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The Prophetic Imagination of P. B. Shelley

Andrew O. Winckles

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The Prophetic Imagination of P. B. Shelley

by

Andrew O. Winckles

Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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in

English with a concentration in Literature

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Ypsilanti, Michigan

DEDICATION

To my wife, Christy Mesaros-Winckles, who now knows more about both Shelley and prophecy than she ever wanted to and who motivated me to complete this project. And to my parents, who have always believed in and supported me.

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ABSTRACT

In his “Defence of Poetry,” Shelley claims, “Poets... were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets.” As such, even a cursory glance at Shelley’s poetry and political beliefs reveals an interest in what is wrong with the world, how to fix it, and what will happen if no action is taken. However, current studies fail to fully assess what makes up the prophetic imagination. They confine discussions of Romantic prophecy to discussions of prophetic inspiration, futurity, and rhetoric – divorcing the work from its impetus for social change. The prophetic imagination, as utilized by Shelley, is instead connected to an ancient Old Testament tradition of radical challenge to authority that possesses a distinctly social function. This study examines Shelley’s poetry and prose as intentionally prophetic texts that critique the dominant consciousness of his (and future) times and energize a community of resistance to the status quo.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Poetry and prose are abbreviated as follows:

“Essay on Christianity”: EC

“Defence of Poetry”: DP

“The Mask of Anarchy”: MA

“A Philosophical View of Reform”: PR

Prometheus Unbound: PU

Queen Mab: QM

All poetry selections, along with quotations from the “Defence of Poetry,” are excerpted from *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat.

All prose selections, with the exception of the “Defence of Poetry,” are excerpted from *Shelley’s Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, edited by David Lee Clark.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In his “Defence of Poetry,” Shelley claims, “Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets” (513). This identification of the poet, and specifically Shelley, with the prophetic has been fertile ground for academic inquiry. Even a cursory glance of Shelley’s poetry and political beliefs reveals a keen interest in what is wrong with the world, how to fix it, and what will happen if no positive action is taken. However, the problem with these studies is that they fail to fully assess what makes up prophecy and specifically the prophetic imagination. Instead, they have confined their discussions of Romantic prophecy to discussions of prophetic inspiration, futurity, and rhetoric – divorcing the work from its radical impetus for social change and empowerment. This study will examine Shelley’s poetry and prose as intentionally prophetic texts that seek to critique the dominant consciousness of his (and future) times and energize a community of resistance to the status quo.

Literature Review and Purpose

In recent years, a relatively large and distinguished body of criticism has emerged linking the Romantic poets to the prophetic tradition. This work has been most useful in establishing some of the prophetic modes in which the Romantic poets operated and how this prophetic reading of their work changes how we view them. Specifically, good work has been done regarding prophetic inspiration, prophetic rhetoric and the power of prophetic language, exploring both the futurity and historicity of prophetic speech, and on the symbolism of prophetic poetry. However, most of the studies to date have failed to fully take into account the origins of prophetic poetry in the Old Testament prophetic texts and the

ways in which the Romantic poets, and specifically Shelley, utilize these prophetic modes to affect socio-political reality.

The purpose of this study is to utilize Shelley's work to bridge the gap between literary scholarship and religious studies. By putting Romantic poetry in conversation with Old Testament scholarship, it will shed new light on the ways in which poets have accessed a living and vital Biblical tradition and point to ways in which both Old Testament prophecy and Romantic poetry continue to speak and act today. While previous studies have focused on Romantic prophecy as a predominant historical phenomenon, this study will utilize the best Biblical scholarship available to argue that prophetic poetry is constantly and vigilantly active and that it becomes eviscerated if we take away its power to confront societal problems and affect change in the present.

Justification and Significance

Despite the tremendous work that has been done linking the Romantic poets to the prophetic tradition, there remain some significant gaps in the scholarship on Romantic prophecy. Specifically, most of this scholarship confines its discussion of Romantic poetry merely to the realm of thought, ideas, and writing. You would think, after reading much of this criticism, that these poems were written in a vacuum, there is so little connection to historical reality and the radical social and political changes these poets hoped to enact.

I would argue that each of these critics has an important piece of the prophetic puzzle, but they miss the big picture. Prophetic poetry is in reality a conglomeration of all of the models presented in the scholarship on the subject. It is based on inspiration and the efficacy of the words, but it also involves a radical reassessment of dominant cultural patterns and a complete revisioning of how the world should work. In order to better understand these

ideas, an alternative prophetic framework is necessary, one that takes into account the true nature of prophecy as a radical, society-altering speech form that works outside of the traditional constructs of both prophecy and poetry.

Furthermore, this topic is especially important to today's literary conversation as we seek to find new ways of reading literary texts and fully understand them in context. It is especially important that, as we move into an increasingly secular literary landscape, we not forget the religious climate much of Romantic literature was written in and that we seek to understand the full extent to which these writers were influenced by religious texts, regardless of the extent they personally may have rejected religious belief in their personal lives. Shelley, for instance, while professing to be an atheist, "read the Bible daily" (Balfour 38) and had a deep respect for Christ, while at the same time despising institutional Christianity. As literary scholars, we have a responsibility for trying to understand the totality of an author's influence and work, not just bits and pieces.

Shelley also would have been familiar with Biblical scholarship, like Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. Not only this, but there is evidence that the Romantic poets borrowed some of the stylistic conventions of Hebrew poetry in their writing as a reaction against the Classicism that had so dominated the previous poetic era (Heschel 377). Shelley, in particular, seems to have been greatly indebted to not only the content, but also the form, of Hebrew poetry as explained by Lowth. In Chapter Four, I will look at some of the ways in which his poetry adopts the stylistic characteristics of Old Testament prophetic poetry.

Thus, understanding the Biblical, and specifically prophetic, influences on Shelley's poetry and thought from the perspective of not only the literary scholar, but also the

theologian, should be a vital part of Shelley scholarship, especially as we seek to understand the ways in which the written word interacts with socio-political reality. As I have already stated, many scholars have noted prophetic qualities in Shelley's work, but none have taken the necessary next step and attempted to truly understand the nature of Judaic prophecy – its interest not only, and not even primarily, in futurity, but also its emphasis on addressing the systemic injustices of society and the creation of a community of hope and resistance to the status quo. It is my contention that this much more robust and more efficacious understanding of prophecy is the paradigm Shelley operated from, hoping that his poetry would not only have an aesthetic effect on his readers present and future, but a powerful motivational effect as well: one that would push them into action, into addressing systemic injustices in their own time and place.

Research Question and Methodology

In this study I will explore the full extent to which Shelley understood and utilized Old Testament prophetic forms and functions in his poetry to critique the dominant social consciousness of his and future times and energize a community of resistance to inherently unjust systems and situations that had become normative. It will utilize a prophetic framework, developed from the work of Walter Brueggemann and Abraham Joshua Heschel, two prominent Biblical scholars, and synthesize this analysis of the nature of prophecy with some of Shelley's most radical poems and social statements. Using these tools, I will then explore some of the ways Shelley's poetry draws on the prophetic tradition and attempts to bridge the gap between the poetic and real, the ways in which he seeks to inspire and motivate real-world action and movement for social change.

Both Brueggemann and Heschel outline a basic framework for understanding the totality of the prophetic calling and function. Their frameworks will then be applied to specific works of Shelley's poetry and prose in order to illustrate the ways in which they are strikingly and significantly similar. This, along with cultural and historical research into Shelley's life, writings, and times will ground this discussion in a very specific socio-historical context – examining the ways in which Shelley's poetry interacts with his unique circumstances and also the ways in which his works transcend time and place, speaking to the present day cultural context.

Walter Brueggemann, a Christian Old Testament scholar from Columbia Theological Seminary, has identified the two key characteristics that make up what he calls the “prophetic imagination,” in his book of the same title. The prophetic imagination first of all “serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant [or royal] consciousness (3)” of a culture; and second it seeks to energize an oppressed community against the dominant cultural consciousness (3). As simple as this basic construction might seem, in reality it encompasses a broad range of prophetic function.

As I will discuss more extensively in Chapter Three, the key here is an understanding of what Brueggemann means by “royal consciousness.” In *The Prophetic Imagination*, he uses the example of the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt and points to Moses as a prophet who railed against Pharaoh's abuse of power and cooption of religious rhetoric as an instrument of oppression (6). Against this, he contrasts the community of resistance, liberation, and hope that Moses establishes when he leads the people of Israel out of captivity and sets up a social system based not on the desires of the richest and most powerful in society, but the needs of the poor, downtrodden, and oppressed (6-7). In this study I will

examine some of the unique methods Shelley utilizes to perform the same function in critiquing the prevailing “spirit of the age,” but also to set up the hope that, maybe not in his lifetime but someday, justice will prevail.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish rabbi and leading Jewish theologian of the 20th century, also constructs a useful prophetic framework in his massive, definitive work on the subject, *The Prophets*, which sheds tremendous light on the processes and traditions Shelley drew upon while constructing his poetry. In it he outlines seven basic characteristics of the prophetic function and then proceeds to apply these characteristics in various ways to the major prophetic figures and social situations of the Old Testament. While not all seven of these characteristics apply to Shelley or are outside the scope of this study, several of Heschel’s ideas will be useful for this evaluation of Shelley’s poetry. For example, one of the main characteristics of the prophet, in Heschel’s model, is an overarching concern with the abuse of economic and religious power by established authorities. Thus, establishing a consciousness of this repression was the special province of the prophet.

Heschel argues that one of the key characteristics of the prophet is that he or she “feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man’s fierce greed” (5). Throughout the books of the prophets in the Old Testament, there are constant denunciations of human greed and economic injustice. The prophet Isaiah rails against those who oppress the poor:

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will

you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain. (Isaiah 10:1-4)

As Heschel writes, “Prophecy is the voice that God had lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet’s words” (5-6). God’s logic is not man’s logic, and He is eminently concerned with the wellbeing of the poor – enough that he would speak especially on their behalf through the prophets. Shelley takes up this vocation as the voice of the poor and oppressed in both his own and future times. Thus, this study will draw extensively on Heschel’s work to pinpoint some of the ways in which Shelley operates prophetically.

However, the ways in which Shelley operates as a prophet are only part of the picture. It is not enough for a poet to write explicitly prophetic poetry if nobody bothers to read it or take it to heart – it must have the power to move people to action, it must have efficacy. This study will utilize the work not only of Brueggemann and Heschel but also Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin to explore some of the ways language interacts with reality. Benjamin writes that he “can only understand writing, as far as it effects matter, poetically, prophetically, objectively but in any event only magically, that is to say, immediately... only where this sphere of the world opens into the unutterably pure power can the magical spark spring between word and action, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides” (qtd. in Balfour 7). What Benjamin seems to be working towards is a “simultaneous conception of language as action and action as language” (Balfour 11). This paradoxical phenomena seems to work in the world via the process of naming, thus “language is...both creative and the finished creation, it is word and name” (qtd. in Balfour 11). It is this process

of naming, combined with Benjamin's unique conceptions of history and prophecy, that lay the groundwork for poetic expression that has agency or efficacy.

Thus the very language of prophecy is involved in creating the reality it hopes to see. This also helps us get a better picture of what Shelley means when he names poets as "prophets and legislators," for it would seem that he too is wrapped up in the idea that poets, and creative forces in general, have the power to shape reality through their work.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The past ten years have witnessed a marked turn to religion in literary theory and scholarship in general. There are many possible explanations for this phenomenon, but at its core, I believe that it can largely be attributed to the rise of new historicism as a defining discourse in literary studies. This has allowed us as scholars to separate out and critically examine the discourses of religion in which most Western texts were created, without necessarily subscribing the ideological tenets of religion itself.

The simple fact is that many of the texts that we as literary scholars spend so much time with were created in cultures saturated by Christianity so that, even if a particular author, like Shelley, claimed to be an atheist, he or she nevertheless was thoroughly familiar with Christianity and Scripture and this plays itself out very clearly in his poetry. Thus a proper understanding of the religious discourses of Shelley's time is necessary if we are truly to understand Shelley. Despite this fact, religious discourses surrounding literature were, for many years, confined to reductive moralizing readings of texts, which sought to locate some larger religious moral or truth.

In reaction to this vein of criticism, many of the theories of the twentieth century sought to unmoor themselves from religion and Christianity in attempt to locate the meaning of a text outside of its Christian roots. This impulse was not wrong; it acted as an important corrective to the simplistic readings of the past, but the end result was that entire generations of literary scholars forgot entirely how to deal properly with the religious material in their texts and were forced to rely on second-hand knowledge instead of a real understanding of the Scriptures or theology. As I have already stated, this has begun to change; but nevertheless much of the modern literary criticism that utilizes religion and religious

discourses still fails to fully understand the historical and theological meanings and implication of the religious discourses within which they are operating. Furthermore, this turn has taken place, ironically, without a subsequent, logical turn to religious texts themselves and religious scholarship as a means to reading religion in texts properly and in context.

Finally, it is important to note that, though the scholarship on the Romantic poets and the prophetic has blossomed over the last twenty years, very little of it has focused on Shelley, perhaps because of his professed atheism. Instead, we have seen numerous studies on Blake, whose work is the most “obviously” prophetic, and, more recently, Wordsworth and Coleridge. However, Shelley’s contribution to Romantic prophetic poetry has been left relatively untouched, despite its radical social content. Instead, scholars have been content to examine him as a political poet, using the narratives of cultural materialism to interpret his poetry.

This impulse is not necessarily wrong, just shortsighted. For, though Shelley was indeed an atheist or at very least irreligious, he read the Bible every day and is certainly, as Harold Bloom has pointed out, a profoundly “prophetic and religious poet whose passionate convictions are agnostic” (282). This prophetic and religious trend in Shelley’s poetry is no doubt expressed differently than in someone like Blake or Coleridge, but it is there nonetheless. Furthermore, it is my contention that this prophetic tendency has gone largely unexamined because many literary scholars have failed to understand the true nature, purpose, and scope of prophecy as rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Prophecy is not simply or primarily interested in futurity, as Blake’s poetry obviously is, but in present societal institutions and injustice – in critiquing the status quo, calling

society back to itself, and envisioning a community of hope in real-world social change. Finally, though many have pointed out the clear relationship between prophecy and poetry, or prophecy *as* poetry, few have fully examined how this relationship works and how the prophetic word gains power, through poetic expression, to affect both present and future social situations. This is the type of prophecy that Shelley's work is bound up in, thus we must seek to expand our conception of prophetic poetry if we are to understand how his work acts prophetically.

The existing work which explicitly links the poetry of the British Romantics and prophecy has been primarily useful in establishing some of the prophetic modes in which the Romantic poets operated and how this prophetic reading of their work changes how we view them. Specifically, good work has been done regarding prophetic inspiration, prophetic rhetoric, and the power of prophetic language, exploring both the futurity and historicity of prophetic speech, and on the symbolism of prophetic poetry. All of this has contributed greatly to our understanding how the Romantics relied upon prophetic modes in their work. However, most of these discussions take place in the abstract – confining their discussions of Romantic poetry merely to the realm of thought, ideas, and writing. You would think, after reading much of this criticism, that these poems were written in a vacuum, as there is so little connection to historical reality and the radical social and political changes they hoped to enact.

For example, in his essay on “The Poetics of Prophecy,” Geoffrey Hartman constructs his argument about prophetic poetry around Wordsworth's *Prelude* and particularly a section where Wordsworth says he hears “A loud prophetic blast of harmony / An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold / Destruction to the children of the earth / By deluge, now at hand”

(V.lns.95-98). Hartman then goes on to stress the power inherent in this prophetic language and address the question of inspiration. This is in concert with prophetic scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel, who writes that “The prophet’s word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven” (16). Furthermore, he is correct in correlating poetic inspiration with the divine revelation of the prophets (Heschel 367). In the end, he comes to the conclusion that what “connects the poet and the prophet,” is “a mighty scheme not of truth but of troth – of trusting the old language, its pathos, its animism, its fallacious figures” (39). This is very useful scholarship and it helps to establish the fact that Romantic poetry does indeed have distinct connections to the prophetic tradition, but it has very little to do with prophetic poetry’s actual action in the world.

Stephen Prickett’s body of work, especially *The Romantics* and *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible*, is excellent in that it seeks to provide the resources for understanding the work of the Romantic poets in historical and theological context. His chapter in *The Romantics* on “The Religious Context,” in particular, provides an exceptional overview of the religious climate of England during Romanticism and its influences on the Romantic writers. For our purposes, this chapter is especially notable because Prickett places special emphasis on the prophetic scholarship that was being conducted towards the end of the eighteenth century. He points to Robert Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (first delivered in 1741 and translated into English in 1787) as a particularly important work in establishing the poetics of Hebrew poetry and indeed a new method of reading the Bible for the Romantic poets. In *Origins of Narrative*, he moves even further, arguing that the new hermeneutics and methods of reading the Bible that were being developed during the eighteenth century had a radical effect on how Romantic poets and

thinkers conceived of narrative forms and the uses of scripture. He argues that the Biblical narrative, more than any other, influenced these thinkers and their works.

