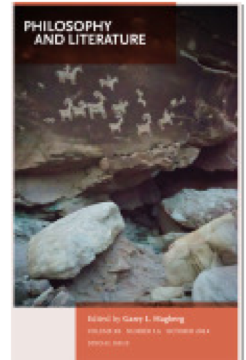
Love Against Revenge in Shelley's Prometheus

David Bromwich



Philosophy and Literature, Volume 26, Number 2, October 2002, pp. 239-259 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/phl.2003.0003

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/phl/summary/v026/26.2bromwich.html

Access provided by Healey Library, UMass Boston (22 Jan 2015 21:20 GMT)

Project MUSE®
http://muse.jhu.edu

David Bromwich

LOVE AGAINST REVENGE IN SHELLEY'S *PROMETHEUS*

I

The modernist prejudice against Shelley has almost disappeared, but when I talk to friends I discover that few have ever cared for his poetry, and if they go back now to read him sometimes they reinvent the prejudice. This resistance is not indifference. Shelley can disturb one's self-knowledge and even one's idea of what self-knowledge may be; and in reaction against the unheard-of demand he routinely makes, one is apt to dismiss him as extravagant. Much of Shelley continues to be outside my range, and occasionally I feel him pulling farther away, as if his starting point were my outermost limit. The fact is shaming enough to prompt a decorous defensiveness. Yet in many of his most far-fetched poems, it seems to me, he justifies his procedures as one looks for a great artist to do. The main reason we find his poetry difficult is its difficulty.

Shelley was a member of the first generation to accept the French Revolution as an accomplished change in the world. It was, he thought, a change for the better; he considered himself a revolutionary, though the Terror and the Napoleonic wars left their chastening mark on him. A sentence from the Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, of 1817, states most clearly an intuition he held as deeply a year later when he wrote the first act of *Prometheus Unbound*: "There is a reflux in the tide of human things which bears the shipwrecked hopes of men into a secure haven after the storms are past."[1] Humanity, by the adaptive work of thoughts and feelings, will prove to have readied itself for any great mutation that occurs in society; so that the violence of a revolution is likely to be

extrinsic and unnecessary. The reasons for the assurance implicit here are brought forward in the two great prose works of his last years, *A Defence of Poetry* and *A Philosophical View of Reform.* By the time any revolution happens in life, Shelley believes, it has already happened in language, with causes that are as visible as the difference between a living and a dead metaphor. Poetry—by which he means anything imaginative and man-made whose good survives the defects of its maker—"redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man." He thinks that poets (including some lawgivers and social critics) are "the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present." The last phrase, from the closing paragraph of *A Defence of Poetry*, seemed to Shelley important enough to be used also in *A Philosophical View of Reform.* For him, the principle of reform in language is identical with the principle of reform in thought and action.

His doctrine belongs to the high Enlightenment, and he had accepted, more complacently, I believe, in his poetry than in his prose, the idea of the poet or thinker or man-of-mind as a bringer of light to humanity. That ideal was strong in Wordsworth too, with his conception of the poet as "the rock of defence for human nature," but in Shelley it exists in tension with another belief: that the instinct for acting and suffering at the bidding of a nature "not our own" may become as general as the appeal of the revolution now accomplished. Only in having a language for thoughts and feelings does the poet differ from other men and women. This, for Shelley, is a difference not (as it was for Wordsworth) between a speaker and a listener, but rather like that between a translator and a reader. If the poet were unique in the way a revolutionary leader is unique, he would be the protagonist of a fable of revenge that needs likewise its antagonist. Our thoughts about change go along these lines because they tend to be thoughts about contest. But in his later poetry, and in *Prometheus Unbound* above all, Shelley was looking at revolution from the point of view of a creator no longer interested in contest, a creator who is not a light-bringer. That is why Prometheus is not the hero of the work that bears his name. He is the name of a mental power that creates a possibility of action in others.

The thought about change that was Shelley's premise in this play required him to press beyond the ethic of revenge, of "vindication" or "usurpation," which had always pervaded radical thinking about the reform of society, and which had been the premise of most tragedies. If his experiment works, Shelley will have made the idea of solitary creation harder to think than it was before, and the idea of revolution

impossible to imagine in metaphors of leveling or turning-the-tables or violent overthrow. It was a large task, but the poet who attempted it was a believer in sympathy—a word he took to mean one seeing soul responding to the life of another—and he was himself a creature of sympathy, as much as any poet who ever lived. The active form of sympathy is pity, and it is natural for pity, as Shelley sees it, to go the length of self-pity. In this he is the disciple of Rousseau. Self-pity, as both of these writers knew and as their work knew better than they did, is a dangerous sentiment, close to narcissism though not the same—a "high instinct" surprising in its power to clarify and to distort. When it becomes a motive in writing, it is liable to disorient the faculty of judgment.[2] Self-pity is something new in the history of emotions. Shelley saw this and in *Prometheus Unbound* he saw, too, a connection between self-pity and the power to invoke or the will to execute violence.

