jack Built*, a political satire by William Hone and George Cruikshank, and the fierce parodies of the radical publisher John Cahuac. Ultimately, this form of resistance made of straightforward political writings and caricatures acted "as if derision and scorn could bring down to earth, and thereby almost nullify, that ineffable hierarchical power that had instigated and brought about the Peterloo massacre" (Crisafulli, 2021: 128). Another aspect of the free press' resistance to power is the subverting of tradition, which Shelley enacts by explicitly using 'mask' in the title, therefore creating a pun on the popular aristocratic literary genre of 'masque'. He uses this pun to satirize said genre by creating a new array of forms, such as his corrosive social critique conveyed through visionary allegorical figures. According to Susan Wolfson, "this literary assembly bodies a symbolic revolution in its genre-collapsing and satirical tropings on traditional forms" (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 726).

Shelley's initial reaction to the massacre is interesting, as is evident in *The Mask of Anarchy* where he urges the poor people to take action. Indeed, building on Cameron's analysis (1974), Kuiken concurs that the poem stands out as one of the poet's most accessible works, compared with more intricate and obscure verses like the ones in *Prometheus Unbound*, which targeted a less popular audience, despite being composed during the same period and addressing similar themes (2011: 96). It is noteworthy that poetry, being distinct from a political essay, presents imaginative expression with different possibilities than a straightforward prose statement, thus a poetic reaction to Peterloo could have been more resolute and militant than a prose response, as it would operate within a realm of symbolic allusion. Scrivener underlines that

His militance is not without its ambiguities, but what distinguishes Shelley's response is a desire to push the reform movement leftwards, to arrive at risking even revolution. At the time, most reformers tried to hold back the movement and keep it within a constitutionalist framework.

(1982: 198)

However, before examining *The Mask of Anarchy* in detail, it is also useful to analyze Shelley's ambivalence towards the poor. His skepticism of the poor is believed to have been influenced by broader cultural attitudes prevalent in radical and Romantic circles of his time, rather than being solely his own bias. According to Foot (1980: 172), there was an ingrained belief that the poor should be represented and guided rather than left to determine their own course of action. Shelley's idealism, which prioritizes the spiritual over the material, further reinforces this prejudice. By assuming that the rebellion lacked spiritual depth and represented merely a mindless reaction, the poet demonstrated a common intellectual tendency against both the working class and the concept of 'hunger', as if intense physical needs invalidated one's capacity for rationality. It appears that spirituality is reserved only for those who do not experience hunger, but only empathize with those who do. However, Shelley also reveals an ability to acknowledge the physical body and its intense emotions, recognizing the concrete suffering of the poor and realizing their potential for assertive responses to their circumstances:

On the exploitation of the poor, Shelley has some of the most lucid statements ever formulated in the early nineteenth century. Unlike so many others who were active in the reform movement, Shelley did not share all its popular prejudices. Although he could not escape entirely from the movement's myths, he was usually able to transcend its limitations because of his position as an outsider. Distance gave him a freedom he could not have had in England. And so, paradoxically, a certain kind of insight is achieved at the price of exile [...]

(Scrivener, 1982: 199)

4.1 Welcome to the Black Parade

Although *The Mask of Anarchy* is obviously a political allegory, the poem's meaning is not easy to grasp because of its internal contradictions. On this matter, I would like to start by focusing on the use and the meaning of a key word in my research, i. e. 'anarchy', as it is employed by Shelley and as I believe it is to be interpreted in his poem.

First of all, the poet detaches 'anarchy' from the standard sense of 'social chaos' that Lord Chancellor Eldon meant when he judged the Manchester meeting "an overt act of treason", posing "a shocking choice between military government and anarchy" (Thompson, 1964: 684), and turns the term back on the government itself to name its perversion by tyranny (Foot, 1980: chapter 15). Indeed, even before knowing about the events at Manchester, Shelley wrote that "anarchy will only be the last flash before despotism" (in Frederick L. Jones, 1964: vol. 2, 115). Secondly, Shelley's personification of Anarchy in the poem draws on the *Book of Revelation* 6:8¹⁰ to present it as an agent of the Apocalypse, and it also alludes to Benjamin West's painting *Death on the Pale Horse* (Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 317), in which Death is portrayed as wearing a crown and, with sword-bearing followers, is trampling a crowd:

Last came Anarchy: he rode
On a white horse, splashed with blood;
He was pale even to the lips,
Like Death in the Apocalypse.

(29-32)

Lastly, in using the name 'Anarchy' as a personification of evil, Shelley was following the literary examples of John Milton and Alexander Pope, who termed the Chaos 'Anarch' (see Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II: 988 and Pope, *Dunciad*, IV: 655). In this sense, if not clearly explained, the use of the term can be confusing at this point of my research: the 'anarchy' I am analyzing is the libertarian ideal derived from the works of philosophers like Bakunin, Proudhon, Stirner and more recent ones like Goldman, Graeber and Ward, which I will take

¹⁰ In the Bible, *Book of Revelation*, Death is described as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in this way: "And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him".

into consideration in the next chapter. Shelley could not have known their views and their systems of thought on anarchy, simply because it was not theorized yet when he was alive. So, even if his core values and ideas are so akin to those of proper anarchist thinkers, he uses ‘anarchy’ in the only sense he possibly knew from literary and political traditions, as a synonym for ‘chaos’ and ‘blind violence’, for a State that needs to be taken down and rebuilt on different premises.

As I lay asleep in Italy
There came a voice from over the Sea,
And with great power it forth led me
To walk in the visions of Poesy.

(1-4)

The poem’s start is typically Shelleyan, with the lyrical ‘I’ immersed in a dreamlike state, and it presents the poet in his self-imposed isolation, distant from the political scene of his country on which he had tried for so long to leave a lasting mark through the support of social reform. He wakes up from his ‘sleep’, his state of unawareness, when the news of Peterloo reaches him ‘from over the sea’, urging him to ‘walk in the visions of Poesy’, i. e. to use the powerful poetic medium as a weapon to open the eyes of readers on the horrors that had occurred and on the course of action needed to build a better future. Indeed, according to Kuiken, the initial frame highlights poetry’s ability to envision not only the violence and illegitimacy of power in all its masked forms, but also their opposition (2011: 97).

Over time, *The Mask of Anarchy* has gained prestige among critics as the epitome of Shelley’s political poetry. Richard Holmes called it not only “the greatest poem of political protest ever written in English”, but perhaps “the most powerfully conceived, the most economically executed and the most perfectly sustained” of Shelley’s poems (1975: 532), while to Paul Foot it is “one of the great political protest poems of all time” (1980: 175). At the same time, the poem has also raised questions on the possibility for poetry to serve a political agenda and to have some kind of impact on social change: can poetry inspire reform and insert itself into the process of social reform? Or is its work only a symbolic reference? For instance, according to Susan Wolfson

What evokes admiration [in *The Mask of Anarchy*] is its daring equation of Anarchy and King, of mask and legitimacy; its proto-Marxist analysis of labor and consumption; and the rhetorical dazzle of its call to the “Men of England” to recognize their claims (vv. 147-372, fully three-fifths of the poem). Yet the material fact is that the bolder aspects of this performance are exactly what rendered the poem unpublishable, unable to affect the struggle it addresses.

(in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 724)

In her opinion, then, the visionary opening of the poem must be read as an acknowledgement of powerlessness, a revelation of the unrealistic nature of Shelley’s aspirations which sets the tone for the entire text’s inability to produce anything beyond a dream or an aesthetic fantasy (1997: 193-226).

This skeptical stance has sparked considerable debate among critics, dividing them between those categorizing the poem as aesthetically self-contained or as politically interventionist, but also between those who regard Shelley’s effort as important in radical political history and others who question its supposed effectiveness, since it was published 13 years after the time when it was written (and 10 years after the poet’s death). I agree with Crisafulli when she observes that the dreaming condition at the opening of the poem “is a necessary ‘pre-condition’, a device or rhetorical strategy that allows the poet/dreamer to acquire the power to speak and intervene in the public debate” (2021: 133). Despite being far away, through the vision the poet turns into a “visionary wanderer”, so that ultimately *The Mask of Anarchy* becomes a poem tasked with imagining an alternative to the fake legitimacy the government has bestowed upon itself:

Shelley’s poem focuses, in other words, on what it is that would separate illegitimate sovereignty from its legitimate form, and how this difference can become legible poetically and formally. What makes his poem ‘politically effective’ is therefore not merely the specific democratic alternative that it envisions, but the way in which the poem represents the relationship between this democratic alternative and the radical groundlessness of modern sovereignty itself.

(Kuiken, 2011: 97)

Indeed, recent debates in contemporary political and critical theory on the paradoxes of modern sovereignty and on the construction of consensus for power have given new

weight to Shelley's poetical effort and offered valuable insights for interpreting the themes explored in *The Mask of Anarchy*. Kuiken observes how the question of the foundation of modern sovereignty has been explored by scholars like Agamben, Derrida, Hardt and Negri (2011: 99). In particular, Agamben draws on Schmitt's theories¹¹ to stress how, in the absence of divine legitimization for its authority, modern sovereignty has resorted to rely on the paradoxical notion of self-authorization, without a shared process to validate its claims. To put it in another way, the sovereignty's ability to decide on exceptions to the law stems from their initial establishment of the juridical order that legitimizes the law itself, thus granting them the authority to determine its applicability. Consequently, modern structures of power do not even derive their authority and legitimacy from pre-existing entities such as nature or law but are rather grounded on their own exceptionality—an external force beyond the law that paradoxically confers power upon it. This creates a sovereignty which perpetuates its claim of power without asking its subjects to participate in the process of legitimization. In the light of this critical analysis, Shelley's poem becomes even more relevant:

The nature of Shelley's political intervention, then, is to both unmask power's collusion with an aesthetics that it is his poem's task to expose, and then to present an alternative that opens itself to the radical contingency of an allegory that is equally groundless but which, by taking up a different relation to its groundlessness, opens the possibility of a radically new form of sovereignty.

(Kuiken, 2011: 98)

Delving deeper into Shelley's poem, I will argue in the following paragraphs that this radical, new form of legitimization for those who have the authority to decide in society is the embodiment of an anarchist philosophy *ante litteram*, not the deadly 'Anarchy' representing the violence of the government in the poem, but what it will come to signify at the end of the nineteenth century through the groundbreaking works of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin (refer to chapter six).

After setting the opening frame, Shelley proceeds to recall in sharp detail the events of the Manchester bloodbath through the use of personifications and visionary images,

¹¹ See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception* (2005) and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), or Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (2005).

employing words specifically devised to provoke shock, then lampooning and attacking directly the government in the persons of Lord Castlereagh, at the time Foreign Secretary and leader of the Tories in the House of Commons, Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor, and Lord Sidmouth, Home Secretary and responsible for internal security. It is also worth noticing how the corrupted nation is presented throughout the poem with images of self-indulgent gluttony or of savage aggression. First, Castlereagh becomes the personification of Murder, with “Seven blood-hounds” all “fat”, to whom he gives “human hearts to chew” (9-13). After him comes Eldon, represented by Fraud, the first of the blood-hounds, weeping tears (the Lord Chancellor was famous for weeping in public) which became “mill-stones as they fell” (17), causing “the little children, who / Round his feet played to and fro” to have “their brains knocked out” (18-21). Indeed, what Peterloo violated most was the family, especially mothers and children, thus perverting the role of the State as ‘father’, since if the State itself has any reason at all for existing it is precisely to protect its citizens, especially the most fragile ones (Scrivener, 1982: 203). Afterwards, Lord Sidmouth is presented through the personification of Hypocrisy and riding on its symbol, the crocodile. According to the legend, this animal wept in order to attract the prey he would later slay; in the same way the Home Secretary had hired spies and agents who first provoked discontented workmen into committing illegal acts, then betrayed them to be hanged or deported. Hypocrisy is described “clothed with the Bible” (22) because in 1818 Sidmouth had persuaded Parliament to allocate a million pounds for new churches, officially to help pacify the half-starved workers in the new industrial towns, in truth to pass state money to corrupt church officials.

