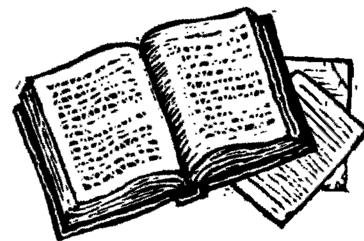
Ozymandias

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

1818

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote "Ozymandias" in 1817, and it was first published in the *Examiner* in 1818. It first appeared in book form in Shelley's *Rosalind and Helen, A Modern Eclogue; with Other Poems* (1819). In the poem, the narrator relates what someone else described to him about pieces of a broken statue lying in a desert. Once a great symbol of power and strength, the statue has become a metaphor for the ultimate powerlessness of man. Time and the elements have reduced the great statue to a pile of rubble. "Ozymandias" describes an unusual subject matter for Shelley, who usually wrote about Romantic subjects such as love, nature, heightened emotion, and hope. But Shelley was also a political writer, and "Ozymandias" provides insight into the poet's views on power, fame, and political legacy. Ultimately, the poem shows that political leadership is fleeting and forgotten, no matter how hard a ruler may try to preserve his own greatness. This poem is widely anthologized, and is featured in the Norton Critical Edition (2nd edition) of Shelley's work titled *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (2002).

Shelley kept company with an impressive array of writers, poets, and philosophers in his day. Among these was a poet and novelist named Horace Smith, whom Shelley admired for his ability to write and effectively manage his money. It was not uncommon for poets at this time to challenge each other to contests in which the two poets would select a topic or title, write



Percy Bysshe Shelley (AP Images. Reproduced by permission)

their individual poems, and submit them to some sort of judging, often publication. Shelley and Smith agreed to write separate poems inspired by a passage they read by the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus. They agreed to write their sonnets about Ozymandias and submit them (with pen names) for publication. Shelley's sonnet was published first, followed by Smith's submission the next month. Today, Shelley's "Ozymandias" is one of his most famous poems.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Shelley was born on August 4, 1792, to Sir Timothy and Elizabeth Shelley in Sussex, England. He was one of six children, of whom he was the eldest brother. Shelley's halcyon days at the family estate did not prepare him for the bullying by other boys at Syon House Academy, in which he enrolled in 1802. Still, he gained a love for, and education in, sciences such as astronomy and chemistry.

At the age of twelve, Shelley entered Eton College, an elite boys school whose students were drawn from the British aristocracy. During his teenage years, Shelley found that he was very interested in romance. Not surprisingly, love and writing became intertwined in his literary style. His first poetry was published in 1810, as was his first Gothic novel, *Zastrozzi*.

In 1810, Shelley entered University College in Oxford. While studying at Oxford (a one-year stint), Shelley continued to pursue publication. In 1811, the publication of *The Necessity of Atheism* destroyed his family relationships. After expulsion from Oxford, Shelley wrote little and then eloped with sixteen-year-old Harriet Westbrook in August 1811.

Encouraged to pursue writing, Shelley became focused on political and religious subjects. His pamphlets reflect the influence of writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine. Shelley also wrote personal and emotional poems that he kept in a private journal. During 1812 and 1813, Shelley and Harriet visited London, where Shelley connected with friends, publishers, and literary figures. Among these was William Godwin, a radical philosopher Shelley admired. Godwin and his deceased wife (Mary Wollstonecraft) had three daughters, all of whom fell for Shelley; but Shelley fell in love with Mary, the youngest. Outraged and heartbroken, Harriet refused an open marriage and abandoned Shelley. He and Mary ran away together on July 27, 1814, enjoying six weeks in Europe before returning home when they ran out of money. Shunned upon their return, Shelley had to work hard to earn money for himself and Mary. In November, Mary gave birth to a son named Charles. When Shelley's grandfather died in January, Shelley inherited a substantial sum of money. With the couple's financial situation now greatly improved, Shelley was free to focus on his poetry.

In January 1816, Mary gave birth to another son, William. When Mary's sister Claire became Lord George Gordon Byron's mistress, the Shelleys went with her to Lake Geneva to see him. Byron was also a poet, and he and Shelley became fast friends, discussing poetry and philosophy. During this trip, Byron challenged everyone to write a ghost story, and Mary's story became the famed novel *Frankenstein*. Meanwhile, Shelley found the natural surroundings inspiring to his poetic spirit.

The Shelleys' return to England brought the tragic news of the suicides of Mary's other sister and of Harriet. Harriet's death led to lengthy court proceedings concerning their children, who were ultimately placed with a guardian. Shelley married Mary on December 30, 1816.

They moved to Marlow, where the environment suited Shelley's writing muse, and the couple interacted with such writers as John Keats and Smith. Notably, "Ozymandias" was written during a sonnet contest between Shelley and Smith. Both poets' works were initially accepted for publication by the *Examiner*, although Shelley's appeared first. He wrote the poem in December, 1817, and it was printed in January, 1818. Shelley later included it in *Rosalind and Helen, A Modern Eclogue; with Other Poems*, published in 1819. A family trip to Italy in 1818 further inspired Shelley, and for the rest of his time there, he wrote more poetry and political reform treatises.

During 1822, Mary was dejected and alone. Shelley, on the other hand, was content and carefree, spending the summer sailing and writing. On July 8, however, Shelley's boat encountered a storm that killed both Shelley and his sailing companion. Their bodies were recovered ten days later. Because of Italian law, the bodies had to be cremated, and Shelley's ashes were buried near his friend Keats's remains in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. Mary and the children returned to England.

POEM TEXT

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, 5
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: 10
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

POEM SUMMARY

Lines 1–2

In "Ozymandias," the reader is receiving the information of the poem second-hand. The speaker describes what someone else told him. The speaker is merely a go-between relating information from the "traveller from an antique land" to the reader. Shelley does this to increase the distance between the mighty figure that once was Ozymandias and the present. Not only does the poem describe the rubble that once was his kingdom, but the speaker is not even looking directly at the rubble. The emotional result is greatly reduced, as when a student reads about an historical event or a piece of art rather than visiting it himself.

The poem begins with the speaker saying that he met a "traveller from an antique land," which brings to mind a country like Greece or Egypt. This traveler told the speaker that, in the middle of a desert, there are pieces of an ancient statue. First, the traveler describes two huge disembodied legs.

Lines 3–5

The legs are said to be standing in the sand of the desert. Near the legs, partially buried in the sand is the statue's broken face. These two body parts—the legs and the face—are at opposite ends of the body, so the resulting image is one that is very chaotic, inhuman, and unintimidating. On the broken face, the traveler could see the expression. It was one with a frown, wrinkled lip, and a "sneer of cold command."

Lines 6–8

The sculptor was very precise in his craftsmanship, creating a very complex and realistic facial expression. The overall effect of these features is harsh. The traveler himself comments that the sculptor clearly understood the driving passion and ambition of his subject. In fact, the traveler suggests that the passions "yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things." Mindful of the lifelessness of the broken pieces of statue, the traveler can still sense the passion that the sculptor strove to preserve in the face. The traveler also notes the "hand that mocked them [the ruler's people], and the heart that fed." This refers to the power of the king's hand to gesture and give commands, all of which reinforced his position of authority over his people. His hand mocked his people; he kept them well below him so that they could not threaten him. Yet at the same time, the ruler was human. He had a heart that made sure his people were fed. Ozymandias used his power to an extent to care for the needs of his people, whether in an attempt to be a good steward of his subjects or to ensure that his rule would continue by maintaining the favor of his people.

Lines 9–11

The last thing the traveler describes about the statue is the pedestal on which it once stood. The pedestal contains the words that Ozymandias wanted to communicate to his own generation and those that would come after him; the words reflect his pride and arrogance. It reads, “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

Lines 12–14

These words are intensely ironic and provide the springboard into most of the thematic material of the poem. After all, as the traveler describes, all around the pedestal is nothingness. A “colossal wreck” of an old statue surrounded by endless sand is all that remains. The landscape is vast and barren.

THEMES

Power

“Ozymandias” is a political poem about the illusion of fame and power. In the poem, Ozymandias was so proud of his own power and so bent on asserting it that he commissioned a great sculpture of himself glorifying his own authority. He must have believed that his political (and, given the time in which the sculpture would have been made) military power was an integral part of his own identity and purpose; after all, the way he chose to be depicted in the sculpture has all the hallmarks of strong rulership. The face is stern and resolute, appearing to be unswayed by anyone with less power than he. The hand keeps his people humble, yet Ozymandias is also the one who ensures that his people are fed. His power is such that his people seemingly would not be able to provide for their own needs without him. In all, the figure of Ozymandias is a commanding and powerful one.

The depiction of power is only part of Shelley’s intent in the poem, however, and not even the most important part. More important to Shelley is showing how this great and mighty authority figure is ultimately reduced to rubble. The power he once possessed is long gone by the telling of the poem, and Ozymandias’s great monument to his fame as a ruler is eroded by time and the elements. Ozymandias is no longer an intimidating figure at all, and he commands no respect from the “traveller from an antique land,” the speaker, or the reader.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Read about the pyramids and the Sphinx in Egypt to learn what their purpose was and why they were built on such an enormous scale. Also, see what you can find out about the adverse effects of the desert climate on these ancient monuments. How are historians and archaeologists taking measures to preserve them? Based on your findings, write a script that could be used by tour guides.
- Choose another of Shelley’s famous poems (such as “Hymn on Intellectual Beauty,” “Ode to the West Wind,” “Mont Blanc,” or “To a Skylark”) and compare and contrast it to “Ozymandias.” Prepare a lesson plan that leads your fellow students through the two poems, suggests conclusions, and prompts the students to make their own observations.
- Using an art form of your choice (painting, sketching, sculpture, digital, etc.), illustrate “Ozymandias.” Your depiction should accurately follow the information contained in the poem, although you may take artistic license with additional details or elements.
- What would the adherents of the movement known as literary realism have had to say about this poem? Research the realists’ literary point of view, take on the persona of a realistic critic, and write a review of “Ozymandias.”