I argue that Shelley's Prometheus becomes a possible example of reform—the agent of a revolution so far beyond political upheaval as to deserve a different name—by passing from self-pity to love. In the process, he shows what it is for the means of a moral transformation to justify the ends. Shelley had learned close to home the mutual dependence of self-pity and revenge. His writings in the preceding years had joined these motives constantly. He was repelled and fascinated by the hero of *Alastor*, for example, and the heroine of *The Cenci*, but the fascination remained strong until Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* with the aim of showing what his heroes looked like. Shelley, who had a sufficiently active interest in that book to write an essay on it and to compose one of its climactic paragraphs, registered a change of heart when he wrote *Prometheus Unbound*. His sense that he owed the change to someone else is dramatized in the presence of Asia, the lover of Prometheus. By feeling, as she does, a sympathy free of pity, Asia performs the action of the play.

II

The contrast with his earlier work is plain when you read *Alastor* as if it were a novel—a useful exercise, since the poem has in fact had enormous influence, particularly in its landscapes, on the science fiction of the twentieth century. The hero is a poet of whom the narrator says, "He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude." His songs have not survived, but the poem tells of the life that made them, and it is the

story of a restless passage among the ruins of empire—Athens, Tyre, Balbec, Babylon, Jerusalem, Memphis, Thebes. In a dell in the vale of Chasmire, the poet dreams of a veiled maid whose "voice was like the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought." He will chase this vision and die of the intensity and fruitlessness of his quest, without knowing for sure whether it was the actual sign of another person's existence or a fantasy projected by himself. This ambiguity gives the poem its air of frenzy and suspense. The visible sign of the maid's presence is her glowing eyes, which have almost the quality of an apparition; and yet, those eyes and images akin to them become the signs by which we learn to recognize the poet himself. His dream ends with a shriek of ecstasy and then dissolves as "sleep, / Like a dark flood suspended in its course, / Rolled back its impulse on his vacant brain." The quest proper begins here; but the dream never seems to have stopped.

Almost from the start, the tone of *Alastor* is elegiac, as if what the hero sought were not a relation to someone else, which might be possible though elusive, but a relation to something lost in himself. "Whither have fled / The hues of heaven. . . . His wan eyes / Gaze on the empty scene." He is, we feel, old already and rendered more substantially so by self-sympathy; there is about him a quality of preternatural sensitivity, like an instrument on which the elements play strange music: "his scattered hair / Sered by the autumn of strange suffering / Sung dirges in the wind; his listless hand / Hung like dead bone." One hint of the deviousness of the poem is the way these suggestions alternate with touches of common naturalism, as in the scene on the Chorasmian shore where the poet confronts an emblem of himself:

> A swan was there,
> Beside a sluggish stream among the reeds.
> It rose as he approached, and with strong wings
> Scaling the upward sky, bent its bright course
> High over the immeasurable main.
> His eyes pursued its flight.—"Thou hast a home,
> Beautiful bird; thou voyagest to thine home,
> Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck
> With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes
> Bright in the lustre of their own fond joy.
> And what am I that I should linger here,
> With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes?"[3]

The hero perceives the beauty of his own egotism; but to the people who encounter him, he seems a frightful and unnatural thing: "the infant would conceal / His troubled visage in his mother's robe / In terror at the glare of those wild eyes, / To remember their strange light in many a dream / Of after-times." The last stretch of the poem depicts the hero's discovery of a place to die. This is the only real event of his life, and his death marks the disastrous fate of genius in an unsympathizing age:

> It was a tranquil spot, that seemed to smile
> Even in the lap of horror. Ivy clasped
> The fissured stones with its entwining arms,
> And did embower with leaves for ever green,
> And berries dark, the smooth and even space
> Of its inviolated floor, and here
> The children of the autumnal whirlwind bore
> In wanton sport, those bright leaves, whose decay,
> Red, yellow, or ethereally pale,
> Rivals the pride of summer. 'Tis the haunt
> Of every gentle wind, whose breath can teach
> The wilds to love tranquillity. One step,
> One human step alone, has ever broken
> The stillness of its solitude.
>
> (577–90)

As the poet expires, we see his eyes a last time: "Two lessening points of light alone / Gleamed through the darkness"—the ghostly emblem of his desire returns to its source, which was himself; and the narrator who began the poem now ends it with a lament for the world deprived of such a spirit, a world filled only with "pale despair and cold tranquillity, / Nature's vast frame, the web of human things, / Birth and the grave, that are not as they were."