Prickett's relation of the tremendous influence Lowth's work (and other scholarship on prophecy) had on the Romantics is valuable in that it conclusively establishes the fact that the Romantic poets were influenced far more by the discourses of Hebrew poetry and its many modes than by the discourses of Classicism. It effectively settles Romantic poetry as indebted to the prophetic tradition and acknowledges that, in their poetry, the Romantics were striving to recreate some of this prophetic agency and action in the world. This lays the groundwork for further examinations of both the ways in which Romantic poetry is indebted to the Hebrew prophetic tradition and how they carried it out, but it leaves open the actual work of analyzing specific poets and poetry. It is a good general overview, but a more detailed work is needed.

Some of this work is accomplished in Michael Scrivener's *Radical Shelley*. In this book, and specifically in his chapter on "Romanticism and Religion," Scrivener lays out some of the ways in which Shelley's notions of prophetic inspiration addressed the social and economic structures of his time. He begins by acknowledging the connection between poetry and prophecy:

A central experience becomes the process of inspiration, the direct communion with a divine presence that exists in nature and humanity. Inspiration leads to an ethical idealism whose ultimate goal is an anarchist utopia. The problem of mediation, however, is difficult to resolve because the inspired poet, like the anarchist prophet, falls between the ideals of perfectibility and the actual historical situation. The poet-prophet has to

translate the apocalyptic ideals into an earthly language capable of being understood by mortals. If he allows the ideal vision to dominate every other consideration, then he will write in a language few people can understand. If he concerns himself more with audience expectations than visionary purity, then he is in danger of eclipsing the vision. (78)

In identifying Shelley specifically with this poetic-prophetic problem of inspiration and transmission, Scrivener is thus able to move the discussion of prophetic poetry into the realm of real-world political efficacy. In other words, if Shelley is transmitting a vision of how he thinks the world should look – how is that vision transferred to the reader and then to action? Scrivener answers these questions by examining some of Shelley’s prose works in the light of these questions and Shelley’s early interest in pantheism. The conclusion he comes to is that Shelley is indeed using these prophetic and pantheistic notions to transmit a very specific political plan for how society should operate. However, what still requires exploration is what this plan looks like, and how it is transmitted prophetically through poetry to current and future generations of readers.

A recent study by James Rasmussen, titled “Reading the Prophets Prophetically in Coleridge’s *Confessions*,” addresses another vitally important issue that Prickett raises in his general overview of religion during the Romantic period. Rasmussen uses Coleridge’s *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* to explicate a new method of reading of the Bible that Coleridge engages in which directly involves the reader in the “prophetic creation of meaning” (404). Here again Romantic thought is inextricably linked to theories about the inspiration, reception, and transmission of prophetic texts. Here again we also see evidence

of the general tendency in Romanticism to return to the Scriptures as a source of inspiration, even prophetic inspiration, and read them in a new light.

Ian Balfour's book, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, is perhaps the most comprehensive and useful study on this subject to date. His introductory chapters point out that prophecy generally surfaces in times of great social and political unrest (2), something that certainly characterizes the Romantic period. He then acknowledges that prophecy is "not a single thing, and one has to attend to the differences that are sometimes tenuously grouped together under a single word" (4). For his purposes, however, he chooses to define prophecy in terms of "personal revelation and charisma" (4) combined with a focus on the efficacy of the spoken word. He places a lot of emphasis on the fact that the prophet claims to speak for God and that his words claim to hold real power (5).

In this light, he utilizes the work of Walter Benjamin to come up with a framework in which an emphasis is placed on the language of prophecy and its actual power in the world. Benjamin writes that "I can only understand writing, as far as it effects matter, poetically, prophetically, objectively but in any event only magically, that is to say, immediately... only where this sphere of the world opens into the unutterably pure power can the magical spark spring between word and action, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides" (qtd. in Balfour 7). Using this as his jumping off point, Balfour develops a model of prophecy in which the spoken or written word acts magically in its environment.

Balfour then takes these ideas and proposes, "The paradoxical task of politics, then, as of history generally, is to prophesy the present" (Balfour 16). He quotes Benjamin to support this idea. "The historian turns his back to his own time," writes Benjamin, "and his seer's gaze ignites on the peaks of peoples of mankind always receding deeper into the past.

This seer's gaze is precisely directed toward that which for one's own time is far more clearly present than it is to the contemporaries who 'keep pace with it'" (qtd. in Balfour 16). Finally, he concludes that "Prophecy is a call and a claim much more than it is a prediction, a call oriented toward a present that is not present" (18). Of course, this is to reduce Balfour's complex argument to quotations and vagaries, but we will return to it in more depth later as we seek to develop a model of prophetic efficacy in which the poetic word works to effect real societal change.

Balfour then turns to the task of applying this framework to Romantic culture and poetry – first exploring how the prophetic tradition was transmitted to the Romantic poets (with excellent chapters on Lowth, Herder, and Eichhorn) and then moving into explorations and close reading of Wordsworth, Blake, Hölderlin, and Coleridge. For its comprehensiveness and insight, Balfour's work is unparalleled and has been invaluable to my own study – informing and shaping some of my own ideas and providing valuable insight into how the prophetic operates through poetry in general and Romantic poetry in particular. His chapters on Benjamin and Lowth in particular are exemplary scholarship and have greatly influenced my own thinking. Unlike many scholars, Balfour does not shy away from addressing the real power of prophetic language to act in and effect reality; however, in my opinion he still fails to deal with the question of what this prophetic language is actually *doing*, what it is meant for. In other words, he defines his subject too narrowly, failing to allow for all of the modes through which prophetic poetry can act – especially its radical interaction with current and future socio-political reality. He also only briefly addresses Shelley in a general overview chapter, which is strange considering the strongly prophetic overtones of much of Shelley's poetry.

In *Prophecy and the Philosophy of Mind*, Terence Hoagwood moves us a little closer to a definition of prophetic poetics grounded in the radicalism that is so apparent in the Biblical texts. Specifically, he analyzes the prophetic works of Blake and Shelley as they related to the philosophical traditions of the time. He asserts that “the central symbolic pattern of biblical prophecy is the overthrow of spiritual tyranny” and that “the prophet and philosopher both narrate a revolution of mind in order to effect a renovation of vision” (5). This prophetic vision, according to Hoagwood, is “composed of images that are to be read as the shapes of ideas... [it] is a composite form, containing verbal and visual images” (40). Thus prophecy is linked to written, spoken, and visual art in that it uses images to convey its radical re-visioning of the world. This provides a glimpse of how prophetic prophecy, through the use of images and symbols, can begin to enact a real revolution of ideas that spills out into the world at large.

The scholarly works of authors like Balfour and Hoagwood have, however, come into question among those who do not believe that work of Shelley, whose most radical poems were published years after his death, could be considered prophetic in his own time. Franta suggests that, by using an indirect method of access to his poetry, Shelley is practicing “prophecy in reverse,” that is prophecy that does not “predict the future for the present,” but “imagines a future that will see the present for what it was” (782). He also suggests that prophecy of the type Shelley practices is merely interested in the historical, that “The Mask of Anarchy” is not interested in making “a case for a particular course of action but instead to recognize that Peterloo is an even that will have a history” (776). This understanding of Shelley’s prophetic work is useful in that it helps situate both the poet and his work historically, pointing to the very real events that Shelley’s poetry was meant to address.

However, it is problematic because it imagines prophetic poetry as mere historical artifact, instead of a living breathing work that has the power to affect the present and future. It also buys too heavily into the notion that prophecy, rightly defined, is only interested in futurity, instead of the entire spectrum of history.

However, each of the critics we have examined has only a piece of the puzzle. Prophetic poetry is in reality a conglomeration of all of these models. It is based on inspiration and the efficacy of the words, but it also involves a radical reassessment of dominant cultural patterns and a complete re-visioning of what how the world should work. It draws upon the work of Lowth and the revival of interest in Hebrew poetry, but at the same time is more than just poetical. It is tied to a specific historical time period, but at the same time extends beyond its history.

Finally, though each of these authors has contributed to our overall understanding of what the prophetic meant to the Romantics – not one of them (with the exception of Franta's contrarian article) has engaged in a comprehensive study of Shelley's poetry and how these prophetic modes play themselves out in his work. All are quick to point to Shelley's identification of the poet as "legislators and prophets," but few are willing to really break down what this means and how it plays itself out in Shelley's own poetry. What I want to suggest is that, if we are to truly understand the full scope of Romantic poetry, further exploration of the prophetic nature of Shelley's poetry is needed, an exploration that takes into account the true nature of prophecy as related in the Old Testament texts that so influenced the Romantic poets' style, content, and poetic intention.

CHAPTER 3: THE PURPOSE OF THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

“What manner of man is the prophet?” (Heschel 3) asks Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his work, *The Prophets*. The answer lies in the true nature of the prophets’ calling. A prophet, in the Old Testament sense, is not concerned *only* with futurity, an easy reduction that has been adopted by many observers of the prophetic tradition. Balfour quotes Blanchot, who writes, “The term of prophet – borrowed from the Greek to designate a condition foreign to Greek culture – deceives us if it invites us to make of the *nabi* [the Hebrew word for prophet] he in whom the future speaks. The prophetic word is not only a word of the future” (5). What Blanchot hints at is that, throughout most of history, the Hebrew word *nabi* and the Greek translation of the word *prophetes* have been unfairly linked. For whereas *phrophetes* denotes futurity only, *nabi* is far more complex. Balfour contends that the word comes from a verb meaning “to call” or “to announce” (6). As Heschel puts it, he is one who is “called (by God), [and] one who has a vocation (from God) (Heschel 405). Thus the prophetic function encompasses far more than just predicting the future – it is involved with confronting the culture with a word from God that may or may not contain an element of futurity.

As we have seen, Walter Brueggemann has identified the two key characteristics that make up what he calls the “prophetic imagination”: first of all it “serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant [or royal] consciousness” (3) of a culture; and it seeks to energize an oppressed community against the dominant cultural consciousness (3).

The concept of the royal consciousness is key to Brueggeman’s idea of what a prophet’s calling actually is. In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, he begins by describing Moses’ famous struggle against an oppressive Egyptian regime that was holding the Israelites

captive. In Brueggeman's construction, Pharaoh is the instigator of a royal consciousness of oppression and exploitation in which no dissent or freedom is possible. Furthermore, he uses religion of "static triumphalism" (6) to justify and extend this regime, setting up the Egyptian gods as the justifiers of continued oppression. Moses sets out to undermine this social consciousness by proving, through a series of confrontations with Pharaoh's advisors, that the Egyptian gods are no gods at all. Thus, "the mythical legitimacy of Pharaoh's social world is destroyed, for it is shown that such a regime appeals to sanctions that in fact do not exist" (6). In place of this consciousness, Moses sets up "the alternative religion of the freedom of God. In place of the gods of Egypt, creatures of the imperial consciousness, Moses discloses that "Yahweh... is extrapolated from no social reality and is captive to no social perception but acts from his own person toward his own purposes" (6). Thus, in setting up freedom over a system of oppression, Moses is instead proposing a system of a "politics of justice and compassion" (6-7). Thus, the critique of the royal consciousness is in reality a setting up of an alternative, just consciousness of freedom and hope against a politics of oppression. In other words, "He [Moses] was not engaged in a struggle to transform a regime; rather, his concern was with the consciousness that undergirded and made such a regime possible" (21).

But what is this alternative consciousness of freedom, justice, and compassion? Upon first glance, the covenantal rules set up by God, through Moses, after the Exodus from Egypt seem anything but freeing, just, or compassionate. Yet further study reveals a social and political system based upon not the oppressive assumptions of the royal consciousness but a real concern for authentic religion and the poor and oppressed. In the place of an economic system based on how the rich and powerful can profit from the misfortunes of the poor,

Yahweh institutes a system that ensures the poor and oppressed will always be taken care of. In Leviticus 25: 8-12, God tells Moses that every fiftieth year is to be declared a year of jubilee in which any land that has been sold by a family to pay a debt, or just to survive, is returned to its original owner. In fact, this entire chapter is filled with just rules for how money and property are to be handled among the Israelites:

- Verse 23: “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.”
- Verses 25-27: “If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold. If, however, a man has no one to redeem it for him but he himself prospers and acquires sufficient means to redeem it, he is to determine the value for the years since he sold it and refund the balance to the man to whom he sold it; he can then go back to his own property.”
- Verse 29: “If a man sells a house in a walled city, he retains the right of redemption a full year after its sale. During that time he may redeem it.”
- Verse 35: “If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you.”

And the list goes on and on, both in this chapter and throughout the Pentateuch. Thus, the covenantal law as laid out by Moses is, instead of being a restrictive document, a radical revaluing of what is important in society. It provides a viable and just alternative to any royal consciousness that would seek to treat others as commodities, expendable in the pursuit of power and wealth.

Yet, despite these specific commands from Yahweh on how society is to be organized, there is little evidence that the Israelites ever observed this year of jubilee or obeyed Yahweh's commands. Instead, they gave themselves over to kings who established their own version of a royal consciousness, every bit as bad (and in some instances worse) than that of Egypt. Solomon's power was based on a consolidation of religion under the power of the state (evidenced by the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, making it the seat of both religious and temporal power) as well as the systematic oppression of the people for the gain of the rich and powerful (Brueggeman 26-29). In the time of the prophets, the kings of Israel and Judah consistently led the people away from the covenant established by Yahweh – establishing a consciousness of disbelief and disobedience in the populace at large. Furthermore, they engaged in policies of oppression and injustice, for their own gain, which the prophets railed against time and time again.

These concerns with the oppression caused by the abuse of economic and religious power became the special province of the prophet. Heschel argues that one of the key characteristics of the prophet is that he or she “feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed” (5). Throughout the books of the prophets in the Old Testament, there are constant denunciations of human greed and economic injustice. The prophet Isaiah rails against those who oppress the poor:

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will

you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain. (Isaiah 10:1-4)

As Heschel writes, “Prophecy is the voice that God had lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet’s words” (5-6). God’s logic is not man’s logic, and he is eminently concerned with the wellbeing of the poor – enough that he would speak especially on their behalf through the prophets. To the prophets, justice is not blind but has its eyes wide open. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf put it best when describing the “partiality” of God’s justice:

How does the God who “executes justice for the oppressed” act toward widows and strangers? Just as God acts toward any other human being? No.... Why is God partial to widows and strangers? In a sense, because God is partial to *everyone* – including the powerful, whom God resists in order to protect the widow and stranger. God sees each human being concretely, the powerful no less than the powerless.... When God executes justice, God does not abstract but judges and acts in accordance with the specific character of each person.... Why does God not treat all people equally but attends to each person in their specificity? Why does God not abstract from the relationship but instead lets the relationship shape judgments and actions? Because God is unjust? No. Because *the justice which equalizes and abstracts is an unjust justice!* (221-222, italics mine)

Thus, the prophet is God's voice in dismantling this overriding ethos of greed, of calling people to repentance and a return to covenant of Yahweh, which promises justice and compassion.

Second, the prophetic imagination must serve to “energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move” (Brueggeman 3). It is important to critique the royal consciousness, but progress takes time. In the mean time, people must still live with the reality of present day oppression and it is part of the prophetic function to energize a community of hope. A prophet must “create the sense of new realities that can be trusted and relied upon just when the old realities had left us hopeless” (14). He or she does this in three ways:

1. By pointing out that the alternative community knows something that those of the dominant consciousness do not know. In the case of Pharaoh, this is that God is moving in dark and mysterious ways on behalf of the children of Israel (14-15).
2. By taking sides with the “losers and powerless marginal people” (16) and by “daring to speak before the data are in” and “daring to affront more subtle thinking” (16).
3. By engaging in doxology “in which the singers focus on this free one and in the act of the song appropriate the freedom of God as their own freedom” (16).

The Song of Miriam (Exodus 15) is one such doxology and it brings to the fore one of prophecy's long-standing connections to poetry, for a song is very much like a poem. In fact, the prophets of ancient Israel were also their trained singers and poets – thus much of the

prophetic work in the Old Testament is written as poetry. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the ancient Hebrew poets had their own specific forms of poetry based on parallel and parabolic structures and a call and response format that made these poetic prophecies ideal for usage with large gatherings of people. The Song of Miriam is a perfect example; take Exodus chapter 15, verse 6:

Your right hand, O LORD,
was majestic in power.
Your right hand, O LORD,
shattered the enemy.

Each of these lines runs parallel to the other and, as a song performed by a great mass, would have alternating parts. Thus, this kind of prophetic doxology of hope was able to create a communal sense of energy and a realization of the possibility for change and deliverance.

It is here we begin to see a glimmer of prophecy's connection to poetry and specifically Romantic poetry. Specifically, doxology, and prophetic poetry in general, serves to energize by "speaking a new name that redefines all social perception, reviewing an unlikely history of inversion in which imperial reality is nullified..., asking for the enactment of freedom in dance, freedom in free bodies that Pharaoh could no longer dominated..." (17-18), and finally in enthroning the assertion that it is Yahweh and not Pharaoh who is in ultimate control of Israel's destiny (18).

The Old Testament prophets who followed Moses continued in this energizing poetic tradition. They were not only brilliant orators and fiery personalities, but also talented poets who were able to creatively convey their message. For example, the prophet Isaiah is one of the finest poets of the Old Testament – able to transform his message into a poetic key that

made it memorable to those who listened. Indeed, Isaiah is the author of one the most beautiful and poetic passages in Scripture:

Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (40:28-31, KJV)

This passage serves to energize the alternative community that was being oppressed by the kings of Israel and about to go into exile because of their wickedness and it is indicative of the important role doxology and poetry play in prophetic expression.