Pride

Akin to the theme of power is the theme of pride. Ozymandias was clearly a proud ruler who seems to have been as determined to hold onto power as he was to proclaim it to all generations. There were numerous rulers throughout history who possessed strength, stability, wisdom, and the respect of their people and other nations, and some of them felt compelled to glorify themselves in art and architecture, as did Ozymandias.

While it is possible that the statue described in the poem could have been commissioned by someone other than the king, the traveler indicates that the sculptor knew his subject well. The sculptor was clearly close to Ozymandias, given access to his motives and leadership style in a way that enabled him to carve a realistic face, and to understand the symbolism of the king's hand and heart. These clues lead to the conclusion that Ozymandias oversaw the sculpture, or at the very least, the artist was caught up in the king's pride. Either way, Ozymandias's pride is clearly reflected in the statue.

Ozymandias's pride is also evident in the inscription on the pedestal. It reads, "My name is Ozymanidas, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" This assertive statement to other mighty men is swollen with pride. He calls himself "king of kings," indicating that he sees himself as the greatest of all kings. Then he tells the viewer to observe all he has done and realize that he (the viewer) is tiny in comparison. The viewer's reaction is supposed to be utter despair at his own inferiority. Of course, Ozymandias had this inscription placed on a statue that was intended to last for hundreds of years, reminding future generations of his greatness, power, and accomplishments.

History

"Ozymandias" is a bit of history told by a traveler to the speaker, who then tells it to the reader. It has a strong tie to the oral tradition that has kept literary and historical traditions and lessons alive for hundreds of years. This fact alone prompts the reader to look for an historical lesson in the poem. The lesson reveals itself early; the poem is a cautionary tale about the transitory nature of rulers and their nations. After all, not only is Ozymandias gone, but so is the rest of his particular slice of civilization. The poem is a reminder of the historical reality of cycles of authority and the rise and fall of nations. Because the statue is from an ancient civilization, and others have come and gone between Ozymandias and the speaker's present, the reader can cull a historical lesson. Present-day readers would be wise to learn from Ozymandias and not repeat his mistake of allowing pride to seduce him into believing that his greatness would be admired forever. The poem also demonstrates that tyrannical rulers are nothing new, and that this tendency in man should be watched for among those in power.

STYLE

Sonnet

"Ozymandias" was the result of a sonnet competition with Smith. Shelley succeeded in containing his expression within the confines of the sonnet; the poem is fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, which are very traditional elements. Shelley breaks from tradition in his rhyme scheme, however. Rather than adhere to the English or Petrarchan rhyme schemes, Shelley does something different in "Ozymandias." The rhyme scheme is ABABACDCEDEFEF. What is interesting about this rhyme scheme is that it reinforces the subject and theme of the poem. Many skilled poets create verse that is so well-crafted that every element seems to strengthen the work, and Shelley is no exception. Here, the rhyme scheme actually evolves from start to finish. There is not a rhyme scheme separating an octave and a sestet; there is not a change at the end to finish with a neat couplet. The rhyme scheme of "Ozymandias" gradually changes over time, just as the subject matter (Ozymandias's statue) does. The last two lines have little in common with the first two, just as the rubble of Ozymandias's statue has little in common with the original structure. In both cases, the form is entirely different; only the subject is the same.

Metaphor

"Ozymandias" is at heart a metaphor. The statue represents the kings and kingdoms of the past, subject to the ravages of time, nature, and their own failings. The description of the statue and its inscription reveals tremendous pride and lost power. The statue, once magnificent, lies in ruins in the middle of a desert. It is a metaphor for all kingdoms, which eventually pass out of time to make room for another kingdom, ruler, or ideology. Shelley demonstrates that nothing lasts forever, even a ruler as powerful and fearsome as Ozymandias.

Irony

The inscription and placement of the statue brings a strong sense of irony to the poem. Although in its heyday, the statue's warning to look at Ozymandias's works and despair would have struck fear and reverence into the hearts of onlookers, the setting in the poem is quite different. The inscription reads, "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Now, the works are gone and nothing remains but a landscape of endless sand. There

are no buildings, monuments, military regiments, or palaces. The "works" seem to be wind and sand—hardly a cause for despair and terror. Ozymandias's pride appears foolish in this setting, and he seems to invite the mocking that he once doled out to his people. It is also ironic that the works that have survived all these years are not Ozymandias's works at all, but the artist's.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Romantic Movement

The Romantic Movement in England took place between the publication of William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 and the death of Charles Dickens in 1870. This was during difficult and uncertain times, as the Napoleonic Wars were underway, England faced financial difficulties, the Industrial Revolution brought both hope and despair, and new philosophies such as utilitarianism were finding a voice.

The Romantics elevated the perceived value of the individual, as well as of nature and the wild. Romantic writers tended toward emotional expression that often cycled between ecstasy and despair. The Romantics had an interest in history and mysticism. Symbolism finds its way into much Romantic literature, and writers favored imagination over realism. Although optimism and hope characterized much Romantic literature, cynicism was sometimes expressed in satire. The optimism of the Romantics was not always passive, however, and many who were attracted to the Romantic mindset were more easily swept up in movement for reform and rebellion. Byron, for example, fought for Italy against Austria, and later went to fight against the Turks with Greece for independence. He died in Greece from illness during the war.

Romantic poetry is regarded by many readers as the most accessible and beautiful of the Romantic literature. The dominant Romantic poets were Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, and Lord Alfred Tennyson. Of course, the Romantic novelists produced some of the greatest works of fiction; they include Dickens, Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, William Makepeace Thackeray, and George Eliot. The atmosphere of debate, reform, and philosophical inquiry led to an outpouring of criticism and social commentary by writers such as Godwin, John Stuart Mill, and John Ruskin.

Ramses II

Most literary scholars agree that "Ozymandias" is based on the ancient Egyptian ruler Ramses II, or Ramses the Great (1302–1213 B.C.E.). Smith and Shelley had read about him from the work of the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, who related an inscription describing Ramses as a great king whose works could not be surpassed. As a ruler, Ramses is remembered for his many imposing monuments, as well as for his roles as warrior, king, and peacemaker who made Egypt a world power again. In the years before Ramses's reign, Egypt lacked timber resources and other materials possessed by neighboring lands. Egypt was also politically and militarily weakened, and thus was vulnerable to being invaded and overtaken. Because of these threats to the kingdom, Ramses's father (the pharaoh) had his son trained in battle and military leadership. When he was twenty-five years old, Ramses became pharaoh following his father's death.

In ancient Egypt, the pharaoh held absolute power, although he was expected to rule and treat his people honorably. Ramses was determined to be a monument builder and make a name for himself. He went so far as to remove the names of other pharaohs on existing monuments and replace them with his own name. Ramses's works indicate that he associated himself with the sun god, Ra. The sun imagery compelled the Egyptians to give Ramses greater loyalty. Historians and archaeologists consider the two rock-cut temples at Abu Simbel to be among Ramses's most impressive surviving structures. The temple of Amun-Ra and Ramses features four sixty-seven-foot tall statues of Ramses. In the thirty-first year of his reign, however, an earthquake struck, destroying the top half of one of the statues.

Ramses even sought to construct a new Egyptian capital near his birthplace in the eastern Delta. The city was named "Domain of Ramses Great-of-Victories," but little of the city remains today. Another interesting historical feature of Ramses's construction efforts were battle reliefs. Although Ramses was a skilled and courageous warrior and general who saw many victories, he also suffered military defeats and land losses. But reading the reliefs, an observer

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1817:** Shelley's "Ozymandias" describes the ruins of a statue of a once-great leader. The expression on the statue's face and the threatening inscription demonstrate the power and harshness of the ruler.

  Today: Saddam Hussein was executed on December 30, 2006, and the war for Iraqi freedom continues after years of struggle. People all over the world still remember the image, in April 2003, of American troops toppling a twenty-foot tall statue of Saddam in Baghdad. Saddam had fled the city, and bringing down the statue represented the destruction of Saddam's reign in Iraq.

- **1817:** The Romantic Period in England is dominated by poets and novelists. Poetry is read widely and appreciated by readers from all segments of society. England takes great pride in its rich poetic heritage, and the Romantic Period became a particularly vibrant movement in this area.

  Today: Readers who choose to read poetry for leisure represent a small percentage of readership. Although students are still exposed to a wide variety of poetry in high school and college, the reading population (which is on the decline) is more interested in fiction and nonfiction than in poetry.

- **1817:** Artifacts from Egypt are just making their way to England in a traveling exhibit. The Romantic Period is characterized by a degree of interest in history, and this atmosphere generates interest in such artifacts. Until now, educated people like Shelley have only read about ancient civilizations in books and learned about them in lectures.

  Today: Archaeologists have made major strides in the last 200 years, and most major cities have Egyptian artifacts in their museums. In the 1990s, there was a major traveling exhibit of artifacts from Ramses II's reign.

would believe that Ramses had handily defeated his enemies in every battle.

Ramses is remembered as a powerful and accomplished king who brought strength and stability to Egypt. He was skilled at international relations, while also reinforcing his status among his own people. He died after sixty-seven years of rule. He was buried in the Valley of the Kings, but robbers stole from, desecrated, and burned the tomb. After being rewrapped and then moved twice, the mummy of Ramses is now in Cairo's Egyptian Museum.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Among critics and readers, "Ozymandias" has been a favorite. Critics note that although it is something of a departure from Shelley's poetry, it is in line with his political writings. They also find the poem accessible and easily understood as the cautionary tale that it is. Critics familiar with Shelley's work as a whole are aware that Shelley's political writings were biting and called for reform. He had no sympathy for injustice or authoritarian rule, so his depiction of Ozymandias's crumbling legacy is certainly expressive of his views of politics. Writing in *ELH*, Christopher R. Miller identifies the deep cynicism of the poem when he writes, "'Ozymandias' might as well be the name for an obsolete god rather than an earthly monarch, and Shelley is really dismissing both: gods bowed to as monarchs, and tyrants worshipped as gods."

