Shelley's sounds of air

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At one point in 'A Defence of Poetry', Shelley notes a telling omission in Thomas Love Peacock's account of the alleged poverty of contemporary verse:

> The Author of the Four Ages of Poetry has prudently omitted to dispute on the effect of the Drama upon life and manners. For, if I know the knight by the device of his shield, I have only to inscribe Philoctetes or Agamemnon or Othello upon mine to put to flight the giant sophisms which have enchanted him, as the mirror of intolerable light, though on the arm of the weakest of the Paladins, could blind and scatter whole armies of necromancers and pagans.[1]

It would perhaps be prudent to read this passage's references to enchantment and necromancy as the kind of jocular banter typical of a dispute between friends—and, indeed, as the jocular banter that is typical of Shelley's correspondence with Peacock in particular. But such prudence is precisely what is called into question here. The prudence that Peacock is taken to evince is itself, in fact, in the service of a sort of enchantment—the sort that entails acceptance of a raft of

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[1] 'A Defence of Poetry' (written 1821; first published 1840), in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 2nd edn, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), pp.510-35 (p.519). References to this edition of Shelley's works (abbreviated to *SPP*) will henceforth be given in the text; references to other editions of Shelley's works will be given in the notes.

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Thinking Verse I (2011), 102-123.

professionalised and pre-approved wisdom which Shelley here calls 'giant sophisms' and which in Act III of *Prometheus Unbound* the Spirit of the Hour condemns as 'reasoned wrong glozed on by ignorance' (III.iv.167; *SPP*, p.268). What to do? How, then, is such sophism to be dispelled?

This essay focuses on Shelley's response to these questions and to those, such as Peacock, who would demand at the least that poetry give up as mere superstition its pretensions to efficaciousness by means of the mere sounds of its verse and accept, along with this renunciation, the authority of disenchanted mere reason. Shelley's response, as I will aim to show in detail here, is to ask, on the one hand, whether such disenchantment might, in fact, be doomed to miscarry and, on the other, whether enchantment itself is necessarily always in the service of obfuscation and oppression.

For in order to dispel the sophism with which Peacock is charged, it would seem not that more rigorous prudence is required, but rather, more enchantment. To be sure, the inscription of 'Philoctetes or Agamemnon or Othello' on Shelley's shield is meant to recall the manner in which those plays, as he had put it slightly earlier in the 'Defence', 'produce a common effect in the representation of the highest idealisms of passion and of power.' (*SPP*, p.518) Indeed, the subject-matter of each of these plays has much in common: each portrays the fall of a figure compromised by an all-too-human tragic flaw from the heights of martial heroism down to a position of virtual animailty.[2] Thus are Philoctetes and Agamemnon and Othello connected, and thus do they produce the effect of which Shelley speaks.

[2] Strictly speaking, the reduction of exceptional humans to the status of animals is an explicit concern only of *Philoctetes* and *Othello*, whereas *Agamemnon* (perhaps more conventionally) addresses the specifically human flaw of arrogating a divine right – namely, as evident in Agamemnon's decision to step on the purple carpet on his return to Argos. Note, nevertheless, the frequency with which Cassandra is described as an animal (e.g., ll.1063, 1064, and 1093-94), her retort that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are wild animals (ll.1258-59) and the Chorus's similar assessment (l.1251). See *Agamemnon*, trans. by Richmond Lattimore, in *Greek Tragedies*, ed. by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, 3 vols, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), I, pp.5-60.

By inscribing these words on his shield, therefore, he means to bring to mind the magnificence of what the plays represent.

But is that all that he means to conjure? What would be changed had he chosen to respond to Peacock by reminding him of the power of 'Philoctetes or Agamemnon or King Lear', thus replacing *Othello* with a play which, in an important digression from just before the riposte to Peacock quoted above, Shelley favourably compares with the *Agamemnon* and even ventures to suggest is 'the most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world' by virtue of its blending of 'universal, ideal and sublime' comedy with tragedy (*SPP*, p.519)? Needless to say, *King Lear* is a very different play from *Othello*, concerned with different passions and powers. But the passions and powers called to mind are not all that is changed in this replacement, for through the replacement of 'Othello' with 'King Lear' would be lost the precise quality of the phrase 'Philoctetes or Agamemnon or Othello'. Although the concluding doubled dentals of 'Philoc*tetes*' and the multiply palindromic 'Aga-mem-non' would remain, the development of those multiple palindromes in the return upon itself of '*O*thell*o*' would be gone, with its 'o's that at once mark the outer limits of the word, call back across it from its end to its beginning, and themselves figure the circling movement which occurs in the word itself.

