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"COMMON SYMPATHIES": SHELLEY'S "REVOLT OF ISLAM"

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"COMMON SYMPATHIES": SHELLEY'S REVOLT OF ISLAM

by

M. ELISABETH BROCKING

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

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April, 1985
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ABSTRACT

The Revolt of Islam, Shelley's longest and most neglected major work, contains some of his most rigorous thinking on the subject of revolution, as well as showing a substantial growth in poetic skill. This poem shows Shelley's empiricism, relentlessly examines the consequences of "reform" as well as tyranny, and is the transition between his earlier works and the great poems which would follow.

Shelley wished The Revolt to appeal "to the common sympathies of every human breast," emphasizing both that his readers share important concerns and that he directs his poem primarily to their hearts. Both his desire to write for society, to converse with a readership rather than dictate to a coterie, and his belief—in accord with Hume—that the will is motivated by emotions, show Shelley's inheritance from the eighteenth century.

Those few critics who have studied The Revolt have usually seen it as a simple chronicle of the war between Good, as represented by the revolutionaries, Laon and Cythna, and Evil, as appearing in the Tyrant and the Iberian Priest. While such a paradigm is indeed established in the allegorical opening Canto, I argue that as the poem progresses this facile dualism disintegrates. Even the protagonists are potential tyrants; Laon's contradictory language and Cythna's elevation as High Priestess of Equality
demonstrate that revolution cannot be achieved instantly, finally, or easily, for evil derives not from external circumstance alone, but also from each man's potential "dark idolatry of self."

Another important aspect of *The Revolt* is the personal immortality achieved by Laon and Cythna after their martyrdom. A seeming anomaly in a skeptical poem which consistently attacks Christianity, and indeed all organized religion, the Paradise of the concluding Canto is actually not an unreal or mystical state but the culmination of the poem's empiricism.

Finally, this poem occupies a crucial place in Shelley's poetic development. Written after *Queen Mab* and before *Prometheus Unbound,* *The Revolt* is the link between them, in technique as well as content, for the dogmatic, declamatory style of earlier works gives way to narrative and conversation, and *Necessity* as the instrument of social change is replaced the individual will. In *The Revolt* Shelley found his mature voice, and his subject and conclusions here, the philosophy of reform, persist throughout his career.
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For my mother, Mary Coggins Brocking
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Chapter One

"I have written fearlessly": an introduction to The Revolt of Islam

...
importantly, the desire to understand and communicate a vision while avoiding the temptations of fanaticism, constitute the subjects of Shelley's longest and most neglected poem.

When Shelley wrote *The Revolt of Islam* he believed that he was dying of consumption. In a letter to Byron dated September 24, 1817, he discusses his poem, completed the previous day, and reveals that "my health is in a miserable state, so that some care will be required to prevent it speedily terminating in death."¹ His physicians had told Shelley that he had tuberculosis, which, among other reasons, would soon prompt him to leave England forever and settle in Italy. His conviction that this poem might have been his last is stated clearly in a letter to Godwin, written several months later:

I felt the precariousness of my life and resolved to leave some record of myself. Much of what the volume contains was written with the feeling ... [of] the communications of a dying man.²

And in 1817 Shelley faced not only the extinction of his own life, but the hardships endured in that year and decade by those working for civil liberty and human rights. For Shelley did not write during the blissful dawn of the early 1790's but during the harsh and repressive Regency, spending his adult life under a government which systematically resisted all reform and indeed became increasingly intolerant. Michael Scrivener describes the dangers reformers faced:

The events of 1816-17 could easily have had an opposite effect of frightening Shelley away from radical politics. The year
1816 saw steadily increasing economic misery... by autumn 96 radicals in England and 37 in Scotland awaited trial for treason. Not since the 1790's had the government felt it necessary to wage such a war against the radicals. The years 1816-17 were also difficult ones for the English poor, who largely composed the active arm of radicalism. A crop failure in 1816 caused a scarcity of food, leading to inflation and food riots. In early June of 1817 the "Pentridge Rising" occurred; 4 Shelley was later to write a pamphlet protesting the execution of the leaders. The misery and repression described in *The Revolt* does not come solely from histories of the French Revolution, but derives as well from Shelley's observation of contemporary events.

The stock image of Shelley as a fuzzy idealist, 5 dreaming beautiful Utopian dreams far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, is contradicted by contemporary accounts. It is crucial to understand that Shelley's involvement in alleviating the misery of the poor was not limited to writing long visionary poems. Mary Shelley eloquently relates his practical efforts to reduce human suffering:

Marlow was inhabited (I hope it is altered now) by a very poor population. The women are lacemakers, and lose their health by sedentary labor, for which they were very ill paid. The poor-laws ground to the dust not only the paupers, but those who had ridden just above that state, and were obliged to pay poor-rates. The changes produced by peace following a long war, and a bad harvest, brought with them the most heart-rending evils to the poor. Shelley afforded what
alleviation he could. In the winter, while bringing out his poem [The Revolt of Islam] he had a severe attack of ophthalmia, caught while visiting the poor cottages. I mention these things, for this minute and active sympathy with his fellow-creatures gives a thousand-fold interest to his speculations and stamps with reality his pleadings for the human race.  

Shelley's radicalism—and his generosity—resulted in considerable financial hardship for him; his beliefs necessitated his rejection of the comfortable life, and the income, of the aristocracy to which he had been born. And Shelley was supporting, on a meagre income, not only his wife and their two children, but Mary's step-sister, Claire Clairmont, and her baby daughter Alba (who was Byron's child, later to be called Allegra). Additionally, Shelley was also giving Godwin considerable sums of money, to extricate the latter from his debts.

In 1817 Shelley also suffered a series of personal tragedies, including the recent suicides of his sister-in-law, and his estranged wife, as well as the loss of two of his children in a custody battle with the Lord Chancellor. This last event is a direct result of his radicalism; following the death of his first wife, Harriet Shelley, Lord Eldon gave Shelley's children by that marriage to their maternal grandparents, largely because of the anti-Christian and anti-monarchical elements of Shelley's writings. In the Preface to The Revolt Shelley claimed "I have written fearlessly," but there was much for him to fear. Both his personal life and the political situation of England in 1817 were filled with suffering and loss.
I mention these circumstances to establish the difficulties that Shelley labored under, while producing a poem of nearly 5000 lines in slightly over six months. But they are significant not so much because they may allow us to drop a sentimental tear on Shelley's bier or to excuse the flaws, inconsistencies, and carelessness sometimes apparent in *The Revolt of Islam*, but because the context stamps the work with reality.

Shelley's commitment to "the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality" motivates his concern for the technique of *The Revolt*. As we will see, he considered it of primary importance to appeal to an audience; ironically, this most neglected of Shelley's poems was perhaps the one he most hoped would be widely read. To this end he wrote to a publisher that

the whole poem, with the exception of the first canto and part of the last, is a mere human story without the smallest intermixture of supernatural interference. The first canto is, indeed, in some measure a distinct poem, though very necessary to the wholeness of the work. I say this because, if it were all written in the manner of the first canto, I could not expect that it would be interesting to any great number of people. I have attempted in the progress of my work to speak to the common elementary emotions of the human heart, so that, though it is a story of violence and revolution, it is relieved by milder pictures of friendship and love and natural affections.⁸

His phrase, "common elementary emotions," repeated in the Preface to *The Revolt* as "common sympathies," condenses two of the most central aspects
of this poem: it emphasizes that his readers share important concerns and it wishes to appeal primarily to their hearts. This is not to imply that Shelley was anti-intellectual but that he believed, in common with Hume and other eighteenth century philosophers, that emotions are the basis of our actions. Much of Shelley's ethics, in fact, derive from Hume, especially from *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume states that "reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will, and . . . it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will."⁹ Emotions, then, dominate and motivate our actions: "moral distinctions, therefore, are not the offspring of reason."¹⁰ Continuing this argument, Hume declares that sympathy is the basis of morality, that we are unselfish, or "benevolent," only when we can feel on our own pulses the pain or pleasure our deeds bring to others:

We are certain that sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature. . . . We find that it has force sufficient to give us the strongest sentiments of approbation, when it operates alone, without the concurrence of any other principle; as in the cases of justice, allegiance, chastity, and good manners. We may observe that all the circumstances requisite for its operation are found in most of the virtues; which have, for the most part, a tendency to the good of society, or to that of the person possessed of them. If we compare all these circumstances, we shall not doubt that sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions.¹¹

if this were so, then a poem which wished to lead its readers to virtue must engage their sympathies. Samuel Johnson criticized Milton for lacking this
element:

The plan of *Paradise Lost* has this inconvenience, that it comprises neither human action nor human manners. The man and woman who act and suffer are in a state which no other man or woman can ever know. The reader finds no transaction in which he can be engaged, beholds no condition in which he can by any effort of imagination place himself; he has, therefore, little natural curiosity or sympathy. 

Shelley wanted to avoid this inconvenience; by showing his protagonists undergoing experiences which we, although not revolutionaries in Constantinople, can share, he tried to make *The Revolt* accessible to the reader. That the poem is a thinly disguised account of contemporary Europe, rather than an escapist Oriental romance, is explained by Shelley:

The scene is supposed to be laid in Constantinople and modern Greece, but without much attempt at minute delineation of Mahometan manners. It is, in fact, a tale of such a revolution as might be expected to take place in a European nation.

Since romances depicting wild adventures in exotic settings—such as Southey's *Thalaba*—were immensely popular, Shelley used this vehicle to convey his revolutionary tale to the public, hoping thus both to appeal to popular taste and avoid some of the prejudice, and possible censorship, the poem would encounter if it were set in Bristol or York.

In accord with Hume's contention that passion, rather than reason, motivates us, Shelley emphasizes that his poem is not a versification of *Political Justice* (or any other tract). Rather, he says in the Preface:
I have chosen a story of human passion in its most universal character, diversified with moving and romantic adventures, and appealing, in contempt of all artificial opinions and institutions, to the common sympathies of every human breast. I have made no attempt to recommend the motives which I would substitute for those at present governing mankind, by methodical and systematic argument. I would only awaken the feelings, so that the reader should see the beauty of true virtue.