Upon closer examination, it becomes evident how Shelley manipulates the traditional masque genre in order to suit his purposes, reversing the roles of the *masque* and the *antimasque* in the literary trope. Indeed, in traditional masques there was often a contrast between these two opposites, with the latter typically comprising grotesque forms or obscene forms and ultimately exiting the masque after a comical confrontation that restored harmony. Crisafulli analyzes how, by parodically subverting tradition, Shelley portrays the notables as the *antimasque* and depicts their procession as a “ghastly masquerade” (27) while

conversely the people, later represented by the dichotomous personification of Hope/Despair, emerge as the true, noble masque (86-101):

If, in fact, Castlereagh, Eldon, Sidmouth and Anarchy, a symbolic projection of the royal power, could nominate themselves for the masque on account of their social rank, it is their ironic and tragic disguise that signals the authentic internal function: the turnabout of antimasque [...] that disrupts the whole demonstration organized by the people to protest their oppressed conditions.

(2021: 133)

The satirical portrayal of the procession of nobles and government functionaries serves then an unmistakable political purpose, namely, revealing the genuine class interest concealed behind their disguises: their masks symbolize the deceptive façade of historical reality, concealing the tyrannical oligarchy in power who was the ultimate perpetrator of the Peterloo massacre. In Shelley's view, Castlereagh, Eldon, and Sidmouth are in fact mere manifestations on the stage of history of a ruling class whose true nature comprises fraud, assassination, and hypocrisy.

The procession that follows Anarchy continues with the description of "many more Destructions" appearing in the macabre spectacle, disguised as "bishops, lawyers, peers or spies" (29) – all figures who, it is useful to remember, represent in Shelley's eyes the worst levels of degradation men attain in serving a tyrannical power (Ngide, 2020: 532) – and it enters London "Drunk as with intoxication / Of the wine of desolation" (48-49). In the latter image, the economic squandering of the ruthless, idiotic ruling class is presented as a form of extreme gluttony, an example of the way in which, by staging kingly power through this terrifying and disgusting parade, Shelley unveils the "calculating principle [that] pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition" in historical periods where tyranny holds power (*A Defence of Poetry*, in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 509). According to Susan Wolfson

This parade is a linguistic masquerade as well, an array of the discursive forms through which official power commands and permeates social organization. In the trappings of kingship, anarchy is logos: "I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!" (37).

(in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 728)

Indeed, through the stressing and the mantra-like repetition of this particular utterance, the poem distinctly depicts the character of Anarchy's power, which is not tied to a specific historical figure but serves as the foundation in order to legitimize political, juridical, and economic systems (Kuiken, 2011: 100). As a demonstration, Anarchy's "hired murderers" echo: "Thou art God, and Law, and King" (60-61), while his agents, i. e. "Lawyers and priests, a motley crowd" (66), whisper: "Thou art Law and God" (69); then "all cried with one accord; / 'Thou art King, and God, and Lord'" (70-71). This is a clear example of the way in which words and language can shape reality, one of Shelley's preoccupations in this poem, and of the way he uses poetic form to satirize the calculating principle that governs society. Indeed, Stephen Goldsmith argues that this frenetic, stifling repetition

encourages belief that [in a tyrannical society] words are limited in supply, belong to few, and can be combined only in prescribed, mechanical ways that endlessly reproduce the structure of power.

(1993: 243)

4.2 Finding Beauty in Negative Spaces

After the bleak portrait painted in the first twenty stanzas, the turning point of the poem is an event beginning when a "maniac maid" in the crowd lies down before the onrushing army of tyrants, "Expecting, with a patient eye, / Murder, Fraud and Anarchy" (100-101). This outward action covers the identity that her voice claims: "her name was Hope, she said: / But she looked more like Despair" (86-88), and Shelley's point here is that precisely when hope seems lost and it starts to change into hopeless despair there might be the key for change. Indeed, what looks like surrender becomes "a potentially revolutionary performance, a political art" (Wolfson, in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 730). Prefiguring the call for non-violent, passive resistance (see later paragraphs), the maid's risk of martyrdom is soon redeemed by a miraculous female intervention which becomes an epiphany ultimately leading to the death of Anarchy:

between her and her foes
A mist, a light, an image rose,
Small at first, and weak, and frail
Like the vapour of a vale:

[...]

It grew -- a Shape arrayed in mail
Brighter than the viper's scale,
And upborne on wings whose grain
Was as the light of sunny rain.

[...]

And Anarchy, the ghastly birth,
Lay dead earth upon the earth;
The Horse of Death tameless as wind
Fled, and with his hoofs did grind
To dust the murderers thronged behind.

(102-105, 110-113, 130-135)

While the first section of the poem had exposed the “groundless self-legitimation of Anarchy” (Kuiken, 2011: 100), the second part elucidates the conditions under which Hope emerges. It is first disguised as “Despair”, but what sets her apart from Anarchy is the different relation with her self-affirmation. Indeed, both Anarchy and Hope appear as self-grounding, but what sets them apart is that the former’s affirmation is volent and sanctioned by a legal structure, whereas the latter’s tentative power stems from an undistinguished and undefined image which rises between them. Hope ultimately sparks the revolution, since her willingness to sacrifice herself does not result in death, but produces instead “a mist, a light, an image” (103) which grows into a “Shape”. With some of the most powerful verses in his poem (102-125), Shelley explains how this Shape not only frees the mind of the enslaved people, but somehow also destroys the procession of tyranny. On one hand, the reader understands the reason why the Shape needs to remain indefinite, since it is an intangible presence that finally produces visionary poetry (Wolfson in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 730-731). On the other hand, the Shape divides Hope and Anarchy but her actions and agency remain unclear, unspecified (it is described as an indeterminate “vapour”), thus remaining

open to different interpretations. My contention is that Shelley left it indefinite on purpose because, despite his imaginative ability to envision unprecedented solutions, he lacked the foundation to define it as a new political form, a viable ‘third way’ to build a better human society. Only at the end of the nineteenth century the Shape would gain a more specific form, taking on the mantle of a new philosophical, political and social movement: anarchism. Indeed, according to Kuiken

The poem gestures not only to the specific futural dream of Hope’s triumph over anarchy in the form of democratic resistance in the wake of the Peterloo massacre, but to a broader future that tries to imagine something like a non-sovereign politics.

(2011: 104)

Furthermore, following Michael Scrivener and Stuart Curran’s suggestions, I argue that through the personifications of Hope and the Shape Shelley represents both the female force which is essential in resisting against the ‘bad father’ (the State) and the female embodiment of the Nation. Indeed, both Scrivener and Curran have demonstrated how Shelley used images from popular mythology and iconography to represent the Nation and its people in the poem (Scrivener, 1982: 199-205 and Curran, 1975: 238). In particular, the poet was clearly inspired by the Hone-Cruikshank satirical pamphlets I have mentioned earlier, published in 1819-1820 and dealing with the Peterloo massacre, in which many drawings represent Britannia – a popular icon for England – as a maternal figure draped like a Greek goddess and holding a staff with the Liberty cap on it.

The rising of the Shape releases her final, long address to the “Men of England” (147-372), envisioned by Shelley to contrast the ritual of tyrannical language and to influence the consciousness of his readers through poetic oratory. Also, in this final part it appears even clearer that Hope’s resistance to Anarchy extends beyond the specific political strategies mentioned in the address: as I have argued, Hope implies a new relationship, a new “Shape”, with sovereignty itself, a relationship which “cannot be made the object of a sovereign act of will” (Kuiken, 2011: 103).

First of all, the poet addresses the people, “heirs of Glory” (147), calling them “Nurslings of one mighty Mother / Hopes of her, and one another” (149-150) with the aim of

underlining the fact that they are all children of the same nation and they are all equally human beings. Then he launches into an examination of what is freedom, starting with its negative conditions, i. e. what freedom is not:

“What is Freedom? -- ye can tell
That which slavery is, too well --
For its very name has grown
To an echo of your own.

“’Tis to work and have such pay
As just keeps life from day to day
In your limbs, as in a cell
For the tyrants' use to dwell,

“So that ye for them are made
Loom, and plough, and sword, and spade,
With or without your own will bent
To their defence and nourishment.

(156-167)

Shelley produces a radical analysis of the total claim on individual identity perpetrated by the forces of economic oppression, followed by strong imagery used to depict the way in which common people (workers) are regarded as tools, useful just to increase the richness of those who hold power. But the poet does not stop here, as immediately after he takes on the greed and the blind fever for the accumulation of money which plagues society, reminding his readers – and, I would like to add, also contemporary readers – that money (“paper coin— that forgery”) should only be a means, not an end for which people are made “slave in soul”:

“’Tis to let the Ghost of Gold
Take from Toil a thousandfold
More than e'er its substance could
In the tyrannies of old.

“Paper coin -- that forgery
Of the title-deeds, which ye
Hold to something of the worth
Of the inheritance of Earth.

“’Tis to be a slave in soul
And to hold no strong control
Over your own wills, but be

All that others make of ye.

(176-187)

And yet, just as remarkably as they had begun, Shelley's political stings fade away and the allegorical figures representing true Freedom emerge:

“What art thou Freedom? O! could slaves
Answer from their living graves
This demand -- tyrants would flee
Like a dream's dim imagery:

“Thou art not, as impostors say,
A shadow soon to pass away,
A superstition, and a name
Echoing from the cave of Fame.

(209-216)

According to Wolfson, the call to Freedom proposes “a linguistic politics” (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 729) which substitutes the rhetoric of power presented earlier. Indeed, naming the idea of Freedom gives it conceptual force and helps generate new ideas of what it is in social existence, enabling the poet to fight tyranny through allegorical signs conjured through his language: “For the labourer thou art bread” (217), “To the rich thou art a check” (226), “Thou art Justice” (230), “Thou art Wisdom” (234), “Thou art Peace” (238), “Thou art Love” (246), “ Spirit, Patience, Gentleness, / All that can adorn and bless / Art thou” (258-260).

Afterwards, through the Shape's speech, Shelley addresses again his fellow citizens, reinforcing his powerful words and poetic forms and wielding them as weapons to pattern political action against his sworn enemies, “God and Law and King”:

“Let a vast assembly be,
And with great solemnity
Declare with measured words that ye
Are, as God has made ye, free--

“Be your strong and simple words
Keen to wound as sharpened swords,
And wide as targes let them be,
With their shade to cover ye.

(295-302)

If Shelley truly believed that words are weapons, then the parallel with real artifacts designed to kill and destroy probably stops there, since the counterattack he envisions “is considered the first modern statement of the principle of nonviolent resistance” (Ngide, 2020: 530). Matthew Borushko (2010: 96) and Seth Reno (2013: 80-81) have analyzed how the poem has long been associated with nonviolence, passive resistance, and civil disobedience, to the point that it inspired Thoreau, Gandhi’s nonviolent work in South Africa and the student-led protests in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in 1989. On another note, Scrivener observes how “Shelley’s nonviolence softens aggression and relieves Oedipal anxieties over killing the bad father [the tyrannical State]” (1982: 209), since the poet represents the final self-destruction of tyranny as the result of non-violent action, despite the violent imagery used. The aggressive, greedy, and self-indulgent father of popular iconography is also present in Shelley’s *Mask*, both in the initial parade and in the vicious attack of the soldiers after the Shape has risen and rallied the people to stir the resistance. But the voice urges the crowd not to answer violence with violence:

“Stand ye calm and resolute,
Like a forest close and mute,
With folded arms and looks which are
Weapons of unvanquished war

[...]

“And if then the tyrants dare
Let them ride among you there,
Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew,--
What they like, that let them do.

“With folded arms and steady eyes,
And little fear, and less surprise,
Look upon them as they slay
Till their rage has died away.

(319-322, 340-347)

What is evident here is struggle, unity, and revolutionary consciousness. Shelley does not make a moral argument, but a political exhortation, an appeal based on the physical

superiority of the poor's number. The famous stanza that concludes the poem – which is the only stanza repeated twice – is also a curious one to signify nonviolence:

“Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number--
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you--
Ye are many -- they are few.”

(151-154, repeated in 369-372)

I maintain that the poet's stance on the most effective way of resisting and overcoming oppression remains ambiguous throughout the poem, even if during the years readers have long debated on the question, taking one side or the other. Some critics view Shelley's final exhortation not as a call to violent revolution, but to perform acts of passive, nonviolent resistance, thus preserving the idea that in the poem he is powerfully asserting the necessity of nonviolence. For instance, Borushko claims that the poem “dramatizes the necessity of integrating aesthetic experience and political practice in order to achieve the critical self-reflection required for nonviolent praxis” (2010: 97). On the other hand, according to Reno, the final lines of the poem “evoke a barely contained violence, an almost-explicit incitement to revolution” (81). Shelley's exhortation to the people is indeed to “rise” like ravenous beasts because their great number will overcome the oppressors, thus it can be read “not as a repeated call to passivity but as a rejection of the reformers' nonviolent tactics” (82). This is the reason why, in Reno's opinion, *The Mask of Anarchy* is an anomalous poem inside Shelley's body of work, as it forces the poet to take into consideration a kind of violence he had shunned both in *Queen Mab* and in *Prometheus Unbound*.