While commentators are drawn into Shelley's imagery and layers of meaning, it is the message inadvertently sent through time by Ozymandias that has inspired the most critical commentary. Miller states pointedly that the poem "concerns not only the physical ruins of a statue, but also the historical eclipse of a name." In

Magill Book Reviews, a critic remarks about Ozymandias that "he is to be pitied, if not disdained, rather than held in awe and fear." The critic further observes that Shelley's message is that "the forces of mortality and mutability, described brilliantly in the concluding lines, will erode and destroy all our lives." John Rodenbeck reaches the same conclusion in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics:*

> In Shelley's ... view of history, all empires are foredoomed to disappear and for a work of what we call art merely to have outlived one of them hardly signifies anything. If that work is merely a portrait of a tyrant, moreover, the value one places upon it ... may well be largely ironical, the irony being present or absent precisely to the degree that the tyranny it was originally supposed to memorialize is in fact remembered at all.

In some ways, the message of "Ozymandias" is to be an encouragement to those who are suffering under an unjust regime, or who are angered by one. Rodenbeck remarks, "What it seeks to remind its readers, instead, is that no tyrannical power lasts forever, no matter how efficient its repressive apparatus or how deep its degree of self-deceit."

CRITICISM

Jennifer Bussey

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she draws parallels and contrasts to the statue described in Shelley's "Ozymandias" and the statue of King Nebuchadnezzar described in the Book of Daniel.

In "Ozymandias," the speaker describes meeting a traveler who tells him about a toppled statue in the desert. The statue was once impressive, large in stature, with a look of stern determination and might. It is a statue of Ozymandias, an ancient king who took pride in his power and authority. Ozymandias attempted to preserve his own legacy of power and fame by building great monuments to himself, but ultimately the statue is a pile of rubble surrounded by endless sand. Building statues to honor themselves was common among ancient rulers, and in the Book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has a dream about a similar statue. The prophet Daniel interprets the dream for him, and the king

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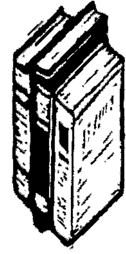

- James Bieri's *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography; Youth's Unextinguished Fire, 1792–1816* and *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography; Exile of Unfulfilled Renown, 1816–1822* (both 2005) offer a thorough look at Shelley's life. From birth all the way to death, Bieri relates the influences and events in Shelley's life that formed his poetic voice, relationships, and personality.
- T. G. H. James's *Ramses II* (2002) presents a wealth of historical information about this pharaoh and his rule, alongside photographs of his buildings, pictures of artifacts from his rule, and maps of his kingdom. It is a thorough look at the king, the legacy he hoped to leave, and what is left to understand him.
- *Percy Bysshe Shelley as a Philosopher and Reformer* was released by the Michigan Historical Reprint Series in 2005. It is a digital reproduction of a nineteenth-century document containing a paper about Shelley's political ideas read to the New York Liberal Club in 1875.
- Edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Frastat, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose (Norton Critical Edition*, 2003) is a comprehensive collection of Shelley's writings, along with critical input from numerous scholars. Reiman and Frastat provide contextual headnotes, cross-referenced footnotes, and selections from the latest in Shelley scholarship.
- Edited by Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom, *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, Volume IV: Romantic Poetry and Prose* (1973) has become a textbook for numerous literature courses for its complete look at Romanticism. The work of Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Byron, and Coleridge is featured.

later attempts to build this great statue to himself. What is it about statues that appeals to a king's pride, vanity, and need for immortality? Both Ozymandias and Nebuchadnezzar tried to preserve their greatness through art, but neither ruler's artistic forms lasted forever. Perhaps they hoped that the work of a great artist on something as durable as stone or marble would surely proclaim their glory forever. Perhaps they were essentially insecure and needed to feel that something much larger and longer-lasting would continue their legacies long after their deaths. Rather than pursue accomplishments that have truly meaningful and long-lasting effects, they chose lifeless statues.

In Shelley's poem, the ruler Ozymandias (based on Ramses II, or "Ramses the Great") is remembered only by a crumbling statue in the middle of a desert. The statue was once impressive and certainly must have evoked fear and respect in his people, and maybe even in his enemies. The face is described as having a frown, a sneer, and a wrinkled lip. The expression is so telling about the character of Ozymandias that the traveler describing the statue is sure that the sculptor must have understood the king's passions and nature. What is even more telling is that this description of the face is based on what is left of that part of the statue. Part of the face is broken and shattered. The traveler also describes the hand that mocked his own people, and the heart that fed them. As a leader, Ozymandias was stern and asserted his superiority, but as a human, he made sure his people's needs were met. All of this is preserved in the statue of the king, but the inscription on his pedestal is placed in quotes, indicating that these words typify the king's statements to the world in which he lived. The inscription reads, "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" It is a daring and threatening statement that in its present context becomes deeply ironic and disturbing. For all his might, wealth, and power, he was ultimately sentenced to the same void that his subjects were.

The poem "Ozymandias" was the product of a friendly sonnet competition with a friend and fellow poet, Smith. Having read about Ramses, Smith and Shelley decided to write about the same topic and submit their poems for publication. Both were published, Smith's one month after Shelley's. What is interesting about Smith's

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version is that it makes a direct reference to Babylon. He writes, "The City's gone, —Nought but the Leg remaining to disclose / The site of this forgotten Babylon." This reference to Babylon calls to mind another statue described in the Bible in the second chapter of the Book of Daniel, a story that takes place in Babylon.

In the Book of Daniel, the prophet Daniel is in captivity in Babylon. He is a servant to King Nebuchadnezzar. When the king has a dream he does not understand, he calls his advisors to first tell him what the dream was (to test their ability to understand things supernaturally) and then to tell him what it meant. They are unable to do so, but after praying, Daniel is able to describe the king's dream about a strange statue, and then interpret it for him. Nebuchadnezzar's dream was about a statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, middle and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron mixed with clay. In the end, the entire statue is destroyed by a stone not cut from human hands. Daniel explains to the king that each metal represents a kingdom. The gold is the Babylonian empire, ruled by Nebuchadnezzar himself. The silver represents the Medo-Persian empire; the bronze represents the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great; the iron and the iron mixed with clay represent a kingdom divided into ten parts. The stone represents the divine kingdom, led by Christ, that ultimately destroys and replaces the earthly kingdoms portrayed in the statue.

Because Nebuchadnezzar was a powerful and wealthy king, he would immediately understand an image of a statue as something created to glorify and memorialize a king or kingdom. That his kingdom was the head of gold spoke to his pride, because the statue's value—and that of the kingdoms it describes—decreases as it moves

from the head to the feet. Rather than take the dream interpretation as good counsel and move forward to rule more wisely, Nebuchadnezzar waited about sixteen years and then, with no second (silver) empire overtaking him, decided to build an actual statue. But because his kingdom was the gold, he built the entire statue of gold as a monument to himself and to Babylon. His statue was ninety feet high, and in no way was meant to represent divine wisdom or faith; it was a very tangible reflection of Nebuchadnezzar's pride and arrogance. The same pride and arrogance that is so apparent in the ruins of Ozymandias's statue—a statue that was intended to glorify his power.

In both cases, the statue ultimately does nothing to strengthen the king's rule or preserve his legacy. If anything, Ozymandias's statue only tarnished the memory of his kingdom. And Nebuchadnezzar's statue did not last any more than Babylon did; the Medo-Persian Empire (the silver in the dream statue) took over Babylon in 539 B.C.E. While both Ozymandias and Nebuchadnezzar expected their greatness to be evident in the fact that they could create things of such value and scale, they failed to learn that a lasting legacy does not come from objects. For Ozymandias, his kingdom is gone and all that is left is a statue that he relied on an artist to make. It is actually the artist's work that has staying power and is admired by future generations. The traveler describing the statue remarked not about Ozymandias, but about the sculptor. And in Nebuchadnezzar's case, he would be a footnote in history without Daniel's act of writing the story of his Babylonian captivity. It is the Book of Daniel that is preserved, not anything Nebuchadnezzar created to glorify himself.

The stories of these two statues point to a truth that the power-hungry kings could not see. Statues are mere objects—beautiful and impressive—but objects nonetheless. Because the kings were only interested in the statues as monuments, they saw them as the means to their ends. The statues were to be in service to the king's power and glory. Neither king had any real understanding of what lasts, which are the things of the human spirit. Ozymandias's example illustrates the enduring character of art to capture a historical, emotional, and expressive moment for all time. Ozymandias's legacy is actually not in his hands at all, but solely in the hands of the sculptor. The expression that Ozymandias is remembered for is the one the sculptor put on his stone face. The inscription is the one the sculptor etched in the pedestal. And the mighty legs and hands are all the work of the sculptor. The sculptor's perception becomes reality, and it becomes history. Nebuchadnezzar's great palaces and his lavish city with all of its prosperity did not last. He felt bulletproof, so he missed the lesson in the dream; that his kingdom will be replaced by another, which will be replaced by another and so on, until a divine kingdom replaces them all. Cities, laws, buildings, and statues do not last. The will of God has power over all of them, but Nebuchadnezzar did not learn to be faithful until very late in life. Had he and Ozymandias put aside their pride during the zenith of their reigns, there is no telling what kinds of lasting legacies each king might have left.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "Ozymandias," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2008.

Christopher R. Miller

In the following excerpt, Miller examines Shelley's attitude toward the concept of heaven, a concept that Shelley initially outlined in his pamphlet Declaration of Rights. *Miller focuses on the manifestations of Shelley's attitude in several of his works, including "Ozymandias." Of this poem, Miller contends that Shelley's treatment of the name of the title character is similar to his treatment of the terms heaven and God.*

. . . As the vehement attack in the *Declaration* suggests, there was a strongly political cast to Shelley's concern with heaven. Conceived as a kingdom, heaven merely replicated earthly notions of monarchy, empire, and class privilege; conceived as a divine reward, it enabled a cynical deferral of earthly justice, an illusory coda to life's struggles. Such a critique is made with pithy force in Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" poem in the *Songs of Experience*, when the young speaker of the title protests that God's priest and king "make up a heaven of our misery." The phrase "make up" subtly implies two acts of creation, one ideological, the other material: the imaginative projection of a heavenly reward out of the wreckage of earthly life, and the construction of a "heaven" of earthly luxuries for the few on the backs of the unfortunate many.