It is not just or indeed primarily that Shelley exposes Peacock's omission of a proper discussion of 'the effect of the Drama on life and manners' by alluding to the large philosophical questions with which it no doubt deals. Instead, he aims to criticise the prudence on which Peacock's argument relies not just by invoking the ideas contained within *Philoctetes*, *Agamemnon*, and *Othello*, but by intimating that the words 'Philoctetes or Agamemnon or Othello' themselves—which would, for Peacock, be mere labels—have a power that is decried or simply ignored in the latter's rejection of poetic enchantment. The particular quality of specific words is at least as important in Shelley's riposte to Peacock as the contents for which those words stand. In the 'Defence', Shelley repeatedly claims in implicit opposition to

Peacock that the sounds of words and the sonic connections between them are a fundamental part of poetry's influence and a fundamental part of what and how it knows. Words are neither mere labels for, nor mere decoration of, always already completed reasoning; rather, the sounds of their letters and their combinations are fundamental to poetry's claim against Peacockian prudence. Against Peacock's denunciation of poetry, therefore, Shelley does not offer a weak defence of it—one that would aim to show that poetry was in fact, pace Peacock, capable itself of being a versified instance of the political economy with which Peacock wished to replace it. Rather, Shelley's defence is much stronger in that it aims to show first that Peacock's modern rationalism has not, in fact, extirpated the enchantment whose extirpation it essentially requires and, moreover, that enchantment itself is not in the first place entirely vulnerable to the kinds of charge that Peacock makes against it. By eliminating what it takes to be the irrationalism of enchantment in the service of establishing itself as lucidly rational, Peacock's prudence in fact condemns itself to stupidity.[3] Extirpation of what is castigated as illusion can often entail the banishment of truth as well.

Focusing, first, on Shelley's frequent appeals to the sound of poetry in addition or even as opposed to its sense and, second, on the consequences of this position for his verse, this essay elaborates the central aspects of Shelley's critique of the rejection of what is alleged to be poetic obfuscation in the name of rational lucidity. Those forms of thought which most loudly trumpet their divorce from mystification often produce, Shelley suggests, more mystification. On the other hand, enchantment itself is not always an attempt to occlude enlightenment but can be an attempt at enlightenment. Such an involvement of enchantment and reason is certainly hinted at in the rebuke to Peacock with which I began: prudence exists alongside enchantment but the correct magic inscription can bring illumination. Laura Quinney is right to remark that Shelley 'defied the automatic

[3] Cf. Nietzsche's characterisation of utilitarian moralities as 'prudence, prudence, prudence, mingled with stupidity, stupidity, stupidity' in *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale, rev. edn (London: Penguin, 1990), p.119.

authority of demystification'.[4] Quinney's phrase is especially apt because an '*automatic* authority' makes a blind function—which would be itself a mystification—of the exercise of authority and thus relies not on living acknowledgement but on mechanical acquiescence.

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It is necessary, first of all, to establish a slightly fuller sense of Shelley's attitude toward the specific forms of rationalism that, according to Peacock, allegedly supersede poetry. Despite his opposition to Peacock's attempt to replace poetry with political economy, Shelley's rejection of the latter, as Philip Connell has emphasised, is more qualified than has often been thought to be the case.[5] Shelley shares aspects, at least, of Peacock's regard for a number of central figures associated with the (gradual, ongoing – and also reversible) emergence of humanity from injustice and superstition. 'The exertions of Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau, and their disciples, in favour of oppressed and deluded humanity', acknowledges Shelley, 'are entitled to the gratitude of mankind' (*SPP*, p.530). He goes on to attempt to specify the achievements that can be credited to these enlighteners: less nonsense talked over the past couple of centuries; fewer burned heretics; and the—albeit, as it would turn out, temporary—abolition of the Spanish Inquisition. Worthwhile as these achievements are, it is clear that Shelley does not hold them to be the pinnacle of human political and intellectual endeavour. In a note to the names of Locke et al., he acknowledges that in listing these thinkers together he is following 'the classification adopted by the author of the Four Ages of Poetry'. In the same note, however, he also tries to rescue one of these figures from the damnation by faint praise to which the rest remain