A third interpretation stresses that in the poem the “call for revolution is clear” because Shelley “calls on the masses not to relent in their fight for freedom” and “violence can only be combated with nonviolence and passive resistance” (Ngide, 2020: 548-549). This is clearly an attempt at finding truth in the middle, as Ngide maintains that Shelley's idealistic revolution can only be effective if the violence of the oppressor is not returned with violence by the oppressed, thus stressing the concept that “violence begets violence” and makes the

revolutionaries “simply change roles and cloak themselves in the same violence that they combated with vigour” (552). Moreover, Crisafulli underlines that

The unique ‘balance’ presented in the poem between ‘the right of resistance and the duty of forbearance’, between the right to revolt against the oppressors and the duty to avoid the use of violent means, may be rendered as the balance between politics and ethics [...] In this political and allegorical text Shelley shows the British people what strategies they should put into action in order to force the ruling power into self-reform. He suggests civil disobedience and passive resistance, and beautifully depicts why and how the existing social system deprives underrepresented citizens of their freedom and wealth.

(2021: 130)

Despite the unclear stance of the poet, what appears certain is that, in the final proposal for a great assembly of people (262-372), the ideal expressed with greater emphasis is the brotherhood of mankind. The maternal spirit addressing the people invokes all her “children”, from the poorest to the richest, “From every hut, village, and town / Where those who live and suffer moan / For others' misery or their own” (272-74). Expanding beyond the limited scope of electoral rights, the spirit extends an invitation to the assembly to include not only the residents of workhouses and prisons but also women, children, and people of all ages without discriminations. Scrivener underlines that “the political implications of the assembly are anarchist in the complete negation of artificial distinctions among people” (1982: 210), and it is indeed a vision ahead of its times to even consider the right for all individuals – also those in jail – to participate in the choices for the community.

Delving further into the analysis, the gathered citizens are urged to respond passively when confronted with violent attacks, relying on “the old laws of England” (331) for protection, and to exercise restraint even in the face of tyrannical aggression. However, ultimately, they are encouraged to become assertive “lions” rising collectively. As I have already stated, ambivalence aptly characterizes Shelley’s stance towards social revolution, as it appears that the concept of widespread nonviolent resistance serves as a means for the poet to articulate his revolutionary ideals while simultaneously mitigating some of the apprehension these ideals evoked in him.

It is also important to underline how admirers of the poem's political vision shift uncomfortably at Shelley's summary and ambiguous appeal to "the old laws of England" (331), as if that social form were the best set of laws possible, with all its vestiges of feudal rules and practices. Paul Foot (1980: chapter 16) tried to rescue this contradiction and the poet in general by noting that "at the end of the poem, he seems to be openly advocating revolution", but he has to concede that "for much of the poem Shelley seems to be counselling the people to behave constitutionally, and to protest within the system". According to Wolfson, the contradiction that finally stumps Foot "has to do with the way passivity can serve the interests of tyranny. While Shelley never consciously put his art to such service, his anxiety about the historical process of change is related to this effect" (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 731). Behind this contradiction lies the specter personified by anarchy at the beginning of the poem, which I have already argued embodies chaos and blind mob violence for the poet. Shelley's caution can also be sensed in his exhortation for the people to value the work of poetry in a stanza which produces, according to Hunt in the Preface of 1832¹², "a most happy and comforting picture in the midst of visions of blood and tumult". In fact, at one point the epiphanic female orator instructs the assembly that

"Science, Poetry, and Thought
Are thy lamps; they make the lot
Of the dwellers in a cot
So serene, they curse it not.

(254-257)

Formally, *The Mask of Anarchy* is an allegorical masterpiece, thoughtfully crafted upon a myriad of symbols. The text explores the potential ambivalence and indeterminacy of these images, but the use of allegory and symbolism does not detract it from its concrete nature. In the same way, the ambivalence between revolution and reform did not hinder Shelley from making it one of the most politically engaged poems of its era (Reno, 2013: 91). Despite Shelley's wavering stance on revolution, whether he was calling for a violent revolution in the

¹² The reference is quoted in Susan Wolfson's essay in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002, p. 732, and comes from the *Preface* to Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy* written by Leigh Hunt for the first published edition of 1832.

name of radical reform or for a collective effort of passive, non-violent resistance that anticipates civil disobedience, he continued his struggle to solve his inner doubts, trying to produce a kind of definitive vision for his ideal society. I will argue in the following sections of this chapter that this is the main reason why he chose to add a fourth and final act to his greatest poetical effort, *Prometheus Unbound*.

On the other hand, *The Mask of Anarchy* is important also because it reveals Shelley trying for the first time to address a wider audience, hoping his words would become useful in waking consciences and stirring people up to enact change. By rooting freedom and release from oppression in the rights of the poor he went even further than the political forces which finally succeeded in passing the *Reform Bill* in 1832 (Scrivener, 1982: 209-210). Furthermore, the poet portrays the crisis and inevitable transformation of his nation by establishing “a close correlation between literature, politics and ethics”, a relationship that “concerns the ways in which literature challenges power and resists deceitful social behaviour” (Crisafulli, 2021: 131). In other words, Shelley uses literature to bridge the gap between two distant realms, the one of political pragmatics on one hand – bound by geographical and temporal constraints – and the one of ethical values on the other – responding to universal principles and spiritual needs. This facilitates the translation of politics into ethics, ultimately portraying political actions through characters, emotions and situations that express universal qualities irrespective of time and place. Similarly, literature translates ethics into politics by shaping the imagination of its readers, who can gain knowledge and identify with the poet’s representations by actively engaging with the text. Despite this function, literature does not impose ideological perspectives, but instead encourages critical debate and freedom of thought inviting readers to interpret, negotiate and fill gaps in meaning—a practice which is very close to the ones enacted by anarchist communities to find common ground while negotiating rules through direct democracy.

4.3 Form and Void: *Prometheus Unbound*, Act IV

In late 1819 Shelley suddenly decided to add a fourth act to his most ambitious work, a coda written in a high lyrical style that notably extends the form and significance of *Prometheus Unbound*, revealing how open the conception was in his mind. It is possible to conjecture Shelley's reasons for returning to his lyrical drama, but the most prominent seems to be that he wanted to provide an ending that better dramatized the millennial rebirth spreading through the universe after the end of tyranny, especially in the wake of the tragic events at Peterloo and the dire aftermaths for those who demanded social change. The poet's decision to depict the universal reawakening more directly required him to enlarge the form and the dimensions of his drama. As Sperry observed, Act IV "takes the form of a celebration whose use of song, dance, and spectacle is more reminiscent of the Renaissance masque than the effects we customarily associate with the chorus of Greek tragedy" (1988: 117).

The masque, already employed by Shelley in *The Mask of Anarchy*, is here presented before the cave of Prometheus and Asia and it is observed and commented on by Panthea and Ione as they gradually awaken. Much of its imagery is overtly erotic, and Shelley's celebration of the rebirth of sexuality chiefly emerges through the larger change made possible by the marriage of Asia and Prometheus. At the climax of the masque the Earth and Moon, in an orgiastic dance around each other, combine to bring about a new creation in space, a propagation described through an imagery rich in scientific implications which throws a fresh light on the nature and direction of human development. At the conclusion of the act an altered and now benign Demogorgon reappears to sum up for the participants the significance of the rites they have enacted. Demogorgon's powerful summary gives Shelley the opportunity to settle certain questions his earlier conclusion had left hanging, specifically the human desire for assurance that, despite the continuous change and historical necessity, man can ultimately gain some permanent hold over the good.

As Donald Reiman has shown (1990: 85-87), the act achieves its end in three clear movements: the reader first watches the approach and greeting of the Chorus of the Spirits and the Chorus of the Hours, culminating in their union through dance and song. Immediately

after, Panthea and Ione witness the scene of the Moon rolling forward in her chariot to meet the sphere that bears the little sleeping Spirit of the new Earth, a scene whose symbols are among the most elaborate and condensed in the drama. As the Moon and the Earth disappear together, united in the orbit of their common love, Demogorgon reascends from the abyss to deliver his concluding and decisive speech.

It is interesting to note what Merrilees Roberts has underlined about Prometheus in this last act of Shelley's play. The most prominent character, in fact, is basically absent, since he does not perform any action, nor has he any role except for that of spectator, one of the many parts of the new world emerging in its full glory. Act IV, then, seems to present readers with another version of the Titan, "who is no longer a singular character but the potential for all humanity to create 'Promethean' work that blends Nature and human nature into one 'mystic measure' (IV, 129)" (2020: 182). The creativity Prometheus has inspired in the world is channeled through the choruses of the Spirits and enables everyone to re-construct reality through their particular sensitivity, thus realizing the harmonious multiplicity making up the Whole (Roberts, 2020: 183), which is at the same time also represented by poetic works and the artist's efforts in general.

Moreover, the nearly complete absence of the titular character suggests another important aspect of the last act, analyzed in detail by Amanda Blake Davis (2020) in an essay where she suggests that androgyny and the dissolution of gender distinctions are of primary importance in the poet's agenda. Indeed, androgyny emerges as Shelley's primary strategy for embodying the revolutionary connection and mutual identification between poet and reader, something which reaches its culmination precisely in Act IV, where the love duet between the Spirits of the Earth and the Moon, rather than embodying a conventional sexual union, culminates in an ambiguously androgynous unity challenging heteronormative norms and extending the theme throughout the drama (Blake Davies, 2020: 165). For instance, the fact that the Earth undergoes multiple transformations serves to emphasize the poet and reader's ability to re-imagine gender hierarchies. Initially portrayed as Prometheus' mother, the Earth is in fact later depicted as a youthful, gender-neutral Spirit of the Earth before assuming the masculine role of "brother Earth" in Act IV. These transformations, alongside

the absence of male characters in the whole act, signify a radical departure from the societal constructions of masculine superiority and reflect Shelley's vision of a universe freed at last from patriarchal dominance. In this light, Jupiter's downfall in Act III becomes a powerful metaphor for the overthrow of both tyrannical rule *and* patriarchy, as evinced by Demogorgon's genderless presence as the responsible for unsettling the tyrant's expectations of male succession.

The subversion of patriarchal control operated by Demogorgon anticipates the harmoniously androgynous conclusion of Act IV, where Shelley's portrayal of a universe devoid of masculine dominance enables female voices to lead the reader into a realm where gender hierarchies can be abolished and re-imagined without the constraints of power. More specifically, the realization of the androgynous unity between the earth and Moon "promotes an imagined universe freed from the constraints imposed by gender binary" (Blake Davies, 2020: 161) and highlights the fluidity of gender and language, revealing the latter as a potential weapon to challenge society's norms. In this way, Shelley "encourages the reader's imaginative participation in *Prometheus Unbound*, and particularly within the final act. Androgyny exalts a freed and transformed universe and consequently promotes the potential for real political revolution outside the text" (Blake Davies, 2020: 177).

In the first movement of Act IV, the union of the Spirits and the Hours in a cosmic dance dramatizes the conditions necessary for the emergence of mankind's best nature into reality. Indeed, the Chorus of Spirits that opens Act IV "represents the highest instincts and intuitions that haunt the human mind" (Sperry, 1988: 118). Along with the appearance of the Spirits and the Hours, at the outset of the act the reader also witnesses a train of dark forms and shadows, the ghosts of past hours, on their way to "bear Time to his tomb in eternity" (IV, 14). The first movement of Act IV (1-184) relates in fact the death of linear time, thus making the liberation of the Spirits and their union with the Hours finally possible. Like form and void, the Spirits and the Hours both imply and need each other, and finally joined together in harmonious dance they symbolize the emergence of human perfection:

But now—oh weave the mystic measure
Of music and dance and shapes of light,

Let the Hours, and the Spirits of might and pleasure
Like the clouds and sunbeams unite.