To understand Shelley's poetics of heaven is to see several things about the poet more clearly: his distrust of orthodoxy and superstition, his ideas about language, his poetic geography of

time and place, his desire for immortality, and his own deeply self-questioning nature. I begin this essay by describing Shelley's moral, political, and philosophical objections to traditional ideas of heaven, and then consider these objections as they are manifested and complicated in the imaginative work of *Queen Mab* (1813), *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), and a seldom-studied poem called the "Ode to Heaven" (1820). All three works, I argue, are invested in a process of redefining and reimagining heaven. In *Queen Mab* the soul of Ianthe is brought to an otherworldly realm of instruction in which she is given a new rhetoric of heaven and sent back to earth; and in *Prometheus Unbound* the deposition of Jupiter from heaven results in a freshened sense of the promise of the word "heaven." *Queen Mab* might be classified as a didactic poem and *Prometheus Unbound* a lyric drama, but despite their generic differences, they share similar mythopoetic concerns. The latter poem, famously lacking in dramatic action, is better understood as a drama of lexical transformation, which can be signally tracked in varying iterations of "heaven." This strategy of redefinition finds an apt frame in the three-part structure of the "Ode to Heaven," in which three choric participants dramatically differ on their conceptions of the subject of their hymn. Odes traditionally ask how best to praise their subjects; this one is remarkable for its radical uncertainty over what is being praised (or derided)—an uncertainty that reflects Shelley's own.

Scholars of Shelley have long seen the poet as wavering between binary extremes: Lockean empiricism v. Berkeleyan idealism (Earl Wasserman); deconstructive skepticism v. visionary affirmation (Tilottama Rajan); the perceptual v. the sublime (Angela Leighton). In examining Shelley's poetics of heaven, I propose to elaborate these binaries in terms of a productive tension over a problematic word—between naming and refusing to name, visualization and blankness, the visible and the invisible. As an antiauthoritarian thinker, Shelley dismisses the word "Heaven" as a "poisonous name" of orthodox superstition; but as a poet, he mines it for its suggestive possibilities. For Shelley, heaven was at the crossroads between political critique and aesthetic creation, doubt and belief; and in the years after his curtly dismissive attack in the *Declaration of Rights*, he went on to offer more richly imaginative statements of what the word might mean instead.

I. Poisonous Names

The animus toward heaven that Shelley expresses in the *Declaration of Rights* is composed of several motives: youthful rebellion, personal renunciation, moral critique, philosophical speculation, and linguistic reform. Most obviously, as the disparaging reference to priests and grandmothers suggests, Shelley was kicking against the pieties of elders. (In precise familial terms, he was off by a generation, since it was his father Timothy who threatened to disown him for his atheistic provocations.) But he was also disavowing beliefs that he had recently held. As he would later recall in the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1816), he himself once "called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed" (53), including "Heaven," the verbal residue of unanswered questions about death and mutability:

> No voice from some sublimer world hath ever
> To sage or poet these responses given—
> Therefore the name of God and ghosts and
> Heaven,
> Remain the records of their vain endeavour.
> (25–28)

To refer to "God" and "Heaven" as "names" was to echo the nominalist skepticism of Locke and Hume—to suggest that "God" and "Heaven" are words rather than essences, and signifiers without perceivable referents. Such words, in Shelley's phrasing, are "records"—memories, in the etymological sense of the word, of past endeavors in faith. A word, then, is a kind of artifact—a point later made in the archeological meditation of "Ozymandias" (1818), which concerns not only the physical ruins of a statue but also the historical eclipse of a name. The verbal inscription on the king's crumbled effigy—"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings, / Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"—could indeed be described as the record of a vain endeavor. Heralded by the Biblical superlative, "King of Kings," "Ozymandias" might as well be the name for an obsolete god rather than an earthly monarch, and Shelley is really dismissing both: gods bowed to as monarchs, and tyrants worshipped as gods.

Shelley's early philosophical struggle with the "name[s]" "God" and "Heaven" is evident in a series of letters he wrote in 1811 to two close confidants, his Oxford classmate (and collaborator on *The Necessity of Atheism*) Thomas Jefferson Hogg and his schoolmaster friend Elizabeth Hitchener. In a strategy of triangulation, Shelley used Hitchener's religious belief and Hogg's

vehement atheism as foils to the velleities of his own free-floating speculation; with one, he could be an iconoclast, with the other, he could play the utopian dreamer. Writing to Hitchener, he argues that God is "a name which expresses the unknown cause, the suppositious origin of all existence." The word "God," he concludes, "analogises with the universe, as the soul of man to his body, as the vegetative power to vegetables, the stony power to stones." On the premise that God is fundamentally a name rather than a thing, Shelley aptly demonstrates its superfluity by a linguistic demonstration—the adjectival derivation of "stony power" from stones and "vegetative power" from vegetables. In a letter to Hogg, on the other hand, Shelley was not so quick to demote heaven:

> I love what is superior[,] what is excellent, or what I conceive to be so, & wish, ardently wish to be convinced of the existence of a God that so superior a spirit should derive happiness from my exertions—for Love is Heaven, & Heaven is Love. Oh! that it were. You think so, too,—yet you disbelieve the existence of an eternal omnipresent spirit.

Shelley's reversible equation suggests at least two possibilities: that all we know of love on earth effectively amounts to heaven and that the concept of heaven is informed by the experience of love. Characteristically, Shelley wavers between assertion ("Love is Heaven") and speculation ("Oh! that it were"), and between his own wishes and his friend's interpolated skepticism. The difference between the reductive definition of God and expansive definition of heaven is borne out in the poems that Shelley would later write: whereas he invents alternatives to God ("Power," the "Spirit of the Universe," and so forth), he exploits the versatility and ambiguity of heaven. In this respect, not all words were like material things: while "God," like "Ozymandias," was a verbal ruin, "Heaven" lived on in new forms.

Source: Christopher R. Miller, "Shelley's Uncertain Heaven," in *ELH*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Fall 2005, pp. 577–603.

James A. W. Heffernan

In the following excerpt, Heffernan notes that ekphrasis is the "literary representation of visual art." The critic explores the poetic use of ekphrasis by examining "Ozymandias" as well as John Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

... I chiefly wish to show how graphic art is represented in ekphrastic poetry and how a

SHELLEY THUS REVEALS THAT IN SPITE OF ITS CLAIMS TO PERMANENCE, BOTH THE MATTER AND THE MEANING OF GRAPHIC ART CAN BE FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED BY TIME, RECONSTITUTED BY SUCCESSIVE INTERPRETATIONS."

knowledge of ekphrastic traditions can help us understand this kind of representation in specific poems. Traditionally, I have argued, ekphrasis is narrational and prosopopoeial; it releases the narrative impulse that graphic art typically checks, and it enables the silent figures of graphic art to speak. I want to argue now that in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ozymandias," Keats and Shelley use these ekphrastic traditions to reflect on representation: not just on a particular work of graphic representation, but on the nature of representation itself.

Consider first what Keats does with the ekphrastic tradition of prosopopoeia that flows from the sepulchral epigrams I mentioned earlier. He opens the first stanza of his famous ode by apostrophizing the Grecian urn as a "still unravish'd bride of quietness." Then he himself threatens to ravish the bride by making her speak. "What leaf-fring'd legend," he asks, "haunts about they shape [?]" (l. 5). The quest for legend not only shows the narrative impulse asserting itself from the very beginning of this ekphrastic poem; it also signifies the urge to envoice the urn, for the word *legend* originally meant "to be read," and when a sepulchral inscription was read aloud by a traveler, the inscribed object spoke. But Keats's urn bears no inscription and refuses to answer the kinds of questions normally anticipated and answered by inscribed monuments. "What men or gods are these?" the speaker asks. Instead of saying something like, "I am the tomb of famous Glauca" or "My name is Ozymandias," the urn speaks only silence, voicing neither story nor circumstantial facts, saying nothing at all until it produces a final conundrum that transcends narrative and circumstance alike: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (l. 49) . . .

Keats's poem makes the act of homage a work of critique, a verbal demonstration of all

that must be sacrificed to make the idea of graphic representation at once beautiful and true.

This critical strain underlying the ostensible iconophilia of Keats's ode subtly connects it with another conspicuous example of romantic ekphrasis: Shelley's "Ozymandias." But Shelley's poem is explicitly iconoclastic. While Keats demonstrates that ekphrasis can criticize graphic art in the very act of paying homage to it, Shelley goes one step further, undermining the assumption that graphic art itself can pay lasting and unequivocal homage to what it represents . . .

Shelley's sonnet questions what Keats's ode takes wholly for granted: the imperishability of graphic art. While Keats confidently predicts that the urn will survive the wasting of the present generation as of so many others that came before it, Shelley foresees the ultimate dissolution of the statue. And to signify the imminence of this dissolution, Shelley complicates the opposition between graphic stasis and narrative movement in an extraordinary way: he verbally perpetuates a moment in the history of a statue. Sculpted to represent enduring greatness, it is gradually disintegrating, and Shelley catches it at a pregnant moment of transition between erectness and prostration: the standing legs recall the self-assertive majesty of the original monument while the shattered, half-sunk visage looks ahead to its final oblivion—its ultimate leveling—in "the lone and level sands."

In the sestet of this sonnet, Shelley follows ekphrastic tradition by recording the words on the pedestal and thus envoicing the statue, which resoundingly declares, "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair." But these words simply accentuate the transitional status of the monument. The single meaning they originally conveyed has disintegrated into a double meaning that looks backward and forward in time. Like the statue on which they are inscribed, the words at once recall the invincible assurance of Ozymandias and foretell the coming dissolution of his works.