Shelley's language is again similar to Hume's, as in his reference to "artificial" restrictions which at best are based on and at worst obscure our common sympathies. While "artificial" means primarily "man-made" rather than "false," it begins to take on that sense as Hume describes how our "virtues" are derived:

now justice is a moral virtue, merely because it has that tendency to the good of mankind, and indeed it is nothing but an artificial invention to that purpose. The same may be said of allegiance, of the laws of nations, of modesty, and of good manners. All these are mere human contrivances for the interest of society . . . and as the good of society, where our own interests are not concerned, . . . pleases only by sympathy, it follows that sympathy is the source of the esteem which we pay to all the artificial virtues.⁴

By stating that all laws derive from sympathy, Hume not only removes divine sanction from the "mere human contrivances" of our present customs, but
also makes way for Shelley's argument that artificial virtues should be abolished unless they are actually grounded in the feelings of "every human breast." This is certainly a radical, and indeed an antinomian, position, and it is an important part of Shelley's philosophical anarchism. No law can be imposed on a man; if it contradicts his own opinions it will either be disregarded or obeyed through fear. Yet if tyranny is practiced systematically enough, the victims will become their own despots, internalizing the rules and believing the voice of authority instead of their own judgments. In the Preface Shelley states that the fact that slavery eats "with poisonous rust into the soul," as seen in the inability of the French Revolutionaries suddenly to become "tranquil and independent," is "the historical fact from which liberty derives all its recommendations, and falsehood the worst features of its deformity." The one point which The Revolt of Islam dramatizes most emphatically is the difficulty of liberation from the structures of domination, the artificial institutions which so deeply separate us from recognizing and acting on our common sympathies.

In the Preface, Shelley presents his qualifications for having undertaken such an ambitious project:

There is an education peculiarly fitted for a poet without which genius and sensibility can hardly fill the circle of their capacities. No education indeed can entitle to this appellation a dull and unobservant mind, or one, though neither dull nor unobservant, the channels of communication between thought and expression have been obstructed or closed. How far it is my fortune to belong to either of the
latter classes I cannot know. I aspire to be something better. The circumstances of my accidental education have been favourable to this ambition. I have been familiar from boyhood with mountains and lakes, and the sea, and the solitude of forests. Danger which sports upon the brink of precipices has been my playmate. I have trodden the glaciers of the Alps, and lived under the eye of Mont Blanc. I have been a wanderer among distant fields. I have sailed down mighty rivers, and seen the sun rise and set, and the stars come forth, whilst I sailed night and day among mountains. I have seen populous cities, and have watched the passions which rise and spread, and sink and change, amongst assembled multitudes of men. I have seen the theatre of the more visible ravages of tyranny and war, cities and villages reduced to scattered groups of black and roofless houses, and the naked inhabitants sitting famished upon their desolated thresholds. I have conversed with living men of genius. The poetry of ancient Greece and Rome, and modern Italy, and our own country, has been to me like external nature, a passion and an enjoyment. Such are the sources from which the materials for the imagery of my Poem have been drawn.

Although he occasionally lapses into rather purple prose, Shelley is not asking us to believe that his poem derives solely from his own intelligence and sensitivity, much less from supernatural inspiration. Rather, he argues that
whatever talent he possesses must be augmented by learning and actual experience. In this he is again perfectly in accord with eighteenth century theory. Fielding tells us that "[genius] is not sufficient for our purpose without a good share of learning . . . for Nature can furnish us only with Capacity"; the same word—capacity—occurs in both passages and in the same context. It is potential, but potential which is unrealizable without learning and experience.

Shelley again resembles Fielding when he defines "genius." Compare the following selections:

By Genius I would understand that Power, or rather those Powers, of the mind which are capable of penetrating into all Things which are within our Reach and Knowledge and of distinguishing their essential differences . . . for how we can be said to have discovered the true essence of two things, without discerning their differences, seems to me hard to conceive.

In this have I long believed that my power consists; in sympathy and that part of the imagination which relates to sentiment and contemplation. I am formed . . . to apprehend minute and remote distinctions of feeling, whether relative to external nature or the living beings which surround us, and to communicate the conceptions which result from considering either the moral or the material universe as a whole.

The first of these selections is from *Tom Jones*, the second from a letter of
Shelley's to Godwin, in December, 1817. There are significant differences in the ideas of these writers: Shelley accentuates sensibility much more than does Fielding and uses "I" instead of "we," denoting a shift in interest from a communal enterprise to an individual quest (though this is partially attributable to the fact that Shelley is writing in a personal letter, not a Preface). Yet both writers are centrally concerned with precision and communication, and both assert that particular points must be the basis of general conceptions.

Our study of Shelley's poetic theory has demonstrated that he is just as committed as Dr. Johnson to "human interest." He imagines his art as having the same purpose—engaging the sympathies of the readers to promote virtue—as Fielding does, and he uses the same techniques. And Shelley's use of eighteenth century principles underscores his avoidance of fanaticism; *The Revolt* is not the product of a drugged dream or of automatic writing, but of sensible technique and the desire to communicate his ideas in an accessible form.

The publication history of this poem is dramatic, and demonstrates both Shelley's desire to reach an audience and the difficulties incurred by fearless writing. It was first published on November 21, 1817, as *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century*. This version differs from *The Revolt* in two particulars: Laon and Cythna are originally brother and sister as well as lovers, and the original poem is harsher and more direct in its specific criticisms of Christianity.

The publisher, Charles Ollier, who had previously only read relatively innocuous selections of the work, quickly realized that he was implicated in
printing a work which could be considered seditious, and in the atmosphere of 1817 this could be dangerous for a publisher as well as for an author. On the 9th or 10th of December, 1817, he wrote to Shelley urging that the poem be revised and the offensive material excised. Shelley was initially very reluctant to change his poem; his friend and biographer Thomas Love Peacock states that he "contested the proposed alterations step by step." However, Shelley bent to Ollier's will when he realized that to refuse would prevent the work from ever reaching an audience. Writing to Tom Moore on December 16, he states very clearly that getting his ideas before the public, and in a fashion which would allow his readers to be receptive to his beliefs, is of the greatest importance:

The present edition of *Laon and Cythna* is to be suppressed, and it will be republished in about a fortnight under the title of *The Revolt of Islam* with some alterations which consist in little else than the substitution of the words 'friend' or 'lover' for that of 'brother' or 'sister'... that peculiarity, contrary to my intention, revolts and shocks many who might be inclined to sympathize with me in my general views—As soon as I discovered that this effect was produced by the circumstance alluded to, I hastened to cancel it.

While the incest element has led critics into elaborate and suspicious conjectures, it is actually of little relevance. In the *Preface* to *Laon and Cythna* Shelley states that he has included this "circumstance" "merely to accustom men to that charity and toleration which the exhibition of a practice widely differing from their own has a tendency to promote," and he adds that
incestuous sentiments "have no personal reference to the writer." His readiness to make Cythna "an orphan" rather than Laon's sister indicates that incest was not a primary quality of the poem to Shelley. And while his opposition to Christianity—and all organized religion—was deep and enduring, he was willing to forgo overt attacks on "superstition" in the cause of gaining an audience. As finally published, The Revolt of Islam argues vigorously for the abolition of our current conception of God as an anthropomorphic ruler; substitutions such as "infidel" for "Atheist" do little violence to Shelley's case.

Despite the concessions to convention, the poem was not widely read. The leading periodicals of the day took predictable stands on its merits; the liberal Examiner, edited by Shelley's friend Leigh Hunt, was the only significant journal to review the work positively. The negative reviews printed in the conservative magazines attacked Shelley primarily for his life, his unorthodox religious sentiments and his radical politics, rather than considering the merits of the poem. There is a strong and contradictory strain in even the most hostile reviews; Shelley was frequently said to have been misled by low companions.

Mr. Shelly [sic], whatever his errors may have been, is a scholar, a gentleman, and a poet; and he must therefore despise from his soul the only eulogies to which he has hitherto been accustomed—paragraphs from the Examiner, and sonnets from Johnny Keats. ²¹

There is clearly an attempt here to engage class bias; vicious as Shelley is, he is less despicable than true members of the "Cockney School" simply by virtue
of his birth. If he would reassume his true position as an aristocrat, turn to Christianity, and free himself from the deleterious influences of Hunt, Keats, and Godwin, he might yet deserve "the privileges of the genius born within him." Another reviewer, John Taylor Coleridge, after a series of slanders and muckraking, piously urged that Shelley "is still a young man, and though his account be assuredly black and heavy, he may yet hope to redeem his time, and wipe it out." What these gentlemen, blinded by their assumptions, apparently failed to realize is that Shelley was the most radical writer of his age, far more committed to revolution than any member of the Cockney School.

The more recent critical history of The Revolt has been less colorful, if only because the poem has been substantially ignored. It is remarkable that this long and significant work by a major British poet has been virtually neglected. While scholars writing in the first half of this century included brief discussions — primarily plot summaries — in their volumes on Shelley, there was little actual critical attention.

In his 1959 study, Harold Bloom dismisses The Revolt quickly and contemptuously; because it does not fit into his reading of Shelley he labels it "abortive," "a false direction," and claims that its "only distinction is that it is Shelley's longest." Kenneth Neill Cameron acknowledges the general lack of critical attention, though holding quite a different opinion of the poem's merit, stating in 1974 that "of all Shelley's major poems The Revolt of Islam is the most neglected . . . the poem is, in fact, an invaluable storehouse of Shelley's ideas and a touchstone for the interpretation of other poems." Yet Cameron's analysis is brief, and, while he recognizes the worth of The Revolt, he views
it mainly as a key to what he deems more important works.

Nathaniel Brown,\textsuperscript{27} in his study of sexuality and gender roles in Shelley, has devoted a chapter to the feminist elements of \textit{The Revolt}. While Brown is a dedicated and intelligent reader of the poem, his interpretation, particularly in its concentration on the heroine, Cythna, to the exclusion of Laon, her co-protagonist, is somewhat limited. Like other critics, Brown's main interest is in a single theme, in this case feminism, as it is manifested in this poem, rather than in the several themes and voices of the poem as a whole.

Finally, Michael Scrivener,\textsuperscript{28} whose 1982 book contains the most recent substantial discussion of \textit{The Revolt}, unfortunately does not apply the same close and thoughtful analysis to this poem as he does to \textit{Prometheus Unbound}. Rather, he neglects the earlier poem, spending only a few pages on it, although his study (not applied to \textit{The Revolt}) of Shelley's philosophical anarchism and his attempt to find language free of terms of domination is extremely helpful, and will be cited below in connection with \textit{Prometheus}.