The intended moral is clear. This hero is a spirit of youth and renovation, the passionate heart of the age, an example of the good who die young. He is a creature of ardent love, and the world does not understand love: the web of human things must be changed if such a catastrophe is not to become the pattern for all generous feeling. The vein of abject pathos one sometimes finds in Shelley—"*Me*—who am as a nerve o'er which do creep / The else unfelt oppressions of this earth"—is not entirely absent here. But *Alastor* has so little of this sensitive mood that a careful reading may prompt the question exactly

what generous feelings the hero can be supposed to exemplify. He was, to judge by everything the people who encounter him think and feel, a bad comet screaming hate and disaster,[4] and this is something the poem knows even better than its author does. Throughout *Alastor* there runs an undercurrent of loathing for created life—an impression most vivid in a passing metaphor that compares a child's attachment to its mother with the twining of parasites around tree trunks:

> Like restless serpents, clothed
> In rainbow and in fire, the parasites,
> Starred with ten thousand blossoms, flow around
> The grey trunks, and, as gamesome infants' eyes
> With gentle meanings, and most innocent wiles,
> Fold their gleams round the hearts of those that love
> These twine their tendrils with the wedded boughs
> Uniting their close union.
>
> (438–45)

Never was "close union" more poisonously celebrated. The poet recoils from the very idea of a feeling that becomes a habit—the process by which a mind evolves the sort of sentiment Wordsworth called "natural piety." Impulse has no better friend than Shelley, and he was sure, when he wrote these lines, that impulse and habit were in deadly rivalry. His distrust of natural adaptation and continuity, which borders on contempt for nature, shows up in a dramatic omission. The self that the hero of *Alastor* reveals would appear to have no attachment to other persons, or to any element of life in the present or the past. What he calls "nature" is a thing outside time and outside experience. Indeed, the hero is a character without ordinary affections or human bonds of any sort, and the title is meant to bear that out: "Alastor" refers to the devouring spirit of solitude that pursues the poet and that he embraces in spite of himself.

I suspect Mary Shelley read this poem by her mate with interest, and with an irony not to be confused with detachment.[5] From its opening address to the "Mother of this unfathomable world," where the narrator says he has "made my bed / In charnels and on coffins, where black death / Keeps record of the trophies won from thee," to the conclusion where he regrets his habit of dwelling in nature rather than science or art ("O, that the dream / Of dark magician in his visioned cave, / Raking the cinders of a crucible / For life and power, even when his feeble hand / Shakes in its last decay, were the true law / Of this so

lovely world!"), a great many arresting details of the poem find a vivid echo in *Frankenstein.* Victor Frankenstein is reported to have spent days and nights in charnel houses looking for materials to build his monster out of corpses. He, too, would like to "penetrate the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding places." Once having shone a light in her hiding places, he would convert his science or art into the law of nature herself—but, unlike the wasted hero of the poem, Victor has the education and the power to carry out his wish. Mary Shelley frames her story from the perspective of a narrator like the one in *Alastor*: some way into the novel, we may forget about Walton, but he comes back at the end and is essential to the satirical part of her intention. Walton is shown to be intoxicated by the genius of Frankenstein, another solitary spirit and creator undertaking to advance knowledge at the cost of every tie of affection. The distant prospect these men look to is some benefit to humankind; but that good recedes as the story progresses, and we do not feel it to be a persistent motive.

Mary Shelley, I believe, saw that the narrator of *Alastor*—drawn so as to suggest a more worldly aspect of Shelley himself—was in love with the hero, just as her own narrator Walton is in love with Victor Frankenstein. In love, except that what these narrators crave is self-submission, a subordination of their will to that of a pure creator. A further point about *Alastor* seems to have struck Mary Shelley. The poem's beautiful opening—"Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood"—presents the narrator speaking as the missing element, fire. By this gesture the words inaugurate a Promethean theme that will have a long afterlife in Shelley's poetry. The young and perceptive Mary Shelley seems to have known this in advance, and the unpleasant ironic subtitle of her novel is "the new Prometheus."

The Promethean impulse did not, she knew, come from benevolence as her husband supposed. Its source was an instinct less to be trusted, a wish to intensify the sense of self to the point of indifference to others. It was, as she also saw, a wish to intensify a peculiarly male version of the self, a sort that cuts across science and poetry. What this wish reveals, wherever it comes to light, is a desire to create oneself—or rather, *not to have been created*—and to owe no duties to any fellow being. Frankenstein will say of his creature, after its escape from the laboratory and its coming to know its own deformity, that when he heard its pathetic tale "for the first time I felt what the duties of a creator to his creature were." But Victor Frankenstein is always in flight from this recognition. For the sake of science, he has deserted many other relations of love and duty:

to his betrothed, Elizabeth; to his family; to his friends. If Promethean idealism, in Mary Shelley's eyes, is a man's ethic—the unattached pursuit of creation, with a limitless contempt for society—it is more particularly the dream of a man who cannot feel gratitude toward a mother and a father. So, against Prometheus, the author of *Frankenstein* will chose Milton's Adam as her pattern of heroism. Her epigraph is drawn appropriately from a speech by Adam in *Paradise Lost*:

> Did I request thee, Maker, from my Clay
> To mould me Man, did I solicit thee
> From darkness to promote me?

The question her story asks of Percy Shelley as of all its readers is how far we can invent at pleasure and how far we can attach feelings to our inventions. The novel will speak for feelings that come before us into the world.