(IV, 77-80)

While the temporal orientation looked forward, seeking freedom in the future while burdened by the wounds of the past, and unable to relish in the present, one's spiritual potential remained constrained and suppressed. However, with Love's eternity supplanting Time, the Spirits are liberated to rejoice in the natural cycle of water (40-47) and the sovereignty of music (48-55). Scrivener goes even further and notes that "with the downfall of Jupiter and the abolition of hierarchical domination, the sacred permeates all living things" (1982: 242).

As is evident in this initial passage, the suitable activities in the newly created world encompass singing, dancing, and playing. Most certainly, Shelley envisions the liberation from oppression as an occasion for the total expression of 'play': Spirits are "free to dive, or soar, or run" without constraints, engaging in their dance measures with pure delight. However, their joy lies not so much in mere freedom as in the more serious work of creation they make possible:

And our singing shall build,
In the Void's loose field,
A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield.

(IV, 153-155)

Indeed, through their singing and dancing the Spirits and the Hours together propagate a new atmosphere which enables the formation of new life:

We whirl, singing loud, round the gathering sphere
Till the trees and the beasts, and the clouds appear
From its chaos made calm by love, not fear.

(IV, 169-171)

To borrow Sperry's words, "combining echoes of Genesis and Revelation with science fiction, the circling spirits summon with their rhythms the gravitational forces necessary for the constellation of a new world in space" (1988: 119). What is different from the old world

and most remarkable is that the forms of life now emerging are impelled not by fear and struggle, the driving force of former evolution, but by love. After the Spirits and the Hours conclude their dance and depart, the new notion of eternity is further elucidated: Panthea and Ione briefly ponder the paradox that, although the music has ended, the beauty of the songs can still be reclaimed through remembrance. Like matter and energy, never destroyed and always transforming, the song merely assumes another form—but it does not die in the memory (IV, 180-181). The importance of music is made even more relevant in comparison with the third act of the drama, an act which was written almost completely in prosaic blank verses. In fact, here the choruses of the Spirits and the musicality of the ever-varied songs represent “the as-yet unseen presence of liberty restoring to freedom both individuals and their collective societies” (Curran in O’Neill and Howe, 2013: 296).

The second, more elaborate movement of the act (185-318) represents the romance and union of the Moon and Earth, and has received a great deal of attention because of its complexity and obscurity. As before, Panthea and Ione hear the approaching forms before they see them. Panthea hears “the deep music of the rolling world” (IV, 186), while Ione detects a range of “under-notes, / Clear, silver, icy, keen” which “pierce the sense [...] / As the sharp stars pierce Winter’s chrysal air” (IV, 189-192), and soon after they can identify the approaching chariots of the Moon and Earth. Ione’s impression of piercing cold is elaborated in her description of the occupant of the first chariot, the “winged Infant”, which is Shelley’s figure of the Moon:

[...] white
Its countenance, like the whiteness of bright snow,
Its plumes are as feathers of sunny frost,
Its limbs gleam white, through the wind-flowing folds
Of its white robe, woof of aetherial pearl.
Its hair is white,—the brightness of white light
Scattered in strings, yet its two eyes are Heavens
Of liquid darkness, which the Deity
Within, seems pouring, as a storm is poured
From jagged clouds, out of their arrowy lashes,
Tempering the cold and radiant air around
With fire that is not brightness.

(IV, 219-230)

The dazzling brilliance radiating from the airy figure, reinforced by the repeated use of the word 'white', both attracts and repels the reader with an impression of purity and frigidity, of something at the same time heavenly and the inhuman. Sperry explains that "the image of the Moon and her chariot is one of Shelley's most elaborate metaphors for the power of potentiality streaming in un-refracted brilliance toward the sphere of this world" (1988: 120).

If the Moon in her chariot is Shelley's symbol for the universal energy informing life, his image of the whirling orb of interpenetrating spheres that bears within it the Spirit of the Earth is his symbol of a potentiality of a different but related kind—the potentiality for endless change. The sleeping child is brought forward on a sphere itself made up of "many thousand spheres", "Ten thousand orbs involving and involved" (IV, 238 and 241). The onrushing mass reflects a multitude of colors, "Purple and azure, white and green and golden" (IV, 242), all the various hues of refracted light, and its surfaces are teeming with "unimaginable shapes" (IV, 244): all of these symbolize the infinite possibilities of earthly evolution, past, present, and future. The orb advances with a "self-destroying swiftness" (IV, 249), as the work of transformation necessarily proceeds through both creation and destruction, for new cycles can emerge only as the old are erased. According to Scrivener this

reminds one of Shelleyan inspiration, where the vitality and destructiveness of poetic creativity are inextricable. The multitudinous orb seems on the verge of exploding, but instead of bursting into fragments violently, it maintains itself at a white heat. It is startling to come upon, at this point, the sleeping Spirit of the Earth, "Pillowed upon its alabaster arms, / Like to a child o'er wearied with sweet toil". Once again, Shelley uses the image of the child to symbolize libertarian innocence (cf. IV, 388-394).

(1982: 243)

Panthea's subsequent speech (270-318) elucidates how Earth discards its history and relinquishes its past, thus facilitating its transformation into a paradise of untamed landscapes. Just as Prometheus and Asia had to regress to fully comprehend their true essence, Earth must also step back to confront its troubled past – "the melancholy ruins / of cancelled cycles" – and undergo purification through rebirth. The vivid imagery (shoot, swords, spears, tyrant-quelling etc.) is considered necessary because eradicating the past

proves to be challenging, as it requires a deep exploration into Earth's core to un-earth suppressed memories. Hidden in these lines there is a powerful message which applies all the more to the contemporary world, with its unresolved issues coming from the violence and the vengefulness of the more recent historical events: recalling and remembering does not mean forgetting and letting go of the past, on the contrary it serves to face the horrors of the past and to recognize them, so that they can be absorbed in history as lessons to be learned and always passed on.

Another important thing to highlight is that the sleeping child lies surrounded by a vast panorama of destruction, which represents the melancholy evidence of many past atrocities. The "monstrous works" of "uncouth skeletons", "statues, homes, and fanes; prodigious shapes" (IV, 299-300), testify to the long dominance of cultural ignorance and superstition. "Huddled in grey annihilation, split, / Jammed in the hard black deep" (IV, 301-302), they resemble debris piled up across countless centuries, and around them lie

The anatomies of unknown winged things,
And fishes which were isles of living scale,
And serpents, bony chains, twisted around
The iron crags, or within heaps of dust
To which the tortuous strength of their last pangs
Had crushed the iron crags.

(IV, 303-308)

According to Sperry's analysis, the passage is

remarkable for the peculiar loathing of evolution it expresses. Well before the methodical investigations and conclusions of Charles Darwin, Shelley had already grasped, largely through the writings of contemporary scientists like Darwin's grandfather Erasmus, the horror of an earthly evolution that, operating through the principles of competition, rapine, and survival, had left a history that was the very antithesis of his ideal of love.

(1988: 122)

The course of evolution had gone terribly wrong, leaving earth like "an abandoned corpse" on which strange forms "multiplied like summer worms"

[...] till the blue globe
Wrapt Deluge round it like a cloak, and they
Yelled, gaspt and were abolished; or some God
Whose throne was in a Comet, past, and cried —
“Be not!”—and like my words they were no more.

(IV, 313-318)

These last lines reveal Shelley’s knowledge of the geological theories of catastrophic change advanced by Erasmus Darwin among others, in which the earth was seen as having evolved through upheavals or floods that periodically destroyed life and reset history. Shelley grasped the evolutionary pattern that the more farsighted among the scientific minds of his time had begun to perceive, but he put no faith in the ‘progress’ it advocated. The point of the whole passage is that true rehabilitation can be attained only when the principles of strife and competition that have brought the earth to its present conditions have been eradicated. The faith that underlies Shelley’s vision is an extraordinary trust in the potential for change in man’s nature, a change that brings to mind claims made in the present day for the possibilities of human, social, and cultural advancement, especially through science and technology.

Once Jupiter and the atmosphere of “solid cloud” and “hot thunderstones” (IV, 341) surrounding him have disappeared, finally “drunk up / By thirsty nothing” (IV, 350-351), the way is prepared for new creation. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so

[...] beneath, around, within, above,
Filling thy void annihilation,
Love Bursts in like light on caves cloven by the thunderball.

(IV, 353-355)

As the Moon and the Earth approach each other to begin their dance of cosmic joy, they also create a new atmosphere, and the Earth gets enfolded by a “vaporious exultation” that surrounds him like “an atmosphere of light” (IV, 321 and 323). Through the warmth of his proximity, the Earth thaws the Moon’s shining but potentially destructive cold, to the point that she exclaims:

Some Spirit is darted like a beam from thee,
Which penetrates my frozen frame

And passes with the warmth of flame —
With love and odour and deep melody
Through me, through me! —

(IV, 327-331)

For her part, the Moon “interpenetrates [the Earth’s] granite mass” (IV, 370) with her own power, inspiring the birth of new life in the chaos of his form. Sperry notices how Shelley, “with imagery that is at once astronomical and erotic, prefigures the union of earth and moon, of man and woman, of the poet and his inspiring muse” (1988: 124). Earth and Moon combine in order to create the harmony of a new nature in which “Labour and Pain and Grief in life’s green grove / Sport like tame beasts—none knew how gentle they could be!” (IV, 404-405), signaling once more how critically the poet looked at a work system in which people are exploited. I believe this is a burning issue in today’s society as well, where a radical rethinking of the concepts of ‘work’ and ‘job’ is needed (I will further develop this idea in chapter 6). Shelley’s lines look forward to a humankind free of feral instincts and competitive drives, of the need to survive by overcoming and suppressing others. The passivity and calm at the heart of the playfulness and rejoicing that close *Prometheus Unbound* may seem strange, because they stand in such contrast to the ideals of our own civilization, where, on the other hand, Thomas Hobbes’ belief that every man is a savage wolf to other men¹³ seems to have been absorbed and become a core value.

The duet of Moon and Earth (319-502) is also the real center of the fourth act, because of its message and its more distinctive feature, i. e. the dialectic of repression. With the liberation of Prometheus, Earth’s volcanoes become a source of “inextinguishable laughter” (IV, 334), whereas before the volcano was a symbol of repression because so much of its energy was compressed and contained by Jupiter’s tyranny. After the liberation, Earth’s erotic energy can at last erupt and flow unrestrictedly in “boundless, overflowing, bursting gladness” (IV, 320). This reaction to liberation demonstrates that Jupiter’s hatred (which is repression) had turned “our green and azure universe” into “black destruction”, splintering the forces of nature “into a lifeless mire” (IV, 338-355). The repression of life-force produced

¹³ Hobbes’ famous philosophical idea, which derives from the Latin proverb ‘homo homini lupus est’.

the forces of destruction, but once Jupiter is no longer allowed to frustrate natural power, nature can once again reach equilibrium in a healthy plenitude.

Scrivener stresses how “the duet implies that Jupiter derived what power he had only from repressing natural energy” (1982: 245). Once Jupiter is overthrown, he turns into the symbol of utter emptiness, whereas unrepressed love embodies abundance, fecundity, and harmonious melody. The heightened intensity and the potential violence of the small orb representing the new planet also become more understandable when considering the aftermath of repression: attempting to disrupt the furious and awe-inspiring power of the orb will result in catastrophic consequences, in the same way that repressing love, thwarting natural desire and crippling a human spirit which contains in itself multitudes of possibilities will surely lead to devastating results.

Indeed, Act IV shows that “Prometheus’s [...] idealism consists in love and truth” and reveals that “Shelley conceptualizes *Prometheus Unbound* as an expression of hope for ages yet to come” (Jung, 2006: 91). Thus, the final movement of the drama can be interpreted as a grand celebration of the triumph of Love over the “hell of hatreds, and hopes, and fears” (IV, 119) which plagued humanity, enacted through the power of music which now inspires Earth and all creatures. In the same way the rain purifies both earthly and spiritual existence from Jupiter’s oppressive rule, “the deep music of the rolling world” will mend the wounds inflicted by the cruel despot. The ever-present melody epitomizes the stability and the joy for which Prometheus has endured his sufferings, but it also underlines the conviction that enduring happiness is ultimately attainable, provided men remain untamed by the ambition for power. In the new, regenerated world Prometheus has in fact replaced the void left by “Heaven’s despotism” (IV, 555) with the gentle light of Love, which renders finally possible the harmonious coexistence of all living things. Through this image, the poet also posits that Love is a force capable of surviving any form of oppression which might arise in the future (Jung, 2006: 98-99).