Thus prophecy, rightly understood, utilizes the past to address the present, while at the same time it speaks to the future. The prophets of Israel were primarily concerned with the state of their *own* society, with the oppression and injustice that were clear result of a people who had turned away from Yahweh's covenant. Nevertheless, the prophets were also able to project their words into the future, to give them agency and the ability to address all unjust situations in all times and places. It is not that Old Testament prophecy is not interested in the future, just that it uses the past and present to speak to that future and envision a future time when injustice will not exist. It is in essence, then, a call to the future to heed the warning of the past – to actualize the prophet's words in the present. Oftentimes they used poetry to do this. Many of the Hebrew prophets were trained as poets or singers

and thus poetry seems to be a uniquely suited vehicle for prophecy. They also utilized this two-fold framework of criticizing the status quo and creating a sensibility of a community of hope that continues to speak. In the following chapters we will examine how this Old Testament prophetic tradition was transmitted to and modified by the Romantic poets and how both Hebrew poetry and this prophetic model are specifically evidenced in Shelley's poetry and thought.

CHAPTER 4: POETRY AS PROPHECY

Until this point, we have taken it as a basic assumption that prophecy *is* poetry and poetry has the potential to be prophecy. However, this bears further examination, especially as regards prophetic poetry's utilization by the Romantic poets and specifically Shelley. For there is significant evidence that Shelley utilized not only the *functions* of Old Testament prophetic poetry but also the *form*, and it is important to understand the ways in which he, and indeed many of the other major poets of his day, understood and integrated the structures unique to Hebrew poetry.

In his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," Wordsworth outlines the basic parameters of Romanticism's radical break with the poetic tradition that had come before, especially regarding the use of poetic language and structures of poetry:

The earliest poets of all nations generally wrote from passion excited by real events. They wrote naturally, and as men. Feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring and figurative. In succeeding times, poets and men ambitious of the fame of poets, perceiving the influence of such language and desirous of producing the same effect without having the same animating passion, set themselves to a mechanical adoption of those figures of speech, and made use of them, sometimes with propriety, but much more frequently applied them to feelings and ideas with which they had no natural connection whatsoever. A language was thus insensibly produced, differing materially from the real language of men in *any* situation (523).

What Wordsworth reacts against so strongly, in this passage, is the formulaic use of poetic devices, passed down from the ancient Greeks, as a means to writing what he conceives of as

dishonest poetry, poetry that utilizes language neither conceived in passion nor used by common men. More specifically, Wordsworth is reacting against the formulaic use of the thousands of stylistic tropes of classicism, which were rampant in the poetry of Wordsworth's time. Thus, not only is *Lyrical Ballads* an example of the Romantic poets' reaction against the dishonest *content* of modern poetry, but also the dishonest use of language. It is an attempt to move beyond classicism and find a new, more honest, form for poetry.

Luckily for the Romantic poets, the groundwork was already in place for this radical shift in style. In fact, it had already been laid nearly a half century before by an Anglican bishop and scholar named Robert Lowth. A professor of poetry at Oxford and later Bishop of London, Lowth delivered a groundbreaking series of lectures at Oxford in the 1741 on the nature of Hebrew poetry (Prickett 144-145). Originally published in Latin, as *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum*, an English edition was released in 1787, as *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* and then reissued in 1815. The importance of this work, both for Biblical and literary studies, cannot be overstated; for (though Lowth likely did not intend it) the first time it opened the door to readings of the Bible strictly as literature, and not as divinely inspired revelation. Lowth encouraged his audience to read selected Old Testament texts as poetry, within the "specific context of ancient Hebrew life" (Prickett 145), and then went on to outline the unique poetic style utilized by the ancient Hebrews.

This method of reading the Bible represented a radical break, both from a religious establishment that insisted on reading scripture solely as the divine word, separated from its cultural context, and from contemporary poetics, which first and foremost looked to the Greeks as the source of poetic form and style. In fact, due to the manner in which much of

Hebrew scripture was translated, many were completely unaware that (outside of the Psalms) a developed Hebrew poetic tradition existed. Lowth's work changed that, and it had an especially great impact upon the Romantic poets who, like Wordsworth, were looking for a new poetic diction and style. It is no coincidence that, as Lowth's work was being published in English for the first time in 1787, William Blake was developing some of his greatest work and Wordsworth was coming of age – *Lyrical Ballads* would be released just twelve years later, and already the stamp of the turn from classicism was upon it.

However, before moving into an analysis of Shelley's particular indebtedness to Lowth and the turn from classicism, a further examination of Lowth's work and the forms of Hebrew poetry he delineates is in order. For, though some of Lowth's basic constructions have been modified and questioned in subsequent Biblical and literary scholarship, his work remains a groundbreaking and incisive analysis of Hebrew poetry. Of particular interest to this study is the ingenious way he, for the first time, designates Hebrew prophecy as poetry, a distinction that had hitherto been denied it, even by Jewish rabbinical scholars (Heschel 470-471). Furthermore, it is Lowth's work that Shelley and the other Romantics would certainly have been familiar with and thus it is with Lowth's work that we must contend with in order to fully understand the ways in which Shelley utilized the prophetic tradition.

Lowth begins his exploration of prophetic poetry by asserting, "The first rank I assign to the Prophetic or that species of poetry which is found to pervade the predictions of the prophets, as well those contained in the books properly called prophetic... I apprehend, will be generally allowed to be written in a style truly poetical" (II:4). He also makes clear that the Hebrew word *nabi* was originally used in "an ambiguous sense, and that it equally denoted a Prophet, a Poet, or a Musician, under the influence of divine inspiration" (II:14).

Thus, though Lowth perhaps does not understand all of the intricacies of the Hebrew word, he recognizes that it intentionally binds up prophet and poet in one, that in ancient Israel the prophets were trained as poets, and that one of their functions was to sing and create poetry.

Having established the Hebrew prophets as poets, Lowth goes on to delineate the unique poetic devices and structures common to Hebrew poetry that are radically different from the poetics of the west. In particular, Lowth points to the prophets' use of parallelism and parabolic style, absent any Western sense of meter or rhyme, which distinguishes their poetry.

Lowth's "discovery" of parallelism is widely regarded as his greatest contribution to the understanding of Hebrew poetry – the key that unlocked the previously closed door of poetic inquiry. For though some previous scholars had outlined the basics of this style, and subsequent ones have criticized and greatly expanded his rather narrow conception of it, Lowth was the first to comprehensively point out and delineate the specifics of a stylistic device that underlies almost all Hebrew poetry. Parallelism, for Lowth's purposes, is defined as "The poetical conformation of the sentences... [which] consists chiefly in a certain equality, resemblance, or parallelism between the members of each period; so that in two lines (or members of the same period) things for the most part shall answer to things, and words to words, as if fitted to each other by a kind of rule or measure" (II:259). This is one of the reasons that Biblical poetry does not lose much in translation: the poetic structure does not depend on rhyme or meter, but on the parallel structuring of words and ideas (Prickett 148). It is also why, for so long, both Biblical and literary scholars did not regard much of the poetry of the Old Testament, and especially the prophetic writings, as poetry – it didn't *look* like poetry in the Western sense, until translators (like Lowth himself, in his translation

of the book of Isaiah) recognizing the poetic qualities of the prophetic writings, gave them their proper form (Balfour 77).

Lowth then goes on to describe three basic categories of parallelism: synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic or constructive. Synonymous parallelism Lowth defines as any place where “the same sentiment is repeated in different, but equivalent terms” (II:259). This is far and away the most common, according to Lowth, and thus the examples are multitude. Just to excerpt one, from the prophetic books, Lowth cites Hosea 11:8-9:

How shall I resign thee, O Ephraim!

How shall I deliver thee up, O Israel!

How shall I resign thee as Admah!

How shall I make thee as Zeboim!

My heart is changed within me;

I am warmed also with repentance towards thee.

I will not do according to the fervour of my wrath,

I will not return to destroy Ephraim:

For I am God, and not man;

Holy in the midst of thee, though I inhabit not thy cities (as translated by

Lowth II:261).

This is just one very obvious example, in which even the words in one line are repeated identically in the next line, but not all synonymous parallelism is so obvious; it also includes instances of thoughts or ideas being reiterated or continued in a different manner in subsequent lines, such as in Isaiah 49:7:

Kings shall see him and shall rise up;

Princes, and they shall worship him:

For the sake of Jehovah who is faithful;

Of the Holy One of Israel, for he hath chosen thee (trans. Lowth II:263)

And the list goes on and on of all the different variations encompassed by synonymous parallelism. The point is that even a cursory glance at the prophetic books reveals that this is the overriding pattern of the poetry which gives it its form and unique diction.

Antithetical parallelism is similar to synonymous except that in this case, instead of a sentiment being repeated in the subsequent line or sentence, “a thing is illustrated by its contrary being opposed to it” (Lowth II:265). This is especially prevalent in the wisdom books like Proverbs and Song of Solomon, but can also be found in the poetry of the prophets. For example, Isaiah 54:7-8:

In a little anger have I forsaken thee;

But with great mercies will I receive thee again:

In a short wrath I hid my face for a moment from thee;

But with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee (Lowth II:267)

Thus the second line is juxtaposed to the first to great effect.

The third category of parallelism Lowth delineates is the synthetic, or constructive. And it is here that the weakness of his artificial categories is most clearly felt, for this category seems to be a sort of catch-all for any parallelistic structure that does not fit into the first two categories. He defines synthetic parallelism as a species of parallelism “in which the sentences answer to each other, not by iteration of the same image or sentiment, or the opposition of their contraries, but merely by the form of construction” (II:267). As can readily be deduced, this is a rather fuzzy category that could encompass many different types

of parallelism. What it really indicates is the fact that the nature of parallelism in Hebrew poetry is multitudinous – it is certainly the underriding structure of Hebrew verse and is used in almost every way imaginable. Thus, though Lowth’s categories are certainly artificial, they do help us understand the basic nature of Hebrew poetry and, more importantly, the influences on the Romantic poets in terms of form and style. For Hebrew parallelism is radically different from the tropes of the Greek classical tradition – relying on ideas, contrast, and the artful use of common language and speech patterns rather than complex mythology and rhetorical patterns.

The second major contribution to the understanding of Hebrew prophetic poetry that Lowth made in his lectures was an exposition on what he termed its “parabolic style.” Parabolic style, according to Lowth, is derived from the Hebrew word *mashal*, which refers to a poem’s diction and sentiments. He translates it “parable,” but makes it clear that this definition includes three modes of speech: the sententious, the figurative, and the sublime (I:51). Lowth’s detailed exposition on this style is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that, through these categories, Lowth is seeking to identify a specific figurative style of Hebrew poetry. It is also clear that he is attempting to steer his audience’s understanding of Hebrew poetry away from the classical tropes and figures that “the teachers of rhetoric have pompously (not to say uselessly) heaped together” (Lowth I:50).

Broadly speaking, the parabolic style, especially as regards prophetic poetry, is used to “afford an abundance and variety of imagery of established use and acceptance, from which every subject may receive the most ample and the most proper embellishments” (Lowth II:279). This imagery is especially important to the prophet because many times he or she is using the specific to speak of the general, individual examples meant to express the

general state of society, and parables that prefigure multiple future events. According to Lowth:

Of all the images proper to the parabolic style, it most frequently introduces those which are taken from natural objects and from sacred history: it abounds most in metaphors, allegories, comparisons, and even in copious and diffuse descriptions.... it excels in the brightness of imagination and in clearness and energy of diction, and consequently rises to an uncommon pitch of sublimity: hence also it is very happy in the expression and delineation of the passions, though more commonly employed in the exciting of them; this indeed is its immediate object, over this it presides as its peculiar province (II:279).

Thus the parabolic style, as conceived of by Lowth, uses clear images and allegories to delineate current and future events in a manner that is calculated to prompt emotion and action. The parable is not simply to be heard, but acted upon, and this action is most effectively prompted by prophetic poetry.

For an example of the parabolic in the prophetic, Lowth uses the prophecy included in Isaiah, chapters thirty-four and thirty-five, beginning by quoting the exordium:

Draw near, O ye nations, and hearken;

And attend unto me, O ye people!

Let the earth hear, and the fulness thereof;

The world, and all that spring from it (Lowth II:281).

In this passage, Isaiah is “invoking universal nature to the observation of these events” (Lowth II:281) and utilizing a figurative style to make a point. As Balfour observes, “The exordium well illustrates the dual or multiple forces of the prophetic word and shows how

this aspect of its rhetoric, just as much as its highly figurative style, permits a single text to be read and reread in a wide range of contexts” (79).

This tendency to “express generals by particulars” (Lowth 282) is further evidenced later in the passage, when the prophet Isaiah uses specific, vivid images to evoke a broader perspective:

For my sword is made bare in the heavens;
Behold, on Edom it shall descend;
And on the people justly by me devoted to destruction;
The sword of Jehovah is satiated with blood;
It is pampered with fat:
With the blood of lambs, and of goats;
With the fat of the reins of rams;
For Jehovah celebrateth a sacrifice in Botzra.

And a great slaughter in the land of Edom (trans. Lowth 282).

Because this prophecy is at least partially concerned with future events, and not single events but a multiplicity of fulfillments, it cannot provide particulars. Ironically, however, it can use particular vivid imagery to evoke general precepts – the wrath of God and his vengeance on those who turn from him. Thus it is the very figurative nature of the prophecy, its utilization of the parabolic, that lends the poem a prophetic force that refers to both present and future times.

It is obvious that through his lengthy exposition on parabolic style, Lowth is striving to effect a clear break between the classical use of figurative language and allegory and the Biblical. It is unclear how effective this break is for, though the parabolic style of the

Hebrews is in some respects markedly different from Greek style, there are still similarities in structure and form that may be attributable to how the tropes and styles were utilized in the centuries to come. Both still rely on “imagery of established use and acceptance” to affect the poetic act. Or Lowth may be simply, as Balfour suggests, striving for a simplification of classical rhetoric instead of outright rejection (62). However, what matters for this study is more the effect this exposition on parabolic style had on the Romantic poets, how they combined and utilized both parallelism and the parabolic style in their writings, and how these forms influenced the prophetic poetry of Shelley in particular.

As can be readily deduced, Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* was a terrifically important work to both Biblical scholarship and poetry. The Romantic poets, in search of a poetic discourse that more accurately represented common life, were naturally drawn to it and particularly to Lowth’s revelatory exposition on the Hebrew prophets as poets. As Balfour states:

Lowth’s analysis of the parallelistic structure and figurative texture of prophetic speech was in itself enough to establish the poetic character of prophecy. But Lowth went further to claim that the prophets were the greatest of poets, and he helped secure their status as the sacred writers most worth emulating. The progress of poetry from the middle of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth shows a gradual displacement of the Psalms in favor of the prophetic writings as the dominant model for religious poetry, a movement for which Lowth’s lectures were a catalyst. (77-78)

Shelley was certainly aware of this trend in poetry, familiar with Lowth’s lectures, and clearly knew the Biblical texts themselves very well. In his “Defence of Poetry,” he even

refers to the prophets as poets, admiring the “astonishing poetry of Moses, Job, Solomon, and Isaiah” (524) and of course makes his famous claim that “poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators or prophets” (513).

Thus, in his desire to break free from classical convention, Shelley could not help but be influenced by Lowth’s interpretation of the prophetic texts. Furthermore, as the following examples will evidence, Shelley very consciously integrated many of the stylistic conventions of Hebrew prophetic poetry into his writings – chief among them parallelism and a parabolic style. As Balfour states, “Shelley is concerned to garner for poetry something of the aura specific to prophecy” (39). Thus, not only is Shelley’s poetry imbued with prophetic themes, messages, and aspirations for future social change, it also adopts a prophetic form, which only serves to lend the poems added immediacy and power.

“The Mask of Anarchy” is perhaps the clearest example of Shelley’s utilization of parallelism to formally support his prophetic aims. The very structure of the poem, rhymed couplets organized into quatrains, lends itself very well to a parallelistic structure. Furthermore, the sing-song quality that is created by this poetic device brings to mind a chant, or song, which is exactly the way many of the Old Testament prophecies were meant to be heard. According to Lowth, a prophetic poem like the ode at the Red Sea in Exodus, which celebrates the Israelites’ miraculous passage of the Red Sea and the destruction of the pursuing Egyptian army, would have been sung in a call and response fashion – with the women answering the chorus of the men (Lowth II:254). For example:

Sing to Jehovah, for he is greatly exalted;

The horse and the rider he hath cast into the sea (Exodus 15:20-21, trans. Lowth).

And though “The Mask of Anarchy” is not explicitly written in call-response fashion, it does lend itself to chanting or singing largely because of its parallel structure. This chant element is one of the things that give the poem its prophetic power and potential for radical social change. It is one of Shelley’s most “popular” poems in that it was addressed to a more common audience (Wolfson 724), and even though it was not published until after his death, it became a rallying cry for reform and was, in fact, chanted or sung by members of the reform movement (Foot 19).

Specific examples of Shelley’s use of parallelism in “The Mask of Anarchy” are numerous, so I will excerpt only a few of the most powerful here. However, these few examples serve to represent the whole well, for the entire poem is bound up in the same sort of structure and ideas. In general there are two basic types of parallelism at work in the poem; they don’t exactly fit Lowth’s categories but this is more a testament to the weakness of the artificial categories than to Shelley’s misunderstanding of parallelism. For one thing, parallelism in rhymed English verse is bound to look different than unrhymed Hebrew poetry and, for another, though Shelley is reacting against and simplifying the tradition of the classical rhetoricians, he is still indebted to them.