The expression fixed on the shattered, half-sunk face, therefore, cannot serve as the pregnant moment of a narrative to be ekphrastically inferred or furnished about the life of Ozymandias himself. Instead, the fixity of the expression signifies the rigidity of Ozymandias's despotic arrogance, which has petrified his face in a "sneer of cold command" that the sculptor has at once imitated and obeyed, since he undoubtedly worked under orders from the ruler himself. Ozymandias sought to perpetuate his power through the medium of sculpture, through "lifeless things" that would permanently represent his personality. But the sculptor's hand mocks the passions that it represents, and time in turn mocks any aspirations that the sculptor might have had for the immortality of his art. Forever committed to one unchanging expression, neither Ozymandias nor the sculptor can command or control the leveling effects of time, which convert the face of power into an object of ridicule or—as with the grandiloquent inscription—impose upon its twisted features a meaning radically different from the one originally intended, so that what were once the frown and wrinkle and sneer of absolute authority become at last the marks and signs of desperation.

Shelley thus reveals that in spite of its claims to permanence, both the matter and the meaning of graphic art can be fundamentally changed by time, reconstituted by successive interpretations. As William Freedman has recently shown, the whole poem is a study in mediation. After the opening words it is spoken not by the poet himself but by a "traveller" he has met, which is of course Shelley's way of personifying or envoicing a text—his not yet definitely identified literary source. The poet draws the voice of the traveler from the text just as the traveler himself draws the voice of Ozymandias from the inscription on the pedestal. And in each case the relation is mediated. Shelley reads a text in which the traveler reports his reading of an inscription.

Before quoting the inscription and thus envoicing the statue as a whole, however, the traveler reads and envoices the sculpted visage. Its "frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command," he says, "*Tell* that the sculptor well those passions read, / Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things, / The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed." The sculpted face graphically represents the expression of the living ruler, which originally signified passions that the sculptor has inferred or "read" from it. Between the sculpted face and the actual one, therefore, stands the interpretive act of the sculptor, who knows how to read faces well and to represent them in stone so that their expressions can *be* read—can tell us what they signify. Yet the sculpted face tells us as much about the sculptor's ability to read Ozymandias as about Ozymandias himself. As a result, we are led to compare the sculptor's reading of the ruler with

the inscription—the ruler's own reading of himself and his works.

To compare the graphic representation and the verbal self-representation is to see that each corroborates the other. Ozymandias's statement can be read as a comment on the statue—clearly one of his most stupendous works—and the statue can be read as a graphic response to the statement, a way of interpreting it in stone. Neither statue nor statement, however, communicates what Ozymandias presumably intended by them both: an immutable assertion of his power. The meaning of both changes radically as the all-too-perishable medium in which they are wrought disintegrates.

The fact that the inscription will disintegrate along with the statue should cause us to question an inference that Shelley's iconoclasm tempts us to draw—which is that language surpasses graphic art in its power and durability. Paraphrasing what Horace said of his odes, Shelley might have said of this sonnet, "Exegi monumentum petra perennius"—I have built a monument more lasting than stone. Raising up his own little tower of words to mark the inexorable leveling of the ancient statue, Shelley makes manifest what virtually all ekphrasis latently reveals: the poet's ambition to make his words outlast their ostensible subject, to displace graphic representation with verbal representation. Yet the fate of everything wrought and inscribed by order of Ozymandias should prompt us to ask how long any work of representation, whether verbal or graphic, can endure. If words cut into stone cannot last, what will happen to words written on paper or even printed in a book? Will Shelley's own poem last as long as the statue of Ramses II, which was already well over a thousand years old when Didorus Siculus described it in the first century B.C.?

Shelley's sonnet leaves us with questions just as disturbing as those raised by Keats's ode. Though Keats is ostensibly iconophilic and Shelley iconoclastic, each in his own way stages a struggle for power between rival modes of representation and makes us see that neither gains absolute victory over the other. Neither verbal narrative nor graphic stasis can fully represent being; neither words nor sculpture can make absolute claims to permanence, stability, or truth. In these two ekphrastic poems, then, Keats and Shelley use the verbal representation of graphic art as a way to reveal the ultimate inadequacy of all representation.

Source: James A. W. Heffernan, "Ekphrasis and Representation," in *New Literary History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Spring 1991, pp. 297–316.

John R. Greenfield

In the following excerpt, Greenfield gives a critical analysis of Shelley's life and work for the period immediately preceding and following the writing and publication of "Ozymandias."

While at Keswick Shelley conceived a plan to put his radical political ideas into action. He had been working on a pamphlet simply titled *An Address, to the Irish People* (1812), and nothing less would do than publishing it, distributing it, and delivering it in person to its intended audience, the oppressed Irish Catholics. Shelley, Harriet, and Eliza arrived in Dublin in February 1812 and began to distribute the pamphlet, which favored Catholic emancipation but cautioned the Irish to proceed slowly so as not to be drawn into violence. The influence of the philosophes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Paine, Godwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft is evident in the pamphlet, which ranges easily from the specific plight of the Irish to the need for "universal emancipation," clearly echoing Paine's international republicanism in its call for universal brotherhood. Shelley delivered a version of *An Address* to an audience on 28 February and was met with a mixed response, the crowd applauding the sections on Catholic emancipation and hissing some of his antireligious sentiments.

Another "Irish" pamphlet, *Proposals for an Association of those Philanthropists*, followed closely upon the first (March 1812). Despite Godwin's misgivings, expressed strongly to Shelley in letters, lest radical organizations might follow the path of the Jacobinical societies that led to the French Terror, Shelley realized that the Irish would not attain any degree of freedom without unity and organization. The *Proposals* are Shelley's earliest public statement of the way in which love and politics should be inseparable: "Love for humankind" should "place individuals at distance from self," thereby promoting "universal feeling." Shelley felt that he could do no more in Ireland, so the Shelleys and Eliza settled briefly in Cwm Elan, Wales, where Shelley continued to write radical pamphlets. He distilled the arguments in *An Address* and the *Proposals* in *Declaration of Rights*, a broadside which he distributed with the help of his servant Daniel Healey (or Hill), who was arrested, technically

for distributing a broadside without a printer's name on it, but really because the material was subversive. This episode incensed Shelley about how little real freedom of the press existed in England; his response was another pamphlet, *A Letter to Lord Ellenborough* (1812), an eloquent argument in favor of freedom of the press and of speech. Rather than pleading his own case, Shelley wisely focuses on the well-publicized trial of Daniel Isaac Eaton, a London bookseller who had been sentenced to prison for publishing part 3 of Paine's *The Age of Reason*.

Amid financial difficulties, local gossip about an immoral household, and fears that Shelley himself might be arrested, the Shelleys and Eliza, now accompanied by Elizabeth Hitchener, who had joined them in Lynmouth, prudently decided to flee and stay for a while near Tremadoc, which attracted Shelley because of an embankment project that would claim land back from the sea. During this early period of his life, Shelley had quietly been composing poems in a notebook, which fell into the hands of the Esdaile family after Shelley's death and which was not published until this century, as *The Esdaile Notebook* (1964). The poems included therein are an interesting mix of very personal poems, treating his feelings for Harriet and some of his moments of despair and isolation, and public, political, and social poems, treating themes of liberty, the Irish cause, the plight of the poor, the futility of war, and his hatred of religious hypocrisy and monarchies. Partaking of the central metaphors of poetic discourse of this time, showing the influence of William Wordsworth, the poems in *The Esdaile Notebook* are written in straightforward language and reiterate the power of nature and the naturalness of poetry. Devoid of mythology, these poems rely upon common personal and political allusions, the eighteenth-century convention of abstractions, contemporary lyric forms and genres, and topical content. Writing these poems was for Shelley a kind of poet's apprenticeship, which he did not feel confident about bringing to the public's eye during his lifetime.

The Shelleys spent periods during 1812 and 1813 in London, where Shelley was able to make new acquaintances among liberal and literary circles and to renew earlier friendships such as those with Hogg and Leigh Hunt, a radical London publisher and writer who was to be a lifelong defender of Shelley. In addition, Shelley became a member of the Boinville circle, an informal literary discussion group, and met Thomas Hookham, a radical bookseller and publisher, and another aspiring writer, Thomas Love Peacock, who became a kind of friendly literary foil for Shelley and later one of his biographers. In October 1812 Shelley finally met his political father, Godwin, who, like Elizabeth Hitchener (expelled from the Shelley circle), failed to live up to Shelley's idealized image of him. Instead of inspiring Shelley with his political wisdom and intellect, Godwin became a nagging financial burden to Shelley for the rest of his life.

Shelley's major literary project at this time was *Queen Mab*, printed by his friend Hookham in May or June of 1813. *Queen Mab* is a political epic in which the fairy queen Mab takes the spirit of Ianthe (the name Percy and Harriet gave their first child, born in June 1813) on a time and space journey to reveal the ideal nature of humanity's potential behind the mistakes of history and the blind acceptance of "outward shows" of power. The poem reiterates many of the themes of Shelley's political pamphlets, attacking the oppressiveness of religious dogma and superstition as well as of customs and institutions such as the monarchy. The poem's perspective is utopian, viewing the pettiness and selfishness of the world from distant, lofty heights and suggesting the great potential of the uncorrupted human soul. The utopian and visionary perspectives of the poem foreshadow the apocalyptic and millennial vision of Shelley's later poetry. That Shelley was using poetry to convey radical political ideas in response to the threats of freedom of the press is clear in his feeling the necessity to assure Hookham that "a poem is safe: the iron-souled attorney general would scarcely dare to attack." Lest his philosophical or political points should get lost in the poetry, Shelley added copious prose notes to the end of the poem, the familiar attacks on religion, monarchy, and wealth, the advocacy of vegetarianism, free love, and free beliefs, and explanatory notes on geology, astronomy, necessity, and the labor theory of value. *Queen Mab* was distributed only privately at the time it was printed, but in 1821 it began to appear in unauthorized, pirated editions, somewhat to Shelley's embarrassment. Interestingly enough, the poem became a kind of radical bible to many in the Chartist movement in the 1830s and 1840s.