[4] *Literary Power and the Criteria of Truth* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), p.107.
[5] Connell, *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of 'Culture'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.210-33. William Keach makes a related point when, in discussing the influence of Locke on Shelley's theory of language, he remarks that 'Shelley had none of the antipathy to Locke assumed to characteristic of Romantic writers'. See Keach, *Shelley's Style* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p.16. I will return to Keach's account of Shelley's theory of language below.

condemned by remarking that 'Rousseau was essentially a poet. The others, even Voltaire, were mere reasoners' (*SPP*, p.530n2).[6] This opposition between poet and mere reasoner also obtains, for Shelley, between Plato and Aristotle: in a discussion of Christianity in the notes to *Queen Mab*, he refers to 'the reveries of Plato and the reasonings of Aristotle'. Although he is drawing on a dismissive phrase from the Baron d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* (1770), [7] his opposing of Plato and Aristotle in these terms is hardly to the detriment of the former, as yet another comparable opposition, this time in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, between Plato and Bacon (with whom Shelley would gladly go to hell) and Malthus and Paley (with whom he would rather not go to heaven), makes clear.[8]

Shelley's opposing of poetry to 'mere' reason or 'reasonings' is fundamental because it allows him to escape the charge that his advocacy of poetic enchantment is opposed to reason *as such*. It also enables him to argue that reason itself is damaged by its self-separation from what it would dismiss as mere poetic decoration. Having offered, then, a fairly unenthusiastic assessment of the nonetheless real achievements of writers like Locke, Shelley goes on to suggest that we try to imagine the world without the influence of another, different set of figures:

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[6] In addition to this contrast between Rousseau and Voltaire in particular, Shelley also compares Rousseau and Gibbon in his and Mary Shelley's 'Letters Written in Geneva' (1817). In the third letter, probably written exclusively by Percy, he recalls an episode in which he and Byron visited Gibbon's grave: 'My friend gathered some acacia leaves to preserve in remembrance of him [Gibbon]. I refrained from doing so, fearing to outrage the greater and more sacred name of Rousseau; the contemplation of whose imperishable creations had left no vacancy in my heart for mortal things'. See *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by E.B. Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), I, pp.206-28 (p.220). There is, of course, an ample literature addressing Rousseau's influence on Shelley. See, for example, Edward Duffy's *Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), which is the classic study.

[7] Note to *Queen Mab*, VII, ll.135-36, in *The Poems of Shelley*, 3 vols, ed. by Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London: Longman, 1989; repr. 1994), I, p.397.

[8] See Connell's discussion of Shelley's association of Malthus and Paley on the ground of that both 'couched their arguments in the language of liberal Anglican theodicy', op. cit., p.212. Aristotle is at least an ambivalent figure for Shelley, as his brief mention in a passage of 'The Triumph of Life' that I will examine later in this chapter suggests; see 'The Triumph of Life', l.261 (*SPP*, p.491).

> But it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon, nor Milton, had existed; if Raphael and Michael Angelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated; if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place; if no monuments of antient sculpture had been handed down to us; and if the poetry of the religion of the antient world had been extinguished together with its belief. The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society, which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.
>
> (*SPP*, p.530)

Some years before Shelley wrote this, Immanuel Kant had suggested in one of the most intriguing insights of the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) (which, it seems, Shelley did not know) that cognitive judgement—that is, the kind of judgement that yields knowledge—is somehow prepared for or anticipated by aesthetic judgement—that is, the kind of judgement that estimates appearances as beautiful or ugly but which does not, according to Kant, actually produce knowledge.[9] In fact, Kant speculates that there was a (potentially mythological) time at which all cognition was proceeded or accompanied by delight, although now that particularly close association between cognition and aesthetic delight has passed. 'It is true', Kant remarks, in Section VI of the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgement*,

> that we no longer notice any decided pleasure in the comprehensibility of nature, or in the unity of its divisions into genera and species, without which the empirical concepts, that afford us our knowledge of nature in its particular laws, would not be possible. Still it is certain that the pleasure appeared in due course, and only by reason of the most ordinary experience being impossible

[9] For somewhat differing treatments of this aspect of Kant's aesthetics, see Hannah Ginsborg, *The Role of Taste in Kant's Theory of Cognition* (New York: Garland, 1990) and Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

> without it has it become gradually fused with simple cognition, and no longer arrests particular attention.[10]

In spite of the view that there is an important analogy or affinity between cognitive and aesthetic judgement and as if in confirmation of the point that the accompaniment of cognition with delight is a thing of the past, Kant holds that cognition and delight are to be distinguished: aesthetic judgement produces no knowledge (although quite how successfully he did actually maintain this distinction is, of course, open to debate).