Additionally, those critics who have attended to the poem have usually taken the view that it depicts a simple, dualistic combat between Good and Evil, as exemplified by Desmond King-Hele:

\begin{quote}
more of a divine text than a weighing of right and wrong. \\
\textit{The Revolt of Islam} is, as it were, Shelley's Old Testament. \\
It chronicles the struggle of his chosen people, and, just as Jehovah's wishes are invoked to justify the wars in the Old Testament, so the war against the tyrant is justified by its being fought under the aegis of his god liberty.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}
This statement is seriously deficient. At no point in the poem does Shelley advocate war against the tyrant, and the notion of a "chosen people," an elite whom Shelley champions, has no basis in this rigorously democratic poem. King-Hele's analogy is particularly inappropriate in view of Shelley's abhorrence of the chauvinism and violence of the Old Testament. And, as I will show, Shelley specifically rejects deifying any person or abstraction, including liberty. Shelley does depict such attitudes, even on the part of the revolutionaries, but does so to demonstrate their dangers. Yet King-Hele's remarks are typical of previous interpretations of this poem; it has been virtually ignored or read as an irrational and dogmatic "divine text," either a Manichean testament or the feverish dream of a fanatic.

Shelley was in fact acutely aware of the dangers of fanaticism, and of its kinship to tyranny. His interest in the French Revolution—one of the formative elements of The Revolt—proceeds from his recognition of the dangers of enthusiasm as well as from his interest in liberation. Shelley begins The Revolt of Islam by specifically stating that the events about to be narrated take place soon after the failure of the French Revolution. The opening line, "When the last hope of trampled France had faded," refers to Shelley’s own day, the reactionary years after the collapse of the liberal hopes of the early 1790’s. In the Preface, Shelley expresses his concern about the "reverses of hope" following the "atrocities" in France:

Thus many of the most ardent and tender-hearted of the worshippers of public good have been morally ruined by what a partial glimpse of the events they deplored appeared to show as the melancholy desolation of all their cherished
hopes. Hence gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live, the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair.

Shelley is less interested in condemning the enemies of the Revolution than in examining—and hopefully, eliminating—the paralysis which had settled on liberal thinkers after the ruin of the Republic. Michael Scrivener recognizes that

the French Revolution parallels and allusions are ways of trying to comprehend the present and shape the future. In 1816 Shelley urged Byron to write a grand epic on the French Revolution, but the motive was not historiographical, it was political, to make the Revolution relevant and alive for the present, as a means of guiding action and thought for the future.30

But the French Revolution was more than an inspiration and an ideal to Shelley: it was a warning. It did not fail only because of the interference of external despotic powers, but through its own passionate intensity. And while the revolutionaries of the Golden City, unlike those of Paris, at no time use or advocate the use of violence, even their attempt fails. The difficulty of successful revolution, rather than simply substitution of one tyrant for another, is the central issue of The Revolt of Islam. By re-visioning the French Revolution in a purer form, and by then showing that even in this instance "such a degree of unmingled good was expected as it was impossible to realize," Shelley demonstrates a sophisticated and thorough understanding
of the difficulties of reform—the same understanding soon to be displayed in *Prometheus Unbound*.

'The theme of hope within defeat reflects the political situation of 1817-31' says Michael Scrivener of *The Revolt of Islam*. And so it does, but the poem is more than the expression of a desire, however deeply felt, for governmental reform and civil liberty. Hope within defeat, action despite the apparent futility of action, life despite death, these are the themes of this poem, and they are grounded in Shelley's own experience.

However, regardless of background, regardless of intention, we may find *The Revolt* the dream of a fanatic. The misery of the victims of strange pestilence and unrelenting famine may seem overstated and melodramatic. The evil Tyrant Othman may seem a painted devil; as we read of his massacres and torturing, we may conclude with George Tesman that people don't do such things. John Taylor Coleridge, one of Shelley's contemporary critics cited above, objected to *The Revolt* on precisely these grounds, crying 'We are Englishmen, Christians, free and independent; we ask Mr. Shelley how his poem applies to us? or what are we to learn from it to the prejudice of our own institutions?' Coleridge's complaint is one we all might make as we dismiss this poem and call it silly or unimportant. But in our time we have seen grimmer and more devastating events than those of the wildest passages of Shelley's poem. We have seen famine more massive than that described so painfully in Canto X. We have made weapons and trained forces which slaughter more efficiently than even the ruthless mercenary troops of the Tyrant. And the Tyrant himself has made his home in our century; the names of Stalin, Hitler, and Mengele are only a few of his aliases.
But Coleridge's objection is not simply that *The Revolt* is overstated, for he perceives what those modern critics who see in the poem a war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness either ignore or do not care to analyze. Coleridge realizes that the poem is not just an indictment of tyrants, not only a political poem agitating for the overthrow of Sidmouth and Castlereagh, but a demonstration of the tyranny we all practice. *The Revolt of Islam* is not a simple-minded sermon suggesting that by abolishing kingship or tearing down churches we might suddenly become free. It is not a sermon of any kind, not a weaving of a Paradise for a sect, but an explication of the difficulties involved in seeking liberty. Even the best things are potential vehicles for tyranny, for evil even "in air and light, and thought, and language dwells." So we, "free and independent," in our enlightened age, cannot assume that *The Revolt* has little to do with us, but must rather realize the implications for our own institutions, of our minds as well as our society.
NOTES

CHAPTER I


5 I refer primarily to the Victorian critics, whose view of Shelley was immensely influential almost to the present day. Francis Thompson's Shelley (London: Burns, Oates, & Washburn Ltd, 1889) pp. 45-46, a sickeningly saccharine attempt to save Shelley from radicalism, is typical of its age: "We peep over the wild mask of revolutionary metaphysics, and we see the winsome face of the child . . . the universe is his box of toys. He dabbles his fingers in the day-fall. He is gold-dusty with tumbling amid the stars. He makes bright mischief with the moon. The meteors nuzzle their noses in his hand. He teases into growling the kennelled thunder, and laughs at the shaking of its fiery chain. He dances in and out of the gates of Heaven; its floor is littered with his broken fancies. He runs wild over the fields of ether. He chases the rolling world. He gets between the feet of the horses of the sun. He stands in the lap of patient Nature and twines her loosened tresses after a hundred willful fashions, to see how they will look best in his song."

Matthew Arnold's description, even more famous, follows similar lines: "the Shelley of actual life is a vision of beauty and radiance, indeed, but availing nothing, effecting nothing. And in poetry, no less than in life, he is a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain." It is the need of both writers not to see his revolutionary metaphysics, his realistic and incisive appraisal of his society, which dominates the received impression of Shelley. Fortunately this image has been modified in the last forty years, in which increasing attention has been given to Shelley's political activities and philosophy.


17 Shelley, Letters, II, 577.

18 Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, points out the potential danger to Ollier, and by extension, to Shelley: “Ollier’s fear was by no means exaggerated, since at the time antireligious literature was subject to prosecution” p. 133.


20 Shelley, Letters, II, 582.

21 John Lockhart, rev. of *The Revolt of Islam*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, January, 1819. (review was originally unsigned). Actually Keats showed no great rapture over *The Revolt of Islam*; in a letter to his brothers on December 27, 1817, he mentions that “Shelley’s poem is out & there is word about its being objected too, as much as Queen Mab was. Poor Shelley I think he has his Quota of good qualities, in sooth la!”

22 Lockhart, *Blackwood’s*.

23 John Taylor Coleridge, rev. of *The Revolt of Islam*, by Percy Bysshe
Shelley, *The Quarterly Review*, September, 1819, (this review was also originally unsigned).

24 Bennet Weaver, in *Toward the Understanding of Shelley* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1932) mentions the prevalence of Biblical language in *The Revolt*, but declines to treat the poem extensively.

Carl Grabo's *The Magic Plant: The Growth of Shelley's Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936) has a more thorough discussion of the poem. (pp. 201-25) However, Grabo, who is primarily interested in demonstrating “Shelley's growing mysticism” (p. 210), is less concerned with *The Revolt* itself than with detecting the strains of an approaching Platonism, saying “were *The Revolt of Islam* the last expression of Shelley's philosophy it would be necessary to dwell far longer upon it than I have done” (p. 225).

Newman Ivey White's analysis in *Shelley* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1947) is disappointingly brief—four pages out of a work over a thousand pages long—and superficial, saying mainly that he finds the poem "long and wandering" (Vol. I, 529).

Finally, Carlos Baker does devote considerable attention to *The Revolt* in *Shelley's Major Poetry: the Fabric of a Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), but his study, though helpful, is centered on discovering the sources of the poem, rather than offering an interpretation.


28 Michael Scrivener, cited above.


30 Scrivener, p. 128.

31 Scrivener, p. 127.

32 Coleridge, *Quarterly Review*. 
Chapter Two

"The Sanguine Eagerness for Good": Cantos I through V

Shelley begins *The Revolt of Islam* by locating his initial narrator firmly in both time and political philosophy; the poem begins "when the last hope of trampled France had faded." We realize immediately that the narrator had supported the French Revolution, especially as he continues by calling it "a brief dream of unremaining glory," and notes that its collapse has induced in him "visions of despair." He is thus analogous to those "generous and amiable natures," described in the Preface, who greeted the Revolution with rapture, only to become filled with "gloom and misanthropy" when the excesses of the revolutionaries became apparent. In both cases the subjects have despaired because "such a degree of unmixed good was expected as it was impossible to realize." Shelley's phrase, "unmixed good," is crucial to an understanding of *The Revolt*, which is primarily about the impossibility of achieving such an absolute Good, and the dangers in seeking or especially in claiming to have found such perfection.

Yet this opening verse, and all of Canto I, disdain ambiguities. It is very significant that the narrator, currently confident of the rightness of his own opinions, scales "the peak of an aerial promontory." Throughout the poem prominences—peaks, columns, and pyramids—are associated with rigid and foolish certainty. The narrator, from his vantage point of physical and moral superiority, watches a storm arise, and the first stanza concludes by likening this storm to "the last wreck," a simile which is definitely in accord with the
dualism of Canto I. Apocalyptic language is characteristic of fanaticism, for it divides the world into the saved and the damned, separates the sheep from the goats, and confines the latter to eternal while weaving a Paradise for the elect children of Light. For Shelley's speaker to use such an image indicates that he, and the poem, are operating within this dualistic system of reference. Characteristically, in millenarian movements the established order is vigorously attacked, the 'downtrodden' are elevated and the former elite firmly suppressed. In addition, divine sanction—and, frequently, active support—is invariably claimed for whatever actions and beliefs the members hold:

The belief-system that we are living in the 'Last Days,' when the world will be torn apart and reconstituted along perfect lines: the Good will be separated clearly and irrevocably from the Wicked, and the former will inherit bliss, the latter eternal torment.¹

The elevation of the speaker, his enlightened and definite beliefs about France, and his image of the Last Judgment combine to induce us to think in precisely this fashion, conceiving of virtue and wickedness as divisible and unmingled. And these points are further developed and emphasized in the rest of Canto I, which will soon give us a theology of the war between Good and Evil.