Once Shelley became a frequent visitor to the Godwin household, it was inevitable that he

would meet the three young women living there: Mary Godwin, Jane (later Claire) Clairmont, and Fanny Imlay. It was equally inevitable that all three women would fall in love with Shelley in varying degrees and that Shelley should fall in love with Mary. As the daughter of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft (whose writings Shelley had already read and admired), Mary represented to Shelley an ideal offspring of two great minds. Growing up in the Godwin household had exposed Mary to ideas, and she could read freely in the books in Godwin's library; moreover, she had an independent mind and was willing to argue with Shelley, when they would go to talk by the grave of Mary's mother, rather than be passively molded by him, like Harriet. Perhaps the only real tragedy was that Shelley had not met Mary before he married Harriet. Although Shelley believed he was following Godwin's principles of free love in replacing Harriet with Mary as the object of his highest love and in offering Harriet to live with them as his sister rather than his wife, Godwin bitterly opposed the relationship, and Harriet became estranged and completely shattered. Knowing that Godwin and his wife would do what they could to stop them, Shelley and Mary, accompanied by Jane Clairmont, eloped on the night of 27 July 1814, first to Calais, then to Paris, and on to Switzerland. After a six weeks' stay, the three were forced to return to England because of money problems.

Upon their return to London, the Shelleys were ostracized for their elopement, especially by the Godwins, and Shelley, at least until his grandfather Bysshe died in January 1815, had to spend much of his time trying to raise money from post-obit bonds in order to meet Harriet's needs and satisfy his own many creditors and thus keep out of the hands of the bailiffs. Harriet gave birth to a son, Charles, in November 1814, and in February 1815 Mary gave birth prematurely to a child who died only two weeks later. In his usual pattern Hogg conceived a love for Mary, and Shelley, with Mary's initial consent, agreed to the experiment in free love, but Mary lost interest.

Shelley's only publication in 1814, *A Refutation of Deism: in a Dialogue*, is a two-pronged attack on what he regarded as the crumbling superstructure of the established institutions of religious belief in early-nineteenth-century England. Directed toward intellectuals and Deists, *A Refutation of Deism* employs two interlocutors, Eusebes and Theosophus, to pick apart the arguments supporting both Christianity and Deism, thus leaving atheism as the only rational ground to stand upon.

With improved finances and health in 1815, Shelley not only found the time to write poetry but began to develop a more sophisticated and symbolic style that foreshadows his mature productions. The volume published in 1816, *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude: and Other Poems*, is Shelley's public initiation into the Romantic idiom of poetry pioneered by Wordsworth and perhaps directly inspired by the publication of *The Excursion* in 1814. Shelley had already served his apprenticeship in writing meditative poems in settings of solitude and nature's grandeur while he was in Wales some three or four years earlier.

Alastor, with its use of symbols, visionary elements, and mythic sources (the Narcissus-Echo myth in particular), marks a real advance over Shelley's earlier efforts in writing poetry. Thomas Love Peacock suggested the title to Shelley: Alastor, which refers not to the name of the Poet, but to an evil genius or avenging spirits of solitude. Certainly there are elements of autobiography in the poem, both in the sense that Shelley felt himself to be haunted by real (the bailiffs) or imagined (assailants) spirits at various times in his life and in the sense that in his personal relationships he had made and would again make the same mistake that the Poet makes: of seeking "in vain for a prototype of his conception" of the idealized part of himself. In the preface to the poem Shelley cautions against this solitary quest, warning not only that such pursuits will result in the neglect of one's social duties but that they will lead one to loneliness, alienation, and ultimately death.

Yet what gives *Alastor* vibrancy and tension—life—is that it is not a didactic morality poem; it is a subtle and complex poem in which the two kinds of poetry represented by the Narrator, the Wordsworthian poet of nature, and the visionary Poet of genius are drawn into a kind of complementary conflict. The Narrator relates the story of the Poet's life and quest, interspersing his narration with panegyrics to nature. Like his famous literary counterparts—Werther, St. Preux, the Solitary, Childe Harold—the Poet is alienated early in life, travels, and becomes a wanderer searching for some truth that will give his life meaning. In his travels

he develops his sensibilities and imagination by viewing symbolic Shelleyan landscapes (volcanoes, caves, domes, springs), by becoming a vegetarian, and by steeping himself in "the awful ruins of the days of old."

The Poet rejects an Arab maiden in favor of a veiled maid, a vision of his own imagination. Except for her feminine attributes, the veiled maid is his doppelgänger, an "echo" of his own narcissistic desires: [...]. After the Poet imagines that he consummates his physical passion for the veiled maid, the vision of the maid taunts him as he futilely pursues her through a blighted landscape. But he is really pursuing himself, and when he realizes this, he welcomes his early death, the fate of many Romantic poets and heroes. Shelley himself felt the lure of the life of solitude contrasted with the enforced solitude that he had experienced at various periods in his life, including the lack of a receptive audience for his writings. Predictably, with the exception of a favorable article on "Young Poets" in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* (1 December 1816), *Alastor* was dubbed in the reviews as "obscure" and "morbid."

The year 1816 proved to be exciting for Shelley and Mary and for Claire Clairmont. In January, Mary gave birth to a son, named William after her father, who though he was still cold to Shelley and Mary, continued to be a financial burden on them. In the spring Claire threw herself at Lord Byron, who was recently separated from Lady Byron, and became his mistress. In May she persuaded Shelley and Mary to alter their plans for a trip to Italy and go to Lake Geneva instead, where she knew Byron was headed. The two poets found each other stimulating and spent much time together, sailing on Lake Geneva and discussing poetry and other topics, including ghosts and spirits, into the night. During one of these ghostly "seances," Byron proposed that each person present—himself, Shelley, Mary, Claire, and his physician, Dr. John Polidori—should write a ghost story. Mary's contribution to the contest became the novel *Frankenstein*; published in 1818 with a preface by Shelley, it became one of the most popular works of the whole Romantic period.

For his part Shelley was deeply impressed with the power of the natural scenery, brought on by the combination of the lake and the surrounding mountains, especially Mont Blanc. Both Shelley and Byron were inspired by the associations the area had with Rousseau, whom they regarded as the spiritual leader of romanticism. Shelley was deeply impressed with Rousseau's descriptions of this area in *Julie; ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). Shelley also "dosed" Byron with Wordsworth's descriptions of nature; this influence is evident in Canto III (1816) of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* .

Shelley too did not come out of this Switzerland trip empty-handed. He was stimulated to write two of his finest poems: "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and *Mont Blanc*. The "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" reveals the influence of Wordsworth, of his "Tintern Abbey" and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" in particular. As Wordsworth does in "Tintern Abbey," Shelley in the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" suggests how his imagination and poetic sensitivity were formed by nature, and more significantly, by visitations from the shadowy power of intellectual beauty and how, in turn, he dedicated his poetic powers to intellectual beauty. Much as Wordsworth did in his "Intimations" ode, Shelley laments his feeling that the presence of this power was stronger in his youth.

In *Mont Blanc* Shelley discovers a similar but even more enigmatic power, but the conclusion he reaches is more skeptical, less Wordsworthian. Shelley chose a familiar romantic topic for this poem: Coleridge's "Hymn before Sun-Rise in the Vale of Chamouni," passages from Rousseau's *Julie*, Wordsworth's poetry, and Byron's *Childe Harold* and *Manfred*—all have in common the description of the awesome effect on the observer wrought by Mont Blanc in particular or the Alps in general. Though Shelley much admired the new kind of poetry ushered in by Wordsworth and Coleridge, he was equally convinced by 1815 that both the older poets were political apostates, having sold out to religion and the political status quo in the reaction that followed Napoleon's defeat. Thus the relationship with nature that Shelley explores in *Mont Blanc* is more ridden with skepticism and doubt than the pantheism of Wordsworth or the Christian revelation of Coleridge. The only meaning the poet can draw from the mountain's impenetrable, impassable visage is what his own imagination can supply. To the imaginative observer the mountain provides a parable of creation and destruction in its lower reaches and valleys and of unknowable permanence and power in the majestic solitudes of its uppermost heights. Probably no passage in Shelley's canon has been more

widely disputed than the final three lines of *Mont Blanc*: [....]

The enigmatic mountain leaves the speaker with no assurance that the imagination may endow with meaning the awful blankness of nature.

After their return to England, Shelley and Mary were faced with the disasters of two suicides: Fanny Imlay, Mary's half sister and an admirer of Shelley, and Harriet, Shelley's wife. Since both women had been, at least at one time, in love with Shelley, Shelley and Mary must have felt in some measure responsible. Shelley married Mary on 30 December 1816, and became involved in drawn-out court proceedings with the Westbrooks, led by his old adversary Eliza, over the custody of Shelley and Harriet's children, Ianthe and Charles. Some of Shelley's writings, most prominently *Queen Mab*, were cited during the proceedings to show that Shelley held moral and religious opinions that rendered him unfit to assume custody. By the time the case was finally decided in 1818, with Lord Eldon making provisions for the children to be cared for by a guardian, the Shelleys were in Italy with Shelley never to return to England.

In March of 1817 the Shelleys settled in Marlow, an environment that provided the flexibility of moving in literary circles and the tranquillity needed for thinking and writing. Now more friendly with Mary and Shelley, probably because of their marriage, Godwin was a visitor. In addition to regular conversations with Peacock, Shelley became good friends with Leigh Hunt and met some of the young writers in Hunt's circle, including John Keats and Horace Smith. Given the fact that Shelley's liberal friends and acquaintances were politically opposed to the reactionary forces in England after Napoleon's defeat, it is not surprising that Shelley's writings during his Marlow period are politically charged: two pamphlets, *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote Throughout the Kingdom* and *An Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte*, and one political epic, *The Revolt of Islam*.