What it is important to emphasise here is that Shelley's conception of the relation between aesthetic delight and cognitive judgement is similar to Kant's intimation that the latter had once been accompanied by the former. Shelley, however, goes much further in his insistence on the need for their connection to persist. Where Kant had ultimately tried to establish the analogy between cognitive and aesthetic judgement as that which both brought them together and—by dint of the fact that analogy is *only* analogy—kept them apart, Shelley, conversely, views the 'excitements' associated with the names of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, et al., as abidingly essential to the proper functioning of 'the grosser sciences'. It is thus the case for Shelley that, as Simon Jarvis has stated, 'poetry lies buried alive in systems of imaginary disenchantment, suppressed and stigmatized, or supplementary and aesthetic, certainly, but in truth one condition of their practicability and intelligibility alike'.[11] Shelley's insistence on the need for poetry to continue to animate the systems of thought that would kill it off is the reason why he does not complain of the attempt on the part of 'analytical reasoning' to reason

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[10] *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith, rev. and ed. by Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [Meredith's translation originally published 1952]), p.22. For an excellent commentary on this aspect of Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement and its consequences see J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992; repr. 1997), chapter 1, 'Memorial Aesthetics: Kant's *Critique of Judgement*', pp.17-65 and passim.

[11] Jarvis, 'Thinking in Verse', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. by James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.98-116, p.103.

analytically—there is nothing necessarily wrong with that—but does indeed complain all the more strongly of its attempt to 'exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself' (*SPP*, p.530). Thus he agrees with Kant that delight plays an important role in cognition but he goes further than does Kant in maintaining that the forgetting of delight by a cognition that has become habitual is detrimental to that cognition itself.

Shelley's complaint against the imperialist tendencies of that cognition which has announced its independence from delight also makes it clear, of course, that however crucial to the proper functioning of the human mind poetic and artistic excitements may be, they are nevertheless acutely vulnerable to being devoured by the children they have begotten. Why, precisely, is this? Shelley suggests an answer in a famous passage of the 'Defence' in which he describes the language of poets as

> 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.
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> (*SPP*, p.512)

Poetry's vulnerability to this process of abstraction is not simply a flaw in it, the undesirability of the outcome of such a process notwithstanding. Were poetry, that is, invulnerable to becoming abstract because it were in no need of constant renewal, then it would lose its vitality. Its life is mortal and any immortality that it might either bestow or gain is, to borrow a distinction from Plato's *Symposium*—which, of course, Shelley translated—the immortality of mortals, as opposed to the altogether more straightforward immortality of immortals.[12]

[12] See the discussion in Diotima's speech of 'meditation, or the exercise of memory' as the 'contrivance' by which 'what is mortal, the body and all other things, partake[s] of immortality; that which is immortal,' Diotima continues, 'is immortal in another manner.' *The Banquet of Plato*,

In particular, the above passage in which Shelley describes the language of poets as 'vitally metaphorical' presents language as the subject of a battle, waged over time, between two conceptions of it. On the one hand, words are essentially inert, a set of labels whose sonic material is only ever entirely subservient to—because at best a secondary reinforcement or decoration of—semantic sense; on the other hand, such signs are a diminished version of all that words can be. The second of these views—the one that initially prevails, in fact, in Shelley's conjectured history—entails that the sound of a word is not rendered nugatory by its bearing of sense. In one of the most significant attempts to tackle the question of the relation between different views of language in Shelley's work, William Keach takes the function of rhyme in 'The Triumph of Life' as a crucial case in point. In particular, Keach is keen to pursue further—and in a somewhat different direction—Paul de Man's influential posing of the question as to whether the 'alignment between meaning and linguistic articulation' is in fact arbitrary, or, indeed, 'random and superficial'.[13] Keach objects that de Man's way of emphasising as merely accidental the association created by the rhyme, for example, of 'billow' and 'pillow' 'is to obscure the process by which valuable constraints of meaning may be generated by, or discovered within, random verbal

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trans. by Shelley, in *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols (London: Benn; New York: Scribner's Sons, 1930 [the 'Julian' edition]), VII, pp.165-220 (p.204).