The narrator sees "a shape, a speck, a cloud" approach, high in the sky above him, and gradually realizes that it is "an Eagle and a Serpent wreathed in fight." This conflict, which takes seven strenuous stanzas to describe, ends in a draw; the Eagle flutters weakly away and the Serpent drops into the
sea. Next, the narrator meets a woman, "beautiful as morning." She spies the Serpent, and attracts it to shore, where it proceeds to nestle in her bosom. She then invites the narrator to sail with them in an enchanted boat on a "voyage divine and strange." Although he is somewhat alarmed by her reptilian companion ("How soon may he devour his feeble prey?"), the speaker embarks, and as they travel the woman discloses the history of the events which he has just witnessed. The upshot of this long and rather silly allegory is that:

from the depth of ages old
Two Powers o'er mortal things dominion hold,
Ruling the world with a divided lot,
Immortal, all-pervading, manifold,
Twin Genii, equal Gods--when life and thought
Sprang forth, they burst the womb of inessential Nought. (1, 25)

As many critics have noted, these ideas are clearly and certainly Zoroastrian. Certainly The Revolt, especially Canto I, owes much to Shelley's study of Near Eastern mythology, especially that of Persia, and the influence of Southey and Peacock, who wrote or attempted to write 'epics' in an Oriental strain.\(^2\) In view of these influences, we expect, after reading these lines, to find that the world of the poem is a neatly dualistic, Manichean, cosmos in which Good is clearly Good and Evil is equally incontrovertibly Evil. Life thus appears to be a war between Light and Darkness. At the beginning of the world Evil won a victory, and the woman goes on to explain the effect the conflict had on humanity:

The earliest dweller of the world alone
Stood on the verge of chaos. Lo! afar
O'er the wide wild abyss two meteors shone,
Sprung from the depths of its tempestuous jar—
A blood-red Comet and the Morning Star
Mingling their beams in combat. As he stood
All thoughts within his mind waged mutual war
In dreadful sympathy—when to the flood
That fair Star fell, he turned and shed his brother's blood. (I, 26)

Witnessing the battle creates disunity and hostility, and the primeval dweller "alone" suddenly has a brother to attack, a brother who is not a companion but an enemy and a victim. Shelley is using material from the traditional story of the Fall of Man; the victory of the Comet over the Star, of Evil over Good, inspires a fratricide resembling Cain's murder of Abel. But Shelley is inverting the traditional symbols; the principle of Good is a Morning Star, a biblical image for Lucifer. Again invoking Genesis, the victorious Comet transforms his enemy into "a dire Snake, with man and beast unreconciled."

While Shelley follows the Near Eastern tradition of seeing existence as a war between equally powerful antagonists representing opposite moral principles, he is knowingly of the Devil's party, contending that religion makes what is Good—the Snake—appear loathsome while exalting the oppressive and imperialistic Evil. So far it seems a simple sort of Manicheism; when the resurgent humanistic principle of Good encounters his ancient rival, as has just occurred, "The Snake and Eagle meet—he world's foundations tremble!"

Following the woman's exposition, she, the Serpent, and the narrator travel to a remote and marvelous temple, where they see "the Great who had
departed from mankind," men and women who had fought for Good throughout history. We are told that "two mighty Spirits now return / Like birds of calm, from the world's raging sea," and that we are to hear "a tale of human power." In this fashion Laon and Cythna, the hero and heroine, are introduced and their story makes up the remainder of the poem. But before turning to their histories, we will more closely examine the dualistic cosmogony of Canto I.

Most critics have read the Zoroastrianism of the Serpent-Eagle conflict as a guide to the entire poem. Desmond King-Hele, quoted in my first chapter, found Shelley attempting to establish the worship of "his god liberty." And Carlos Baker believes both Canto I and the entire work show "a struggle of white against black, and one is never in doubt as to where Shelley's sympathies are." If this is true, then it is logical to expect the poem to show a battle between evil Tyrants and Priests, slaves of the Comet / Eagle and the noble liberators of mankind, inspired and guided by the spirit of the Star / Serpent.

However, there are indications that The Revolt is not as blatantly dualistic as this scheme would indicate, for throughout the poem Shelley mixes the images, frequently speaking of evil things as serpentine. To note only a few examples, the Spirit of Evil is compared to "a snake in flowers," (I, 29), oppressive, fraudulent religion is termed "an obscene worm," (V, 50), and the mercenaries of the Tyrant are likened to "wolves and serpents" (X, 7). On the other side of the equation, the Eagle is not consistently connected with repression: the heroine is aided by a wild eagle which she sees "as a friend," (VII, 14). And when speaking of his hopes for freedom in the new country of
America the hero says "That land is like an Eagle," (XI, 23), specifically contrasting the liberty he imagines its inhabitants enjoy to the bloodthirstiness of the Tyrant's slaves, whose eyes glow with hatred, like "hungry snakes" (XI, 25).

It is important to realize that this demonstrates not inconsistency but a breaking down of categories, a depiction of the complexity of the issues involved. Though the poem, and Laon and Cythna, begin in certainty, sure of the battle-lines separating them from the Tyrant, the process of the Revolution shows that unmingled good cannot be expected. The theology of Canto I is, to a considerable extent, a red herring, for the poem does not finally assert the dualism of the "Twin Genii." As we will see, Laon and Cythna, while virtuous and dedicated, are not solely emblems of Good, nor can the Tyrant be viewed only as an external foe, but must be recognized as a part of each individual. Reading Canto I as an abstract, a summary, of The Revolt seriously oversimplifies the poem. Yet neither is it an unimportant or irrelevant element, for it proclaims the dualistic philosophy it will actually undermine.

As Canto II begins and the narrative, rather than "purely introductory," section of the poem begins, Laon steps forth and speaks of his earliest memories, briefly sketching his childhood among humble cottagers. Rather than describing clouds of glory, Laon is grounding his autobiography in his particular associations. Laon's memories, far from being idiosyncratic or those of someone set apart, are impressions which the audience can probably share. "I have heard" Laon tells us, "as all have heard, the various story / Of human life," not differentiating himself from his countrymen. Laon makes no
claim to a special background or inheritance; his growth as a revolutionary is not exclusively his experience, but something which may be shared by others.

Laon's country, "Argolis, beside the echoing sea," is dominated by evil rulers who infiltrate every aspect of their subject's lives: "Tyrants dwell side by side / And stabled in our homes." These tyrants have so oppressed the people that the captives compete with them in ignominy:

All vied

In evil, slave and despot, fear with lust

Strange fellowship through mutual hate had tied

Like two dark serpents tangled in the dust (II, 4)

It is luminously clear, both from the direct statement and the appearance of "serpents" in a negative capacity, that Shelley is already arguing that good and evil people cannot be dogmatically distinguished and so labelled. Both slave and despot become darkened and serpentine; it is hardly "a struggle of white against black."

One of the main tools of the oppressors is religion, which both appeases and torments the people:

Well might men loathe their life! well might they turn

Even to the ills again from which they sought

Such refuge after death!—well might they learn

To gaze on this fair world with hopeless unconcern!

For they all pined in bondage; body and soul,

Tyrant and slave, victim and torturer, bent

Before one Power, to which supreme control
Over their will by their own weakness lent
Made all its many names omnipotent. (II, 7-8)

Such religion teaches and thrives on weakness, promoting dependence and fear. It is essentially the domination of one person by another; tyrant and slave deny each other's humanity and abrogate their mutual responsibility, escaping into apathy and despair.

After describing this environment Laon tells of his travels throughout the world. He is particularly impressed by some "monuments of less ungentle creeds," and begins to dream that man's lot may be susceptible of improvement. His assessment of the relationship between slave and enslaver is apt, and his determination to act admirable, if somewhat enthusiastic.

Yet Laon's understanding of the situation, particularly of his own part in it, is egocentric as well as naive. In verse 13 he injects himself into his world-picture, and the following verses become progressively less concerned with the the fate of the world and less based in reality. Instead, they elaborate Laon's daydream; the emphasis is not on the salvation of man but on its savior. "Justice and Truth their winged child have found," Laon cries, asserting that he will "arise and waken/the multitude." He proceeds to liken that multitude to a volcano, ready to cleanse the world by fire, and carefully delineates his own prominent position:

—who shall stand

Amid the rocking earthquake steadfast still

But Laon? on high Freedoms desert land

A tower whose marble walls the leagued storms withstand! (II,14)

These words are brash, indeed ridiculous, and the imagery, especially the
curious reference to Freedom's land as "desert", indicates that Laon, despite his study of ruined Greek temples, does not have a precise idea either of the aims or of the results of his awakening what he vaguely terms the "multitude." Note Laon's picture of himself as a "tower," a stronghold which holds itself superior to the populace, like the dwelling of a medieval prince, and like the speaker at the beginning of Canto I, on his aerial promontory. He elevates and separates himself; above his surroundings, he thinks himself omnipotent.

The madmen of Swift's *Tale of a Tub* speak as Laon does in Canto II. For these dreaming things, "it is manifest what mighty Advantages Fiction has over Truth. ... because Imagination can build nobler Scenes and produce more wonderful Revelations than Fortune or Nature will be at Expense to furnish." \(^5\) Unlike a sensible man, who lives "without any Thought of subduing Multitudes to his own Power, his Reason, or his Visions," \(^6\) Laon is an enthusiast, suffused completely with a sense of his own benevolence. It is really not surprising, considering the lack of sense Laon shows, that he makes no effort to build, rather than dream of, the nobler scenes he claims to desire. Despite his concern for humanity and his grandiose dreams, he takes no action until considerably later.

Laon's self-absorption is again evident in his introduction of the poem's other protagonist, Cythna. She, an orphan, is now the only "human thing" our humanitarian can bring himself to "prize." Deserted by friends and apparently lacking any other family, Laon relates how "I turned from all to be / Cythna, the only source of tears and smiles to [Cythna]." To Laon, Cythna is incapable of reason, or of discovering for herself any of the realities of
experience. He will be the only source of her knowledge, forming her mind and providing the motivation for her grief as well as her joy. Now we see Laon's attitude towards humanity demonstrated on a particular human thing. There is a note of self-sacrifice in his tone; he "turned from all," though what "all" he has relinquished is not precisely described. Laon tells us that this child exists "as mine own shadow," and "a second self." Telling us that "Once she was dear, now she was all I had," Laon describes how "this playmate sweet" would follow at his heels as they roamed the countryside. And if she made her own desires felt at all, it was "with looks entreating....too earnest and sweet ever to be denied." She is, to Laon, typically 'feminine,' passive and dependent, and Shelley must have been aware of the stereotype involved. He was, as previously noted, reading Mary Wollstonecraft intently while writing *The Revolt*, and cannot have been unfamiliar with the passage from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which Wollstonecraft attacks Milton's sexism. She quotes from Book IV of *Paradise Lost*:

To whom thus Eve with perfect beauty adorned.