The first type of parallelism at work may be considered a form of synonymous parallelism, in which subsequent lines modify, repeat, or expand the idea or image of the first. Take, for example, this quatrain that occurs towards the beginning of the poem:

Last came Anarchy: he rode
On a white horse, splashed with blood;

He was pale even to the lips,
Like Death in the Apocalypse (30-33).

These lines are pretty straightforward; each line after the first essentially gives another image of Anarchy, each line essentially says “here is Anarchy,” just in a different, more vivid manner. Once again, there are obvious classical tropes at work here as well, allegory and metaphor, but they are simplified and bear the mark of parallel structure.

A more complicated example occurs a few lines down, when Shelley is describing the British soldiers who committed the massacre at Peterloo:

For with pomp to meet him came
Clothed in arms like blood and flame,
The hired Murderers, who did sing
“Thou art God and Law, and King” (58-61).

In this stanza the parallelism is almost inverted; the subject of the lines is the “hired Murderers,” mentioned in line three, but the first two lines modify it and the second essentially identifies the subject, but does it in a figurative manner, so that the second and third lines give the same information. The fourth line, “Thou art God, and Law, and King,” though not necessarily part of the parallelism, nevertheless plays a role in a more extended parallel structure that runs through the beginning stanzas of the poem.

The line “Thou art God, and Law, and King” first appears in line 37, written on the brow of the figure Anarchy. It appears again in lines 61, 69, and 71, each time gaining significance with the repetition. This repeated rhythmical pattern could almost be said to inform the structure of the first half of the poem, which deals with the rise and acts of anarchy under the guise of God, Law, and King. This species of parallelism uses similar, in

this case identical, lines to contribute to the overarching sense of anarchy and oppression just as the Hebrew prophets used parallelism to create images of God's displeasure at and punishment for injustice.

But if the atmosphere of oppression, informed by the repeated lines "Thou art God, and Law, and King," informs the tone at the beginning of the poem, Shelley uses a different set of parallel, repeated lines to set the tone for his song of hope with which the poem concludes. The figure of Hope sings:

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number
Shake your chains to Earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you –
Ye are man – they are few (151-155).

These exact lines are then repeated in the final stanza of the poem, bookending Hope's call to the people to rise up and cast off their chains. Once again, the prophets often use the same type of formal repetition and parallelism to create their visions of hope and redemption. Shelley adopts and modifies the form to suit English poetry – indebted to both Hebrew and Greek traditions – but nevertheless, through the use of parallelism, creating a new, simpler poetry that could speak, sing, and prophesy to the masses, calling them to action.

Shelley was also a master at using the parabolic style that Lowth describes at length in his *Lectures*. For, though once again indebted to the classicists, the habit of the Hebrew prophets to describe the general form of events through the use of specifics was especially adapted to Shelley's poetic style and prophetic message. To begin with, much of Shelley's great prophetic poetry (for example *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*) is structured in

the same manner as Hebrew prophecy – a detailed description of evil, the status quo, injustice – followed by a vision of hope for real change. I will examine these overriding structures in more detail later, what is important to not now is how the overall form of the poems is inclined towards the parabolic, towards showing the form of events through extensive use of detailed figurative imagery.

Queen Mab is an excellent example, for the entire poem is a sort of vision of society, a prophetic rendering of the present and a possible future. In describing the desolation of modern society, the Fairy Queen Mab uses very specific images of past civilizations that imploded due to their inherent injustice and greed:

Where Athens, Rome, and Sparta stood,

There is a moral desert now:

The mean and miserable huts,

The yet more wretched palaces,

Contrasted with those antient fanes,

Now crumbling to oblivion; (II.162-168)

Thus the specifics of these civilizations, which have crumbled into oblivion, stand to represent the direction England is going. Likewise, Mab says that “ten thousand years / Have scarcely past away, / Since, in the waste where now the savage drinks / His enemy’s blood, the aping Europe’s sons, / Wakes the unholy song of war” (II.182-186). Images like the savage drinking his enemy’s blood, and “aping Europe’s sons,” are exactly the types of symbols that the Hebrew prophets used to describe the spiritual and moral desolation that prompted God’s judgment and wrath.

Parabolic images such as these abound throughout the poem, not only in the condemnation of the status quo, but also in the vision of hope Mab presents at the end:

The lion now forgets to thirst for blood:
There might you see him sporting in the sun
Beside the dreadless kid; his claws are sheathed,
His teeth are harmless, custom's force has made
His nature as the nature of a lamb (VIII.124-128).

In this new vision of the world set aright, Shelley thus continues to use vivid figurative language to represent the form of future events. He does not, and cannot know, what the future holds – but he *can* envision a time when the natural order is restored. He may not know the exact form it will take, may not know how those who read his poetry will enact it, may not have any set time frame for this restoration – but he senses that it *will* happen. Thus he is confined to images like the lion and child playing together without fear to represent these ambiguous future events.

Parabolic imagery also abounds throughout *Prometheus Unbound* but it takes much the same form that it does in *Mab*, and, as *Mab* is a much more straightforward poem, it is easier to identify within it. I will examine *Prometheus Unbound* at length further on in this study, as it is perhaps Shelley's most mature synthesis of all of his prophetic ideas and forms, and will have recourse to examine the parabolic there as well. However, what is important to note here is the way in which Shelley, even at this early juncture of his career, is intentionally playing with and manipulating poetic form – synthesizing many different traditions to create his unique prophetic style. One of the most important influences on this style was undoubtedly the prophetic poetry of the Hebrews, which he was certainly familiar with, and

Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, which had (by the time *Mab* was composed) become *the* seminal work on Hebrew poetry and had altered, forever, how poets (and especially the Romantic poets) and scholars read and utilized Hebrew scripture. Most important, this poetic form gave Shelley the means to express his criticisms of society and his visions of hope for future action and change in a manner that carried beyond his own time – so that his prophetic poetry still has agency today. And it is this prophetic tradition that sets Shelley, and the Romantic poets in general, apart from the poetic traditions and forms that came before them.

CHAPTER 5: THE EFFICACY OF LANGUAGE

For both the prophets and the Romantics, language and especially poetic language plays a major role in critiquing the dominant consciousness, energizing the oppressed, and effecting real change in the world. This is a theme that many of the scholars of Romantic prophecy have picked up on in their attempts to compare Old Testament prophets with the Romantic poets. As I stated before, Balfour uses Walter Benjamin's essays on language to delineate a prophetic model based on how language "magically" interacts with past, present, and future.

I have already put forward Benjamin's assertion that he "can only understand writing, as far as it effects matter, poetically, prophetically, objectively but in any event only magically, that is to say, immediately... only where this sphere of the world opens into the unutterably pure power can the magical spark spring between word and action, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides" (qtd. in Balfour 7). As we have seen, what Benjamin seems to be working towards is a "simultaneous conception of language as action and action as language" (Balfour 11). This paradoxical phenomena seems to work in the world via the process of naming, thus "language is...both creative and the finished creation, it is word and name" (qtd. in Balfour 11).

Benjamin further examines this connection between naming, language, and action in his essay, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." In it, he clearly traces the origins of language and appropriates to the unique practice of naming something of a magical power associated with the almost mystical communication of mental being and purpose into the world through the creative act. Benjamin begins his essay by establishing that "The distinction between mental entity and the linguistic entity in which it communicates is the

first stage of any study of linguistic theory” (315) and that language communicates “the mental being corresponding to it” (315). Thus language is connected to some sort of mental entity that exists outside of and is larger than the linguistic act but nevertheless is made intelligible and actionable through language. It is a mental entity that is consistent through time and exists both in and separate from language.

But the real question is *how* mental being is communicated through language and, furthermore, how this being is put into action *through* language. In answering this question, Benjamin turns to the creation myth as related in Genesis and the process of creation through naming that God engages in. Naming, for Benjamin, is the fundamental metaphor through which linguistic being is transmitted into reality. “The linguistic being of man is his language,” he writes, “Which signifies: man communicates his own mental being *in* his language. However, the language of man speaks in words. Man therefore communicates his own mental being (insofar as it is communicable) by *naming* all other things... *It is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things*” (317). Benjamin then goes on to relate this function of naming to God’s three-fold naming of creation and the creation of man.

In general, Benjamin envisions the act of creation as an explicitly linguistic act. As such, he argues that, in Genesis, there is a specific, vital, *rhythm* to creation that culminates in being through naming:

the rhythm by which the creation of nature (in Genesis 1) is accomplished is:

Let there be – He made (created) – He named.... In this “Let there be” and in the words “He named” at the beginning and end of the act, the deep and clear relation of the creative act to language appears each time. With the creative omnipotence of language it begins, and at the end language as it were

assimilates the created, names it. Language is therefore both creative and the finished creation, it is word and name. In God the name is creative because it is word, and God's word is cognizant because it is name. "And he saw that it was good"; that is: He had cognized through name.... That means: God made things knowable in their names (322-323).

Creation is not finished until it has been given a name and it is through naming things that God thus brings them their fullest expression of being. Thus the linguistic act is almost magically (to use Benjamin's term) connected to reality, to mental expression of the true essence of things.

However, Benjamin does not stop there, because the account of creation is not finished. For creation is not complete until God gives his greatest creation, man, the power to name, the "gift of language" (322) as Benjamin terms it. He writes that, "The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental.... The Bible expresses this symbolic fact when it says that God breathes his breath into man: this is at once life and mind and language" (321). Once again, Benjamin stumbles on the magical connection between language and reality and expands upon it later in the essay:

God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him. He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language, which had served *Him* as medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge. Man is the knower in the same language in which God is

creator. God created him in his image, he created the knower in the image of the creator (323).

Now, in coming up with this divinely inspired concept of human knowledge, Benjamin does not mean to imbue the human linguistic act with the same creative power as God, but he does mean to point out the inherent power of language to affect reality. “The human word is the name of things,” Benjamin argues, “Hence it is no longer conceivable... that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention. *Language never gives mere signs* (italics mine)” (324). For Benjamin, language is far too much caught up in the process of naming and creation to be completely separated from mental being. Thus this creative process of naming speaks into being that which existed only in mental being formerly. Furthermore, it is the naming itself that creates, that *acts* in the world – somehow, in the process of naming something, of giving linguistic being to it, the mental being becomes reality. And in naming creation, in calling it good, God ensures (through the linguistic act) that this creation will endure and continue to have being.

As far as prophecy goes, here Brueggemann is helpful as well. For in forming the poetic language of prophecy, the prophets are implicitly participating in the idea that their words have agency, that they can change things and that by speaking, or naming, an alternative consciousness can be set in place and energized:

The evocation of an alternative reality consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimization of a new rhetoric. The language of the empire is surely the language of managed reality, or production and schedule and market. But that language will never permit or cause freedom because there is

no newness in it. Doxology is the ultimate challenge to the language of managed reality, and it alone is the universe of discourse in which energy is possible. (18)

Thus the very language of prophecy is involved in creating the reality it hopes to see. This also helps us get a better picture of what Shelley means when he names poets as “prophets and legislators,” for it would seem that he too is wrapped up in the idea that poets, and creative forces in general, have the power to shape reality.

However, a full understanding of the power of prophetic poetry, the linguistic word, and how it operates in the world is not possible without an altered conception of history and how both humans and poetry conceive of and operate within a historical space. Here Benjamin is instructive as well, for his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* are perhaps the most cogent and forward thinking exposition on the nature of the prophetic, even revolutionary, word on the historical process. For prophecy, rightly conceived, carries through history, uses history, and can be drawn upon at any time to bring its prophetic word to the present and enact change in the present.

History has the potential to become a tool of the ruling class for oppression if it is viewed purely as a narrative of eternal progress towards some higher societal goal. As Benjamin was writing these *Theses* during the very time that Hitler was consolidating power in Germany, using history and the narrative of progress to justify his actions, it should come as no surprise that Benjamin was concerned with this topic. Thus history, or the definition of history, if left to the victors will always be distorted, will always be used in the service of power. The historic word must be seized (almost through revolution, Benjamin suggests) and imbued with what Benjamin calls a “weak messianic” power (254), which recognizes

that it is the *present* that is at stake in our conception of the past, and the prophetic word has the power to intervene in the present.

It is this prophetic power that is at work in Shelley's poetry. It calls forth to the present from the past, prophesying the present in essence, prophetically warning the "now" that history and the definition of history is too valuable a commodity to give up to definition by those in power and usage as a tool of oppression. According to Benjamin, the historian "grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (263). Thus it is only by seizing the past in the present that we are able to carry on the two-fold prophetic vision of combating established power structures which seek to define and control, and enact this messianic hope which prophetic poetry conceives of and brings into being.

Thus the past, history, is constantly bound up in the present and how we read the works of the past is bound up in how we interpret and act in the present. In some respects *we* fulfill prophecy by carrying out its prophetic function again and again – *we* make a work prophetic by enacting this community of hope in the here and now and seizing back history, seizing back the prophetic word for ourselves. As Benjamin argues in his second thesis, "There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim" (254). Thus it is we, the readers of history, who are called to carry on the prophetic tradition in the present, bring prophetic vision into being through an act of historical remembrance and mediation.

In this light, Benjamin's ninth thesis is vital to our understanding of how all of these elements work together:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.
(257-258)

It could be argued as well that not only is this angel the angel of history, but also of prophecy – the angel who sees the wreckage of the past for what it is and is able to prophesy the present. Indeed, in his drafts of the theses it appears that Benjamin was concerned with this very notion of prophecy – of refuting Schlegel's idea that a historian is simply a "prophet turned backward." In fact, Benjamin writes:

The historian turns his back to his own time, and his seer's gaze ignites on the peaks of the peoples of mankind always receding deeper into the past....
Whoever stumbles around in the past as a rummage room of exempla and analogies has no idea how much in a given moment depends on its being made present. (qtd in. Balfour 16)

Thus a historian who is backwards looking only, who uses the past simply for nostalgia's sake, is missing the point, is denying history its prophetic agency – its ability to continue to act in the present.

As I have already pointed out, some scholars have made the same claim about Shelley: that by writing poems that could not be published until after his death, he was utilizing an indirect method of access to his poetry, very similar to Schlegel's notion of "prophecy in reverse," prophecy which does not "predict the future for the present" but "imagines a future that will see the present for what it was" (Franta 782). Yet this conception of history, this conception of prophecy, is emphatically refuted by Benjamin because of the danger implicit in this historical vision. By conceiving of Shelley's prophecy as only backward-looking we are partaking of the historical force or "storm" as Benjamin terms it, which enlists history in the service of progress, which encourages us to read history according to the will of the victor, to define poetry like Shelley's merely as an outlet for frustrated sentiment. It denies prophetic poetry the power to view the wreckage of history and then speak a message forward into time which prophetically speaks to future generations – giving them the power, the agency, to act.

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that this may have been Shelley's aim, to speak powerfully to his present and ours by abstracting the general from the specific socio-political situations of his time and sending forward a message of revolution and hope to future generations. This does not mean that Shelley had no interest in addressing the present. As I have already argued, the problem with much of the existing scholarship on this topic is that it regards prophecy as forward looking *only*; it simply means that Shelley sees poetry acting in both present and future spaces simultaneously.

For example, when Shelley was preparing to publish *Queen Mab* for the first time, he wrote, “I expect no success – let only 250 copies be printed. A small, neat *Quarto*, on fine paper and so as to catch the aristocrats: They will not read it, but their sons and daughters may” (*Letters* I:361). This seems to indicate that Shelley understood that his most radical works, like *Mab*, were likely going to be ignored in his own time – but that that did not mean they had no agency, no power to act in an unknown future. The prophetic word, once written down, becomes a sort of historical time bomb, constantly charged and ready to explode at any moment. However, this does not mean that poems like *Queen Mab* lacked the power to act in Shelley’s own time for, though unpublished and banned in England, pirated copies of the work did circulate and the poem became quite popular among the various reform movements in England at the time (Scrivener 67).

Likewise, in “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley seems to be cognizant of his own prophetic utility and historicity, as he returns again and again to the image of dead leaves (with a clear reference to leaves as written pages) being scattered by the wind – perhaps the wind of history or prophecy. He concludes the poem with an invocation to the wind, spurring it on to carry his poetry, his thoughts, on to future generations:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,
Like wither'd leaves, to quicken a new birth;
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? (lms. 63-70)

Each image in these lines is a powerful representation of how Shelley envisions his poetry acting in history – the “dead thoughts,” and “withered leaves,” that live on after his death, live on to “quicken a new birth” and “scatter ashes and sparks” unto all mankind, a “trumpet of prophecy,” and, finally and most powerfully, the image of these thoughts, leaves, and ashes inevitably birthing spring and renewal out of winter and death. These do not sound like the words of a man concerned only with commenting on history, but instead the prophecy of a poet intent upon spreading his ideas and hope to future generations who will have the opportunity again and again to bring these prophecies into reality. This, then, is what Shelley means by labeling poets “prophets and legislators”: their words have power, they have utility, they are imbued with the power to *act*, a power that Shelley over and over again reaffirms as a power inherent in and unique to the poetic word.