[13] Keach, *Shelley's Style*, ch. 6, pp.184-200 (de Man quoted, pp.184 and 185). See also Keach, ch. 1, pp.1-41, for a thorough account of Shelley's view of language in the 'Defence' (and elsewhere) that pays particular attention to Shelley's nuanced appropriation of various strands of, in particular, eighteenth-century language theory. The essay of de Man's to which Keach is responding is 'Shelley Disfigured', in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Continuum, 1979; repr. 2004), pp.32-61. There have, in addition to Keach's, been a number of other important responses to this essay in particular of de Man's, but on this specific topic of the status of non-semantic aspects of language see also Thomas M. Greene's defence of Wordsworth's view of language (in 'Essays on Epitaphs, III') against de Man's strictures (in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (in which 'Shelley Disfigured' is reprinted)) in Greene's *Poetry, Signs, and Magic* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), pp.17-28 (especially p.24). Similarly, Andrew Welsh had earlier taken what he claims is his extension of Wordsworth's question regarding the nature of poetic language as the point of departure for his important study, *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), especially p.4.

resources'.[14] Keach claims, therefore, that the instances of rhyming discernible, for instance, in 'The Triumph of Life' and elsewhere in Shelley's work suggest 'a compositional intelligence fully in touch with the arbitrariness of its expressive medium yet capable of shaping that arbitrariness into, as well as according to, precisely provisional "constraints of meaning"'.[15] He is thus able to argue that, in Shelley's manipulation and deployment of language, there is not dominant semantic sense and dominated, wholly accidental sonic material, but rather two tensely countervailing aspects of language at work. If anything, the relation of dependence is the other way around, as can be seen in Keach's description of the poem on which de Man's discussion focuses: 'Forgetting, obliteration and erasure are powerful forces in *The Triumph of Life*. But the articulation of these forces *depends upon* the counterforces of remembering, literation and repetition'.[16]

What this set of claims entails is that precisely that aspect of a word which is thought to be subservient to its definition – its material constitution and, especially, its sound – is neither, in fact, to be rejected as irrelevant, nor, if not wholly rejected, accommodated only as mere decoration. The sounds of words are part of what Shelley envisages as the way that verse thinks:

> Sounds as well as thoughts have relations, both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts. Hence the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensible to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves without reference to that peculiar order.
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> (*SPP*, p.514)

[14] Keach, p.185. Keach has developed the implications – especially, political ones – of the central and contended role of 'arbitrariness' in language theory in the period after Locke in his *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
[15] Keach, p.188.
[16] Keach, p.192 (my emphasis).

The influence of poetry, as we saw in Keach's discussion of rhyme in 'The Triumph of Life', is as dependent on its sound as on what is opposed to it as its sense. Furthermore, it follows from Shelley's argument in the above passage that if sounds are to recur, then there must be single instances of sound to recur and hence, in turn, that words themselves must not only be considered with reference to the peculiar order of the recurrence of sound but also with reference to their own individual sounds. If it may be that 'a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought' (*SPP*, p.515), as Shelley goes on to claim, then this is not only or indeed chiefly because of how that word might be defined but, as we saw with the examples of 'Philoctetes or Agamemnon or Othello', of what it is. It is in this light that we must understand the claim that in poetry 'a word, a trait in the representation of a scene or a passion, will touch the enchanted chord, and reanimate, in those who have ever experienced these emotions, the sleeping, the cold, the buried image of the past' (*SPP*, p.532).

The combination of a commitment to the efficaciousness of the sounds of words and a rejection of the opposing view not as disenchantedly rational but as, precisely, superstitious is fundamental to Shelley's assessment of one of his most important poetic and political forebears: Dante. Shelley accords Dante the principle role in the liberation of Europe from papal tyranny not chiefly because of his principled argument but instead precisely because of the verse in which his critique of Catholic corruption was articulated:

> Dante was the first religious reformer, and Luther surpassed him rather in the rudeness and acrimony, than in the boldness of his censures of papal usurpation. Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language in itself music and persuasion out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms. [...] His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor.
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> (*SPP*, p.528)