My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst

Unargued I obey; So God ordains;

God is thy law, thou mine: to know no more

Is Woman's happiest knowledge and her praise.

How similar these terms are to Laon's! The very word he uses—"sweet"—was for Wollstonecraft synonomous with weakness and insignificance:

Thus Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in
the true Mahometan strain, he means to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation. 7

Laon invokes precisely this notion of female excellence in his initial description of Cythna; she is important primarily as a reflection of his values, a disciple and a distraction. Her presence allows him to believe that he is furthering the cause of humanity by making speeches to her.

Oh, excellently great

Seemed to me then my purpose, the vast theme

Of those impassioned songs, (II, 29)
says Laon, who has been occupied with hearing Cythna murmur his name in dreams and sing the hymns his soul had made to Freedom. While these lines show a glimmering of self-knowledge—especially through the verb "seemed"—they are a distillation of all that we have heard of Laon (and from Laon) so far. Soaring on the wing of contemplation, Laon is above all human contact, except that provided by Cythna's sweetness and apparent willingness to exist only as his mirror. First-person pronouns have dominated his speech throughout Canto II, and the vastness of the theme has derived largely from Laon's own ego, rather than from genuine contact with the evils of tyranny. In the sense that tyranny means to control, to impose one's own vision of what should be upon others who are then treated as subjects or slaves, Laon is tyrannical himself, and this is demonstrated both by his attitude towards Cythna and by his picture of his role as revolutionary:
... my song

Peopled with thoughts the boundless universe,

A mighty congregation, which were strong,

Where'er they trod the darkness, to disperse

The cloud of that unutterable curse

Which clings upon mankind; all things became

Slaves to my holy and heroic verse. (I, 30)

His "holy" words, the "congregation" of his thoughts, benevolent as he conceives them to be, are almost as controlling as the large codes of fraud and woe embodied in the political and religious systems he denounces. Laon speaks in "the true Mahometan strain," enunciating a version of the tyranny which *The Revolt of Islam* tries to abolish, for Laon here is a creator who enslaves, a poet who coerces.

Finally Cythna speaks for herself, and her perception, both of the plight of women and of Laon's own attitudes, is far more acute than that of her erstwhile guide. She declares her intent to speak to women, and, seeing that Laon smiles, she asks "Why dost thou smile? / At what I say? Laon, I am not weak." She demonstrates the strength of her insight by surpassing at a stroke all of Laon's high-flown intentions, showing that she understands the true obstacles they must face:

I had thought

It was more hard to turn my unpracticed cheek

To scorn and shame, and this beloved spot

And thee, O dearest friend, to leave and murmur not. (I, 39)

She realizes that loneliness and ingratitude, boredom and resentment, are
greater enemies than the Gothic foes Laon so grandly imagines himself defying.

However, Cythna accurately perceives Laon as the fashioner of her ideas; the wisdom and hope she intends to distribute to the captive women of "towers and huts" comes from him. While she acknowledges him as the source of much of her theory, she is willing to assume the responsibility for her own actions. Imaginative sympathy underpins her philosophy, far more than it does Laon's. While he dreams of his own grand role, she imagines her audience, saying "In towers and huts are many like to me." It is not that she assumes that all will share her perspective, but, as Shelley emphasized in the Preface, unless she speaks of things her hearers share she can have no effect. This effect is foremost in her mind:

. . . . All shall relent

Who hear me; tears as mine have flowed, shall flow,

Hearts beat as mine now beats, with such intent

As renovates the world, a will omnipotent! (II, 41)

Her desire to evangelize among women derives from her sense of the sympathetic bond which links them. She understands their experiences, and they can quickly comprehend her perspective. Cythna's concern with making herself understood, her emphasis on her listeners, and her specific ideas about how to speak to her countrywomen contrasts strongly with Laon, who looks only at the noble end he wishes to achieve, with no grasp of the means he might employ to reach it.

Finally, Cythna realizes her own limitations. Not wishing to be a superhero, she is honestly reluctant to take up her role in the revolution,
particularly since she foresees that it will necessitate her separation from
Laon, and perhaps lead to their deaths:

'We part to meet again—but yon blue waste,
Yon desert wide and deep, holds no recess
Within whose happy silence, thus embraced,
We might survive all ills in one caress;
Nor doth the grave—I fear 'tis passionless—
Nor yon cold vacant Heaven... (II, 48)

For the first time, Laon is silent, bereft of glib answers and grandiose
statements. The pair returns to their cottage, and Laon dreams. After
several hours of tumultuous visions, he finds himself (in his dream) sitting
with Cythna "upon the threshold of a cave." Like the dreamer in Alastor,
Laon imagines his companion as a perfect complement; she is "pure and
radiant," "so divine" that "now love was agony." But their idyll is interrupted,
for:

.... suddenly was blended

With our repose a nameless sense of fear;
And from the cave behind I seemed to hear
Sounds gathering upwards--accents incomplete,
And stifled shrieks,--and now, more near and near,
A tumult and a rush of thronging feet. (III, 4)

This dream is noteworthy for its revelation of Laon's state of mind as
well as for its foreshadowing of coming events. the shrieks and tumult from
the cave at their backs which suddenly threatens Laon's companionship with
Cythna represents the submerged power struggle which underlies their
interaction. Even as the beginning of the dream replicates Laon's experiences with Cythna—calm conversation in the open air—so the sounds from the cave demonstrate his fears, both of the ills which Cythna predicts and of the assertiveness which this "simple child" is so suddenly exhibiting. As well as revealing character, Laon's dream advances the plot, for he awakes and finds it true. His impressions of "foul and ghastly shapes" which "hung" on him and "plucked" at Cythna are in fact "a sense of actual things," for the tyrant has sent his servants to abduct Cythna. And having burst the "impotence of sleep" Laon is still powerless. Despite his grand ideals, he has not gone forth to encounter the world's evil, now the evil has come unavoidably to confront him. By relating the dream, Shelley has bound the foul and ghastly shapes which inhabit the corners of Laon's mind with the armed men, whose glittering swords were bare

And whose degraded limbs the Tyrant's garb did wear. (III, 6)

Although these slaves have come to abduct her, Cythna is almost inhumanly calm, "solemn, serene, and lofty," exhibiting almost medieval patience and hope, she transforms her torture into triumph, telling Laon to:

... say farewell in hope;

These bloody men are but the slaves who bear

Their mistress to her task. (III, 9)

Her ability to wear "willing chains" rather than be ensnared by despair is not passivity or weakness, for she does not abandon her "task." Rather, she argues that she—and Laon—will be more effective agitators if each is now forced to go forth among the people of the Golden City.

But Laon, seeing something he loves slip from his grasp, does not listen to
her but bares his own glittering sword in the form of a "small knife," with which he kills three of the intruders. This is a terrible mistake; not only does it show the hollowness of any beliefs Laon may have voiced about human brotherhood, but it fails to free Cythna and results in Laon's own imprisonment. He describes his action thus:

I drew

My knife, and with one impulse, suddenly,
All unaware three of their number slew,
And grasped a fourth by the throat, and with loud cry,
My countrymen invoked to death or liberty.

What followed then I know not, for a stroke,
On my raised arm and naked head came down,
Filling my eyes with blood. (III, 10—11)

While "unaware" refers primarily to the fact that Laon was able to take the slaves by surprise, it refers also to Laon, to his own ignorance of the motives or consequences of his actions. And this syntactical ambiguity serves to link Laon and the Tyrant's servants; though he does not realize it, the men he kills are the countrymen he invokes. Rather than giving a bold speech a la Patrick Henry, Laon is delivering a threat: free Cythna or die. Laon's impassioned hymns to Freedom now serve him as a justification for depriving three of his compatriots of their lives.

His actions provoke retaliation (self-defense, to an extent, on the part of the soldiers) and his eyes are filled with blood even as the eye of his reason has already been blinded with rage. So now Laon is led captive, with
"friendless care" to a "mighty column," and imprisoned alone atop it. Why such a singular prison? The column is of immense height, almost insurmountable by "cloud, the vultures, or the blast," and it remains in the sunlight after shadow has fallen on the land and sea surrounding it. Vertical structures on which a character is perched have these implications throughout *The Revolt*; we have seen the aerial promontory from which the narrator of Canto I watches the grand battle between the Eagle and the Serpent, and we will study several other such heights. One of the most important images of the poem, these towers, pyramids, and pyres function throughout as pictures of the ways in which even the best intentioned revolutionaries may elevate themselves above the multitude, and thus become tyrants in their own right. That Laon is imprisoned in such a structure demonstrates his own inner captivity; the column is an appropriate prison because it is his own conception of himself made manifest in the world of experience. In Canto II, he called himself "a tower whose marble walls the leagued storms withstand," and he has spoken of himself as springing forth "from wisdom's tower / a minister of truth." He has thought of himself as superior to the landscape, perhaps even to natural forces, and, like the brazen column which possesses more sunlight than its environs, Laon has believed that he owned a greater measure of illumination than the countrymen he exhorts and kills.

The description of Laon's imprisonment and eventual madness is one of the most remarkable passages in the poem. Although it derives in part from Gothic romance, it is a precise and realistic rendering of the effects of sensory deprivation. Laon's hunger and dehydration after four days
imprisonment atop "that column's dizzy height," as well as his solitude and isolation, have unleashed these hallucinations. He cannot test his visions, either against his other senses, because of the extreme limitations and discomfort of his position, or through consulting other people: "thought could not divide / the actual world from these entangling evils." Separated from reliable sensation, Laon is incapable of investigating these "foul, ceaseless shadows."