Recalling the analysis of negatives in the previous acts carried out by Timothy Webb (refer to the previous chapter), it speaks volumes the fact that Act IV celebrates the regenerated universe “not through the mediation of negatives but through joyful self-

expression” (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 702). Indeed, the regained freedom offers new and fresh perspectives, and even Jupiter’s stifling world of negation does not appear as substantial and all-pervasive as before. The tyrant’s most frightening properties are stripped from him, so many negatives can now be reinterpreted with a decisively opposite connotation: for instance, when the Spirits celebrate the “unmeasured wildernesses” (IV, 336) they are suggesting that what was seen as threatening in the old world becomes a suggestion of infinite potentiality in the new one, a mirror for Duffy’s regenerative awe inspired by the natural sublime (2005: chapter 5) and a powerful representation of the “free range of possibility which is available to the human mind when it has liberated itself from the shadow of the darker forces” (Webb in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 703).

In the third and last movement of Act IV, as the voices of Earth and Moon fade off into the distance, Panthea calls Ione to behold the reemergence of Demogorgon, who rises now as a mighty power, a cloud of darkness, from the center of the earth. Exactly when it seemed that the symphony of love could continue indefinitely, Shelley has his most obscure character reappear, and the effect is quite startling. Sperry notes how Demogorgon’s reappearance at the end of the drama as a more forthcoming and human character

is not more remarkable than the alteration in his role and character. The diction and tone of his invocation of the powers of the universe, “Ye Kings of suns and stars, Daemons and Gods” (IV.529), recalls Prometheus’s first line at the opening of the play, “Monarch of Gods and Daemons, and all Spirits,” suggesting that the wheel has come full circle.

(1988: 124)

Reintroducing Demogorgon upon the stage was necessary for Shelley to recall his authority in order to clarify a troubling ambiguity at the heart of his drama. Indeed, as its central movement, Shelley’s play proclaims the achievement of an earthly millennium, but it does so only within a universe of change and mutability, showing that it does not lie within the power of Prometheus to will the good into existence. If it must depend upon the inscrutable processes Demogorgon represents, what guarantees the stability and continuation of humanity’s new achievement? We have seen Demogorgon dethrone Jupiter, so may he not rise at some equally unforeseen time in the future to reinstall the tyrant? The

reversibility of time and the astonishing rapidity of change that remain always potential can work on behalf of humanity's evil instincts as well as its good. This is the reason why Demogorgon's closing declamation openly raises these concerns, which Shelley, using the deity as his spokesman, can settle with no final assurance. Indeed, the best Demogorgon can do is to deliver certain pledges:

Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance, —
These are the seals of that most firm assurance
Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;
And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
Mother of many acts and hours, should free
The serpent that would clasp her with his length —
These are the spells by which to reassume
An empire o'er the disentangled Doom.

(IV, 562-569)

In the end, not even Demogorgon can offer an easy prescription, but in giving what is something of a mixed signal he recalls the qualities Prometheus has already exhibited, namely "Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance". Among these, it is the last, i. e. the Titan's ability to endure, the principal example held out to humanity as a tool to reclaim self-rule, should the kingdom of darkness ever retake power:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;
To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change nor falter nor repent:
This, like thy glory, Titan! is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory.

(IV, 570-578)

According to Cian Duffy, this is a final "gradualist apostrophe" through which the poet urges to 'hope' and 'love', but also to 'defy power', therefore closing his drama with a problematic ending where readers are "returned to Shelley's familiar concerns about the

viability of gradualism in an age of extreme reaction” (2005: 182): how can the celebrated Promethean virtues be effectively translated into concrete political action? On another note, Sperry writes that “the concluding stanza goes to the moral center of the Promethean situation Shelley had represented as all humankind’s” (1988: 126). Indeed, it raises the main questions the poet was asking himself while trying to suggest a viable recipe for change. How can one maintain the delicate but necessary balance between seemingly conflicting demands such as to defy and to love? How can one continue hoping through defeat after defeat for a victory that can spring, paradoxically, only from something close to despair? I argue that in *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley chooses to jump over the problems of history, even over the vision he had presented in *The Mask of Anarchy*, because he does not look to particular programs or to individual saviors but to the triumph of a universal consensus, something which is always inherent to man’s better nature—if it is allowed to emerge. Such a victory, he seems to imply in his final line, is the only one worth having: the victory over ourselves, over our fears, our prejudices, and our worst impulses.

To sum up, the poem is revealed to be truly “the apotheosis of Shelley’s revolutionary aesthetics” (Blake Davies, 2020: 160), where he uses androgyny to create a “psychic unity” with the reader and encourage the dissolution of all power relationships and hierarchical forms of thought. In particular, the last act presents a renewed universe whose main feature is to be one harmonious, collective unity, a Whole in which “Man” is re-imagined as “one harmonious soul of many a soul” and is freed from male connotations, since its unified soul is indicated by the neuter pronoun ‘it’ (IV, 400-401). With his last act the poet is also “concerned to assert the power of the human will, together with the shaping influence of love, to defy evil and to escape the dark corridors of despair” (Webb in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 705), thus presenting a world which is the reversed image of the one with which he started the first act, a regenerated universe capable of building a bridge over the abyss of hatred and fear and overcoming men’s capacity for evil. Despite this intention, when Demogorgon resurrects issues one thought were disposed long ago in the poem, he does so precisely because Shelley felt these issues were not solved, especially after his troubled and uncertain dealing with the possibility for revolution and change after the Peterloo massacre (see earlier in the chapter).

The poet then bids goodbye to the lyrics of love and dismisses the idyllic dream. Indeed, in the final speech readers are carried back to actuality, which is not the world of dreams because in the harsh reality Jupiter still rules. This is why Demogorgon returns readers to themselves, the place where everyone must begin the processes of real change envisioned by the poem: “To defy Power, which seems omnipotent; / To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates” (IV, 572-574).

Chapter Six

Back to the future: Shelley and anarchism today

Having analyzed in the previous chapters the theme of freedom in some of Shelley's most relevant works, I sustain here that his most pressing concern, his lifelong driving passion, is liberation in the form of the utopian anarchy presented in the fourth act of *Prometheus Unbound*:

[...] one harmonious Soul of many a soul
Whose nature is its own divine control
Where all things flow to all, like rivers to the sea.

(IV, 400-402)

Indeed, throughout his life the poet constantly struggled to make his voice heard and his ideas resonate in society, with the hope they would enable people to realize how they could become truly free. A more difficult question than the utopian goal of liberation is from what exactly we are to liberate ourselves, just how we could be able to recognize

[...] those foul shapes, abhorred by God and man—
Which under many a name and many a form
Strange, savage, ghastly, dark and execrable
Were Jupiter, the tyrant of the world

(III, iv, 180-183)

On this matter, Stuart Curran contends that “Jupiter is constituted by interlocking systems of ideology, and that Shelley spent his entire life in an endeavor to locate the root from which these derived their sustenance” (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 600)¹⁴.

Following Godwin proto-anarchist ideas, Shelley determined that all external sources of power were inimical to human well-being. In the central cantos of *Queen Mab*, and especially in the explanatory notes attached to them, he brilliantly traced a clear

¹⁴ The quotation is taken from Stuart Curran's essay *Shelley and the End(s) of Ideology* (pp. 600-607).

interdependence of civil, commercial, and religious power, were each component protected itself through the association with the others, and together they collectively functioned to deprive individuals of their natural rights. Shelley's identification of this interlocking power structure remains until today a compelling feature of the social analysis carried out by the poet, but according to Curran it "fails exactly at the point of explaining why so monstrous a structure exists in the first place" (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 601).

In other words, why should human beings willingly give up their autonomy to such a constraining bondage? Shelley is clear about his idea of the reason, and clear as well as penetrating in the way he traces its implications: he suggests that people give themselves over to a system of power rather than face chaos, that they crave a totalizing order because it takes away the menace of the unknown. It is no wonder then that Jupiter sits on his throne serenely unconscious of his impending doom. As the avatar of all ideological systems whatsoever, his only real threat can come from his subjects, should they be willing to totally reject the system. This is precisely what Prometheus accomplishes when he chooses to step outside of the antagonistic system he has created in collusion with Jupiter, an achievement which is simultaneously doubled by Asia as she finds herself unable – or unwilling – to use Jupiter as a scapegoat by naming him the source of evil. After these revolutionary acts, Jupiter's reality simply disintegrates and is completely negated as a form of thought. In his essay *On Life* Shelley produces a relevant commentary on the fall of Jupiter:

Philosophy, impatient as it may be to build, has much work yet remaining as pioneer for the overgrowth of ages. It makes one step towards this object; it destroys error, and the roots of error. It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation.

(in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 507)

Jupiter falls and leaves behind "foul shapes", "not o'erthrown, but unregarded now" (III, iv, 179-180). These are his instruments, a wreckage of signs which, as the Spirit of the Hour will observe at the end of Act II, "are now / But an astonishment" (III, iv, 175-176). In other words, Jupiter disappears, but his words do not. That is why Demogorgon ends the drama with a timely warning about historical repetitions. Indeed, as Curran observes, "we are

dependent upon words, and, since they are arbitrary representations of unique things in unique combinations caught in a unique moment of time, they are susceptible—more than susceptible, they are prone—to ideological abstraction” (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 604).

Demogorgon’s warning uncovers once more Shelley’s obsession with signs as instruments of ideology. From this point of view, the following passage about the poet’s metaphysical speculations seems to have some urgent implications:

We combine words, combined a thousand times before. In our minds we assume entire opinions; and in the expression of those opinions, entire phrases, when we would philosophize. Our whole style of expression and sentiment is infected with the tritest plagiarism. Our words are dead, our thoughts are cold and borrowed.

(in Clark, 1954: 184)

This is precisely Jupiter’s language: ready-made, dead and deadening. This is the language that poets fight against, as Shelley proclaims in *A Defence of Poetry*. Poets are indeed seen as legislators because, without acknowledging their purpose, they restlessly reformulate the building blocks of culture, the conceptual structures that are words:

Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.

(in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 512)

The ultimate aim of Shelley’s poetry is political, and it coincides with the liberation of the self from the strictures and the structures surrounding it, especially when these may be acknowledged not as the traps of tyrants and priests, but as the potentiality in all men to become tyrants and priests, first for themselves and then for others. Despite this apparently hopeless picture, in his works Shelley resolutely refuses the despair that haunts his analysis of human reality. On the contrary, he keeps reasserting that men have the right to freedom, all the more so since they can see so fully, so painfully, so intimately, the ideological forces that are their enemy.

In this chapter I will draw from Shelley's analysis and themes in order to demonstrate that they lived on in the anarchist visions which flourished at the end of the nineteenth century with the first true anarchist philosophers, and that they still speak to contemporary society. I believe the question whether Shelley can be considered an anarchist is wrongly put, since the poet lived before the term 'anarchism' started being associated with a clear set of ideals and philosophies. Moreover, as Annette Wheeler Cafarelli reminds contemporary readers, "we can only measure any gesture of radicalism or social reform within its historically relative context" (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 616). It is nevertheless true that ideas and visions grow over time, and that they can be developed and changed, but those which share the same purpose and core ideals always contaminate and inspire each other.

If one has to look for anarchist clues in Shelley's own life, it is easy to glimpse them in his deep humanitarianism, in his care for his fellow beings and for all living things, and also in his restless and vagabond life, which can be somehow considered a summative symbol of his anarchic spirit in the sense that he made a continuous effort to live without barriers, impositions and borders (both physical and abstract). Indeed, Shelley always kept moving, he eschewed labels – except perhaps the one of 'poet' – and he kept changing both directions and the means of communicating his vision. But before taking a closer look at the way in which his anarchism can still be useful today, I believe it is of paramount importance to clarify what anarchism is – philosophically and historically.

6.1 Visions of Anarchy

As I have already mentioned in the first chapter, the word 'anarchy' comes from the Greek *anarkhia*, meaning 'contrary to authority' or 'without a ruler'. It was mainly used in a derogatory sense until 1840, when it was adopted by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to describe his political and social ideology, arguing that organization without government was both possible and desirable. In the evolution of political ideas, Colin Ward underlines how "anarchism can

be seen as an ultimate projection of both liberalism and socialism, and the differing strands of anarchist thought can be related to their emphasis on one or the other of these” (2004: 1).