As Mary Shelley diagnoses the idealism of solitary genius, its heroes are not undone by society so much as by their attempt to stand apart from life. Read in this way, her novel is a criticism of Shelley, much as *The Prelude* is a criticism of Wordsworth's revolutionary self. Victor's specialization of genius is brought out early in a dream that dissolves to show the creator's first actual recognition of his creature. The dream finds Victor with Elizabeth on a street, and he kisses her; next, he is holding his mother dead in his arms; as he awakens, the monster has materialized beside the bed—pulling the curtain aside and making a face (cooing perhaps as a mother would). I can venture an analysis of the dream so basic it hardly amounts to analysis. In Victor—the scientist, the impartial creator and benefactor of the species—the power to give life by communicating desire, and the power to give death, have been confused at their source; the wife who might have borne his child becomes, by a trick of montage in the dream, his own mother dead in his arms (to whom his kiss was death) and then on the instant, as a living allegory of his confusion, the monster stands over him. Victor lives in an inverted nature. The thing he created with no parental feeling now watches him parentally, while he lies passive and guilty.

Victor Frankenstein's mania for creation is a wish to get behind the natural processes of life, to reverse the necessity of generation. Before him, birth had appeared to be the gift of women, but with the kiss of his dream he conquers both wife and mother, and in the same moment he

sees the reward of his ghastly embrace of artificial life. Once all the given differences are abolished, between mother and child, woman and man, antecedent and inheritor, the monster is eligible as a creator in its own right. Readers of science-fiction romances are familiar with the dramatic rule of the genre that Mary Shelley here invents. When you see a hero who wants to get outside himself or outside nature, watch for a tightening of bonds between men.[6] All of the men in *Frankenstein* present themselves as objects of sympathy eminently worthy of pity: Victor, his disciple and double Walton, and even the creature, once he has grown sufficiently corrupt to resemble his creator. The apparent exception is Victor's friend Clerval, but he perishes quickly, torn to shreds by the creature in revenge, after Victor has built and destroyed the creature's promised mate. Clerval anyway is pictured as feminine, indeed as someone very like Dorothy Wordsworth in her brother's poem "Tintern Abbey," of whom it is said in words that *Frankenstein* nearly quotes: "in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart . . . Oh! yet a little while / May I behold in thee what I was once." But Victor has fallen far from that innocence. To guard the secret existence of the creature who has displaced Clerval as his second self, he will allow the innocent Justine to endure a trial and be punished with death on the charge of murdering his brother: a crime he alone knows to have been committed by the creature.

Meanwhile, the creature has been trying to learn the natural sentiments of mankind from an instructor more willing and adequate than Victor. He finds his lesson in a cottage in the forest, watching a pair of lovers who dwell nearby. Witnessing his first scenes of human affection, the monster clings to them as if they were favorite chapters in a favorite book. But he has also been reading books (*Werther,* Plutarch, Volney, *Paradise Lost*) and drawing from them the "lofty sentiments and feelings" that belong to humanity. His idyll is broken when he sees his own reflection in a forest pool and realizes he is not like the people he has admired. It is an amazing recognition, without a precedent in literature. Does he see then that he is a monster—as if that were a natural fact? He knows only that his face does not resemble what he has learned to read as a human face; though he, and not his human-seeming creator, owns the sentiments proper to a human being. The proof of this complex recognition—that society humanizes the self—comes when a blind man, De Lacy, befriends him. De Lacy recoils at the point when the monster confesses: *you are my only friend.* A solitary being is always monstrous.

It is this moral axiom that gives propriety and dramatic justice to the creature's wish for a mate. "I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being and become linked to the chain of existence and events from which I am now excluded." Even Victor acknowledges that on hearing this "I was moved." In *Frankenstein*, the creature's experience shows that human nature is something formed by modeling and not disposed in advance in all its elements; that love is shaped by an experience of two beings, and not by an act of determination by one. This discovery finally governs the sympathies of the book, but it does not quite control the author's design; even at the close Mary Shelley seems not to have decided how to judge the original demonic energy of Victor as against the pathetic human feelings of his creature. The climactic words uttered by the creature over the lifeless form of Victor bring together once and for all, without resolution, the thoughts of imitative affection and strife that have haunted the fable:

> Farewell Frankenstein! If thou wert yet alive and yet cherished a desire of revenge against me, it would be better satiated in my life than in my destruction. But it was not so; thou didst seek my extinction, that I might not cause greater wretchedness; and if yet, in some mode unknown to me, thou hadst not ceased to think and feel, thou wouldst not desire against me a vengeance greater than that which I feel. Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine.[7]

The mood of this—the pride in a suffering that is not a defeat, and that still nurses an impulse of revenge—is identical with that of the opening speech of Shelley's Prometheus.