This power is also inextricably bound to the processes of reading and interpretation, with which many of the Romantics were very concerned. If a text is to have life and influence after the author’s death, a theory of reading is necessary that allows the text to speak and have prophetic power. Here again, we see the important influence that theories of Biblical interpretation and transmission had upon Shelley and the other Romantics. Rasmussen uses Coleridge’s *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* to argue that Coleridge actually envisions the process of reading the Bible as a sort of “prophetic creation of meaning” (404), in which the reader, like the prophet, is inspired by the written word and must interpret or transmit the message into actual existence and action. For Coleridge, this method of reading Scripture “does not diminish but rather increases the universal authority and truthfulness of the Bible and the inspiration of the prophets: the reader’s experiences,

similar in kind to the prophet's, bear more powerful witness of the supreme authority of the Bible than any article of faith could do" (Rasmussen 406). Reading thus becomes the vehicle through which prophetic power is transmitted.

This theory of reading is useful not only for reading the Bible (which is what Coleridge is primarily concerned with) but also for reading any prophetic text. What it ultimately suggests is that the reader is part of the prophetic function, that his or her interpretation of the written word plays a part in prophetic interpretation. Balfour argues that, "Long after prophecy is officially silenced, the act of reading recapitulates and transforms it: Reading prophecy can itself attain an aura of the prophetic" (265). Thus the very act of reading prophetic poetry in the future is in some ways prophetic for it takes part in the prophetic transmission of the work by actuating the prophetic word in the present.

Through these acts, then, prophecy gains the power, not only to define the past or act in the present and future – but to do all three simultaneously. There is no denying that prophecy can have historical agency, but it becomes eviscerated if we take away its power to confront societal problems and effect change in the present. As Brueggemann makes clear in his analysis of the Old Testament prophets, their major role was to critique the "dominant consciousness" of a culture, and these critiques (while providing interesting insights into the past) also ring true in the present. Jerrold Hogle argues just this point:

We value or should value Shelley today... for how often he reveals and breaks open rigid systems of self-assessment and social hierarchy that continue to restrict the potentials of men and women.... [H]e uncovers the deeper, more mobile logic that has been forgotten... and releases that movement into verbal activity so that our minds can be reoriented toward the personal freedom to

change and the sense of equality among differences generated by truly relational thinking. (qtd. in Goldsmith 260)

Thus prophetic poetry is not strictly delineated by time or place – it spans all times and addresses all situations that are inherently unjust. It confronts the dominant cultural assumptions of any time and argues for radical change. It projects itself into a future of hope that it speaks into being through the prophetic word, withstands attempts to co-opt its message for purely aesthetic purposes, and stands against a view of poetry as strict historic artifact. It represents, as Benjamin put it, “a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance to fight for the oppressed past” (263).

The prophecy of the Bible does this by utilizing the parabolic – the specific to reference the general. It too is speaking to the present, criticizing the status quo and calling people back to God, and to future generations who will hear the prophetic word and perhaps see it fulfilled again. Thus, the futurity of prophecy is bound up not so much in the prediction of specific future events, but in the acknowledgement that history is cyclical and that oppression and injustice continue to happen again and again and that people will need to be called to repentance and action repeatedly.

Nevertheless, the futurity of prophecy is simultaneously and paradoxically bound up in a vision of hope for the future, which foresees a time when the world will be set aright, and justice will prevail. Prophetic poetry, then, is an exposition of injustice, a call to action, and a vision of hope wrapped into one. It speaks, or names, the future it wishes to see and in doing so speaks it into being. As Balfour states:

Shelley is concerned to garner for poetry something of the aura specific to prophecy. Poets as prophets may not know the form of events... but they do

know their *spirit*, which is surely the most essential thing. And more than this, the prophetic poets, insofar as their thoughts are the germs of the flowers and fruit “of latest time,” help produce the very future that they might otherwise seem merely to know in advance (39).

Thus, through prophetic poetry, the poet is able to keep the prophetic vision alive and transmit it to future generations in the hope that it will have some positive effect.

CHAPTER 6: SHELLEY'S PROPHETIC POETRY

Queen Mab, Shelley's first great prophetic poem, elucidates in poetic form many of the prophetic ideas we have discussed. In it he follows, almost to the letter, the prophetic pattern laid out earlier. He critiques the dominant consciousness of his age by pointing out the oppression and injustice created by the aligning of religion and religious sanction with power, and then energizes an alternative community by aligning himself with the marginalized community and providing it with a vision, a doxology, really, of hope.

True to its prophetic form, the poem starts out with an overview of the prophetic function in the poem. After the fairy queen Mab has awakened Ianthe from her slumber, she explains that she is "the Fairy Mab," to whom is given "the wonders of the human world to keep: / The secrets of the immeasurable past," along with "the future" (I.168-169,172). Mab, then, functions as the prophetic voice in the poem who will instruct Ianthe on the realities of the world. She explains that "the past shall rise; / Thou shalt behold the present; I will teach / The secrets of the future" (II.65-67). Like the prophecy in Isaiah 34 and 35, which I discussed earlier, Shelley is utilizing a general invocation as a means of imbuing the poem with an all-inclusive, parabolic structure, which uses a specific vision to address general societal conditions.

With this valediction, the fairy queen embarks on her survey of the past and present, which is, predictably, marred with tyranny and violence. What is interesting here is how Shelley chooses to frame the problems of oppression and injustice. Throughout the poem, he sounds a sustained note of discontent and accusation against the church and the role it plays in oppressing humankind. But it is not simply the church he is angry at, but the alliance of the church with temporal power. Often, Shelley's diatribes against king and church go side

by side and it is clear that he sees them as in league with each other. He begins several stanzas with some variation of the phrase “Kings, priests, and statesmen, blast the human flower / Even in its tender bud; their influence darts / like subtle poison through the bloodless veins / Of desolate society” (IV.104-107).

Specifically, Shelley sees the government (represented by the kings and statesman) and the church (represented by the priests) as complicit in a scheme to subjugate and plunder the poor. He writes that “War is the statesman’s game, the priest’s delight / The lawyer’s jest, the hired assassin’s trade” (IV.168-169), which is enacted simply for material gain. On the subject of commerce, he sees the economic system of the industrial revolution as something created by this two-headed power:

Commerce has set the mark of selfishness,
The signet of its all-enslaving power
Upon a shining ore, and called it gold: (V.53-55).

Thus the capitalizing impulse is what drives power to amass wealth at the expense of the many. As he wrote in his “Defence of Poetry,” the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. He expresses this same sentiment in *Mab* when he writes about the poor man:

Whose life is misery, and fear, and care;
Whom morn wakens but to fruitless toil;
Who ever hears his famished offsprings scream,
Whom their pale mother’s uncomplaining gaze
For ever meets, and the proud rich man’s eye
Flashing command, and the heart-breaking scene (V.114-119).

In and of itself, this concern for the poor and their oppression by those in power could be considered prophetic. But combine that with the identification of religion as a tool of power for repression, and the resemblance is uncanny. Remember that both Pharaoh and Solomon set up a religion of “static triumphalism” (Brueggemann 6) to justify and extend

their regime. By exercising absolute state control over religion, these rulers were able to utilize religious sanction in order to set up oppressive social policies that enriched the powerful and the expense of the masses. According to Brueggemann, “It is precisely religion that legitimates and makes possible the economics and politics that emerged [in the time of Solomon]” (30).¹ These ideas of course predate Marx, who would have heartily agreed that religion has been historically used as an instrument of oppression.

In this light, Shelley’s attack on religion is not simply a diatribe against God and organized religion, but an attack on the dominant consciousness of his day in which the church and state were not only linked but almost identical. The church in his time had gotten so far away from the principles of Jesus that he admires in his “Essay on Christianity” and had instead moved towards simple moralizing as an instrument of oppressing the people mind, body, and soul. This cold, state-controlled religion, Shelley is pointing out, is really no religion at all, just another tool in the hands of the powerful, a tool that “the tyrant tempers to his work, / wields in his wrath, and as he wills destroys” (*Shelley’s Poetry* 41).

¹ In *Mab* Shelley even identifies Solomon as an example of an oppressive ruler who utilized religion as a tool of oppression:

Behold yon sterile spot;
Where now the wandering Arab’s tent
Flaps in the desert-blast.
There once old Salem’s haughty fane
Reared high to heaven its thousand golden domes
...
Oh! many a widow, many an orphan cursed
The building of that fane; and many a father,
Worn out with toil and slavery, implored
The poor man’s God to sweep it from the earth,
And spare his children the detested task
Of piling stone on stone, and poisoning
The choicest days of life,
To soothe a dotard’s vanity (*Shelley’s Poetry* 27).

If the first half of *Mab* is a vision of the past and present in all its bloodiness, oppression, and degradation, then the second half is a doxology and revelation of future hope. After listening to the depressing catalogue of humankind's depravity, the spirit Ianthe inquires:

O Fairy! in the lapse of years,
Is there no hope in store?
Will yon vast suns roll on
Interminably, still illumining
The night of so many wretched souls,
And see no hope for them?
Will not the universal Spirit e'er
Revivify this withered limb of Heaven (VI.15-22)?

The depressing truth of the dominant consciousness has been revealed, an alternative community or resistance formed; but given the depressing reality of oppression and injustice, can there be any room for hope?

It is here that the prophetic function of energizing comes into play, and Queen Mab obliges by presenting Ianthe with a revelation of hope for a new day and a doxology of praise for the powers of nature that will fulfill it. Using her power of looking into the future, she envisions a new day in which the religious powers that have so long oppressed humankind are gone and nature has been revitalized. "How sweet a scene will earth become!" sings Mab, "Of purest spirits, a pure dwelling place, / Symphonious with the planetary spheres; / When man, with changeless nature coalescing, / Will undertake regeneration's work" (VI.39-43).

Nature, then, plays a vital role in Shelley's vision of the future. If God and religion are gone, then the organizing principle we must return to is nature, and it is for nature that he saves his highest praise in the form of several doxologies to her power. "Spirit of Nature!" Mab exalts:

all-sufficing Power,
Necessity, thou mother of the world!
Unlike the God of human error, thou
Requirest no prayers or praises; the caprice
Of man's weak will belongs no more to thee
Than do the changeful passions of his breast
To thy unvarying harmony (VI.197-203).

In this vision of nature's revitalization, everything has been reordered. In a description that clearly references the book of Revelation, Shelley writes, "The lion now forgets to thirst for blood: / There might you see him sporting in the sun / Beside the dreadless kid; / his claws are sheathed, / His teeth are harmless, custom's force has made / His nature as the nature of a lamb"(VIII.124-128). Nature itself then, is portrayed as something animate that has been harmed by human cruelty, but in this revisioning, even the most natural of enemies can play together without fear.

It does not end there, though. Not only nature will be reordered but also human beings:

Here now the human being stands adorning
This loveliest earth with taintless body and mind:
Blest from his birth with all bland impulses,
Which gently in his noble bosom wake
All kindly passions and all pure desires (VIII.198-202).

In this new world, humankind's worst impulses have been negated – war and poverty are no more and humans can live together in harmony.

This revelation of hope is given to Ianthe, who is instructed to carry it back to the world of sorrow and despair. It is a prophetically energizing vision, a vision upon which she must fix her eyes as she toils against injustice. It is a vision that no doubt can easily be criticized as idealistic, impractical, and impossible given the pragmatic realities of the world. But true prophecy will have none of this, it will not be bogged down by what the world

thinks is *possible*. It knows something the rest of society does not and presses on undaunted toward that day when the earth will be revitalized and renewed, toward that day when the alternative community of hope can be restored.

Prometheus Unbound

If *Queen Mab* is Shelley's early-life formulation of his prophetic poetics, then *Prometheus Unbound* is his more mature vision of nature reordered. In it, he specifically accesses the creation myth of Prometheus to underline the oppression of his own and future times and to prophetically sing into being a future of hope and regeneration. This future hope is also more specifically tied to the prophetic word here than in any of Shelley's other poetry. Through this poem, Shelley lays out the role that poetry, and specifically his own poetry, has to play in naming, and thus creating, a new world order.

Like *Mab*, the poem is also essentially divided into two major sections – a description of oppression (Acts I and II) and then a doxology of regeneration (Acts III and IV). Thus Shelley primarily utilizes the Prometheus myth not to retell a familiar story (as he makes clear in his own preface) but to explicate and expose current events in a new and different manner. The point is not imitation but application.

The poem begins with an image of Prometheus bound to the mountain, with only the spirits Panthea and Ione for company. From the very beginning, Prometheus is sensible that his pain and his punishment is in reality the world's pain and punishment and that, Christ-like, he bears this burden on his shoulders.

No change, no pause, no hope! – Yet I endure.
I ask the Earth, have not the mountains felt?
I ask yon Heaven – the all-beholding Sun,
Has it not seen? The Sea, in storm or calm
Heaven's ever-changing Shadow, spread below –
Have its deaf waves not heard my agony?

A me, alas, pain, pain ever, forever (I.24-30)!

In fact, as we shall see, Shelley repeatedly associates Prometheus with Christ, his torture with Christ's torture, and his freedom with Christ's regenerative work. This may seem unusual for a man so vehemently opposed to religion but, as we have already discussed, Shelley was drawn to Christ and his story as a model for societal change, even if he rejected the insidious links between the organized Church and power.

In fact, this link is strengthened soon after this passage when Jupiter, after repeating his curse on Prometheus, sends the Furies to torture and test him in a scene reminiscent of both Christ's temptation in the desert and the crucifixion. Crucifixion imagery is present throughout, with both the Chorus, Panthea, and even the Furies using it both to describe what Prometheus witnesses and to reference Prometheus himself:

CHORUS

Past ages crowd on thee, but each one remembers,
And the future is dark, and the present is spread
Like a pillow of thorns for thy slumberless head (I.561-563).

...

PANTHEA

A woeful sight – a youth
With patient looks nailed to a crucifix (I.584-585).

This imagery is later carried through when the Furies torture Prometheus with a vision of the crucified Christ – emphasizing the fact that Prometheus, as the champion of oppressed humankind, has been entrusted with the same type of work:

FURY

Behold, an emblem – those who do endure
Deep wrongs for man, and scorn and chains, but heap
Thousand-fold torment on themselves and him (I.594-596).

Thus, it is for this that Prometheus is bound to the rock, crucifix-like, and the Furies proceed to torture him, not physically, but with images of the corruption and oppression Jupiter has committed in the world because of Prometheus' binding.

The Furies even begin by emphasizing the fact that they come from a world where they have been wreaking havoc on Jupiter's orders:

FIRST FURY

We are the ministers of pain and fear
And disappointment and mistrust and hate
And clinging crimes; and as lean dogs pursue
Through wood and lake some struck and sobbing fawn,
We track all things that weep and bleed and live
When the great King betrays them to our will (I.452-457).

...

FIRST FURY

Your call was as a winged car
Driven on whirlwinds fast and far;
It rapt us from red gulphs of war –

SECOND FURY

From wide cities, famine-wasted –

THIRD FURY

Groans half heard, and blood untasted –

FOURTH FURY

Kingly conclaves, stern and cold,
Where blood with gold is bought and sold –

FIFTH FURY

From the furnace, white and hot (I.525-531).

The Furies then allow Prometheus (and Panthea, who looks on) to witness a vision of how desperate the situation in the world has become, a torture worse than anything else they could have devised. The veil (an image rife with Biblical connotations that we will return to later) of reality is torn aside and, as the Chorus says, "The pale stars of the morn / Shine on a misery dire to be borne" (I.539-540). Prometheus then sees reality in all its degradation:

SEMICHORUS 2

'Tis another's –
See how kindred murder kin!

‘Tis the vintage time for Death and Sin:
Blood, like new wine, bubbles within
Till Despair smothers
The struggling World – which slaves and tyrants win (I.572-577).

...

Panthea:

The Heaven around, the Earth below
Was peopled with thick shapes of human death,
All horrible, and wrought by human hands,
And some appeared the work of human hearts,
For men were slowly killed by frowns and smiles:
And other sights too foul to speak and live
Were wandering by. Let us not tempt worse fear
By looking forth – these groans are grief enough (I.587-592).

Thus, the key word of this vision is despair, a lack of hope – Prometheus is bound and we are allowed a glimpse of reality – wars, poverty, death, violence. All these things are attributed to the enslavement of the human mind and nature by Jupiter.

It is primarily to this enslavement of human *minds* that Shelley attributes all of the terrible things that happen on earth. In his vision of the world it is the mind, rightly ordered, that has the power to enact good – the disordered mind thus enacts evil. Thus humankind *wants* to do good but is prevented by this disordering of reality:

FURY:

In each human heart terror survives

The ravin it has gorged: the loftiest fear
All that they would disdain to think were true:
Hypocrisy and custom make their minds
The fanes of many a worship, now outworn.
They dare not devise good for man’s estate
And yet they know not that they do not dare.
The good want power, but to weep barren tears.
For the powerful goodness want: worse need for them.
The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;
And all best things are thus confused to ill.
Many are strong and rich, - and would be just, -
But live among their suffering fellow men
As if none felt – they know not what they do (I.618-631).

Once again, as well, Shelley explicitly ties Prometheus' torture with Christ's crucifixion, using the phrase "they know not what they do," which Christ uttered on the cross, and applying it to all of humanity. Humanity knows not what it does, thus it continues to oppress; it continues to do evil.