Historically, anarchism arose not only as an explanation of the divide between the rich and the poor in any community, and of the reason why the poor have been obliged to fight for their share of a common inheritance, but also as a radical answer to the question on ‘what went wrong’ that followed the ultimate outcome of the French Revolution, which had ended not only with a reign of terror and the emergence of a newly rich ruling caste, but with a new adored emperor, Napoleon, strutting through his conquered territories.

Anarchists and their precursors were unique on the political Left in affirming that workers and peasants were inevitably betrayed by the new class of politicians, whose priority was to re-establish a centralized state power. Indeed, after every revolutionary uprising in the 19th and 20th century, usually won at a heavy cost for ordinary populations, the new rulers had no hesitation in applying violence and terror, establishing a secret police and employing a professional army to maintain their control. This is the reason why for anarchists “the State itself is the enemy, [...] not merely because every State keeps a watchful and sometimes punitive eye on its dissidents, but because every State protects the privileges of the powerful” (Ward, 2002: 2).

For more than a century, the mainstream of anarchist propaganda has been labeled *anarchist-communism*, and it argued that property in land, natural resources, and the means of production should be held in mutual control by local communities, federating for innumerable joint purposes with other communes. This vision differs from state socialism in opposing the concept of any central authority. Some anarchists prefer to distinguish between *anarchist-communism* and *collectivist anarchism* in order to stress the obviously desirable freedom of an individual or family to possess the resources needed for living, while not implying the right to own the resources needed by others. *Anarcho-syndicalism* puts its emphasis on the organized industrial workers who could, through a ‘social general strike’, expropriate the possessors of capital and thus engineer a workers’ take-over of industry and administration.

There are also several traditions of *individualist anarchism*, one of them deriving from the ‘conscious egoism’ of the German writer Max Stirner (1806–1856), and another from a remarkable series of 19th-century American thinkers, led by Thoreau, who argued that in protecting one’s own autonomy and associating with others for common advantages one is promoting the good of all. These thinkers differed from free-market liberals in their absolute mistrust of American capitalism, and in their emphasis on mutualism. In the late 20th century, the word ‘libertarian’ (which had previously been used as an alternative to the word ‘anarchist’) was appropriated by a new group of American thinkers among whom the most prominent was Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), with his groundbreaking ideas on civil disobedience and life in tune with nature¹⁵.

More recently, *pacifist anarchism* follows from the anti-militarism that accompanies the rejection of the State (with its ultimate dependence on armed forces), and from the conviction that any morally viable human society depends upon the uncoerced goodwill of its members. This and other threads of anarchist thought, namely *green anarchism* and *anarcho-feminism*, have different emphases, which is the reason why the term ‘anarchist galaxy’ is so often employed for describing anarchist groups and activities. Nevertheless, what links all these different visions is their constant rejection of external authority, whether that of the State, the employer, or the hierarchies of administration and of established institutions like the school and the church.

Colin Ward (2002: chapter 1) explains that it is customary to relate the anarchist tradition to four major thinkers and writers. The first was William Godwin (1756–1836), whom I already dealt with in the first chapter as the main inspiration for Shelley’s ideals. In his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published in 1793, Godwin set out the anarchist case against government, the law, property, and the institutions of the state. His book brought him instant fame, soon followed by hostility and neglect in the political climate of the early 19th century, but retaining an underground life in radical circles until its rediscovery first by Shelley himself, and later by the anarchist movement in the 1890s.

¹⁵ For further analysis, see Lawrence Buell’s *Henry David Thoreau: Thinking Disobediently* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

The second of these pioneers was the previously mentioned Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), the French propagandist who was the first one to call himself an anarchist. He became famous in 1840 by virtue of an essay that declared that ‘Property is Theft’, but he also claimed that ‘Property is Freedom’. He saw no contradiction between these two slogans, since he thought it obvious that the first related to the landowners and capitalists (whose ownership derived from conquest or exploitation and was sustained only through the state, its property laws, police, and army), while the second was concerned with the peasant or artisan family with an obvious natural right to a home, to the land it could cultivate, and to the tools of a trade, but not to ownership or control of the homes, land, or livelihood of others.

The third of the classical anarchist luminaries was the Russian revolutionary Michael Bakunin (1814–1876), famous for his disputes with Marx in the First International in the 1870s, where, for his successors, he predicted with remarkable accuracy the outcome of Marxist dictatorships in the 20th century. “Freedom without socialism” he said, “is privilege and injustice, but socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality” (in Cutler, 1992: 40). His elaborations on this perception are cited in innumerable books published since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and subsequently of the regimes it imposed on its satellites. Typical of Bakunin’s observations was a letter of 1872 in which he remarked:

I believe that Herr Marx is a very serious if not very honest revolutionary, and that he really is in favour of the rebellion of the masses, and I wonder how he manages to overlook the fact that the establishment of a universal dictatorship, collective or individual, a dictatorship which would create the post of a kind of chief engineer of world revolution, ruling and controlling the insurrectionary activity of the masses in all countries, as a machine might be controlled – that the establishment of such a dictatorship would in itself suffice to kill revolution and warp and paralyse all popular movements [...]

(in Cutler, 1992: 237)

The last of these key thinkers was another Russian of aristocratic origin, Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921). His original reputation derived from his work as a geographer, and in a long series of books and pamphlets he sought to give anarchism a scientific basis. *The Conquest of Bread* (1892) was his manual on the self-organization of a post-revolutionary society, while *Mutual Aid* (1902) was written to confront those misinterpretations of

Darwinism that justified competitive capitalism, by demonstrating from the observation of animal and human societies that competition within species is far less significant than cooperation as a precondition for survival. *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899) was Kropotkin's treatise on the humanization of work, through the integration of agriculture and industry, of brain work and physical work, and of intellectual and manual education. The most widely read on a global scale of all anarchist authors, he linked anarchism both with subsequent ideas of social ecology and with everyday experience.

Ward (2002: 8) underlines how some anarchists would object to the identification of anarchism with its best-known writers. They would point out that everywhere in the world where anarchist ideas have arisen there is a local activist conspiring to get access to a printing press, aware of the anarchist undercurrent in every uprising of the downtrodden all through history, and full of ideas about the application of anarchist solutions to local issues and dilemmas. They point to the way in which anarchist aspirations can be traced through the history of mankind, from the slave revolts of the ancient world to the peasant risings of medieval Europe, in the aims of the Diggers in the English Revolution of the 1640s, in the revolutions in France in 1789 and 1848, and the Paris Commune of 1871. In fact, in the 20th century anarchism had a role in the Mexican Revolution of 1911, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and most notably in the revolution in Spain that followed the military uprising that precipitated the civil war in 1936.

Indeed, in the ground-breaking works *People without Government* (1990) written by Harold Barclay and *The Dawn of Everything* (2021) by the late anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow, the authors brilliantly trace anarchist ideals through the history of mankind and analyze the myriad of non-hierarchical types of societies realized from the Paleolithic onwards, showing how official historiography has often scorned or guiltily hidden these organized forms of society in the name of orthodoxy and from a State-centered perspective. This is also the reason why most people do not know that anarchist societies have always existed, and that they do exist (and function well, too) today: the most relevant example can be considered Rojava's autonomous and stateless democracy established in 2013 in the north and east of Syria.

Despite the seemingly unattainable hopes of reshaping society, anarchists do not necessarily fit the stereotype of believers in some ultimate revolution, succeeding where all others had failed and inaugurating Utopia. On this matter, the German anarchist Gustav Landauer declared that:

The state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.

(quoted in Ward, 2002: 9)¹⁶

Moreover, if anarchists have not changed society on a vast scale in the ways that they hoped were possible, the same is true for the advocates of every other social ideology of the past century, whether socialist or capitalist. Nevertheless, anarchism “has contributed to a long series of small liberations that have lifted a huge load of human misery” (Ward, 2002: 10) and it has, in fact, an enduring resilience – much like Shelley’s ultimate hero, Prometheus. To back this statement, Colin Ward explains that

Every European, North American, Latin American, and Asian society has had its anarchist publicists, journals, circles of adherents, imprisoned activists, and martyrs. Whenever an authoritarian and repressive political regime collapses, the anarchists are there, a minority urging their fellow citizens to absorb the lessons of the sheer horror and irresponsibility of government. The anarchist press re-emerged in Germany after Hitler, in Italy after Mussolini, in Spain after Franco, in Portugal after Salazar, in Argentina after the military dictatorship, and in Russia after 70 years of brutal suppression. For anarchists this is an indication that the ideal of a self-organizing society based on voluntary cooperation rather than upon coercion is irrepressible. It represents, they claim, a universal human aspiration.

(2002: 10)

The goal of a self-managed society born out of the free will of its people and devoid of authoritarian control and regimentation is as attractive as it could be feasible in the long run. The reader may wonder why, if ideas and aspirations similar to those of the anarchists can be traced through so many cultures through history and around the world, the concept is so regularly misunderstood or caricatured. The answer is to be found in a small episode in

¹⁶ The quotation is taken from Gustav Landauer’s *Revolution and Other Writings* (PM Press, 2010).

anarchist history: there was a period, a century ago, when a minority of anarchists (like the subsequent minorities of a dozen other political movements) believed that the assassination of monarchs, princes, and presidents would hasten popular revolution. Sad to say, in terms of changing the course of history and ridding the world of its tyrants anarchists were no more successful than most posterior political assassins. But their legacy has become the cartoonist's stereotype of the anarchist as the cloaked and bearded carrier of a bomb with a smoking fuse, and this has consequently provided yet another case for the States' relentless and demonizing propaganda against anarchism, and another obstacle to the serious discussion of anarchist approaches. Meanwhile, Ward notes that in truth "modern political terrorism on an indiscriminate scale is the monopoly of governments and is directed at civilian populations or is the weapon we all associate with religious or nationalist separatism, both of them very far from the aspirations of anarchists" (2002: 13).

In the entry he compiled in 1905 for the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Kropotkin wrote that 'anarchism' is

the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government – harmony in such a society being obtained not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements, concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.

(in Ward, 2002: 13)

Implicit in this definition is the inevitability of compromise, an ordinary aspect of politics which has been found difficult by anarchists, precisely because their ideology mainly precludes the usual routes to political influence. More recently, in his posthumous book of conversations on anarchy, David Graeber gives another poignant and interesting description, which I believe is extremely helpful to keep in mind to better understand the next paragraphs:

The closest I've come to a definition was to say that anarchy isn't an attitude, isn't a vision, isn't even a set of practices; it's a process of moving back and forth between the three. When members of a group of people object to some form of domination, and that causes them to imagine a world without it, and that in turn causes them to re-examine and change their

relations with each other [...] that's anarchy, whether or not you decide to pin a name on it and whatever that name may be.

(2020: 11)

6.2 The Elements of Freedom

6.2.1 No Other Gods before Me

Percy Shelley shares numerous ideas and beliefs with the stalwarts of anarchism that lived many decades after him, but the best starting point to analyze them is perhaps his rejection and profound disgust for organized religion. Indeed, as I have already examined in previous chapters, Shelley was a lifelong opposer of any authority, especially of the Church. He considered himself basically an atheist, albeit of a peculiar kind: he did not believe in any revealed truth imposed through dogmas of faith, but kept searching for something to believe in, a deeper truth that could give meaning to human life. Ultimately, his personal faith and his sensitivity made him a believer in a greater universal spirit which he liked to call 'the One', a spirit which in the poet's vision contains the whole universe, and of which vice versa every living being is a part of. Indeed, Shelley was a staunch supporter of the idea that everything and everyone is deeply connected, so that any action had direct and indirect consequences overall. Some might even suggest he was one of the first to theorize the now famous 'chaos theory'¹⁷.