III

The hero of *Prometheus Unbound* begins the action of the play by claiming that his agony has been superior to Jupiter's. Hoarding his pain with the keenness of an ascetic, he compares his power to suffer with Jupiter's power to inflict suffering:

> Monarch of Gods and Daemons, and all Spirits
> But One, who throng those bright and rolling Worlds
> Which Thou and I alone of living things
> Behold with sleepless eyes! regard this Earth
> Made multitudinous with thy slaves, whom thou
> Requitest for knee-worship, prayer and praise,

And toil, and hecatombs of broken hearts,
With fear and self-contempt and barren hope;
Whilst me, who am thy foe, eyeless in hate,
Hast thou made reign and triumph, to thy scorn,
O'er mine own misery and thy vain revenge.—
Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours
And moments aye divided by keen pangs
Till they seemed years, torture and solitude,
Scorn and despair,—these are mine empire:—
More glorious far than that which thou surveyest
From thine unenvied throne, O Mighty God!

(I, 1–17)

In these opening lines, Prometheus has already triumphed over his misery. He is sure that he does not envy Jupiter's power. What he has not yet conquered is his hunger for revenge.

Shelley took a continuous interest in the idea of revenge and its operation in literature. As he embarked on *Prometheus Unbound*, he was finishing work on *The Cenci*, whose heroine, the victim of incestuous rape, tells a judicial lie to convict her tormentor. In his Preface, Shelley reflected equivocally on the emotions which he, as the author of a tragedy, may have fostered by such a sympathetic portrait of retaliation:

> Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes. If Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better; but she would never have been a tragic character: the few whom such an exhibition would have interested, could never have been sufficiently interested for a dramatic purpose, from the want of finding sympathy in their interest among the mass who surround them. It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge; that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists. (p. 240)

Shelley could, the argument implies, have written a play about someone who acts more generously and wisely in her predicament, but that play would have lacked the sort of contest people find dramatic and therefore interesting. He does not approve of the "casuistry" employed by a drama of revenge to vindicate the feelings of the audience. Nevertheless, he suspects that such casuistry may serve a higher end than ingenuity; it points to a great puzzle of the moral world, namely

that wrongs, when palpable, seem to justify revenge, yet revenge is itself a wrong that needs justification. Maybe the drama that comes from putting this question before the audience is in no way superior to the instincts that the drama portrays. Still, a tragedy may do some good by showing the conditions from which those instincts arise. To do something better, Shelley seems to say, one must pass beyond "the dramatic character" of tragedy as a genre.

His thinking about revenge is closely linked to his suspicions about the idea of character as such—the stability of a continuous self and the reciprocal motives by which it is supposed to act. He meditated on this problem twice with Milton's Satan as his subject. In the *Defence of Poetry*, Satan is called more admirable than God because, uncertain of his powers, and possessing inferior means, he exhibits a defiance and a courage with which we can sympathize. The discussion in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* is subtler, and affords a revealing echo of Shelley's comment on Beatrice Cenci:

> The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgment, a more poetical character than Satan because, in addition to courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible to being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which in the Hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. In the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling, it engenders something worse. (p. 133)

Notice that Shelley here has made up his mind about casuistry. It is pernicious wherever it occurs; an imaginative artist must on no account encourage its restless probing. What he says of Satan now would apply with equal force not only to Beatrice Cenci but to the creature of Victor Frankenstein: we weigh his faults against his wrongs, and finding the latter exceed all measure, we excuse the former. Because his agony is superior, he appears in some degree admirable. What the character of Prometheus must accomplish, it seems, is to overcome a tendency of the mind to balance faults against wrongs, a tendency that may be inseparable from our habit of treating life as a series of acts for praise or blame. What if a life is rather a bringing to bear of a series of emphatic moods or purposes? Prometheus in his opening speech seems to want

to say this for his life. What remains for Shelley is to say what it is for such a life to act diffusively upon others and to be reformed in the light of moods and purposes drawn from others.

In the first fifty lines, Prometheus confesses that he hates no more. But he still wishes to know the effects of his curse of Jupiter. Mountains, springs, air, and whirlwinds, which endured or executed the curse, all give their testimony, and Earth asks him not to utter it again: the force of the words will be again, as it was at first, unfathomably destructive. She also warns Prometheus of a nether world unknown to him, a world of shadowy doubles, one of whom will have to be summoned for any speech or act to repeat itself. Prometheus does ask that his curse of Jupiter be repeated—but now (to preserve his retraction) by no one resembling himself; appropriately, it will be done by the "writhing shade" of that other world who has the shape of Jupiter. So Prometheus retains the effects of his hatred, without appearing to have created those effects. The distinction is casuistical, the more so as Jupiter is his rival and double in the contest of agonies.