Laon's hallucinations bear a considerable resemblance to his dream, and in both cases he is attacked by various forms. "Legions of foul and ghastly shapes" have become "a chain of devils" and there is the same confusion of delusion and reality. But the devils have faces now, identities, and Laon sees "All shapes like mine own self hideously multiplied." The projection of one's own evil characteristics onto external reality, entangling greed and selfishness with the actual world, is one of the poem's persistent themes. Laon's experiences, both his dream and these hallucinations, are reminiscent of a description in Canto I of the operation of Evil within the human mind:

His spirit is their power, and they his slaves
In air, and light, and thought, and language dwell;
And keep their state from palaces to graves,
In all resorts of men—invisible,
But when, in ebon mirror, Nightmare fell,
To tyrant or imposter bids them rise,
Black, winged demon-forms—whom, from the hell,
His reign and dwelling beneath nether skies,
He loosens to their dark and blasting ministries. (1, 30)
Evil can exist even in light, and thought, and language, and Laon's devils are the dark forms of the "slaves" he wished to create by his "holy and heroic verse. Attempting to explain the origin of religion, of the idea of a Deity, Cythna describes a similar dynamic:

"What is that Power? Some moonstruck sophist stood,
Watching the shade from his own soul upthrown
Fill Heaven and darken Earth, and in such mood
The form he saw and worshipped was his own,
His likeness in the world's vast mirror shown" (VIII, 6)

Like Laon, the moonstruck sophist has deified himself, perceived only through the shadow of his own ego, without imaginative sympathy. But unlike this first priest, Laon rejects the solipsistic vision. He recognizes the demons as elements of himself and does not create a theology based on them. He refuses to be a fanatic, and never pretends that his devils have an objective reality. In this moment, Laon ceases to be a tyrant.

It is now that a rather mysterious set of circumstances combine to bring about Laon's release. In his delirium he sees "the shape of an old man . . . . stately and beautiful," and wakes to find that this dream has also become true. An old Hermit has arrived to free him, gently bearing him away from the column and over the sea to an idyllic refuge. For seven years—and most of Canto IV—this Hermit restores Laon to health, largely by encouraging him to talk of Cythna and the losses he has sustained. Only after his thoughts have reassumed "their due array" can he remember his determination to struggle for liberty. And he learns that others participate in this effort; the Hermit himself has "collected language" and promulgated "doctrines of human power"
among the people. Unrest is rising in the land and "fearless love" shakes the tyrant's throne. The Hermit also tells Laon that a maiden has brought "the law of truth and freedom" to women, teaching courage and forgiveness. But in order to accomplish the revolution bloodlessly it is finally necessary for Laon to act, to go to the Golden City and convince the Tyrant's guards not to oppose the will of the multitude. So Laon, thinking Cythna dead, begins his journey and expresses his commitment in one of the poem's most beautiful stanzas:

What then was I? She slumbered with the dead.
Glory and joy; and peace had come and gone.
Doth the cloud perish when the beams are fled
Which steeped its skirts in gold? or, dark and lone,
Doth it not through the paths of night unknown,
On outspread wings of its own wind upborne,
Pour rain upon the earth? The stars are shown,
When the cold moon sharpens her silver horn
Under the sea, and make the wide night not forlorn. (IV, 31)

Canto V, the longest in the poem, shows the apex of the revolution. Laon, who has come to the Golden City, makes no mistakes now; his actions throughout are governed by unselfishness and non-violent principles. Although some traces of his self-aggrandizement remain, as when he wishes the populace to call him "Their friend, their chief, their father," he is now neither passive nor overly concerned with his own glory. This Canto contains some of Shelley's finest pacifist rhetoric, and the revolutionaries, led by Laon, act according to the most benevolent doctrines. The test of their faith, of course, is the tyrant himself—for what treatment should be given such a man,
who has oppressed, robbed, raped and tortured the people for many years? Laon and a band of revolutionaries find the Tyrant Othman deserted by his court, alone except for a child who seeks to comfort him.

   Alone, but for one child who led before him
   A graceful dance—the only living thing,
   Of all the crowd, which thither to adore him
   Flocked yesterday, who solace sought to bring
   In his abandonment; she knew the King
   Had praised her dance of yore, and now she wove
   Its circles, aye weeping and murmuring,
   'Mid her sad task of unregarded love,
   That to no smiles it might his speechless sadness move. (V, 21)

   She cannot break his depression, yet concern for her elicits his only words: "She hangres, slave! / Stab her, or give her bread." Othman is clearly trapped in the rhetoric of domination; he cannot address Laon as other than slave, and sees him as someone (like himself) who approaches people with a "carrot and stick," a knife and a loaf. Laon leads them from the palace and feeds them, noting that:

   .... the lonely man's despair
   Hunger then overcame, and, of his state
   Forgetful, on the dust as in a trance he sate. (V, 30)

   The effect of all this is to humanize Othman, to emphasize his kinship with the citizens who also hunger and have children whom they love. And surely Shelley wishes to arouse the audience, both within the poem and outside of it, to be as sympathetic to Othman as to Laon. The multitude, however,
cries that the tyrant must be punished:

Then was heard—'He who judged, let be brought
To judgment! blood for blood cries from the soil
On which his crimes have deep pollution wrought!
Shall Othman only unavenged despoil?
Shall they, who by the stress of grinding toil
Wrest from the unwilling earth his luxuries,
Perish for crime, while his foul blood may boil
Or creep within his veins at will? Arise!

And to high Justice make her chosen sacrifice! (V, 32)

This is a hard argument to counter, for like the statements advanced to support capital punishment today, it emphasizes both the criminal's guilt and the suffering of his victims. Laon, however, opposes execution of the tyrant, not by contesting his guilt but by denying the validity of the law of retribution:

What do you seek? What fear ye? then I cried,
Suddenly starting forth, that ye should shed
The blood of Othman? if your hearts are tried
In the true love of freedom, cease to dread
This one poor lonely man; beneath Heaven spread
In purest light above us all, through Earth—
Maternal Earth, who doth her sweet smiles shed
For all--let him go free, until the worth
Of human nature win for him a second birth.

What call ye justice? Is there one who ne'er
In secret thought has wished another ill?
Are ye all pure? Let those stand forth who hear
And tremble not. Shall they insult and kill,
If such they be? their mild eyes can they fill
With the false anger of the hypocrite?
Alas, such were not pure! The chastened will
Of virtue sees that justice is the light
Of love, and not revenge and terror and despite. (V, 33-34)
Laon’s words prevail, and the Tyrant is released.

Canto V concludes with a great Festival, presided over by Laone (a
disguised Cythna). The citizens assemble on a plain outside the City, having
reared through their “devotion” “the Altar of the Federation.” They gather at
the base of this Altar—a marvelous marble Pyramid—to hear a veiled Laone
speak of their victory. This scene is disturbing for a number of reasons. It
is more than bliss to be alive in this dawn, “to hear, to see, to live, was on
that morn / Lethean joy!” Except for Laon and Laone, all the people have “cast
off their memories of the past outworn,” and are revelling in their new
freedom. This Lethean joy is a warning note, for I do not believe that Shelley
would consider an ignorance of history beneficial. After all, Laon’s first
insight into man’s true potential came from his study of the past, and
forgetfulness of the nature of tyranny can, and in fact does, allow it to return.
Rather than abolishing “religion’s tottering dome” the people are simply
switching idols. The rhetoric of the passage bears this suspicion out; the
Pyramid is the throne of a Deity and Laone something between the Deity itself
and its high priestess. Like Laon’s column-prison the Pyramid towers above
the people: "its still shadow hid / Far ships; to know its height the morning mists forbid!" and in the next verse this structure is twice directly named an "Altar," while the song of the multitude is termed a "hymn." The language of monarchy is used as well as that of religion, as when Laone is seated on "an ivory throne."

On the steps of this Pyramid appear three images; the first, a sleeping Giant whose grasp crushes "sceptres and thrones," probably represents some such abstraction as Time, Necessity, or the Power of the People. The iconography of the second, a beautiful woman "feeding from one breast / A human babe and a young basilisk," is less certain but seems to refer back to the woman of Canto I, who cradles the Serpent "in her embrace." And the third figure, beside which Laon chooses to sit, is an angelic form:

Beneath his feet, 'mongst ghastliest forms repressed,

Lay Faith, an obscene worm, who sought to rise,—

While calmly on the Sun he turned his diamond eyes. (V, 50)

The vagueness of the pronoun reference in the final line—is "he" the angel or the worm?—is probably unintentional, yet it adds to the weakness of the entire passage. These Spenserian figures, with their blatant and unShelleyan allegory, are ugly billboards proclaiming by their violence the potential for repression—Shelley's word—inherent even in the revolution's most successful moments.

Remarkably, in a figure which follows from the Third Image, and which dominates this particular paean, Laone begins her hymn by telling the people that "underneath thy feet writhe Faith and Folly / Custom and Hell and mortal Melancholy." The image of trampling, of good victorious and fiercely
triumphing over a fallen foe, occurs repeatedly in Laone’s speech. Despite all the talk of brotherhood the dynamic of oppression remains very much in force, as does the tendency to conceive of both people and abstractions in terms of hierarchies. The “female choirs” which attend Laone are composed of “the loveliest / Among the free,” as if women are still to be rated, (apparently in terms of pulchritude), compared and ranked. Laone is put, very literally, on a pedestal, and her language, as well as her physical position, overshadows her beliefs. “Eldest of things, divine Equality, / Wisdom and Love are but the slaves of thee,” she cries, and almost every word of these lines undermines the equality it purports to promulgate. Equality is most revered because of its age—a moral primogeniture—and the use of “slaves” here, as when Laon hoped his audience would become “slaves to [his] holy and heroic verse,” is incredibly inappropriate. “Equality” is here a divine monarch, a hierophant, attended by angel-slaves, and immersed in treasures. Rather than an active practice, Equality is a god which sits atop this Olympian Pyramid, receiving homage. Verse 3 of Cythna’s Hymn concludes with an astonishing metaphor; still speaking to Equality she cries how glorious it is that all Earth’s children are gathered here: “To feed upon thy smiles, and clasp thy sacred feet.” These sentiments are not merely banal, they are monstrous. Why are they here? Has Shelley simply let his enthusiasm for Equality lead him into writing of it in such a way? Is it purely carelessness which leads him to portray Equality on a throne, holding “sway,” with its feet clasped by the adoring multitude? Rather, Shelley is demonstrating how difficult it is to be truly free from the psychology and the language of domination. The Revolt is recognized as a poem grounded firmly in its
author's realization that liberty is very difficult to attain. In the Preface, Shelley describes why he believed the French Revolution failed:

Such a degree of unmingled good was expected as it was impossible to realize. If the Revolution had been in every respect prosperous, then misrule and superstition would lose half of their claims to our abhorrence, as fetters which the captive can unlock with the slightest motion of his fingers, and which do not eat with poisonous rust into the soul. Could they listen to the plea of reason who had groaned under the calamities of a social state, according to the provisions of which one man riots in luxury whilst another famishes for want of bread? Can he who the day before was a trampled slave suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing, and independent?