Moreover, as pointed out earlier in this research, Shelley held an ambiguous attitude towards the figure of Jesus Christ. He was torn between regarding him just as the symbol of the oppressive Christian Church – and of its deadliest dogmatic system, Christendom – and his being the example of a rebel who defied Roman and Jewish authority, teaching a new philosophy based on love and on the rejection of violence and greed. If one thinks about Jesus and Christianity today, according to the orthodox opinion they seem to be synonymous with

¹⁷ Specifically, the 'butterfly effect', an underlying principle in chaos theory, describes how even a small change in one state of a system can result in large differences in a later state, meaning that there is a strong interdependence between seemingly distant systems. A common metaphor to describe this behavior is that a butterfly flapping its wings in (for example) Texas can cause tornado on the other side of the world. For further reference, see Robert C. Bishop's *Chaos Theory* (Tibidabo Publishing, 2023).

order, authority and State power, and even the most casual glance at the – often dark – history of the Church reveals a reliable and systematic pattern of violence and lust for power or political subservience of the worst tyrannies. Clearly, Christianity not only supports authority, but presupposes that authority exists and rules. And yet, there was a time when being associated with Jesus of Nazareth was a criminal offense, and during the Roman empire such subversives were even called atheist because they refused to worship the emperor. That all changed when emperor Constantine made Christianity the preferred religion of the State. From that moment onwards, the Church started to transform itself from a welcoming community of mutual aid into an organization that aimed at maintaining its power at all costs, even if in open contempt of the original teachings of Christ.

Shelley often aggressively attacked this hypocrisy and the corruption of the Church, thus aligning himself with the undercurrents of opposition to both secular and Church authority that have been present since the very foundations of Christianity, and which are much more than just incidental protests against power abuse: they are essentially anarchist in character. Indeed, in his seminal work *Anarchy and Christianity*, the French theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul coined the term ‘Christian anarchy’ to indicate these undercurrents, while unmistakably explaining why it is not an oxymoron. Ellul saw no contradiction, but definitely some tensions, in the relationship between the anarchist political movement and the faith movement of powerless Christianity: “The only political position consistent with revelation is the negation of power: the radical total refusal of its existence, a fundamental questioning of it, no matter what form it may take” (Ellul, 1988: 173).

Through the analysis of various biblical passages both in the Old and the New Testament, Ellul aims at uncovering once again the true nature of Christian teachings and philosophy, especially focusing on Jesus’ own radically negative attitude towards political power and his rejection of authority: just to quote an example, it is plainly stated in the Gospel that “the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matthew, 20.20). From his deep and detailed argumentation, Ellul can astonishingly conclude that “biblical thought leads straight to anarchism” (1988: 157). Going even further, he adds that “anarchism is the only answer to the modern state and politics when the milieu and action become technical and

order and organization are imposed” (1988: 198). The idea presented by the French theologian is nothing else than the core value of anarchism, namely that there is no distinction to be made between different forms of power. Emma Goldman noted that all political regimes impose some forms of social hierarchies and coercive institutional authority, so there can be no political power without tyranny: “all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore not only wrong and harmful, but also unnecessary” (quoted in Shulman, 2012: 12)¹⁸.

As it happens with Shelley’s vision, Ellul’s argument seems to be established on the belief that a radical personal and collective revolution is needed to subvert or transform the socio-political structures and technology that destroy the human person. More importantly, Christian anarchy is presented as a prophecy, a counter-cultural voice of hope that states that it is the action of humans fully realizing their God-given potential the igniting spark which could fundamentally change society (Ellul, 1988: 103-105), an attitude which appears almost identical to the prophetic features in Shelley’s works.

6.2.2 Work (and Money) Set You Free

The second major point of contact between Shelley’s thought and anarchism which still speaks to contemporary society can be observed in the poet’s attitude towards the political establishment – the State, with its armed enforcers and servile bureaucrats – and economy. In my research I have analyzed the way in which power is portrayed by Shelley as a poison, a disease personified by kings, priests and judges, but now I want to focus on the structures who enable power hierarchies to perpetuate themselves, namely police forces and economic levers.

To tackle the former, I would like to take into account as a paradigmatic example the events occurred during the G8 meeting in Genova in July, 2001, which contain disturbing echoes of the Peterloo massacre. Indeed, on that occasion huge protests from the no global movement were expected in the Italian city, and it was later revealed that police forces were specifically instructed to create riots by infiltrating the demonstrators – something they

¹⁸ The quotation is taken from Emma Goldman’s essay *Anarchism: What It Really Stands For*, collected in the book edited by Alix Kates Shulman listed in the bibliography.

succeeded in – in order to justify their brutal repression and savage beatings which led to the death of a young activist and to nightmarish episodes of violence and torture on harmless people in what was later labeled by the European Court of Human Rights as “the worst case of a suspension of human rights in Europe after World War II”¹⁹.

David Graeber brilliantly outlines the significance of the anarchist principle by contrasting it with the way in which hierarchical power employs police enforcement in situations like the one above:

I have seen that a lot of times since: a cop gives an order that’s just completely insane, like surrounding you and then ordering you to disperse, you’re stupid enough to try to reason with them, they just say “Oh so you think you have it all figured out, don’t you? You have all the answers.” That or they hit you with a stick. But, of course, if you are a pure authoritarian, then pure moral relativism makes perfect sense because in the absence of truth there’s only the law. Well, force and law—the same nasty cosmology that gets enshrined in the language of physics. That’s why police and criminals ultimately like each other so much; they both inhabit the same universe. Essentially, it’s a fascist universe, one in which force and law are the only ontological principles. For me anarchy only makes sense as an attempt to sidestep that entire dialectic.

(Graeber, 2020: 17)

The violence at the G8 summit in 2001 is not at all an isolated case of the way in which a State can employ its weapons, whenever it feels its hold on power is threatened by people uniting to protest and demand change: in recent years one can have often witnessed, for instance, the police violently quashing student demonstrations or shooting unarmed black people, which is a clear symptom of the State protecting its authority at all costs by unleashing its brainless, violent and unquestioningly loyal apparatus – and I am referring especially to those states usually regarded as ‘democratic’, since the authoritarian or dictatorial ones reject democracy, plurality and dissent by definition.

If events such as violent repression of dissent usually occur when a clear outright protest is underway, the State apparatus needs to perpetuate its power on a daily basis in more subtle and covert ways, primarily through bureaucracy and the control of economy. On this subject, I find it is of paramount importance to follow David Graeber’s analysis and critique

¹⁹ For a detailed account of the events and an accurate insight on their political significance, I suggest reading *L’eclisse della democrazia* by Vittorio Agnoletto and Lorenzo Guadagnucci (Laterza, 2011).

of the contemporary economic system as it is outlined in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011) and *Bullshit Jobs* (2018). The author clearly states he wrote “about the history of money, debt, and credit” (2011: 212), and he starts by emphasizing the centrality of slavery to social development. According to Graeber, it was slavery that laid the basis for modern economies, since it is “the ultimate form of being ripped from one’s context, and thus from all the social relationships that make one a human being [...] The slave is, in a very real sense, dead” (2011: 168). Ultimately, the point of slavery has always been the exploitation of human labor, be it through direct coercion like in the more distant past or through what is today the creditor-debtor relationship at the basis of financial, economic and work-related forms of contracts, about which Graeber observes that “a wage-labor contract is [...] an agreement between equals to no longer be equals (at least for a time) [...] It is the very essence of what we call ‘debt’” (2011: 120).

In fact, the idea presented by the anthropologist is that debt is the modern weapon through which the slavery of wage labor is imposed on a vast majority of unaware people by State power, which also perfectly coincides with economic power because “the opposition between market and state is entirely illusory: both came out of each other, since markets are created through sovereignty” (2020: 28). Indeed, the concept of ‘debt’ functions as a control device for society, since it binds people and social groups to the financial system while categorizing them on the basis of their economic relevance. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that

The word production comes from the Latin verb ‘pro-ducere’, meaning ‘to push out’, so the image seems to be that, just as women push out babies fully formed, factories are a kind of male imitation of childbirth – these black boxes shoving things out. You don’t really know what happens inside, except the whole thing is terribly difficult and painful. That is our conception of work.

(Graeber, 2020: 14)

The bitter irony of the actual situation is that debt ultimately does not exist, and to explain this contention there is a funny short story that I find illuminating in its simplicity:

It is a slow day in a small town, and the streets are deserted. Times are tough, everybody is in debt and living on credit. A rich tourist visiting the area drives through town, stops at the motel, and lays a \$100 bill on the desk saying he wants to inspect the room upstairs to pick one for the night. As soon as he walks upstairs, the motel owner grabs the money and runs next door to pay his debt to the butcher. The butcher takes the \$100 and runs down the street to retire his debt to the pig farmer. The latter takes the bill and heads off to pay his supplier, who in turn takes the \$100 and runs to pay his debt to the local prostitute, who has also been facing hard times and had to offer her services on credit. The hooker finally rushes to the hotel and pays off her room bill with the hotel owner. The hotel proprietor then places the \$100 back on the counter so the rich tourist will not suspect anything. At that moment, the traveller comes down the stairs, states that the rooms are not satisfactory enough, picks his money and leaves town.

(taken from projectavalon.net)

At the end of the story, no one produced anything and no one truly earned anything, but the whole town is nonetheless completely out of debt because the very concept of debt does not materially exist.

Alongside this, a second weapon of mass distraction and enslavement today is represented by the way work is organized, almost in the exact way Shelley's images showed common people being regarded as numbers, gears in the economic machine whose sole purpose is to increase power and richness of the rulers (refer to my analysis of *The Mask of Anarchy* in chapter 5). On this matter, one can immediately understand the immense importance one's job has in society by thinking how unemployed people are usually defined in negative terms: to lack work equals to be socially and economically marginalized, while on the other hand those who work are identified by what they do and considered normal, productive members of society.

David Graeber specifically coined the term 'bullshit jobs' to indicate the myriad of meaningless tasks created to pigeonhole and alienate people through labor today, and he defined such kinds of job as "a form of paid employment that is completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence, even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case" (2018: 26). As a result of the spreading of 'bullshit jobs', people grow increasingly frustrated and deeply unhappy, in most cases without even realizing why this happens. According to Graeber, setting aside the argument that work should 'liberate' a

person by realizing one's aspirations, the reason why these deadly forms of labor were designed – even if today's levels of technological advancement should enable everyone to have considerably more free time and to be paid generously to work less – is precisely that people with free time are dangerous to power, since the risk is that they might start to use their time to think critically and might come to realize the real conditions of current enslavement (2018: chapter 5).

Lastly, the third tool used by power holders to control the majority in contemporary societies is bureaucracy, which Graeber sees as deeply intertwined with the threads of violence underlying everyday life, those

boring, humdrum, yet omnipresent forms of structural violence that define the very conditions of our existence, the subtle or not-so-subtle threats of physical force that lie behind everything from enforcing rules about where one is allowed to sit or stand or eat or drink in parks (or other public places), to the threats of physical intimidations or attacks that underpin the enforcement of tacit gender norms. [...] These 'areas of violent simplification' affect us in almost every aspect of our lives. Yet no one likes to talk about them very much.

(2006: 105-106)

Shelley had already identified the threat posed by bureaucracy, that vast array of courtiers blindly obeying and managing the affairs of the State, but it is only during the 20th century that bureaucrats became fundamental for rulers. Indeed, during the Nazi dictatorship in Germany, most of the nefarious and criminal activities were organized and personally supervised by bureaucratic officials unquestioningly following orders, as Hannah Arendt has discussed through her notion of 'banality of evil'²⁰. Nevertheless, Graeber shows how from the post-war period until today the role and the importance of bureaucracy have only increased, with the official purpose of better managing the complex structure of modern nations, but in truth elevating paperwork to the most effective new form of social ritual (2006: 108).

The apparent circularity, emptiness and idiocy of bureaucracy is also the main subject of important literary works such as Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), in which the story takes the

²⁰ Refer to Hannah Arendt's works *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).

form of a horror-comedy and bureaucratic life is shown in all its comic senselessness, but also mixed with undertones of violence. Going further, Graeber interestingly notes how

in contemporary industrialized democracies, the legitimate administration of violence is turned over to what is euphemistically referred to as “law enforcement”—particularly, to police officers, whose real role, as police sociologists have repeatedly emphasized (e.g., Bittner 1970, 1985; Waddington 1999; Neocleous 2000), has much less to do with enforcing criminal law than with the scientific application of physical force to aid in the resolution of administrative problems. Police are, essentially, bureaucrats with weapons. At the same time, they have significantly, over the last fifty years or so, become the almost obsessive objects of imaginative identification in popular culture. It has come to the point that it’s not at all unusual for a citizen in a contemporary industrialized democracy to spend several hours a day reading books, watching movies, or viewing TV shows that invite them to look at the world from a police point of view, and to vicariously participate in their exploits. If nothing else, all this throws an odd wrinkle in Weber’s dire prophecies about the iron cage: as it turns out, faceless bureaucracies do seem inclined to throw up charismatic heroes of a sort, in the form of an endless assortment of mythic detectives, spies, and police officers—all, significantly, figures whose job is to operate precisely where the bureaucratic structures for ordering information encounter, and appeal to, genuine physical violence. [...] Bureaucratic knowledge is all about schematization. In practice, bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae.