Again, Shelley is keen to point out that Dante's role as enlightener is not dependent on a disenchanted view of language; indeed, quite the opposite. This is notable in this specific case, given the linguistic control exerted by the Catholic curia. Thus Dante's awakening of Europe from its entrancement is not predicated on a brisk rejection, like Luther's, of what could easily be viewed as the core of priestly mystification: that is, the view that specific words are spiritually efficacious and that, therefore, they have a living relation with what they name. There is certainly more than a hint, too, that Luther's 'rudeness and acrimony' is itself rather akin to the likewise mighty unmannerly 'papal usurpation' that he would criticise. What is fundamental to this description of Dante is that his status as an awakener from superstition is bound up precisely with the fact that his language is anything but disenchanted. But also, even here, Dante's achievement is a vulnerable one because not all of it has found a sufficient advocate, which, of course, is consistent with the view established early in the 'Defence' that just as poetry reanimates so it is in need of reanimation lest its words harden into mere terms and thus lose their connection with living.

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It is important to see how some of these claims might be borne out—or, rather, enacted—in Shelley's poetry. This is not just because it is generally desirable to test theoretical claims with practical examples but particularly because Shelley's recuperation of enchantment relies on the belief that the words and traits of poetry are in themselves efficacious bearers of knowledge, rather than either the outer casing of a pre-established meaning or merely decorative of it.

I want to begin with an example from 'The Witch of Atlas'. Around twelve stanzas into the poem, Shelley describes the appearance and habitation of the witch. As is often pointed out, he had earlier imagined, in 'Mont Blanc', 'the still

cave of the witch Poesy' and it is here, in 'The Witch of Atlas', that he offers a fuller description of what is inside that cave:

> The deep recesses of her odorous dwelling
> Were stored with magic treasures—Sounds of air,
> Which had the power all spirits of compelling,
> Folded in cells of chrystal silence there;
> Such as we hear in youth, and think the feeling
> Will never die—yet ere we are aware,
> The feeling and the sound are fled and gone,
> And the regret they leave remains alone.
> (XIV; ll.153-60; *SPP*, p.372)

The feeling and sound may be 'fled and gone' but this may not necessarily mean that they are dead and gone, not least because the phrase 'fled and gone' gently demurs from striking the note of decided finality in the more common phrase that it echoes.[17] But 'fled and gone' does not just conjure an association—that is, the association with 'dead and gone'—in order to refuse it but also establishes an association in the subtle modulation effected in the transposition of the *f* and *l* of 'feeling' into 'fled'. It is, of course, these letters shared with 'feeling' that make the difference between 'fled' and 'dead'. Even as it is fleeing, elements of feeling remain. Shelley, adopting a pivotal aspect of Plato's philosophy of memory, described in the 'Defence' how the 'evanescent visitations of thought and feeling' arise and leave unpredictably but that 'in the desire and the regret they leave, there cannot but be pleasure, participating as it does in the nature of its object' (*SPP*, p.532). This can be seen in the 'recurrence of sound' ('Defence', *SPP*, p.514) in this stanza. Thus, even where Shelley regrets the loss of the sounds that we hear in youth, the line which announces that regret performs its own reanimation of those

[17] The only instance of 'fled and gone' that I have managed to find in the OED, from Ralph Cudworth's *Intellectual System* (1678), is much closer to 'dead and gone' than, according to my argument, Shelley's use of this phrase is: 'That Soul and Life that is now fled and gone, from a lifeless Carcase, is only a loss to that particular Body or Compages of Matter, which by means thereof is now disanimated'. See OED, 'disanimate', *v.*, 1. 'Compages', incidentally, refers to 'a whole formed by the compaction or juncture of parts, a framework or system of conjoined parts, a complex structure.' See OED, 'compages', 1.

'Sounds of air': 'yet ere we are aware'. Indeed, it is worth taking that line as a whole 'Will never die—yet ere we are aware': the performance of the sounds of air after the line's caesura enacts precisely the youthful assumption that is being disavowed, that is, that those sounds 'Will never die', a phrase here which is thus detached from its semantic sense and claimed for verse sound.

What is going on in this stanza is not sonic reinforcement of something that is also semantically claimed in it, but the reverse. The echo that the verse performs tells us something that the sense does not. But, more than this, it adds to our knowledge of the sounds of air—which could only otherwise be either nostalgically or disenchantedly described—by performing them.