While the people of the Golden City have thus far refrained from instituting a Terror of their own, their minds, even Cythna-Laone's, are still fettered by the old habits of power. Rather than abolishing tyranny, they have exchanged a specific tyrant for an abstract, but also coercive, ideal. "Pity" now "holds dominion" over "the prostrate nations," and "Truth with Joy enthroned o'er his lost empire reigns."

All of the elements of this revolutionary fete—the Pyramid, the instructive images, the veiled leader and her message—are the trappings of mysterious societies, smacking of the Masons and the Illuminati. They are designed both to unite the masses in awe and instill in them a feeling of superiority over the unenlightened. Their actions have enabled them to build this Paradise for a sect. Cythna now aptly calls herself Laone, for she is exemplifying the worst
qualities of Laon's tendency to abstraction. She is the best character we have seen in the poem, yet she falls victim to the temptation to elevate herself above the masses; if the best revolutionary may become a priestess, then tyranny permeates even the most noble enterprises.

Shelley is clearly questioning the idea of revolution, for even the best and most bloodless dethronement of oppressors, led by the most virtuous and enlightened humanitarians, remains compromised by the old images of worship and trampling. Certainly the Golden City is in better hands with its Philosopher Queen than with Othman, but the people remain ruled, glamourized and preached to. I do not argue that the revolution or Laon and Cythna are as wicked as Othman and his reign, for clearly they are not. Yet even these virtuous revolutionaries cannot escape the temptation to establish themselves as shepherds of the multitude; finally, it is a difference of degree and not of kind.

Canto I began with certainty, with the narrator standing on a promontory anticipating the Apocalypse and witnessing the battle between Good and Evil. And Canto V ends in equal dogmatism, with Laone seated high above the trembling throng, proclaiming the apocalyptic dawn of a new age. But the poem will not end with this moment, and what has so appeared a fairly simple struggle between Good and Evil will become far more complex.

In the Preface to The Revolt, Shelley says that those who supported the French Revolution were filled with "the sanguine eagerness for good." Such eagerness is thus "imbued with hope," but sanguine also means "bloody," and such passionate intensity eventuates in the self-contradictory image of King Liberty, and liberators become tyrants. This may seem a harsh evaluation,
but it is justified by the language of the poem; man cannot be free while his words and his ideals, his grand schemes of reform, enslave him.
NOTES

CHAPTER TWO


3 Baker, p. 72.

4 Wilfred S. Dowden's, article "Shelley's Use of Metempsychosis in The Revolt of Islam," *Rice Institute Pamphlet*, Vol. XXXVIII, April 1951, pp. 55-72, argues convincingly that Canto I is not a fragmentary and disconnected section of the poem, but is rather an important introduction and a unified element.


6 Swift, p. 348.


8 J. M. Roberts' book, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972). This book analyzes the attraction of the mystical machinery of the secret societies, and shows how they exacerbate the tendency toward dualism inherent in the revolutionary movements, specifically those of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which advocate "a view of politics whose roots lie in the Enlightenment itself, and [which is] sometimes claimed by the revolutionaries themselves, [resting] on the assumption of one great and general antithesis, Good vs. Evil, Right vs. Wrong... At once such a polarization hardened men's attitudes and blunted their discrimination. The idea of the struggle between Revolution and ancien regime, reason and religion, rich and poor, talent and birth (or whatever translation was given to the idea from time to time), helped to create behavior exemplifying its own reality." p. 203.
Chapter Three

"The shipwrecked hopes of men": Cantos VI through XII

Writing to a publisher, Shelley said of The Revolt of Islam:

I am conscious indeed that some of the concluding cantos, when "the plot thickens" and human passions are brought into more critical situations of development, are written with more energy and clearness. ¹

While the second half of the poem continues the basic themes of the foregoing Cantos, I agree with Shelley's evaluation and note that both the ideas and the poetry are more critically developed. Especially from the middle of Canto VII through the poem's conclusion, Laon and Cythna are better able to articulate their vision of liberty and human sympathy, avoiding most of the contradictory language each had fallen into previously. Additionally, the last third of the poem is indeed written with both energy and clarity, virtually dispensing with fuzzy melodrama and artificial allegory. Finally, extensive and rigorous discussions of religion accompany the attention given to problems of political reform, adding an additional dimension to the poem, while in a related area Shelley's most extensive depiction of immortality is a crucial element in our understanding of his religious beliefs. Therefore, my examination of Cantos VI through XII will not only sharpen our understanding of Shelley's philosophical anarchism but more thoroughly illuminate his complex metaphysics.

In the Preface Shelley stated that he wished to write a poem which would
attract its audience in part because it was "diversified with moving and romantic adventures." While the action of the entire work more than adequately fulfills this promise, Canto VI, perhaps more than any other, appeals to our sensibilities rather than our intellects. We are inundated with pictures of graphic horror and perfect bliss, beginning with the slaughter initiated by Othman as he returns with foreign mercenaries. The struggle is unequal from the start; the nonviolent revolutionaries are helpless before the invading armies.

One of the most modern aspects of the battle is the attention Shelley gives to describing the elaborate weapons the Tyrant's troops employ:

    the fearful glow

    Of bombs flare overhead—at intervals

    The red artillery's bolt mangling among them falls. (VI, 4)

    Far overhead, ships from Propontis keep

    A killing rain of fire. (VI, 7)

The "ships from Propontis," this prophetic vision of airborne destruction, are perhaps balloons. Shelley's friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg, in a biographical anecdote referring to the poet's Oxford days, relates his great hopes for aeronautics. Shelley is represented as saying:

    The balloon has not yet received the perfection of which it is surely capable; the art of navigating the air is in its first and most helpless infancy . . . . It promises prodigious facilities for locomotion and will enable us to travel vast tracts with ease and rapidity, and to explore unknown countries without
difficulty. While Hogg was given to exaggerating what he considered Shelley’s amusing peculiarities, including his fascination with science, the story of the balloons indicates Shelley’s sense of the practical potential of science. And this reference in *The Revolt* shows that he was no blind optimist, but that he knew that even the most wonderful discoveries of man could be twisted into instruments of war.

Significantly, the multitude is persistently described in metaphors connected with water: they are “like waves before the tempest;” while caught in the struggle Laon sees himself “as drifted on some cataract / By irresistible streams.” Blood falls “like rain,” and as the people are gradually overcome they are said to have “failed like a mountain river / Which rushes forth in foam to sink in sand forever.” This waste of human life, this prodigal shedding of blood, will eventuate in drought and dessication.