Furthermore, in this passage in particular and throughout the torture scene as a whole, Shelley consistently references the dangers of an alliance between religion and power which he speaks out so strongly against in both *Mab* and his "Essay on Christianity." "Hypocrisy and custom make their minds / The fanes of many a worship, now outworn." say the Furies and, while Christ is held up throughout this passage, the corruption of his message by the Church is emphasized often. In fact, one of the first torturous images that the Furies present is that of Christ on the cross and the perversion of his message by the Church:

One came forth, of gentle worth,
Smiling on the sanguine earth;
His words outlived him, like swift poison
 Withering up truth, peace and pity.
Look! where round the wide horizon
 Many a million-peopled city
Vomits smoke in the bright air. –
Hark that outcry of despair!
'Tis his mild and gentle ghost
 Wailing for the faith he kindled.
Look again, - the flames almost
 To a glow-worm's lamp have dwindled:
The survivors round the embers
 Gather in dread.
 Joy, Joy, Joy (I.546-560)!

Read carefully and it is clear that not only is Christ the "One," but it is after his death, when his words are twisted and misused, that they become "swift poison" and contribute to the "outcry of despair." In fact, Christ is even portrayed as "wailing for the faith he kindled," because of the way in which his message of love has been twisted into a means to power,

oppression, and injustice. Thus once again, Shelley is prophetically concerned with the ways religion is used and abused by those in power, and he makes it clear that it is this alliance that contributes so insidiously to the status quo.

In fact, this vision of the near-deseccration of Christ's message and sacrifice deeply disturbs and pains Prometheus as a Christ-like character:

Remit the anguish of that lighted stare –
Close those wan lips – let that thorn-wounded brow
Stream not with blood – it mingles with thy tears!
Fix, fix those tortured orbs in peace and death
So thy sick throes shake not that crucifix,
So those pale fingers play not with thy gore. –
O horrible! Thy name I will not speak,
It hath become a curse. I see, I see
The wise, the mild, the lofty and the just,
Whom thy slaves hate for being like to thee (I. 597-606).

What Prometheus finds so disturbing about this image is not so much the crucifixion itself but the fact that, through interpretation and manipulation, it has been made not a symbol of hope and regeneration but a curse, a tool of further oppression.

Despite these many temptations to despair, however, Prometheus repeatedly refuses to succumb. Like Christ in the desert, he throws these visions back at the Furies, lamenting the state of the world while at the same time refusing to give in to despair. Instead, he chooses to engage in hope, and it is here that we first get a glimpse of the potentiality for change wrapped up in the action of hope in the midst of despair:

Ah woe!
Ah woe! Alas! pain, pain ever, forever!
I close my tearless eyes, but see more clear
Thy works within my woe-illumined mind,
Thou subtle Tyrant!... Peace is in the grave –
The grave hides all things beautiful and good –
I am a God and cannot find it there –
Nor would I seek it. For, though dread revenge,
This is defeat, Fierce king, not victory!

The sights with which thou torturest gird my soul
With new endurance, till the hour arrives
When they shall be no types of things which are (I. 634-645).

Thus, even in the middle of pain and torture, Prometheus is able to glimpse a glimmer of hope, a constant belief that an hour will arrive when the world will be made right and things will be as they should.

It is also here, at the end of Act I, that the regeneration of the world through Prometheus is explicitly prophesied by the Spirits of the Earth:

FIRST SPIRIT
And one sound – above, around,
One sound beneath, around, above,
Was moving; 'twas the soul of love;
'Twas the hope, the prophecy,
Which begins and ends in thee (I.703-707).

The Spirits come from the earth, the world of pain and oppression that Prometheus has just witnessed, in order to prophesy the change that is coming, the change that will occur through Prometheus, a fact that he himself comes to recognize. “How fair these air-born shapes!” he exclaims, “and yet I feel / Most vain all hope but love, and thou art far” (I. 807-808). Thus this prophecy, “which begins and ends” in Prometheus, will be fulfilled through love, which Prometheus explicitly references at the end of Act I, by calling upon Asia, who becomes clearly identified with love. Prometheus calls to Asia crying, “Asia! who when my being overflowed / Wert like a golden chalice to bright wine / Which else had sunk into the thirsty dust.” (I.809-811), and “I said all hope was vain but love – thou lovest...” (I.824). Thus it is through love that hope and redemption come, and Act II is largely bound up with an explication of how this regeneration through love can be accomplished.

Much of Act II is taken up with Asia and Panthea's journey to meet Demogorgon in preparation for Jupiter's fall. Along the way, they are allowed to gain further perspective on

the evils of the world and glimpse the change to come. Eventually they reach Demogorgon himself, whom they question about Jupiter's power to enact evil in the world. Once again, Asia lays the blame squarely at Jupiter's feet:

And Jove now reigned; for on the race of man
First famine and then toil and then disease,
Strife, wounds, and ghastly death unseen before,
Fell; and the unseasonable seasons drove,
With alternating shafts of frost and fire,
Their shelterless, pale tribes to mountain caves;
And in their desert hearts fierce wants he sent
And mad disquietudes, and shadows idle
Of unreal good, which levied mutual war,
So ruining the lair wherein they raged (II.iv.49-57).

Demogorgon argues that these powers and decisions are Jupiter's and Jupiter's alone and that, "He reigns." However, at the end of Asia's explication of Jupiter's abuses of his power, Demogorgon says, "Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? – To these / All things are subject but eternal love" (II.iv.119-120). Thus the overflow of Jupiter is made possible by the love represented in Asia.

In fact, as Asia and Panthea rise with Demogorgon to overthrow the tyrant Jupiter, Panthea exclaims to Asia:

...love, like the atmosphere
Of the sun's fire filling the living world,
Burst from thee, and illumined Earth and Heaven
And the deep ocean and the sunless caves,
And all that dwells within them; till grief cast
Eclipse upon the soul from which it came:
(II.v.26-31).

To which Asia responds:

Thy words are sweeter than aught else but his
Whose echoes they are – yet all love is sweet,
Given or returned; common as light is love
And its familiar voice wearies not ever.
Like the wide Heaven, the all-sustaining air,

It makes the reptile equal to the God...
They who inspire it most are fortunate
As I am now; but those who feel it most
Are happier still, after long sufferings
As I shall soon become (II.v.38-47).

Thus love triumphs over power and oppression and, at the very beginning of Act III, Jupiter is overthrown by Demogorgon, Hercules frees Prometheus, and a new day dawns.

It is at this point in *Prometheus Unbound* that the tone shifts. No longer is Shelley critiquing the status quo – the oppression and injustice that he witnesses in the world; instead, the majority of Acts III and IV are concerned with proclaiming a new world order, of singing a doxology of hope that creates a community of resistance and resilience that will endure. The glimmers of hope in the first two acts have now come to fruition and the work of regeneration can now begin. In this Shelley mirrors his work in *Queen Mab* with one important exception. In this later, more mature work, Shelley seems to be aware of the textuality and textual history of his own writing, of the way that it will extend through time. As such, he is explicitly conscious of the way in which his words, much like Demogorgon's at the end of the poem, create the world they speak through the process of naming.

This new tone of hope that pervades the second half of the poem is evident almost immediately as the Ocean sings of the end of violence following Jupiter's fall:

Henceforth the fields of Heaven-reflecting sea
Which are my realm, will heave, unstain'd with blood
...

Tracking their path no more by blood and groans
And desolation, and the mingled voice
Of slavery and command – but by the light
Of wave-reflected flowers, and floating odours,
And music soft, and mild, free, gentle voices,
That sweetest music, - such as spirits love (III.ii.18-20, 29-34).

After this Prometheus himself, newly freed, calls upon the spirits to proclaim the new day that is rising and retires to his cave to witness the renewing of all things, beginning with the regeneration of nature, which is represented in the song of the Spirit of the Earth to Asia, Panthea, and Ione. In this song, the Spirit (who represents nature), speaks of the great pain humankind had caused her prior to Jupiter's fall, which she attributes to the ugliness of human nature that has now been lifted. In this new and regenerated nature everything has been reordered, made right – the ugly human nature has been cast off and those who had been natural enemies now live in harmony:

And that with little change of shape or hue:
All things had put their evil nature off.
I cannot tell my joy, when o'er a lake,
Upon a drooping bough with nightshade twined,
I saw two azure halcyons clinging downward
And thinning one bright bunch of amber berries
With quick long beaks, and in the deep there lay
Those lovely forms imaged as in a sky. –
So with my thoughts full of these happy changes
We meet again, the happiest change of all (III.iv.76-85).

Thus once again, as with *Mab*, Shelley utilizes the Biblical vision of lion with lamb, of halcyons turned vegetarian and un-poisonous nightshade to indicate that nature has been restored to its natural order.

This is followed by a vision of the regeneration of humankind by the Spirit of the Hour. Freed from the oppression of their evil nature and slavery to Jupiter, humankind is now altered and perfected as well. In a long speech, the Spirit first indicates that humankind is free from mental slavery:

From custom's evil taint exempt and pure;
Speaking the wisdom once they could not think,
Looking emotions once they feared to feel
And changed to all which once they dared not be,
Yet being now, made Earth like Heaven – nor pride

Nor jealously nor envy nor ill shame,
The bitterest of those drops of treasured gall,
Spoilt the sweet taste of the nepenthe, love (III.iv.156-163).

This is a common theme of much of Shelley's mature political work. Unable to speak openly of contentious political ideas, Shelley cloaks his radical politics in the underlying mythology of the poem. His goal is to not only avoid prosecution, but also to awaken the mental faculties of his readers and free them from the mental slavery that clouds their vision. As he writes in the Preface to the poem, "My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of this happiness" (*PR* 209). Thus the mental freedom and regeneration that Shelley speaks of within the poem is exactly the thing he is trying to awaken in his readers – a freedom from mental slavery that will allow them to regenerate the world through love.

The Spirit of the Hour then proceeds to expound upon freedom from yet another controlling institution of power – the alliance of religion and the state:

Those imaged to the pride of Kings and Priests
A dark yet mighty faith, a power as wide
As is the world it wasted, and are now
But an astonishment; even so the tools
And emblems of its last captivity
Amid the dwellings of the peopled Earth,
Stand, not o'erthrown, but unregarded now (III.iv.173-179).

For Shelley, a vital part of advocating for freedom from mental slavery was the destruction of the monolith of state-sanctioned religious power. As we have already witnessed, Shelley has nothing but contempt for what results when the words of Christ are taken and twisted for

political, temporal purposes. In Shelley's vision of a regenerated world, this institution has been torn down. Every human is now, as he so eloquently phrases it in his "Essay on Christianity," his or her own "magistrate and priest" (EC 214).

This sort of philosophical anarchism, where each person is in control of his or her own destiny also extends to the temporal political world in Shelley's vision of a regenerated earth. Inequality has been destroyed and a new, classless, and equal state created:

The painted veil, by those who were, called life,
Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,
All men believed and hoped, is torn aside –
The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed – but man:
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, - the King
Over himself; just, gentle, wise – but man:
Passionless? no – yet free from guilt or pain
Which were, for his will made, or suffered them,
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance and death and mutability,
The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended Heaven
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane (III.iv.190-204).

This regeneration is made possible by the overthrow of Jupiter's oppressive power and the release of Prometheus, and it is the second time in the poem that the image of a torn veil is used to indicate the relationship between Prometheus and suffering humankind. This is no coincidence for, in keeping with the Christ and crucifixion imagery that pervades the poem, the image of the torn veil bears a powerful significance for understanding this regeneration of the world through Prometheus.

In the New Testament story of Christ's crucifixion, the veil of the temple that separated the Holy of Holies, where Yahweh himself dwelled in the Ark of the Covenant, from the outer parts of the temple, was torn apart from top to bottom at the moment of

Christ's death. This operated as a symbol that the old covenant of the Old Testament had been abolished and the new covenant established. Within this new covenant, the intercession of the High Priest within the Holy of Holies was abrogated, the idea being that now, through Christ, humankind could access God directly and intercede for themselves. That Shelley chose to associate this torn veil imagery with Prometheus is fascinating given the way in which he operates within the poem. With the overthrow of Jupiter, the veil is torn aside and the possibility for human regeneration is renewed. Freed from mental and physical slavery, human beings can now partake of the new world as their own "magistrate and priest" (EC 214).

These visions by the Spirits of the Earth and the Hours lead finally into the Fourth Act of the play, which is a full-blown doxology of hope. Formally and structurally different from the rest of the poem, Act IV even reads as a song of praise that unfolds as each of the characters of the poem takes part in celebrating the new world order:

SEMICHORUS I

We have heard the lute of Hope in sleep,
We have known the voice of Love in dreams,
We have felt the wand of Power, and leap –

SEMICHORUS II

As the billows leap in the morning beams!

CHORUS

Weave the dance on the floor of the breeze,
Pierce with song Heaven's silent light,
Enchant the Day that too swiftly flees,
To check its flight, ere the cave of Night (IV.65-71).

This lengthy song of rebirth ultimately ends with Demogorgon creating a new world order through the process of naming, and it is here that Shelley starkly departs from his prior work

and where his poetry seems most distinctly prophetic for, like a prophet, he seems to be aware of the way in which his words affect reality.

Demogorgon's final song of regeneration thus ultimately functions as almost a second creation, which mirrors the three-fold rhythm of creation that Benjamin expounds upon. First Demogorgon names each of the entities of the new world which are to be made new: the earth, the moon, the sun, stars, and heavens, the dead, the "elemental Genii" or spirits, animals, plants, lightning and wind, and finally humankind. This clearly mirrors the Genesis account in that God named each entity in order. However, Shelley goes even further in making it clear that each of these elements is given its full being through this process of naming. After each of Demogorgon's invocations to the different groups, each group responds in kind with some variation of "I hear." Thus in naming, Demogorgon gives being, and by responding each group acknowledges their own actuation and renewal.

The third part of this order of creation is the second naming or the declaration of creation's goodness, which Demogorgon accomplishes in his final speech. In this incredible passage, Demogorgon acknowledges the goodness of the ideal new order he has set in place by first describing the slavery that has been overcome:

This is the Day which down the void Abyss
At the Earth-born's spell yawns Heaven's Despotism,
And Conquest is dragged captive through the Deep;
Love from its awful throne of patient power
In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour
Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,
And narrow verge of crag-like Agony, springs
And folds over the world its healing wings (IV.554-561).

Then affirming the values by which the new world will be governed:

Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance, -
These are the seals of that most firm assurance
Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;

And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
Mother of many acts and hours, should free
The serpent that would clasp her with his length, -
These are the spells by which to reassume
An empire o'er the disentangled Doom (IV.562-577).

And finally by declaring the means to salvation through hope, should the earth ever become enslaved again:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;
To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change nor falter nor repent:
This like thy glory, Titan! is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory (IV.570-578).

In doing this, Demagorgon not only performs the function of a prophet in that he creates the regenerated earth through the language of hope and the processes of creation through naming, he also participates in the uniquely Benjaminian conception of history previously discussed. In some respects, Demagorgon operates as the “angel of history,” prophesying and contextualizing the past to the present. Not only does he sing of the oppression that has occurred and the new world order he has created, he also uses this reality to predict the future. In other words, he recognizes the fact that history tends to repeat itself and that, as wonderful as this new world is, it is still corruptible. Thus by referencing the past in this speech, Demagorgon creates a true community of resistance, freedom, and hope by singing a doxology of change that will continue on into the future.

As should be abundantly clear by this point, Shelley re-works this myth not simply for his own pleasure or because of an underlying interest in mythology, but to address the injustice and oppression of his own time and to project his words into the future in creating a

community of hope and regeneration. Like Demogorgon, he creates the world he hopes to see through his words and, even though they were not read by many during his time, he projects them forward into time and, through naming, makes action possible. He likely realized that the vision he presents at the conclusion of *Prometheus Unbound* was unlikely to come to fruition during his lifetime, but nevertheless he thought it important enough to write down. Thus, as we have discussed, Shelley evidences a profound awareness of his own historicity and prophetic function – working to critique and change his own time, while holding out hope for future generations. This is where the true power of the poem lies, not in the creation of a new myth, but in the hope that myth can transform reality.

The Mask of Anarchy

Queen Mab and *Prometheus Unbound* are both vital to understanding how Shelley dealt with the underlying problems of human society in general and proposed solutions. *The Mask of Anarchy*, on the other hand, is a fascinating prophecy against the very specific socio-political realities of his day, which are embodied in the Peterloo Massacre. In the poem, Shelley performs a radical turn in which he figures the king, the government, and the church as Anarchy and then tears down this configuration with the power of hope and liberty. Understanding how he enacts this turn thus becomes a key to understanding how Shelley conceived of his own role in history and how he was able to utilize specific societal events (as opposed to the detached abstractions of *Mab* and *Prometheus*) to address more general problems across time.

The poem begins with explicit references to political figures and situations of Shelley's day, referencing the debates over Parliamentary reform, the Corn Laws, and specific oppressive figures of his time. Thus, from the very beginning of the poem, he is

setting up the dominant consciousness of the rich and powerful that he will then react against in the rest of the poem. Murder is the figure for Lord Castlereagh, the Foreign Secretary and a key Tory leader. Fraud is the Lord Chancellor who denied Shelley custody of his children. Hypocrisy is Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary who was involved in suppressing and pacifying the increasingly poor and restless workforce (*Shelley's Poetry* 316-317). Finally comes Anarchy, the greatest and most terrible figure of them all. Here is how Shelley describes him:

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

And he wore a kingly crown,
And in his grasp a scepter shone;
On his brow this mark I saw –
“I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!”