Shelley signed both pamphlets "The Hermit of Marlow." The first suggests petitions to increase suffrage, along the lines of what would eventually be put into practice in the 1832 Reform Bill. The second pamphlet (no copies of the first edition are extant) is a rhetorical tour de force in which Shelley chastises even liberals, borrowing a phrase from Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*: "We pity the plumage but forget the dying bird." Shelley suggests that in the public outpour of mourning over the untimely death of Princess Charlotte, people, even the friends of liberty and reform, have neglected the executions of three laborers, who in turn become symbols of all the poor and the unjustly treated. Shelley concludes the essay with an allegorical account of the death of Liberty, a valid reason for mourning.

Shelley was again confronted with the problem of censorship with his longest poem in its original version, with its original title: *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century*, which was withdrawn after only a few copies were published. Even the comparatively liberal Ollier brothers, Shelley's publishers, objected to the brother-sister incest between the two title characters and to some of the attacks on religion. Shelley took out the incestuous relationship, deleted other objectionable passages, and republished the poem as *The Revolt of Islam; A Poem, in Twelve Cantos*. His description of the poem in the preface suggests some of its structural difficulties: "It is a succession of pictures illustrating the growth and progress of individual mind aspiring to excellence, and devoted to the love of mankind." Dedicated to the idea that "love is celebrated everywhere as the sole law which should govern the moral world," *The Revolt of Islam* provides a poetic forum for Shelley to condemn oppression, religious fraud, war, tyrants, and their consequences [...] and to recommend hope, enlightenment, love, "moral dignity and freedom."

Written in Spenserian stanzas, *The Revolt of Islam* begins with an allegory of the eternal struggle between evil and good[...]. Laon, a Shelleyan hero representing love, begins his narrative in Canto II by relating the natural, loving, and inspiring childhood relationship between himself and Cythna, who appears as a liberated Wollstonecraftian woman. In Cantos III and IV Cythna is captured by soldiers, while Laon is imprisoned and goes mad. A kindly hermit frees him and nourishes him with nature and learning, finally bringing him back to sanity after seven years.

Laon rejoins Cythna as the revolutionary forces of good march into the Golden City. The revolution is kept peaceful as the soldiers throw

down their weapons, and, through Laon's intervention, the tyrant Othman is spared the revenge of the people. The forces of reaction overwhelm the patriots, but Cythna saves Laon, and they consummate their love. The king's "Iberian Priest" decides that the only way to stop the famine and pestilence is to burn Laon and Cythna. The burning purifies them, and their spirits travel beyond the mutable world to the Temple of the Spirit, a permanent realm of virtue and happiness. J. G. Lockhart, the reviewer for *Blackwood's* (January 1819), thought the poem obscure and unfinished, and in a way *The Revolt of Islam* was a kind of testing ground for Shelley to work out his system of symbols—caves, rivers, boats, veils—and his political mythology so that he could employ them with greater skill in later works.

Shelley probably wrote *Rosalind and Helen, A Modern Eclogue* before he left England, though the poem was not published by Ollier until 1819. Shelley derives the relationship between Rosalind and Helen from the friendship that had existed between Mary Shelley and Isabel Baxter before her husband, a domestic tyrant like Rosalind's husband, caused the friendship to be broken off. For shock value Shelley introduces the incest theme in the relationship between Rosalind and her brother and the theme of free love in the relationship between Helen and Lionel, whose prototypes are Laon and Cythna. As an aristocrat who writes radical poetry, Lionel appears to be based upon Shelley himself. After both women lose their male lovers, they turn to each other in sisterly love, exchanging tales of woe and social injustice.

For reasons of health and finances, as well as for the obligation to take Allegra, Byron and Claire's child (born in January 1817), to her father, the Shelleys and their children, William and Clara (born in September 1817), together with Claire and Allegra, and the children's nurses set out for Italy in March 1818. For Shelley's development as a poet the change of climate proved fruitful, for he was to write some of his greatest poetry under the clear blue Italian skies. Once in Italy, Shelley found himself in the delicate position of having to mediate between Claire and Byron over Allegra, with the later result of Allegra's being placed in a convent and dying. The expatriates stayed in Pisa and Leghorn before settling for the summer in Bagni di Lucca, in the Apennines. They found congenial company in John and Maria Gisborne and her son, Henry Reveley, an engineer developing a steamboat.

Two poems written at Este, "Lines Written among the Euganean Hills" and *Julian and Maddalo*, grew directly out of Shelley's Italian experiences in the summer and fall of 1818. The immediate source for "Lines" is a day spent in the Euganean Hills overlooking Padua and Venice. The emotional source is Shelley's misery over the death of his child Clara in September 1818 and Mary's subsequent depression and disaffection. The hills are [...] moments of happiness and insight among man's generally dark and miserable existence. That Shelley's recent visit to Byron was very much in his mind is evident in his tribute to him as the poet of Ocean. The imagery of the changing intensity of light during the day reflects the poet's visionary imagination. Shelley concludes this beautiful poem with a wish for domestic tranquillity for himself and those he loves and a hope that the world will recognize its brotherhood and "grow young again."

Julian and Maddalo, not published until its inclusion in *Posthumous Poems* (1824), is Shelley's most direct poetic treatment of his relationship with Lord Byron and reflects conversations during their horseback rides along the Lido while Shelley was visiting Byron at Venice in August 1818. In the poem Julian (Shelley) takes the side of optimism and hope in the face of despondency and evidence of misery, while Maddalo (Byron) takes a pessimistic view, stemming partly from his pride. For the side of hope Julian cites the beauty of Nature in this "Paradise of Exiles, Italy!" and the natural goodness of childhood, describing Shelley's own play with Byron's child Allegra as evidence: [...].

Maddalo accuses Julian of talking "Utopia," citing as evidence for his pessimism a madman who was once as idealistic as Julian. Each thinking he will support his own arguments, they decide to visit the madman, whom commentators have variously identified as Tasso or as Shelley's alter ego. But the madman's soliloquy is inconclusive. He says that part of his suffering is his own doing, but part seems inflicted upon him from some outside power. However, he has retained his ideals and integrity, still believing in the possibility of social reform and eschewing revenge against his lover, who has scorned him for her paramour. He believes that love leads to

misery[...]. After hearing the madman's soliloquy, both Julian and Maddalo are subdued and feel pity.[...] Julian returns many years later only to find Maddalo away, the madman and his lover dead, and Maddalo's child a grown woman. He learns from her that the madman's lover returned for a while but deserted him once again.[...] Many of the other poems Shelley wrote during this same period, such as the fine lyric "Stanzas Written in Dejection near Naples," depict Shelley's despair over his estranged relationship with Mary and were also not published until *Posthumous Poems* .

Shelley provided rapturous descriptions of his travels in Italy in his letters to Peacock, expressing his particular delight in Roman ruins. But these delights were balanced, as always seemed to be the case for Shelley and Mary, by yet another tragedy, the death of their son, William, in June 1819. An additional cause for despair was what came to be known as the "Hoppner Scandal," so called because the Shelleys' discharged servant Elise Foggi had related to the Hoppners, Byron's friends in Venice, that unbeknownst to Mary, Claire had born Shelley a child in Naples. Records do support the existence of Shelley's "Neapolitan Charge," Elena Adelaide Shelley, but to this day scholars view the parentage of this child as speculative.

During this 1818-1819 period Shelley wrote what many consider to be his masterpiece, *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), subtitled *A Lyrical Drama*, perhaps to suggest a hybrid genre in the way Wordsworth and Coleridge had signaled their pioneering efforts by titling their first volume of poetry *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Shelley had been developing the symbolism, imagery, and ideas for the poem for several years. For example, he states in the preface that "the imagery which I have employed will be found ... to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind," a technique he had already used in *Mont Blanc*. Shelley had had a longstanding interest in and familiarity with Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, even translating it for Byron, but he could not accept the idea that Aeschylus had bound the champion of mankind for eternity, or even worse, that Prometheus would have been reconciled with Jupiter in Aeschylus's lost drama, the sequel to *Prometheus Bound*. As Shelley avers in the preface, "I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind." The choice of Prometheus as his hero is not surprising, given this mythological character's association with rebellion and isolation from his act of giving fire to man against the gods' wishes and his reputation as a "forethinker" or prophet. For Shelley he came to symbolize the mind or soul of man in its highest potential.

The drama begins with Prometheus bound to a precipice of icy rocks in the Indian Caucasus, the situation of a Romantic outcast. Prometheus has reached the point of desperately needing to reveal his thoughts and so free himself of the self-imprisoning hatred of Jupiter. Many commentators regard line fifty-three [...] as the turning point of the play. Prometheus also "recalls," meaning he both remembers and takes back his curse against Jupiter, thus breaking the wintry deadlock between the two adversaries and initiating a change of consciousness. Believing that Prometheus's recantation of his curse is a sign of submission, Jupiter sends Mercury and the Furies to extract from the Titan the price of his freedom: the secret that contains the key to Jupiter's overthrow. The Furies try to demoralize Prometheus by reciting the great failures of human hope, the co-option of Christianity by reactionary elements and the violence of the Terror in the French Revolution. But the Furies' message of futility is counterbalanced by the Spirits' message of hope and courage.

Asia, the female counterpart of Prometheus and the embodiment of love and nature, opens act 2 in a vale in the Indian Caucasus, waiting for her sister Panthea to come. Asia's and Panthea's lyrics in the following sections image forth a change in nature, signaling the coming of spring, hope, and reawakening that will accompany Asia's reunion with Prometheus. Asia descends into the cave of the enigmatic Demogorgon, who may represent the principle of necessity or of revolution, in order to gain knowledge of how to effect the overthrow of man's oppressor. Demogorgon is terse with Asia, responding to her questions[...]. His terseness stems from his desire to make Asia see the need to change her mental outlook like Prometheus; once this is done, she will understand that the real tyrant exists only in her mind.