This addition to our knowledge about something that is otherwise acknowledged to have vanished is characteristic of the recursive patterning of Shelley's verse. In his book on the affinities between aspects of English and post-Fichtean German Romanticism, importantly, for my purposes, entitled *Beyond Enchantment*, Mark Kipperman describes how Shelley's poetry is preoccupied by the danger that the mind becomes entangled in images of its own making without realising it. He comments on lines 49-59 of 'Mont Blanc' that the 'attempt at imagining the indeterminate' in these lines 'ends only in empty recursiveness'.[18] The passage Kipperman is discussing concludes thus: 'For the very spirit fails, | Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep | That vanishes among the viewless gales!' Kipperman's comment, that these lines contain the recognition of the spirit's entrapment in 'empty recursiveness', does not, in fact, quite capture their direction. The spirit is not recursive here: it nowhere turns back, but is instead driven onward. Recursiveness in Shelley is, in fact, rarely empty but is instead the attempt to reanimate what is otherwise hollowed out. Shelley's

[18] Mark Kipperman, *Beyond Enchantment: German Idealism and English Romantic Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p.169.

recursive poems are, to borrow Stanley Cavell's phrase, texts of recovery, not of regression.[19]

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Kipperman's sense, however, that Shelley's poetry is concerned with the unflinching recognition of the dangers of 'empty recursiveness' is closely allied to a number of influential ways of reading his poetry as ultimately sceptical of poetry's power. This is nowhere more the case, of course, than in commentary on 'The Triumph of Life', key elements of which William Keach has both adopted and questioned, as we saw above. I do not wish to offer any further discussion of the consequences of Paul de Man's account of that poem here;[20] I wish instead to look at a brief episode in it in order to examine a little more the contentions that, first, Shelley insists that the words and traits of verse are themselves efficacious and knowledge bearing, and that, second, those characteristics involve a recursive movement of reanimation that verse initiates and on which it depends.

Given the vulnerability of the reduction of poetry to the ineluctable march of the processes of abstraction that Shelley mentions near the beginning of the 'Defence' and which I discussed above, it is certainly unsurprising to find that poets themselves are cast as victims of such a process in 'The Triumph of Life'. Of course, that process is called 'life' in that poem but the poem does not merely or entirely acquiesce in the grim wisdom that life just is a version of death. William Hazlitt, for example, who is at best an ambivalent admirer of Shelley, perhaps hinted at this when he acknowledged both that what is called 'life' in 'The Triumph of Life' is, on the one hand, hardly 'living' but that, at the same time, 'living' is not

[19] See Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; repr. 1994), ch.3, 'Texts of Recovery', pp.50-75.
[20] I have done so elsewhere, however; see my 'Poetry as Reanimation in Shelley', in *The Meaning of 'Life' in Romantic Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Ross Wilson (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp.125-45, pp.127-28. For a more extended—and widely influential—discussion and critique of de Man's 'Shelley Disfigured', see Orrin N.C. Wang, *Fantastic Modernity: Dialectical Readings in Romanticism and Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; repr. 2000), ch.2, 'Disfiguring Monuments: History in Paul de Man and Percy Shelley', pp.37-68.

entirely erased in the process of abstraction that the poem narrates. Rather, despite it being the case, for Hazlitt, that 'the poem entitled "The Triumph of Life" is in fact a new and terrific "Dance of Death"', it is also at once full of both 'morbid genius and vivifying soul.'[21]

What 'living' is and, in particular, its connection with the 'melody' of the verse that tells of its diminution is a prominent concern of the following passage. The poem's narrator and 'what was once Rousseau' (l.204; *SPP*, p.489) are watching as a range of historical figures go by attached to the car of 'life'; they have just seen Alexander and Aristotle together and the remnant of Rousseau describes Aristotle thus:

> "The other long outlived both woes and wars,
> Throned in new thoughts of men, and still had kept
> The jealous keys of truth's eternal doors
>
> "If Bacon's spirit […] had not leapt
> Like lightning our of darkness; he compelled
> The Proteus shape of Nature's as it slept
>
> "To wake and to unbar the caves that held
> The treasure of the secrets of its reign—
> See the great bards of old who inly quelled
>
> "The passions which they sung, as by their strain
> May well be known: their living melody
> Tempers its own contagion to the vein
>
> "Of those who are infected with it—
> (ll.266-78; *SPP*, pp.491-92)

Like Dante, in Shelley's description of that poet in the 'Defence', Bacon is an awakener whose significance for Shelley is in no small part owing to his

[21] Hazlitt, review of Shelley's *Posthumous Poems*, *Edinburgh Review*, 11 (1824), 494-514 (repr. in *Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by James E. Barcus (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp.335-45 (p.342)).