With a pace stately and fast,
Over English land he past,
Trampling to a mire of blood
The adoring multitude (30-41).

Anarchy, then, is not chaos in Shelley's construction, but the King and the power he represents. For, Anarchy knows that “the Palaces / Of our Kings” are rightly his,” along with “the Bank and Tower,” and “his pensioned Parliament” (78-79, 83, 85). Instead of working for the common good, he is working against it, trampling them into a “mire of blood.”

Opposed to this dominant consciousness, Shelley proposes one of freedom. After Hope has defeated Anarchy, she launches into her “Men of England” speech in which she defines slavery – the poverty and oppression that characterized the life of the common English laborer – and she explains what true liberty looks like:

For the labourer though art bread,
And a comely table spread
From his daily labour come
In a neat and happy home

Though art clothes and fire, and food
For the trampled multitude –
No – in countries that are free
Such starvation cannot be
As in England now we see (217-225)

...
Though art Justice – ne'er for gold
May thy righteous laws be sold
As laws are in England – thou
Shield'st alike the high and low (230-233).

Liberty, then, defines the alternative consciousness that Shelley is attempting to create in this poem. It defines itself against the logic of oppression and injustice perpetrated by the people at the beginning of the poem and those involved in the Peterloo massacre. And finally, it is a vision of an England that is free from policies that disenfranchise and alienate the workers upon which the economy depends.

The similarities between Brueggemann's framework and *The Mask of Anarchy* go even further than critiquing the dominant consciousness, however. The conception of liberty, so vital to the poem, is something that Brueggemann talks about at length. For Brueggemann, the freedom of God is constantly striving against a royal consciousness that attempts to hold God captive for its own purposes. Solomon sought to hold God captive for his own purposes; likewise the rulers of England sought to impose restrictive social sanctions for their own selfish gain. True prophecy strives to break down the language of triumphalism and control – to tear down any structure that stands in the way of freedom. God could not be constrained by mere human forces or political will; likewise Shelley seems to be saying that liberty cannot be constrained by Anarchy and his companions or even the bayonets of an

oncoming army. At the end of her address to the “Men of England,” Hope bids them “Stand ye calm and resolute,” and continues that “if the tyrants dare,” to “let them ride among you there, / Slash, and stab, and main, and hew, – / What they like, that let them do” (319, 340-343). For even if they are slain, liberty will have won a moral victory and it cannot be constrained forever.

Finally, we cannot ignore the central figure of Hope in the poem and the vital role she plays in not only dismantling the dominant consciousness of oppression but also in energizing an alternative community of resistance. Her very name suggests that she is involved in lifting up a people without hope, a people ravaged by tyranny and oppression. Her placement as a figure responding to the massacre at Peterloo, suggests that she is intended to provide hope not just to the characters in the poem, but to real people in England in a real temporal space. Her vision is one of power and hope to a marginalized people. She gives them a vision of liberty that, even though it may seem far off, is still present. And she gives them power in the very fact of their numbers. The final statement of the poem could not be more hopeful or more energizing:

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number –
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you –
Ye are many – they are few (368-372).

There is also incredible energy in this poem due to the fact that it was addressed to a more popular audience than much of Shelley’s other work (Wolfson 724). Even though its publication was delayed due to his publisher’s concern over its radical content, it nonetheless became a rallying cry for the reform movement after its publication. Thus this poem seems to be an example of a prophetic work with quantifiable agency – a work of art that inspired

and may continue to inspire actual action in the world, and this fact is a testament to the power of its critique and the energy of its prophetic vision.

CHAPTER 7: SHELLEY'S POLITICS AND PROSE

Despite, or perhaps because of, these many trends linking Shelley to the prophetic tradition, a common criticism of his poetry (and that of prophets in general) is that it is nothing but starry-eyed utopianism with little grounding in practical reality. On the surface, this may seem to be true; however, this misconception mainly springs from the misconceptions about the nature of prophecy that this study is meant to combat. For, just as prophecy is two-pronged in that it addresses both present and future, this very characteristic also allows it to speak to both the possible *and* the practical simultaneously. Much of Shelley's prophetic poetry, which we have just examined, operates within this realm of the possible – painting the current oppression of the world in broad strokes and then envisioning a future time of perfection when this oppression will cease. It is often to these poems that critics point when they accuse Shelley of impracticality, the very same thing the Old Testament prophets were accused of. However, a study of Shelley's prose, and specifically his longer essays, "A Philosophical View of Reform," the "Essay on Christianity," and "A Defence of Poetry," clearly show that Shelley also carries through the prophetic strain of practicality. Far from being misty-eyed idealism, both of these essays prophetically face the problems of the world – both in the England of the early nineteenth century and the present day – head on and offer real world, practical, and reasonable solutions that still ring true today.

That prose rather than poetry should, for Shelley, prove to be a more suitable vehicle for this more practical form of prophecy should come as no surprise given his life-long ambition to garner for poetry, as Balfour puts it, "something of the aura specific to prophecy." As we have amply witnessed in our discussions of some of Shelley's most

prophetic poems, they are heavily concerned with abstract notions of justice, truth, nature, hope, and love. Poetry, for Shelley, represented the proper, elevated sphere through which these sentiments could be communicated – the Platonic ideal forms, if you will – that then impress themselves on the readers' minds. As I have already discussed, Shelley's Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* makes it quite clear that he means for his poetry to be concerned with these universal ideas of love and hope which, ultimately, will free humankind from mental slavery.

Shelley's prose, however, is very different and though he is doubtless a brilliant essayist, it is clear that he conceives of his prose work as possessive of a different prophetic and social function. It is still meant to speak to the general populace, still meant to convey truth and prompt change, but its very form dictates its content. In other words, just as poetry is uniquely suited to the expression of abstract ideals so prose, for Shelley, is ideally suited for the communication of specific and practical modes of social change and empowerment. As he writes in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, poetry is not the place for political pamphleteering:

Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse.... Should I live to accomplish what I purpose, that is, to produce a systematical history of what appear to me to be the genuine elements of human society, let not the advocates of injustice and superstition flatter themselves that I should take Aeschylus rather than Plato as my model (*PR* 209).

Thus, much like the division between the practical and the possible that Shelley delineates within his essays, it is clear he prefers the poetic and the possible, while recognizing the necessity of the practical.

Further emphasizing this apparent divide between the generic purposes behind poetry and prose is a letter dated November 6, 1819, in which Shelley writes of his prose essay “A Philosophical View of Reform,” “I have deserted the odorous gardens of literature to journey across the great sandy desert of Politics; not, you may imagine, without the hope of finding some enchanted paradise” (II.529). The difference in function between poetry and prose is strictly delineated for Shelley and, though both can and do certainly act prophetically, it is clear that he prefers the “odorous gardens” of prophetic poetic possibility to the more rough and tumble world of political prose. If he could have accomplished his goals solely through the regeneration of the human mind through poetry, no doubt he would have done so – but reality and practicality dictated that he “journey across the great sandy desert of Politics” via prose.

Recognizing as he did the necessity of practical, real-world solutions to the problems facing England, Shelley does utilize his prodigious skills as an essayist to perform this second, more practical half of the prophetic function. In “A Philosophical View of Reform” (like much of his work not published until long after his death), Shelley clearly and concisely lays out the political history and condition of England and then suggests incremental and cogent measures for reform. Like a prophet, he always has in view the vision of a perfected future, which he so beautifully portrays in the poems, but at the same time is constantly aware of the progressive nature of political and societal change. For example, in a section expounding the desirability of complete equality (the underlying concern of all of Shelley’s

political thought) he eloquently lays out his vision of the future which may be accomplished, if not by him, then by his children and their children:

Equality in possessions must be the last result of the utmost refinements of civilization; it is one of the conditions of that system of society towards which with whatever hope of ultimate success, it is our duty to tend. We may and ought to advert to it as to the elementary principle, as to the goal, unattainable perhaps by us, but which, as it were, we revive in our posterity to pursue. *We derive tranquility and courage and grandeur of soul from contemplating an object which is, because we will it, and may be because we hope and desire it, and must be if succeeding generations of the enlightened sincerely and earnestly seek it* (253-254, italics mine).

Thus in lines nearly as beautiful as his poetry, Shelley makes it clear that he is aiming for this possible perfection, yet the very next paragraph is firmly grounded in political reality, in the fact that this vision takes time and effort to achieve and that compromise will be necessary along the way. Specifically, he notes that “our present business is with the difficult and unbending realities of actual life, and when we have drawn inspiration from the great object of our hopes it becomes us with patience and resolution to apply ourselves to accommodating our theories to immediate practice” (254). Shelley is clearly concerned with both the possible and the practical – speaking to both the future and the present simultaneously, and the bulk of these essays are taken up with dealing substantively with these issues.

But what exactly are these pressing problems that Shelley both attacks and seeks solutions for? Throughout both his poetry and prose, they can be split into three separate but

interrelated categories: economic concerns, established religion concerns, and temporal power concerns – all of which are addressed by the Old Testament prophets as well.

Economic concerns are, without a doubt, at the forefront of Shelley’s socio-political agenda. The England of the Industrial Revolution had undergone immense and rapid economic development and the socio-political structures of the country had largely failed to keep pace – leaving many people, including children, in deplorable conditions. Furthermore, this economic development had largely benefited a small and select group of the aristocracy, who had become immensely wealthy utilizing the labor of the poor while sharing little of the benefit with the rest of society. As I have already discussed, economic injustice was one of the Old Testament prophets primary concerns – the social and economic conditions of ancient Israel, though not affected by the Industrial Revolution, nonetheless were characterized by an underlying inequality that enriched the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Take, for example, the prophet Amos, who rails against the injustice and abuse inherent in society:

This is what the Lord says: “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines (Amos 2:6-8).

And Amos is not alone; almost every single Old Testament prophet, without exception, rails against the oppression of the powerful – exposing it as a trademark of a people who had turned away from Yahweh.

Compare this to Shelley who, throughout his prose works, consistently exposes the reality of England's economic prosperity. This is the absolute foundation to all of his political thought – an awareness of the inequality inherent in society and a realization that this is not how the world is meant to be. For, though Shelley is consistent in his rejection of a personal god, he nevertheless possesses a highly developed sense of the evil inherent in human nature, its effects on society as a whole, and the necessity of not only a political, but what he terms a moral regeneration. Take, for example, his detailed account of the economic reality of industrial England in “A Philosophical View of Reform”:

Since the institution of the double aristocracy, however, they [the poor] have often worked not ten but twenty hours a day. Not that all the poor have rigidly worked twenty hours, but that the worth of the labor of twenty hours now, in food and clothing, is equivalent to the worth of ten hours then. And because twenty hours' labor cannot, from the nature of the human frame, be exacted from those who before performed ten, the aged and the sickly are compelled either to work or starve. Children who were exempted from labor are put in requisition, and the vigorous promise of the coming generation blighted by premature exertion. For fourteen hours' labor which they do perform, they receive – no matter in what nominal amount – the price of seven. They eat less bread, wear worse clothes, are more ignorant, immoral, miserable, and desperate. This, then is the condition of the lowest and largest

class from whose labor the whole materials of life are wrought, of which the others are only the receivers or consumers. (246)

This, then, is the price of England's rising prosperity and power – upon this it is grounded and built and throughout this essay Shelley is insistent that those who perform the labor, who do the work, should have a greater share in the reward, instead of the landed aristocracy who have no part in producing the labor.

This massive inequality between the majority workers and the minority aristocracy is, for Shelley, at the heart of what is wrong with England. Furthermore, he blames the institution of credit (as opposed to the gold standard) and the use of this credit to run up the national debt (thus again saddling the working populace with even more labor) for much of this inequality. He states that, “The majority [of] the people of England are destitute and miserable, ill-clothed, ill-fed, ill-educated” (247). Furthermore, he writes that “the cause of this peculiar misery is the unequal distribution which, under the form of the national debt, has been surreptitiously made of the products of their labor and the products of the labor of their ancestors; for all property is the produce of labor” (247). For this Shelley clearly blames the government and goes on to suggest specific measures for gradual progress towards a society in which labor, property, and wealth are distributed more equally.

The overriding problem with the national debt is that these massive sums of money were borrowed by the wealthy few to fight wars in which the poor died, and then the money was expected to be paid back by the poor. After the abolishment of the property tax, naturally the majority of the tax burden fell on those who had to pay consumption taxes on goods and services (Dawson 167). Thus the poor became responsible for both fighting and paying for the wars of the rich. To solve this problem, Shelley proposes a restructuration of

taxation that would instead tax people based on what they earned or the property they possessed, thus compelling the rich to negotiate payment for their own expenditure:

One of the first acts of a reformed government would undoubtedly be an effectual scheme for compelling these [persons of property] to compromise their debt between themselves. When I speak of persons of property I mean not every man who possesses any right to property; I mean the rich. Every man whose scope in society has a plebeian and intelligible utility, whose personal exertions are more valuable to him than his capital... It is the interest of all these persons as well as that of the poor to insist upon the payment of the principal. For this purpose the form ought to be as simple and succinct as possible. The operations deciding who was to pay, at what time, and how much, and to whom are divested of financial chicanery, problems readily to be determined. The common tribunals may possess a legal jurisdiction to award the proportion due upon the several claim of each (250).

The basis of this proposal is what we know today as the graduated income tax – those who have more, pay more. This may seem common sense today, but to propose such a system at the time was quite radical. In essence, Shelley is laying out a concrete measure for reform, a step towards more complete equality. For if the rich pay for their own wars, if they pay for the debt they incur, the poor will thus have more to spend on the necessities of life. Once again, it is not a perfect solution, but a step in the right direction.

The “Defence of Poetry,” though slightly less practical than “A Philosophical View of Reform,” nevertheless faces the economic problems of the Industrial Revolution head-on and suggests some striking solutions that deal, not with physical conditions, but with the

underlying cultural and moral fabric of society. In fact, Shelley himself seems to delineate a dominant consciousness of the age that his poetics is a reaction against. This is a consciousness specifically influenced by the economic logic of the Industrial Revolution and expressed by Thomas Love Peacock in his *Four Ages of Poetry*. Peacock argues that poetry “can never make a philosopher or a statesman, nor in any class of life an useful or rational man. It cannot claim the slightest share in any one of the comforts and utilities of life of which we have witnessed so many and so rapid advances [i.e. the Industrial Revolution]” (17). Because of this, poetry, in Peacock’s mind, becomes almost useless. He claims, “There are more good poems already existing than are sufficient to employ that portion of life which any mere reader and recipient of poetical impressions should devote to them, and these having been produced in poetical times, are far superior in all the characteristics of poetry to the artificial reconstructions of a few morbid ascetics in unpoetical times” (17).

Shelley summarizes this dominant consciousness in his “Defence” and then argues that this logic cannot prevail:

We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practise; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies.... We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest (530).

Shelley’s reasoning is strikingly similar to the prophet’s attack on the royal consciousness, namely that this consciousness, based solely on economic and industrial logic,

manifests itself as oppressive and unjust social policy in which the powerful enrich themselves at the expense of the poor. In his mind, the poet is a vital combatant in the battle against the alienation of labor. Speaking of the economic disparity in England caused by the industrial revolution, he writes:

Whilst the mechanist abridges, and the political economist combines, labor, let them beware that their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination, do not tend, as they have in modern England, to exasperate at once the extremes of luxury and want. They have exemplified the saying; "To him that hath, more shall be given; and from him that hath not the little that he hath shall be taken away." The rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism. Such are the effects which must ever flow from an unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty. (DP 529)

To Shelley, one of the only things that can mitigate this never-ending march towards disaster is poetry, thus "The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature. The body has then become too unwieldy for that which animates it" (DP 531).

Thus it is from this sensibility that Shelley derives his famous dictum that poets are the prophets and legislators of the world, for it is poetry and the underlying cultural movements it represents that subtly move within history. In parallel passages in both the

“Defence of Poetry,” and “A Philosophical View of Reform,” Shelley includes the sentiment that poets and poetry possess a real power to alter reality:

But even whilst they [those in power] deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve, the Power which is seated upon the throne of their own soul. It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the *mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present*, the words which express what they understand not, the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World (DP 535, PR 240, italics mine).

Once again, Shelley clearly identifies himself and poets in general with the prophetic – the ability to speak to the present of the future, or the possible future, if the status quo is not altered, if the unequal power dynamic alive in England at the time is not reformed.

Furthermore, the second to last sentence in this passage makes it clear that Shelley is fully aware of this two-fold nature of writing. He says that poets are “the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts on the present.” In other words, poets hold out the future to the present, but also simultaneously reflect the future to itself.

As strange as it might seem this is not a primarily idealistic notion, but a practical one. For Shelley, the work of the poet and writer is to create a consciousness of this disparity and thus promote change. His own “Mask of Anarchy” is an excellent example, as is *Queen Mab*, for, though never officially published during his lifetime, it was widely available in pirated form and became a defining document for the early socialist movement in England (Scrivener 67). Furthermore, at the end of “A Philosophical View of Reform,” Shelley calls on the writers and poets of his age, Godwin, Hazlitt, Bentham, and Hunt, to take up their pens in opposition to the dominant hierarchy, to use their powers of language to call for and inspire change, arguing:

These appeals of solemn and emphatic argument from those who have already a predestined existence among posterity would appal the enemies of mankind by their echoes from every corner of the world in which the majestic literature of England is cultivated; it would be like a voice from beyond the dead of those who will live in the memories of men, when they must be forgotten; it would be Eternity warning Time (259).