Act 3 depicts the fall of Jupiter and thus tyranny from the world. Shelley delighted in making tyrants fall at the moment of their greatest complacency over their omnipotence. Jupiter, thinking that his child Demogorgon will consolidate his power, is shocked to learn that

he is a "fatal child," the principle of revolutionary change. Rather than ascend Jupiter's vacant throne, Prometheus retires with Asia and her "sister nymphs," Panthea and Ione, to a cave, forming what one commentator has called "a typically Shelleyan household." Shelley's political point here is that even Prometheus would be corrupted by the structure of power, as were the well-intended French revolutionaries; therefore, the political model is an egalitarian utopia with its roots in the philosophical anarchism of Godwin's *Political Justice* . Since Prometheus and Asia together symbolize the mind of man, the peoples of the earth undergo the same transformation in consciousness: [....]

Act 4, written several months after Shelley had completed the first three in April 1819, is a celestial celebration of the birth of a new age. All of nature joins the Earth and the Moon in celebrating in poetic song the passage into a millennium governed by universal love. Demogorgon's final message to the universe reminds us that maintaining the millennium requires eternal vigilance: [....]

Shelley knew that *Prometheus Unbound* would never be popular, but he thought that it might have a beneficial influence on some already enlightened intellects. In letters to his publisher Ollier, Shelley proclaimed that although this was his "favorite poem," he did not expect it to sell more than twenty copies and instructed Ollier to send copies to Hunt, Peacock, Hogg, Godwin, Keats, Horace Smith, Thomas Moore, and Byron. The reviewers were predictably harsh in their condemnation of the poem's moral and political principles, with the reviewer for the *Literary Gazette and Journal of the Belles Lettres* (9 September 1820) quipping that "no one can ever think [*Prometheus*] worth binding," but there was also praise, with words such as "beauty" and "genius" used in various reviews.

Bound with *Prometheus Unbound* in the volume published in 1820 by Ollier were some of Shelley's finest extended lyrics, including "Ode to the West Wind," "The Cloud," "To a Skylark," and "Ode to Liberty." Written in the autumn of 1819 when the Shelleys were in Florence, "Ode to the West Wind" employs natural imagery and symbolism to foretell not only a change in the physical but in the political climate. Writing in terza rima to suggest the force and pace of the wind, Shelley addresses the wind as a "Wild Spirit" that is both "Destroyer and Preserver." Shelley asks the wind to drive him forth as it does the leaves, the clouds, and the waves so that his poetic song will have the same irresistible power for change to awaken Earth: [...].

Both "An Ode, Written October 1819, before the Spaniards Had Recovered Their Liberty" and "Ode to Liberty" were written in Shelley's enthusiasm for the recent Spanish revolution. The latter poem recites an idealized history of liberty from its birth in ancient Greece to its most recent appearance in Spain, and its possibilities in England. Recalling Shelley's earlier interests in science, "The Cloud" demonstrates his knowledge of the meteorological cycle of cloud formation. It is perhaps unfortunate for Shelley's reputation that "To a Skylark," a dazzling exercise in metaphor, rather than "Ode to the West Wind," has been his most frequently anthologized poem, for "To a Skylark" suffers by comparison with Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale."

Almost immediately after finishing the first three acts of *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley began work on another drama, *The Cenci* (1819). This time instead of using mythology and classical literature as his source material, he used the true Renaissance story of the macabre Cenci family, the villainous count and his virtuous daughter, Beatrice, of whom Shelley had a portrait. Shelley believed that this drama, unlike *Prometheus Unbound*, would be both popular and stageable, even suggesting his favorite actress, Miss O'Neill, for the part of Beatrice. The Gothic trappings, the elimination of "mere poetry," and the absence of didactic political instruction were all calculated to make the drama accessible to a wide audience.

Shelley's political disclaimer in the preface is, of course, belied by the fact that Beatrice's rebellion against her tyrannical father is yet another version of Shelley's lifelong struggle against any form of authority, be it kingly, priestly, or fatherly. Count Cenci acts on the assumption that his patriarchal power is absolute, sanctioned as it is by the Pope, the head of Church and State. He knows no checks, first toasting his sons' deaths in a bizarre parody of the communion ceremony, then raping Beatrice, who has been abandoned by all powers—religious, state, personal—who might have helped her. Although the Count raped Beatrice to assert his domination over her and so make his control over his weak family complete, he is not prepared for Beatrice's

response of revenge. In Shelley's hands Beatrice's revenge is a revolutionary act against the oppression of patriarchal authority, not a personal vendetta. Though some commentators have found a character flaw in Beatrice because she lacks remorse for her part in the parricide, Shelley's portrayal of her as an ascetic revolutionary personality seems justified.

In his hope that the play would be read widely and staged, Shelley again misjudged the predominance of conservativism in the literary milieu of Regency England. The taboo theme of incest, the horror of parricide, the "blasphemous" treatment of religion, the implicit attack on the family and all patriarchal institutions, and Shelley's own dangerous reputation—all broke the rules of Regency society and ensured *The Cenci* would be condemned by all but a few reviewers and friends, such as Leigh Hunt, to whom the play is dedicated. One reviewer's response is symptomatic: "The ties of father and daughter ... ought not to be profaned as they are in this poem" (*British Review*, June 1821). The play was staged only once in the nineteenth century, by the Shelley Society in 1886.

Shelley's political ire was stirred in 1819 by the shocking events in England that became known as the Manchester Massacre, or "Peterloo." During an assembly in St. Peter's fields, where a crowd was to be addressed by "Orator" Hunt, the local militia charged the crowd, killing at least nine people and wounding many more. Shelley's response was to write several explicitly political poems, including *The Masque of Anarchy* (1832), the sonnet "England in 1819," and "Song to the Men of England," all of which were deemed even by Shelley's friends, such as Leigh Hunt, to whom he sent *The Masque of Anarchy*, to be too dangerous to publish during Shelley's life-time. *The Masque of Anarchy* begins with a dream vision of a procession, or masque, in which Murder, Fraud, and Hypocrisy have masks like Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh; John Scott, Earl of Eldon; and Henry Addington, Viscount Sidmouth—all ministers in the current English government. Anarchy, which Shelley identifies with tyranny and despotism, rides by[...]. Though much of the poem's rhetoric and imagery are violent and revolutionary, Shelley's council to the victims of attacks from oppressors is to respond not with violence in kind, but with passive resistance: [...].

This tactic should shame the soldiers into joining the cause of freedom. Shelley assures the people of their ultimate victory over their oppressors[...]. Shelley must have felt particularly frustrated that all his attempts, both in poetry and prose, to address explicitly the political events of 1819 and 1820 failed to be published during his lifetime.

While Hunt did not deem *The Masque of Anarchy* safe to be published until the more relaxed political climate that accompanied the Reform Bill of 1832, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, written by Shelley during this same period, did not find its way into publication until 1920. Actually, *A Philosophical View of Reform* is a calmer and more carefully reasoned response to Peterloo and the repressive policies of this period than the poems Shelley wrote in response. Shelley's intended audience in the essay is the leaders in the reform movement, and he hoped to consolidate opinion and bring forth action on urgent issues: the need for expanded suffrage, for reforms in the way taxes are levied, and, most important, for greater freedom of speech, press, and assembly.

Lest Shelley should be thought of as only a humorless reformer where politics is concerned and a serious visionary where poetry is concerned, two satires, *Peter Bell the Third* and *Oedipus Tyrannus; or, Swellfoot the Tyrant*, and two light-hearted poems, the "Letter to Maria Gisborne" and *The Witch of Atlas*, suggest the contrary. Perhaps these more playful poems, written in late 1819 and during 1820, were an outlet after his intensive poetic efforts in 1819. Shelley got the idea to write his own *Peter Bell* from reading in the *Examiner* reviews of Wordsworth's *Peter Bell*, published for the first time in 1819, and John Hamilton Reynold's burlesque *Peter Bell: A Lyrical Ballad*, which had actually preceded Wordsworth's poem into print. Though Shelley certainly admired Wordsworth for the advances in poetry that he had helped to initiate, he believed that the elder poet had become a political apostate and that his more recent poetry, such as *Peter Bell*, had become "Dull" [...]. To counteract the pious moralizing in Wordsworth's *Peter Bell*, Shelley portrays his Peter Bell as damned in hell.

Though Shelley never equals the satirical skills of his friend Byron, in *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, written in August 1820, he demonstrates an ability to sustain a satire on political events. Queen Caroline, who was strongly supported by the Whigs, was tried for infidelity, in an effort by George IV and his ministers to prevent her from taking part in the coronation ceremonies—prompting Shelley to write a satirical drama in

the manner of Aristophanes, complete with a chorus of pigs, the choice of which was suggested to Shelley by the pigs being brought to market beneath his windows in his summer residence near Pisa. In the drama's climatic scene Iona (Queen Caroline) snatches the green bag full of perjured testimony against her and pours its contents over Swellfoot (George IV) and his ministers, turning them into small predators. Iona mounts the Minotaur (John Bull) and with her loyal pigs gives chase. With all the targets of the satire readily identifiable, it is not surprising that the publisher, J. Johnston, under threat of prosecution, was forced to surrender all remaining copies after only seven were sold.

In the summer of 1820, while staying at the Gisbornes' house in Leghorn while they were away in London, Shelley wrote one of his most informal poems, the "Letter to Maria Gisborne." Written in the style of Coleridge's conversation poems and even recalling the situation of his "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison," Shelley's verse epistle capsulizes his view of himself and his closest friends. Describing himself in the clutter of Henry Reveley's study, Shelley depicts himself first as a spider and a silkworm and then as a scientist and a magician. After recalling the pleasant times he has spent with Maria Gisborne in Italy, Shelley then imagines the Gisbornes in London meeting his friends and briefly characterizes them fondly and playfully: Hunt, Hogg, Peacock, and Smith. The poem concludes with a vision of the future when Shelley will be reunited with all of these friends in a warm and supportive literary community.

Source: John R. Greenfield, "Percy Bysshe Shelley," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 96, *British Romantic Poets, 1789–1832, Second Series*, edited by John R. Greenfield, Gale Research, 1990, pp. 308–338.

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