One may notice an odd resemblance, so far, between Prometheus, the death-dealing "benefactor of the species," and the philanthropic genius Victor Frankenstein, who discovers only in dreaming the effects of a destructive impulse that he formally disowns. The sense of a secret and repressed self gives an added propriety to Earth's remarkable description of the world of doubles:

> Ere Babylon was dust,
> The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,
> Met his own image walking in the garden.
> That apparition, sole of men, he saw.
> For know, there are two worlds of life and death:
> One that which thou beholdest, but the other
> Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
> The shadows of all forms that think and live
> Till death unite them, and they part no more;
> Dreams and the light imaginings of men
> And all that faith creates, or love desires,
> Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.
> There thou art, and dost hang, a writhing shade
> 'Mid whirlwind-peopled mountains; all the Gods
> Are there, and all the Powers of nameless worlds,
> Vast, sceptred phantoms; heroes, men, and beasts;
> And Demogorgon, a tremendous Gloom;

And he, the Supreme Tyrant, on his throne
Of burning gold. Son, one of these shall utter
The curse which all remember. Call at will
Thine own ghost, or the ghost of Jupiter,
Hades or Typhon, or what mightier Gods
From all-prolific Evil, since thy ruin
Have sprung, and trampled on my prostrate sons.—
Ask and they must reply—so the revenge
Of the Supreme may sweep through vacant shades
As rainy wind through the abandoned gate
Of a fallen palace.

(I, 191–218)

This description robs Prometheus of every ounce of satisfaction he once felt in enmity. The dramatic effect is stark, but mysterious. The existence of a world of shadows, repeating ourselves, might seem to enhance the importance of any word or deed of our own. Yet in that world, every soul is known to have become already the one thing it can aspire to be: its character, and the character of its actions, have been forever fixed. Where none is free, and none holds in reserve the possibility of becoming anything but what it is, words and deeds lose all their claim to be distinct and majestic.

The curse of Prometheus was that the cruelty of Jupiter should return upon Jupiter:

An awful Image of calm power
Though now thou sittest, let the hour
Come, when thou must appear to be
That which thou art internally.

(I, 296–99)

The imperative expresses an allegorical wish (common in everyday fantasies of personal revenge) for the surface of a character to reflect exactly its hidden depths. The wish proceeds from the supposition that to be unmasked is the worst conceivable punishment of wickedness or treachery.

This topic of unmasking has an irresistible interest in literature—because we are beings who lie and because no medium better than words exists in which to lie or to prove the existence of a lie, to tell a story or to change a story. For an idealizer of enlightenment like Shelley, the metaphor of unmasking takes additional strength from his

belief that science and imagination may pierce the coverings of our nature and reveal ultimately who and what we are. But can so noble an ideal be extricated from the pleasure of defeating an antagonist?—a pleasure doubtless increased by the knowledge that it was done in the service of all truth and all justice. The mask will have fallen in a different sense by the end of Act III of *Prometheus*, where men and women are said to be free to act and suffer as it is in them to act and suffer. That is, they will no longer be subdued to the conditions of life, not even the condition of a revenge casuistically justified. But how do we arrive at that peculiar affirmation? The work of detachment starts from a regret of Prometheus at the repetition of his curse.

On being assured that the words were indeed his, he says: "I wish no living thing to suffer pain." With this retraction at line 305 of the first act, the dramatic possibilities of the play would seem to be exhausted—a puzzle that every commentator has remarked on.[8] Prometheus has renounced his desire for revenge, and has surpassed the limitations of Satan which Shelley's Preface declared the poet's aim of surpassing. What is not clear is why this should be a victory of feeling rather than of stoical restraint. That Prometheus retracts his curse out of love, and that love itself carries the germ of a revolution: these are assumptions that still await proof.

IV

The next temptation of Prometheus, after revenge, will be self-sacrifice; and as the torment continues with Jupiter's "tempest-walking hounds" (the Furies), Prometheus sinks so far as almost to become the victim of his own curse: "Whilst I behold such execrable shapes, / Methinks I grow like what I contemplate." What is the sense of their torture now that Prometheus offers no contest of will against Jupiter? He is still vulnerable because he believes that the good of his renunciation will bring some larger benefit, and that the effects may be calculable and known by himself. It touches him to agony when the Furies reveal that the human state is worse—more selfish, more sadistic—after his act of sacrifice than it had been before. A crucifix is shown, an image of Christ, of whom Prometheus is the prototype; the knowledge shared by Prometheus and Shelley is that the later sacrifice also will be subject to abuse by the human institutions that act in its name. "Behold an emblem," says the Fury: "—those who endure / Deep wrongs for man, and scorn and chains, but heap / Thousand-fold

torment on themselves and him." You have no cause, the Fury is telling Prometheus, to suffer for someone else; your sacrifice will take on a distorted meaning; it cannot but do so, for the meaning of a life is indeterminate, whereas the hoped-for effects from an action are finite and specific. You must suffer if you choose, as you must speak or write; but your suffering does not belong to you any more than your life does: its results lie hidden in a necessity beyond the reach of the will. The delayed response to this advice comes from Prometheus at the end of Act I. He says that all hope is vain but love; and he thinks of Asia.