Here again, Shelley is constantly aware of the relationship of the poet and writer with both present and future political reality. His call is to take action in the here and now, to utilize the writings of the most respected English thinkers to push for change, but he is also clearly aware that their words will echo throughout history, long after they are in the grave.

Considering Shelley’s own meditations about the role *his* words would have in history, it should thus come as no surprise that he views language and writing as possessing inherent power because they contain the potentiality for action in both present and future times.

Throughout both his poetry and prose, Shelley is also prophetically concerned with the abuse of religious power and authority. Specifically, as I have already mentioned, he is wary of state-established religion and the abuses this always engenders. To him Christ's radical message of love had been destroyed and trampled on by a church that had little regard or care for loving the oppressed and marginalized as Christ commanded, and instead cared only for gaining political power. Thus the church that called itself "Christian" was really nothing of the sort, just a socio-political institution backed up with religious sanction.

Though these concerns are amply represented in Shelley's poetry, it is in his essays that we really get a sense of the extent to which he recognized this issue as a major societal problem. The essays are also useful for understanding the distinction that Shelley makes between Christ (whom he admired) and Christianity (which he despised). In his "Essay on Christianity," Shelley argues that Christ "tramples upon all received opinions, on all the cherished luxuries and superstitions of mankind. He bids them cast aside the chains of custom and blind faith by which they have been encompassed from the very cradle of their being, and become the imitators and ministers of the Universal God" (200). He then proceeds to successively outline both Christ's key doctrines and the ways they have been ignored by the Church. Christ's commands to love enemies, not to value material possessions, share everything, and to care for the poor are all covered – as are his followers' consistent failures to do any of these things. He grants that the first disciples attempted to carry out this vision but says that "after the transitory glow of enthusiasm had faded from the minds of men, precedent and habit resumed their empire, broke like a universal deluge on one shrinking and solitary island" (212), and things returned to how they were, with the rich jealously guarding their money and power.

This state of affairs, in Shelley's mind, led directly to the state-established church which, under the guise of following Christ's teaching, actually took every opportunity to subvert them. In fact, Shelley argues that the doctrines of Christ actually lead to freedom and the moral regeneration necessary for a reformed, just, and equal society, whereas the established church made it a point to oppose these reforms at every turn and jealously guard their rights and privileges to power:

The doctrines [of Christ] indeed, in my judgment, are excellent and strike at the root of moral evil. If acted upon, no political or religious institution could subsist a moment. Every man would be his own magistrate and priest; the change so long desired would have attained its consummation, and man exempt from the external evils of his own choice would be left free to struggle with the physical evils which exist in spite of him. But these are the very doctrines which, in another shape, the most violent asserters of Christianity denounce as impious and seditious; who are such earnest champions for social and political disqualification as they? This alone would be a demonstration of the falsehood of Christianity, that the religion so called is the strongest ally and bulwark of that system of force and fraud and of the selfish passions from which it has derived its origin and permanence, against which Jesus Christ declared the most uncompromising war, and the extinction of which appears to have been the great motive of his life (214).

State-sponsored religion naturally fights any movement for equality or justice because such a movement is actually a threat to its authority. Nevertheless, as Shelley makes clear, Christ's teachings are remarkably consistent in calling for the overthrow of such systems of tyranny

and the establishment of a system where every person would be his or her “own magistrate and priest.”

Likewise, in “A Philosophical View of Reform,” Shelley attributes much of the institution of unjust social institutions on the perversion of, or outright disregard for, Christ’s teachings by his professed followers:

That superstition which has *disguised itself under the name of the religion of Jesus* subsisted under all its forms, even where it had been separated from those things especially considered as abuses by the multitude, in the shape of intolerant and oppressive hierarchies. Catholics massacred Protestants and Protestants proscribed Catholics, and extermination was the sanction of each faith within the limits of the power of its professors. The New Testament is in everyone’s hand, and *the few who ever read it* with the simple sincerity of an unbiased judgment may perceive *how distinct from the opinions of any of those professing themselves establishers were the doctrines and actions of Jesus Christ* (232, italics mine).

In this essay, then, Shelley locates the abuses of church power within a specific historical context – calling up still raw tensions between the two major established churches and even specifically referencing church leaders who fostered division instead of harmony.

Throughout the essay, Shelley instead takes every opportunity to highlight the fact that Christ and his teachings are on the side of the poor and clearly advocate reform. He argues that the fundamental principle of reform is the “natural equality of men,” and that this “equality in possessions which Jesus Christ so passionately taught is a moral rather than a political truth and is such as social institutions cannot without mischief inflexibly secure”

(253). By emphasizing this point, along with the fact that the established church opposed these reforms, Shelley is thus able to move the issue of political reform into the moral sphere, which he considered vitally important. In the same passage he remarks that, “Morals and politics can only be considered as portions of the same science, with relation to a system of absolute perfection as Christ and Plato and Rousseau... have asserted.... Equality in possessions must be the last result of the utmost refinements of civilization” (253). By emphasizing the moral quality of political reform and highlighting Christ’s emphasis on equality that directly contradicts the thinking of established Christianity, Shelley is thus able to move the question of political reform into a whole new realm. He is able to navigate the dangerous waters of political and religious issues without losing sight of either the political *or* religious implications of reform. Unlike many reformers who have come after him, Shelley fully realizes the necessity of a moral regeneration like the one Christ propagates in the New Testament, but he is able to effectively separate this regeneration from the taint of established religion.

Throughout his work, Shelley also speaks out again and again against the abuses of temporal political power that contrive to keep the populace in a state of subservience to the privileged few. Specifically, he targets Parliamentary Reform and suffrage as the primary means through which a more equal distribution of political power can be achieved. At this time in England’s history, the population had begun to explode and the demographic distribution of the nation was rapidly changing. Workers were flocking to industrial cities like Manchester to find jobs, while formerly bustling rural villages were decimated. Despite this, representation in the House of Commons was still determined by the old population and demographic figures; thus a city like Manchester had almost no representation, while a

sparsely populated rural district had an inordinate amount. According to Shelley, the inequality was such that between 1641 (the overthrow of Charles I) and 1688 (the Glorious Revolution) the proportion of the represented to representatives increased from one to eight to one to twenty; and from 1688 to 1819 (when Shelley was writing) to one to many hundreds (PR 242).

Furthermore, the number of people who possessed the right to vote, even under this flawed system, was relatively small – limited to adult, male, land-owners – thus even the more “representative” House of Commons mainly represented the interests of the middle class, not the majority of the working poor. Add to this the power of the aristocratic House of Lords and the monarchy, and it is clear that the common working person had extremely limited power to effect political reality. In fact, Shelley argues that, following the Glorious Revolution, what was really instituted was an oligarchy of the rich – with both the weakened monarchy and the wealthy parliament conspiring together against the interests of the poor. “The power which has increased therefore is the [pow]er of the rich,” writes Shelley, “The name and office of king is merely the mask of this power and is a kind of stalking-horse used to conceal these ‘catchers of men,’ while they lay their nets” (243). Thus, while the absolute monarchy (to the extent there ever really was one in England) was abolished, Shelley argues that the oligarchy that took its place was actually worse because, “an oligarchy of this nature exacts more of suffering from the people because it reigns both by the opinion generated by imposture and the force which that opinion places within its grasp” (243). In other words, such a government is able to masquerade as a democracy, working for the good of the people when, in reality, it continues to work only for the benefit of those with money or power.

This political situation in England thus makes up another crucial part of Shelley's proposals in "A Philosophical View of Reform," for it is only through the reform of these representative institutions and the extension of suffrage rights that common people would be able to obtain more real political power and thus alter the status quo. In the third section of the essay, Shelley thus calls for a measured and incremental reform of the House of Commons to make it a truly representative body, the expansion of suffrage rights, and electoral reform (arguing that MP's should be elected openly instead of by secret ballot) (253-254). Above all, he argues that "the great principle of reform consists in every individual of mature age and perfect understanding giving his consent to the institution and the continued existence of the social system which is instituted for his advantage and for the advantage of others in his situation" (253). In other words, every person who has a stake in society should have a voice in how it is run. To those who would object to this reform, Shelley notes that "The aristocracy and those who unite in their own persons the vast privileges conferred by the possession of inordinate wealth are sufficiently represented by the House of Peers [Lords] and by the King" (254); thus if England is to be a truly democratic country, the mass of the people still need to be represented.

Throughout all of this Shelley maintains a note of measured practicality and moderation. For example, he does not call for the overthrow of the monarchy or the peerage system or recommend extending suffrage to women. It is entirely possible, in fact likely, that he aims for these goals, but he also fully realizes that such radical reforms take time and must occur incrementally – he is not willing to let the perfect become the enemy of the good. In fact, he has harsh words for those who would oppose some reform in favor of the perfect state for which Shelley himself continues to aim:

But nothing is more idle than to reject a limited benefit because we cannot without great sacrifices obtain an unlimited one. We might thus reject a representative republic, if it were obtainable, on the plea that the imagination of man can conceive of something more absolutely perfect. Towards whatsoever we regard as perfect, undoubtedly it is no less our duty than it is our nature to press forward; this is the generous enthusiasm which accomplishes not indeed the consummation after which it aspires, but one which approaches it in a degree far nearer than if the whole powers had not been developed by a delusion. It is in politics rather than in religion that faith is meritorious. (256, italics mine)

Thus, as long as those in power are willing to negotiate, Shelley advocates compromise for the greater good of the nation while still keeping the perfect solution he imagines in poetry like *Prometheus Unbound* in view. He realizes that a utopia will not happen overnight – it will take hard work and the gradual regeneration of humankind’s moral nature. It is to that end that he urges people to work, all the while taking into account present political reality.

Finally, Shelley leaves his readers with a concrete course of action should their best efforts to work within the system fail. In a passage that anticipates the non-violent writings of Tolstoy and the philosophy of Gandhi, Shelley elucidates a powerful argument for non-violent resistance that operates almost as his prose extension of the sentiments he expresses in “The Mask of Anarchy.” In this section he instructs his readers to avoid retaliation or resistance, if faced with the threat of violence, arguing, “the soldier [attacking] is a man and an Englishman. This unexpected reception would probably throw him back upon a recollection of the true nature of the measures of which he was made an instrument, and the

enemy might be converted into the ally” (257). And in fact history has borne out the theory that passive resistance is a most effective tool for change, especially in civil conflicts, and Shelley seems to be light-years ahead of his time in suggesting this as an instrument of change. No doubt he had the Peterloo massacre in mind when he wrote these lines.

At the very end of “A Philosophical View of Reform,” Shelley does leave open the door for violent resistance to oppression, arguing that if all else fails it might be necessary. His view of insurrection, however, is firmly rooted in the right of a people to resist tyranny. “The right of insurrection is derived from the employment of armed force to counteract the will of the nation,” he writes, “Let the government disband the standing army, and the purpose of resistance would be sufficiently fulfilled by the incessant agitation of the points of dispute before the courts of common law” (259). This right is, of course, a deeply rooted idea throughout English history. Remember, this is the country that first forced the King to sign the Magna Carta in 1215, overthrew and executed another in 1649, and overthrew yet another in 1688 – setting up William and Mary only after exacting even more compromises from them. Thus Shelley is not alone in believing that the mass of the people should have the right to alter their government if that government is not acting in the best interests of the nation. However, he also makes it clear that this should only be a final resort and that civil war is an evil to be avoided at all costs. In fact, the essay ends with a lengthy exposition on the evils of war in general, which makes it abundantly clear that this is not the ideal solution or means for change.

Above all, the final goal towards which Shelley is aiming throughout his poetry and political prose is the regeneration of the human spirit. Though often claimed, both in his day and ours by socialist movements, in reality Shelley is closer to a philosophical anarchist. As

any cursory glance at his work makes clear, he is deeply suspicious of any large concentration of power exerting influence over the individual. Instead what he is really aiming for is a society in which every man and woman is his or her own “magistrate and priest,” and possesses the power and means to control his or her own destiny. This is only possible, however, when this broader moral regeneration takes place and after years of the types of incremental reforms he posits in his essays. We may never completely reach this state, and yet Shelley views it as his role as both prophet and poet to dare to hope that it *might* happen.

Thus, what Shelley is really striving to do through both his poetry and prose is to set up language in direct opposition to the unjust economics, religion, and politics of the industrial revolution. Poetry, for Shelley, is a tool whereby an alternative consciousness can be tracked and created in the world at large, an alternative consciousness that both attacks the dominant consciousness of the day and of ages to come; and which energizes this alternative community, providing it with the hope that, one day, they will be able to look back on events like the Peterloo massacre as ancient history – drowned out by the light of freedom, justice, and compassion. In other words, in becoming a legislator and prophet, Shelley aims to become a “voice from beyond the dead of those who will live in the memories of men” (PR 259).

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Through his poetry and prose, Shelley seeks to carve out for the poet a vital and living role in society. Throughout the course of his career, Shelley was poet, prophet, and legislator, leaving behind a body of writings that continues to speak today. Nonetheless, further study of these characteristics in Shelley's life and work is necessary for several reasons. First of all, the scope of this study prohibited delving deeply into Shelley's day-to-day life and the development of his political and philosophical thought. An in-depth study of his correspondence would, no doubt, be useful in tracking the development of the sensibilities that come to be expressed practically in his prose and more abstractly in his poetry. Likewise, further study of a broader range of Shelley's poetry would be beneficial for constructing a sense of the full scope of his prophetic vision.

Second, as I have mentioned before, further study is desperately needed into the connections between theology and Romantic poetry in general. This branch of inquiry has been unjustly ignored for far too long, and Biblical scholarship and literary theory must be put into conversation once again. Specifically, the question of Shelley's religious beliefs and Biblical influences needs to be revisited in far more depth. For some time now, the question of Shelley's personal faith has been regarded as settled in the bulk of the scholarly literature on the subject. This is, I believe, a mistake for, though there is no question that Shelley was not a "Christian" in the sense that we have come to understand, as Shelley himself made clear the distinction between Christ and the interpretation of his teachings by his followers is stark. Thus, the question of Shelley's religion and religious influences is more rightly placed within the ongoing theological debate over what (if anything) truly constitutes Christianity.

If we are both aware of and contribute to this conversation as literary scholars, it is thus likely that our conceptions of thinkers like Shelley will be altered.

Ultimately this is important for, as I hope this study has made clear, when we open the field of scholarly inquiry to include the scholarship and debates occurring in other disciplines, we are thus provided with a new set of lenses through which to examine literary texts. We cannot simply make assumptions about Shelley's religious influences absent any knowledge of the texture of the Romantic religious landscape or of the religious debates that have raged from then till now. We must be willing to put the two into vital conversation.

Luckily, the grounds for this dialogue have already been laid. As I mentioned in the literature review, the last five to ten years have witnessed a renewal of interest in religious studies and literature. Ian Balfour's *Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* is absolutely foundational in this respect, and any new study of the Romantics and religion must run through him. Nevertheless, though Balfour provides the framework for any current discussion of Romanticism and the Bible, his book actually opens the field to further analysis and discussion well beyond the margins of his pages.

Stephen Prickett is also one of the leading voices of this revival of interest in religion, scripture, and literary texts. For over thirty years, even when it was considered anathema within the academy, Prickett has advocated for a vital and living dialogue between the Biblical text, literature, and specifically the Romantics. His contention that we cannot truly understand the Romantic poets until we understand the Biblical texts and the religious climate of 18th century England should be a call to action for any student of religion or Romanticism. Once again, however, there is still much work to be done, specifically in understanding how Biblical hermeneutics affected and continue to affect literary analysis.

Hopefully this study has cast just a glimmer of light on some of these issues and perhaps advanced discussions of Shelley, the Romantics, and religion just a millimeter. More study certainly could be conducted for, as we have seen, P. B. Shelley was a truly prophetic poet who utilized the poetic form to criticize and dismantle the dominant consciousness of his time and then energize an alternative community of hope and resistance against it. In place of this dominant consciousness he consistently sets up an ideal of freedom and justice that is incredibly consistent with the Old Testament prophetic tradition. From “The Defence of Poetry” and the essays to *Queen Mab*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and his prophetic poetry, he remains consistent in his desire to see society change for the better and in his belief that the poet can help effect that change. As Mary Shelley wrote in her edition of Shelley’s collected poems, “These characteristics breathe throughout his poetry. The struggle for human weal; the resolution firm to martyrdom; the impetuous pursuit; the glad triumph in good; the determination not to despair. Such were the features that marked those of his works which he regarded with most complacency, as sustained by a lofty subject and useful aim” (*Poetical Works* I:vii-viii).

And it is these unique characteristics that continue to make Shelley’s work so engaging and relevant today. His work *does* have a living and breathing history, just as he had hoped, and his words continue to speak and act today, especially in a time of increasing economic disparity, war, and the financial meltdown of a system of credit so immense Shelley could not even have dreamed it; it is becoming increasingly clear that his time was not so different from ours and that his ideas still have relevancy and agency. Thus, not only did Shelley foretell the end results of unjust economic and religious systems, he also

provided us with hope and solutions. His vision of a regenerated earth and society lives on today – calling upon us to bring it to fruition.

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