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revolutionary overthrow of patterns of thought that had become petrified. Furthermore, Bacon, along with Plato, was described by Shelley in the 'Defence' as 'a poet' (*SPP*, p.514) and it is perhaps worth noting, incidentally, that here Bacon's words are taken up and transformed in Shelley's verse. The editors of the Norton edition of Shelley's works append as a note to the clause 'Throned in new thoughts of men', the following assessment of Aristotle by Bacon: 'I will think of him that he learned the humour of his scholar, with whom it seemeth he did emulate, the one to conquer all opinions, as the other to conquer all nations'. The Norton editors do not give the source for this assessment—it is from *The Advancement of Learning* (1605)—nor do they comment on whether Shelley might have had it in his mind during the composition of these lines, but maybe it is more than just chance that Aristotle's desire to conquer 'opinions' finds an echo in the rhyming on 'pinion' and 'minion' of the tercet preceding the first that I quoted, which in turn develops the rhyme from 'Dominion' in the tercet that it follows. The need for poetry to be perpetually renewed that Shelley articulated in his exposition of what it means to describe the language of poets as 'vitally metaphorical' is echoed here in this brief account of the history of knowledge. Before Bacon's renovation of knowledge, Aristotle's thinking had hardened into a range of scholastic touchstones. Whereas Plato and Bacon were, for Shelley, poets,—a view which finds confirmation here in the deployment not just of Bacon's sense but of his sound as well—his tacit refusal to bestow on Aristotle, the towering figure in the history of Western philosophy between these two figures, this appellation can be taken as evidence of his view that the consequences of Aristotle's 'opinions' were the abstract dogmas of mediaeval scholasticism.

How does the turn to consider the 'great bards of old' affect this consideration of the calcification of truth and its renewal? It is not just that they happen to be the next group of unfortunates to hove into view; the account of Bacon's heroic compulsion of nature is connected to the poets not least in the chime of 'bards' with 'unbar', which is significant not least because, in these textually complicated

lines of this unfinished poem, the phrase 'the great bards of old' is a replacement for an earlier reading, 'Homer and his brethren'. That chime might be taken to suggest that where Bacon had opened nature by unbarring its caves, the action associated with the bards is much more like sealing up or closure: they 'inly quelled | The passions which they sung, as by their strain | May well be known'. This accords, of course, with Shelley's sense that, as Maddalo says in 'Julian and Maddalo', "'Most wretched men | Are cradled into poetry by wrong, | They learn in suffering what they teach in song.'" (ll.544-46; *SPP*, p.133) This sense that what is learnt in suffering is taught in song is central to the work of the great bards of old. We may be able to tell from their poetry that they quelled their passions, but these lines also hint at the sense that those passions may be known in the strain itself. This is not a knowledge that is simply waiting to be discovered but one that must be relived. The play on 'strain' as both song and potentially painful exertion—a play that is, incidentally, also crucial to Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper'—suggests again the sense of poetry as, or, at least, as the result of, suffering,[22] but 'strain' also indicates a line of descendents, a family, tribe, or other group connected by some sort of tie. What is known in the song, then, has to be relived in everyone that experiences it: "'their living melody | Tempers its own contagion to the vein | Of those who are infected with it'". Contagion is never anyone's in particular and Shelley is fond of deploying the word 'own' in contexts where it is acutely undecided whose 'own' it is. Indeed, this is the case here not just in the semantic equivocation of these lines but most clearly in the decisions as to their scansion that they demand of their readers.

There is a schema of mutual dependence in these lines such that they both beget a lineage and depend on it for their continuation. The lines of living melody live if they circulate not just through the minds but also the bodies of their readers,

[22] 'Alone she cuts and binds the grain, | And sings a melancholy strain', 'The Solitary Reaper' (written 1805; published 1807), ll.5-6, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984; repr. 2000), pp.319-20 (p.319). On 'strain' and, in particular, 'melancholy' here, see J.H. Prynne, *Field Notes: 'The Solitary Reaper' and Others* (Cambridge: privately printed, 2007), pp.36-37.

if, that is, these lines are a sort of veins. Shelley's recuperation of poetry's 'sounds of air' against Peacock's prudence is not predicated on flight from the world ordered by political economy into the ineffectual realm of the angels. On the contrary, it is the attempt to save the breath and blood on which verse depends from the all-consuming machinery of abstraction into which disenchanters would feed it.

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