Act II contains the moral action of the play, beginning with Asia's welcome to the descent of spring, the "child of many winds." She awaits its coming and, in the same breath, waits for the coming of her sister Panthea:

> As suddenly
> Thou comest as the memory of a dream
> Which now is sad because it hath been sweet;
> Like genius, or the joy which riseth up
> As from the earth, clothing with golden clouds
> The desert of our life. . . .
> This is the season, this the day, the hour;
> At sunrise thou shouldst come, sweet sister mine,
> Too long desired, too long delaying, come!
>
> (II, i, 7–15)

Panthea apologizes for her delay and announces that she has had two dreams, though she can remember only one, of Prometheus:

> I saw not—heard not—moved not—only felt
> His presence flow and mingle through my blood
> Till it became his life and his grew mine
> And I was thus absorbed—until it past
> And like the vapours when the sun sinks down,
> Gathering again in drops upon the pines
> And tremulous as they, in the deep night
> My being was condensed, and as the rays
> Of thought were slowly gathered, I could hear
> His voice, whose accents lingered ere they died
> Like footsteps of far melody. Thy name,
> Among the many sounds alone I heard
> Of what might be articulate; though still
> I listened through the night when sound was none.
>
> (II, i, 79–92)

This recollection of Prometheus is enough to dispatch Asia on the quest that takes her to the cave of Demogorgon. There she will pose a riddle to which the answer has already been given by her presence—the answer to Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance, and Change—that to them “All things are subject but eternal Love.” Literally, Asia’s question to Demogorgon regards the term of Jupiter’s reign: “When shall the destined hour arrive?” So far, it is an echo of her question about the coming of Panthea with the dream of Prometheus: “This is the season, this the day, the hour.” And Demogorgon’s answer is as ostensive as that of Panthea when she allows the dream to be read by Asia through her eyes. He will simply say: “Behold!”—an imperative that is also a metaphor, whose true vehicle appears in Asia’s song, “My soul is an enchanted boat.”

Asia is thus the personal prophet of a great change that love alone can bring into the world. She reports of all she has seen in the eyes of Panthea:

> There is a change: beyond their inmost depth
> I see a shade—a shape—’tis He, arrayed
> In the soft light of his own smiles which spread
> Like radiance from the cloud-surrounded moon.
> Prometheus, it is thou—depart not yet!
>
> (II, i, 119–23)

By her love, as the dream makes clear, she has gained the power to make Prometheus return; she does so by following the summons of a second dream of Panthea, spoken by a shape with streaming hair. It says simply *Follow*, and that is the figurative stage direction for the rest of the play. Follow, in the sense of freely obey, and in the sense of deliberately read and interpret.

What is communicated by these words of instruction and witness? The love felt by Asia is as swift as thought; and its results are not felt by her alone. When Panthea first awoke from her dream (she reports), she was embraced at once by a sister god who said, “it is sweet / Even to desire”—as if she too had been touched by the dream. It is the nature of love to overflow, to create unseen possibilities of feeling—in that sense it is the least immediate of emotions—and Shelley comes upon a truth about love when he has Asia read the dream about her lover in someone else’s eyes. The love of Prometheus is confident in a way that makes it magically pass beyond itself, like a face “arrayed / In the soft light of his own smiles.” We think of love as the most other-regarding of

passions and yet, says Shelley, it is also the most self-sufficing. In this, love appears as the antithesis of revenge, which requires someone or something prior to itself to supply the motive for action. "The deep truth is imageless," says Demogorgon to Asia: a Platonic aphorism of great instinctive power. Truth has this in common with love. By contrast, the face of revenge—both the action and its object—is always "imaged" to the point of obsession. If one asks how the change of Prometheus can have radiated so far, into Panthea's dream and what Asia could see of the dream as well, the answer must be that having given up revenge, Prometheus for the first time was free to extend himself with unselfish pleasure.

A power of the mind founded on nothing but human recognition—this, for Shelley, is another name for love, and the idea he links it with most often is hope. Asia and Prometheus by their love grow capable not, as they had supposed, of destroying an old tyranny—for that, Demogorgon must be the efficient cause—but rather of building the human order of freedom they have begun to experience in themselves. It is this intuition of freedom that Demogorgon will invoke in the last verses of Act IV. Freedom in this sense is almost identical with hope: it differs as much from defiance as courage differs from resentment; it does not forget the past, knowing everything an agent of repetition or revenge would know; yet, at last, it creates "From its own wreck the thing it contemplates." This moral discovery is the climax, formulated late, but achieved by the middle of the play. In the last two acts nothing happens apart from Asia and Prometheus together watching the catastrophe of the old world and the beginnings of a new. The writing is a superior tissue of effects from Gibbon, Volney, and others; the rashness and boldness of the invention are exorbitant. We are invited to witness an apocalyptic and redemptive future, the very spectacle Milton reserved for the last two books of a poem of twelve books, but that Shelley has saved for the last two acts of a play of only four. We attend this performance with interest, because we are interested in the characters who watch it.