(2006: 119)

Ultimately, he defiantly puns on the fact that, through the imposition of this model of labor, “the war against imagination is the only one the capitalists have actually managed to win” (2006: 122). The portrait presented in the previous paragraphs is indeed a bleak one, with economy (finance), work and bureaucracy – not to mention the more recent technological mass control – silently crushing individual freedom, as if power does not need to be openly totalitarian anymore in order to control people. But it is also not written in stone anywhere that it has to be this way. There is nothing sacred about these structures and institutions, nothing permanent about the employment contract that prevents it from being challenged to the core. Borrowing Susan Brown’s words, a better way of work

would more resemble what we call play than work. That is not to say that it would be easy, as play can be difficult and challenging, like we often see in the sports we do for fun. It would be self-directed, self-desired, and freely chosen. This means that it would have to be disentangled from the wage system, for as soon as one is paid one becomes subservient to whoever is doing the paying. As Alexander Berkman noted: “labour and its products must be exchanged

without price, without profit, freely according to necessity.” Work would be done because it was desired, not because it was forced. Sounds impossible? Not at all. This kind of work is done now, already, by most of us on a daily basis. It is the sort of activity we choose to do after our eight or ten hours of slaving for someone else in the paid workplace. [...] We take part in this underground free economy when we coach, tutor, teach, build, dance, baby-sit, write a poem, or program a computer without getting paid. We must endeavor to enlarge these areas of free work to encompass more and more of our time, while simultaneously trying to change the structures of domination in the paid work-place as much as we possibly can.

(2011: 3)

Radically rethinking the notion of labor is not impossible, and it would also mean radically changing the way power can influence people’s lives. Shelley himself has pointed at the conditions for such a change to possibly take place by presenting his vision of Utopia in *Prometheus Unbound*, a new world realized only under the condition of free and unprivileged reciprocity – where one’s self is free to love and play in relationships without power and submission (refer back to chapter 4). In doing so, the poet also carried out a deep examination of power and freedom. He has in fact suggested that the people more adapt to lead or bring about change are those who do not seek power at all: Prometheus is a new kind of liberator, who does not seek glory for himself but realizes the vicious cycle he is into and renounces domination. Indeed, in the end he retreats with Asia to be free and follow his aspirations, leaving the stage to Demogorgon, a universal and objective force, so that Jupiter’s reign may finally end.

6.2.3 The Womb of Humanity

I believe at this point it is important to consider another aspect that Shelley and anarchism have in common, and which is related to some of the main issues in contemporary times, namely his prophetic ecologist sensitivity. Indeed, aside from his ethical vegetarianism and respect for animals and the natural world, Shelley thought well ahead of his time in presenting *Queen Mab* as a “biosocial utopia” (Bewell in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 627), showing how deeply he realized that humankind cannot think of itself detached from the environment it is immersed in and part of. What is most striking about Shelley’s vision is that he seems to understand a major distinction that even contemporary experts appear to forget very often,

and which might not be clear to the general public, i. e. the one between environmentalism and ecology.

One of the most insightful anarchist thinkers of the last decades, Murray Bookchin, played a greatly significant part in stimulating the environmental movement. In his book *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982) he discussed for instance pesticides, food additives, and X-radiation as sources of human illness (including cancer), and he influenced a generation of radicals to consider both the human community and the planet. A pioneer in the ecology and conservation movements, Bookchin was also a libertarian socialist and a great believer in Goya's statement that "imagination without reason produces monsters", whose ideas on the social role of anarchism put him at odds with those rising groups of anti-capitalists who focused more on personal rebellion than social action. To Bookchin, this was a retreat into a bourgeois self-absorption that absolved anarchists from responsibility to enact real change, thereby betraying the basic principles set down in the nineteenth century by the first great anarchist thinkers like Bakunin and Kropotkin.

The greatest legacy he left is probably the clear distinction he drew between environmentalism and ecology. Most of the people who involve themselves in the so-called green movements today – and this includes government officials and scientific personnel – are actually 'environmentalists' rather than 'ecologists'. Indeed, as Bookchin clarifies, environmentalism is a form of what could be called biological engineering, where nature is not seen as an organic whole but as a habitat, and consequently the natural world is viewed as a mere repository of natural resources. Thus, one speaks of 'improving the environment' and often brings an environmentalist approach to such solutions: what society should do, the environmentalists say, is engineer the environment in such a way that it will not be 'harmful' to us. An ecological approach is basically different, since it is first of all a holistic one, stemming from the belief that 'the whole is larger than the sum of its parts'. The complex interrelationships and food chains and the spontaneous development of various processes in nature are what really preoccupy the ecologists. From an ecological point of view, human beings are not engineers of the environment, adapting it to their needs alone, but they are considered part of the much larger whole of the natural world. They are not above it and they

do not sit on top of a biological pyramid, but represent just one facet of nature. In other words, mankind is not the ruler of the universe as the Bible would have men believe – by calling them masters of all that fly, crawl, and swim – but it is part of the natural world and needs to seek a harmonious relationship with it (Bookchin, 1982: chapter 12).

To further clarify this distinction, a useful example can be given considering the current debate on alternative sources of energy. While an environmentalist approach would try to solve the problem by focusing on producing energy in a different way, without considering beforehand the possible disadvantages and the feasibility, an ecologist approach would start by underlining that the real problem is to find a diversified mosaic of clean energy sources for different types of community, since solar energy or wind power alone are not a viable solution for everyone. But, for example, using solar energy and wind power together with geothermal energy and hydroelectricity could lead to diversifying the sources of energy for a community, creating in turn a new energy base which would involve a minimal, if any, use of the traditional fossil fuels.

In a very similar way, Shelley understands that in nature there is no cruelty, no hierarchies, no power, but everything is part of everything else and depends on it. There is no breeding for slaughtering among animals other than men, no cages, and no hunting for sport. Most of all there is no killing out of hate or revenge because nature always respects the cycle of life. Nevertheless, Shelley's utopia "remains centered in human beings as he describes how reason and passion, no longer at war with each other, extend over the entire earth their energies" (Bewell in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 629) and as he tries to show that no individual can exist unless one first recognizes oneself as part of the Whole.

For Shelley, human beings and nature are so intertwined that diseased environments are "symptoms of the absence of truth" and they "are not the cause of social and political disorder but are their result, the effects of a power that is truly a desolating pestilence" (Bewell in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 632-633). Thus, the ecologist in Shelley comes out especially in his denial that nature and human life can be conceived apart, and he takes this consideration further to reach the extraordinary conclusion that there is no spot on earth, no matter how wild, that was not once a populous city: everything is part of everything else,

every being is made up of cells and units of other beings who lived before, and animals, plants and humans are on the same levels as inhabitant of the 'cities of nature'. Indeed, it is not by chance that, in *Prometheus Unbound*, the new earth of Utopia is described as a loving, nurturing mother to all creatures, without any distinction.

On a further note, for intellectual honesty I believe it is relevant to point out that, whatever kind of deep sensitivity and vision Shelley exhibited towards the environment, it was sadly not matched by an equally radical view on another burning social issue which is deeply ingrained into anarchist ideals, that of women's emancipation. In fact, despite his staunch opposition of conventional marriage and his belief in free love – something which never stopped him from taking care of his children and family in the best way he could – the poet somehow could not break free of all the narrow views too often forced on the female sex.

As Minasian (2021) aptly notices, while analyzing eighteenth and nineteenth-century society one must put aside contemporary views and focus on the occurrences of that period. Indeed, (white) men and women in the Romantic era were cast into a constraining binary structure and expected to perform according to their gender identity, with the former category much more likely to succeed in society and the latter stuck on crippling stereotypes like their supposed duties of wives and mothers, often dismissed and anonymized. Bearing this in mind, it is certainly true that Percy Shelley stood out among Romantic writers and poets because of his support of many feminist ideals of his time, namely the breaking of gender roles and expectations (Minasian, 2021: chapter 3): for example, even though he cannot be regarded as a feminist in contemporary terms, he valued and respected his wife both as an author and an individual and he chose to portray powerful female lead characters in some of his most important works – the main example of such character is Beatrice in Shelley's poem *The Cenci*, who challenges typical roles of women in society and strives to finally obtain justice for the patriarchally dominated circumstances she lives in. Cross goes even further, claiming that "Shelley attempts to challenge the status quo, including the representation of women, by calling into question the binary structures of oppressor and oppressed and, ultimately, his own act of representation" (2004: 169).

At the same time, considering the radical approach through which the poet tackled other issues, one cannot fail to notice how, despite the progressivism of his thought, values and beliefs, in Shelley still remains a lingering presence of the crippling prejudices and repugnant practices that constituted the norm in his times (and which, sadly, very often still exist today), such as sexism, gender discrimination, and patriarchal order. Precisely on this matter, Annette Wheeler Cafarelli notes how one should “regard Shelley’s views, like Godwin’s, as well intentioned, but as nevertheless sharing the blindness to gender-based issues that bedeviled the sexual ideology of the men of the era”. For instance, on the themes of marriage and female emancipation Shelley’s emphasis is “on facilitating dissolution of marriage, rather than on the female radical agenda of property rights within marriage and educational and labor opportunities” (in Reiman and Fraistat, 2002: 609). Indeed, during the poet’s lifetime radical men popularized free love and divorce reform to solve the risks of perpetual marriage, whereas women were more concerned with rights within marriage, educational equality, and destigmatizing female transgressors. Lack of control over reproduction was a crucial factor shaping the female radical views, which found a viable channel of expression some decades later through anarchist philosophies.

Indeed, anarchism takes decisively some quality steps further in the empowerment of women and the attempt at breaking the gender gap to reach equality at last. There is no need to look further than the works of a great American anarchist pioneer, Emma Goldman, to find an example of such ground-breaking ideas. She was able to give clear, tight proof explanations on the still unchanged condition of women and in her trenchant pamphlet *The Tragedy of Women’s Emancipation* she argued that the vote, which had failed to liberate men, was not likely to free women. Emancipation, she argued, must come from the woman herself,

The import is not the kind of work woman does, but rather the quality of the work she furnishes. She can give suffrage or the ballot no new quality, nor can she receive anything from it that will enhance her own quality. Her development, her freedom, her independence, must come from and through herself. First, by asserting herself as a personality, and not as a sex commodity. Second, by refusing the right to anyone over her body; by refusing to bear children, unless she wants them; by refusing to be a servant to God, the State, society, the husband, the family, etc., by making her life simpler, but deeper and richer. That is, by trying to learn the meaning and substance of life in all its complexities, by freeing herself from the

fear of public opinion and public condemnation. Only that, and not the ballot, will set woman free, will make her a force hitherto unknown in the world, a force for real love, for peace, for harmony; a force of divine fire, of life-giving; a creator of free men and women.

(quoted in Shulman, 2012: 138)

What emerges from the research I carried out in this chapter is a recurring pattern showing clearly how Shelley's sensitivity and insight put him at the forefront among his literary peers, enabling him to envision the possibility of a better future in which humankind might finally overcome his basest and worst instincts. In this perspective, the return to the past hopefully invoked by the poet in *Prometheus Unbound* and in *The Mask of Anarchy* ("the old laws of England") is not what might be interpreted as a populist call for a return to traditions which are actually nothing more than empty rituals of false identity, nor it is the idea of returning to a 'Golden Age' or a mythical past, but rather the ideal inspired by Eastern philosophies (like the Buddhist and yoga traditions) that one needs to look deep within oneself in order to rediscover what is already hidden there, cautiously stored under layers of false selves and the masks used or imposed by society through its coercive norms, expectations and prejudices. The utopian future envisioned by Shelley might appear impossible to achieve, but this is exactly why utopia is desperately needed: to look ahead, to strive and walk constantly in the direction it points to, knowing it might never be reached, but at the same time also becoming aware that the journey towards freedom will be much more easy and less lonely using the utopian ideals as guiding lights.

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