There is an incidental flaw in the dramatic machinery of the play which I do not see how an admirer of Shelley can avoid mentioning. For the author has so contrived his ending that the emotions of revenge should be satisfied in some degree. At the start of the third act, we see Jupiter torn from his throne by Demogorgon, and we hear the cries of pain. Yet something in the conception of Demogorgon may reconcile us to the catastrophe. He is, like the "necessity" he represents, a figure

both irresistible and inert, a most unpromising fomenter of passion against any human antagonist. He makes for this reason an excellent minimal allegory of the conditions that allow a great change of the world to appear to have been inevitable in retrospect. He is modest and dull. He is without ideas. When Jupiter asks who he is, he relieves the burden of anxious care at once: "Eternity—demand no direr name."

V

As early as the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," and emphatically in *Alastor*, Shelley had been drawn to an anti-naturalistic imagining of the mind and its idealisms. He was, in those early poems, a disappointed disciple of Wordsworth—for whom, as Shelley read him, nature had become another name for expedience or acceptance of the world as it is. Shelley's fascination with death, a curiosity often surprisingly free of morbidness, seems to have been in large part an interest in forbidden possibilities of change, the sort of change that he saw now closed off to Wordsworth. Yet his own anti-naturalism had turned Shelley against the common affections of human nature as a fetter on the perfect liberty of dedicated spirits. And his youthful depictions of revolutionary heroism, as in *The Revolt of Islam*, had always presumed that a distinguished personage alone could serve as a benefactor of the species. Promethean pride was the virtue of the scientist or poet. It came with his fortunate separation from experience—the lowly experience to which the creatures he would benefit were of course condemned. Such was Shelley's thinking when the companion who knew him best confronted him with the anti-Promethean romance of *Frankenstein*. The novel shook his self-confidence into a new shape even as it helped to change the story about Prometheus that he wanted to tell. *Prometheus Unbound* is his chastened reply. Reading it, we can watch Shelley pass from a contest of agonies between two men of will to an idea of reform that is made intelligible by love. The relationship between Asia and Prometheus, a love that might as well be called friendship, supports without complacency the appeal that ends the play,

> 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.
>
> (IV, 570–74)

It is an appeal Christian in temper, but without the image of agonistic suffering and the suppressed desire for revenge that must deform a Christian as much as a pagan morality.

Nothing could be less accurate than to suppose that Shelley wrote these words of the play in a fanciful or a richly exaggerating mood. He meant them literally. For him, the turn from Promethean knowledge to love is not a turn away from reform. It implies a renewal of reform, with a new conviction that the making of a great change in the world cannot be solitary work. By the kind of love that Asia and Prometheus share, reform builds the necessary means to the generous ends it frames. Where Prometheus, gloating over his revenge against Jupiter, once became the dead thing he beheld, love informed by hope will create "From its own wreck the thing it contemplates." This is of the essence of love and not an obstruction to it, for love aims at

> the discovery of its antitype: the meeting with an understanding capable of clearly estimating the deductions of our own, an imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish and unfold in secret, with a frame whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own; and of a combination of all these in such proportion as the type within demands: this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that, without the possession of which there is no rest or respite to the heart over which it rules. ("On Love," *PP,* p. 474)

Shelley uses the word *antitype* in its proper sense of foreshadowing, and he agrees with Aristophanes in the *Symposium* that for the lover it is as if the loved had always been waiting for him somewhere in the world. The respite or rest that love imparts even to the wise is temporary. Nourished by nothing but itself, its gift is to encourage, as nothing else can, the unbroken series of beginnings that Socrates called wisdom and Shelley called poetry.

> No, Music, thou art not the "food of Love":
> Unless love feeds upon its own sweet self
> Till it becomes what music murmurs of.

YALE UNIVERSITY

1. *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, new edition corrected by G. M. Mathews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 33.

2. Melville wrote an epigram about self-pity and called it "Shelley's Vision." Walking by the ocean one morning, the poet watches his shadow and is disturbed by thoughts of "hate the censor"; in a moment of "elf-caprice," he decides that he, too, would like to "pelt the pelted one," and casts a stone at the shadow:

> When lo, upon that sun-lit ground
> I saw the quivering phantom take
> The likeness of St. Stephen crowned:
> Then did self-reverence wake.

3. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 275–86. Subsequent references (*PP*) are to this edition.

4. I borrow the phrase from John Ashbery's "Syringa," a poem, like the same author's "Parergon," that seems to have come partly from a reading of *Alastor*.

5. Her characterizations of Shelley's poetry are few but memorable: for example, the description of *Epipsychidion* as "Shelley's Italian Platonics."

6. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). Sedgwick explores the psychic repression at the source of "homosocial" bonds and the suffering it exacts as the price of continued innocence. I am interested in the ethics and metaphysics of such relations, as they appear in romantic stories about benevolence. The miraculous fertility associated with the natural scientist as a benefactor of the species still crops up in our day in grotesque moments of history as well as literature. In a telegram to a colleague and collaborator, Edward Teller announced the successful explosion of the first hydrogen bomb: "It's a boy."

7. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: New American Library, 1965), p. 211.

8. See, for example, Newman Ivey White, *Shelley*, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1940), vol. 2, p. 117; and Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 99.