As the battle—or, more precisely, the massacre—continues, Laon relates in considerable detail the violence perpetrated by the mercenaries. The horror becomes surreal, Gothicized, and indeed somewhat gratuitous: the “defenceless limbs” are “strown” about, the eyes of the dead are “stony,” and Laon encounters portions of the Hermit, who has apparently been scalped:

```plaintext
my old preserver’s hoary hair,
With the flesh clinging to its roots, was strewed
Under my feet! (VI, 15)
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Laon is rescued from this scene of general destruction by Cythna, who arrives suddenly on a huge horse. They are borne away to an idyllic retreat, where they joyfully consummate their love. It is noteworthy that neither had
recognized the other during the triumph of the Revolution; Laon states that "some impulse made my heart refrain" (V,57) from seeking out Laone to ascertain her identity. They are not united until after each has been first elevated and then cast down from a great height. As we have seen, Laon's column and Cythna's Pyramid both signal their isolation and separation from each other as well as from humanity. The removal of both from these positions of superiority is necessary before they can truly discover and enjoy their mutual affection.

The external world eventually intrudes on the lovers' bliss, for "Cythna's eyes looked faint, and now two days were gone / Since she had food," and so the final episode in this sequence concerns Laon's visit to a nearby village. Much of the ensuing description of the town, which has been destroyed by the invading armies, partakes of the same feverishly overwritten tone as the battle scene: the dead stare "with horny eyes," the waters are filled with blood and the sky "flooded with lightening." Yet Shelley appears to be gaining control over his imagery; certain of the phrases foreshadow the grim cogency of Canto X. The madwoman who believes herself to be the spirit of Pestilence is certainly a Gothic figure, yet her macabre utterances show a grotesque coherence. She suddenly kisses Laon, telling him that he will surely now contract the Plague; like a figure from the *Inferno* or the "Pardoner's Tale" she vividly describes her search for doom: "All lips which I have kissed must surely wither, / But Death's—if thou art he, we'll go to work together!" When Laon asks for food, she gleefully promises to satisfy him, since

"Famine, my paramour,
Waits for us at the feast—cruel and fell"
Is Famine but he drives not from his door

Those whom these lips have kissed. (VI, 50)

And so, grasping Laon "with the strength of madness," she leads him to her hut. She has gathered loaves from her neighbors and placed them before her own dead children, who died as a result of the devastation wrought by the soldiers.

It is only the memory of Cythna which keeps Laon sane; otherwise, he says, "I might have raved in sympathy." He takes the food she offers and then leaves, after having tried to convince the woman to return with him. Canto VI ends with the joy of his reunion with Cythna, as they recline on their "bridal couch" and share their "peaceful meal."

As Canto VII opens, Laon and Cythna sit "in converse and caresses," telling each other of their experiences since their separation. Their delight in each other does not cause them to forget their concern for society; rather, Cythna's story will return us directly to the issues of the revolution. Cythna relates how she was carried over the sea to the Tyrant's hall, placed among his harem, and apparently ignored for a period of time. One day Othman, hearing her sing to herself, is seized with lust, not entirely unmixed with love:

Even when he saw her wondrous loveliness,
One moment to great Nature's sacred power
He bent, and was no longer passionless;
But when he bade her to his secret bower
Be borne, a loveless victim, and she tore
Her locks in agony, and her words of flame
And mightier looks availed not, then he bore
Again his load of slavery, and became

A king, a heartless beast, a pageant and a name. (VII, 5)

Since she rejects his seduction, he rapes her, and she reacts by withdrawing into madness. Her frenzy, her refusal to be swayed by Othman's coercion, not only frightens him but engages the "sympathy" of her fellow slaves. Sensing the power of Cythna's will, degraded and victimized as she is, Othman exiles her to a faraway island, immuring her in an underground cavern.

Except for Richard Haswell, critics have ignored the interesting possibility that Othman might have felt any actual love for Cythna. Haswell has an extensive discussion of this dynamic, contending that her coldness is as great a sin as Laon's killing the Tyrant's soldiers. Her error indicates a flaw "so radical that it is surprising that critics have never seen it as a flaw of moral character," 4 and Haswell finds that her reaction to the rape stems from "her immature refusal to accept sexual pleasure." 5 I find his view absolutely untenable; it is true that Othman, like any human being, would be less cruel if he became more loving, but his vulnerability endures but "one moment." After Cythna is borne forcibly to his bower she pleads with him in agony, yet he refuses her sympathy or love, denying her autonomy; "selfishness mocks love's delight." That Cythna had some sort of moral obligation to assent to her treatment as an object, that she is somehow to blame for Othman's evil choices, as Haswell asserts, is a view which is not only mistaken but vicious.

Haswell then proceeds to endeavor to justify Cythna's madness and imprisonment on the grounds that she must redeem her sin of having insufficiently enjoyed her rape, contending that she has "a guilty conscience
parallel to that the tyrant reveals." I suspect that Haswell's desire to read the poem in this way springs from his belief that it is unified, meaning that Cythna's character and experiences must precisely correlate with Laon's: if he suffers as a consequence of his mistaken actions, Cythna's suffering must result from a similar fall. This harsh and heavy-handed interpretation actually does considerable violence to the poem's morality, for Shelley consistently denounced the desire for retribution, even for actual criminals, which Cythna is not. While neither she nor any other character in the poem is morally perfect, Cythna's limitations do not include any which would justify her misery. Nor does she act incorrectly here; while she succumbs to the temptations of tyranny in Canto V, refusing Othman is her right and derives from her self-esteem Haswell, like Job's comforters, suggests that misery must derive from sin, whereas Shelley was acutely aware that sometimes innocent people suffer.

Othman indeed might have learned love from Cythna, but not through her accepting "sexual pleasure" simply because that was his demand. In fact, I find that the lines quoted above do not indicate that her rejection automatically burdens him again with his "load of slavery." Rather, by ignoring her entreaties and over-powering her he "then" becomes what Shelley calls "a heartless beast." The choice and responsibility for Othman's actions are his own; not only does Shelley refuse to proclaim that Cythna should assent to coercion, he will not take away even Othman's humanity by insinuating that he is not responsible for his deeds.

During her confinement on the island prison Othman relegates her to, Cythna endures madness and solitude, visited only by a wild eagle, which is
hardly an embodiment of the Spirit of Evil, since it brings her food and comfort. After a period of time Cythna gives birth to a daughter, presumably Othman's child, who is soon stolen away by the Tyrant's minions. Heartbroken at the loss of the child she had come to regard as her "very life," Cythna lapses into a deeper insanity, but with "stern resolve" strives to regain her "human strength." Eventually she is able to recollect Laon's philosophy and uses it as a basis for her own. She decides that "Even throned Evil's splendid impotence / Girt by its hell of power" cannot extinguish profound hope which, like the flower within the bud, endures even in "this dark ruin."

Soon after she attains this conviction an earthquake shatters her cave and leaves her sitting on a crag in the midst of the ocean, where as she says, "my spirit moved upon the sea like wind." Fortuitously, a ship happens by at this moment and Cythna is rescued by the sailors. The delight she feels in the sea and the fact that it quickly leads her to resume her place among mankind, reinforces the connection between the ocean and humanity. The Mariners are eager to hear her story, and so she begins her mission immediately. Cythna very sensibly opens her speech by reminding her audience of their homes and families—an affection they all share—and follows this quickly with an attack on religion. Using a line of thinking that Shelley again employs in "Song: To The Men Of England," Cythna tells the sailors not to attribute the worlds which they themselves have built to the the actions of an omnipotent Deity. Teaching skepticism, proclaims the anthropomorphism of religious systems: the people"mock [themselves], and give / A human heart to what [they] cannot know!" "Mock" here is used in a typically Shelleyan sense; as in "Ozymandias," where the sculptor "mocked the passions of the King and in Canto III where
Laon's envisioned devils "bemocked" themselves in showing him his own shape. Mocking reveals the worst while distorting the best of our human qualities, just as our anthropomorphic God is only a projection of ourselves unfortunately invariably of our worst impulses, for the idea of an all-powerful God is essentially a fantasy of control.

One of the chief weapons of these tyrants is the idea of immortality, as a bribe to lull the oppressed or especially as a threat to frighten the unruly:

And it is said this Power will punish wrong;
Yes, add despair to crime, and pain to pain!
And deepest hell, and deathless snakes among,
Will bind this wretch on whom is fixed a stain,
Which like a plague, a burden, and a bane,
Clung to him while he lived; for love and hate,
Virtue and vice, they say, are difference vain—

*The will of strength is right.* (VII, 8, emphasis added)

But Cythna knows a way out of this hell of power, fear, and domination: "human love." But "to live as if to live and love were one" is not available to those who still adhere to the structures of domination; Cythna's philosophy "is not faith or law," and cannot be practiced by "those who bow / To thrones on earth." In any land, home, or individual where "one rules another," "life is poisoned at its wells." Shelley again speaks of the most important human experiences in terms of water; thus love makes love flow forth, but coercion engenders poison. Cythna repeated contrasts the beauty of love and "sympathies" with the "fear and restless care" that burdens those participate in tyranny.
Cynthia concludes her argument by crying that we are wrong to believe evil is inevitable and thus acquiesce in it: "This need not be; ye might arise and will / That gold should lose its power and thrones their glory." She then asks the sailors to tell her their stories, to share their experiences and decide if they conform to hers. They are not to be consumed with guilt, she says, whatever they have done in the Tyrant's service, for guilt teaches self hate, a judgmental attitude, and a cruel egocentrism:

Reproach not thine own soul, but know thyself,
Nor hate another's crime, nor loathe thine own.
It is the dark idolatry of self,
Which, when our thoughts and actions once are gone,
Demands that man should weep and bleed and groan;
Oh, vacant expiation! be at rest! (VIII, 22)

Cynthia is undermining the very foundations of institutionalized Christianity: the dogma claiming that man's sins are 'debts,' which must be 'redeemed,' either through his own suffering and / or the torment and death of a divine substitute. God, whether wrathful or simply 'just,' holds the mortgages on our souls due to our crimes and must be paid. But Cynthia reveals that these are not God's demands but man's, another projection of the worst parts of our nature, inflated by our egos into a divine command. Her brilliant phrase, "the dark idolatry of self," condenses her argument perfectly: such fixation on a despised self freezes us into tyranny.

In this context we learn that the sailors are returning from a trip to seize maidens and convey them to the Tyrant, even as Cynthia herself had been taken. Learning that they have a choice—that their past does not determine
their future—and that no omnipotent God requires and sanctions their deeds, the sailors gladly abandon their mission. In the Preface, Shelley speaks of the effect of "the tide of human things [on] the shipwrecked hopes of men," representing revolution as a sea voyage, and this is the central image of Cythna's story. It is not a supernatural journey, not a magic boat from which we see the Eagle and the Serpent, but a union of sympathy and thought. The sailors had been tools of the Tyrant, and thus tyrants themselves, sailing "wearily, wearily o'er the boundless sea." But now they deck their boats with "wreaths of budding foliage," release their captives, and all rejoice.

Cythna's tale continues in Canto IX as she describes how the joy of liberty spread from ship to ship, from man to man. In more liquid images, the liberty, which has been "poured" out among the people is said to have "drowned" fears and cares, and the sailors and the sea together symbolically embody it.

Cythna goes to the City and finds intense curiosity among the people about her origin:

Some said I was a maniac wild and lost;
Some, that I scarce had risen from the grave
The Prophet's virgin bride, a heavenly ghost;
Some said I was a fiend from my weird cave,
Who had stolen human shape, and o'er the wave,
The forest and the mountain, came; some said
I was the child of God, sent down to save
Woman from bonds and death, and on my head
The burden of their sins would frightfully be laid. (IX, 8)
These theories demonstrate that her audience still seeks a supernatural explanation for her actions; most revealingly, they try to cast her as a savior who will pay for their sins. Seeing this as the trap which it is, Cythna refuses such a role and approaches her audience through conversation "soon my human words found sympathy / In human hearts." Rather than promoting violence, vengeance, or guilt, she helps them escape from their mutual bondage:

[neither] fear nor gain

Could tempt one captive now to lock another's chain.

Those who were sent to bind me wept, and felt

Their minds outsoar the bounds which clasped them round.

(IX, 10)

Cythna's final words about the Revolution—she does not mention either the Pyramid or the massacre—reiterate her message. And then she turns to the present, saying "we have survived a ruin wide and deep," words which echo her prophecy in Canto II that she and Laon would pass through "a desert wide and deep." She marvels at the absence of her own despair, deciding that her hope is no longer subject to mutability, to "chance and change, dark children of tomorrow." Indeed, the second half of Canto IX is devoted to Cythna's analysis of her reaction to the counter-revolution. While she states initially that she is ignorant of the future, she quickly waxes prophetic, seeing in the cycle of the seasons renewed hope for humanity. The belief that if Winter comes Spring cannot be far behind sustains her as she describes the desolation tyranny has wrought:

The seeds are sleeping in the soil. Meanwhile
The tyrant peoples dungeons with his prey;
Pale victims on the guarded scaffold smile
Because they cannot speak; and, day by day,
The wasting moon of Science wanes away
Among her stars, and in that darkness vast
The sons of earth to their foul idols pray,
And gray Priests triumph, and like blight or blast
A shade of selfish care o'er human looks is cast. (IX, 24)

She initially accepts her dissolution, and Laon's, as individual
intelligences for she contends that they will live on through their deathless
ideas:

Our many thoughts and deeds, our life and love,
Our happiness, and all that we have been,
Immortal must live and burn and move
When we shall be no more. (IX, 30)

And even if their reputation is temporarily sullied by the Tyrant's propaganda,
eventually their worth will be recognized. Her long and lyrical speech stalls,
however, when she examines more precisely the nature of the immortality she
envisions:

The while we two, beloved, must depart,
And Sense and Reason, those enchanters fair,
Whose wand of power is hope, would bid the heart
That gazed beyond the wormy grave despair;
These eyes, these lips, this blood, seems darkly there
To fade in hideous ruin; no calm sleep,
Peopling with golden dreams the stagnant air,
Seems our obscure and rotting eyes to steep
In joy;—but senseless death—a ruin dark and deep. (IX, 32)

This important stanza marks the change in Cythna’s speech from a rather glib transcendentalism to actual confrontation with her fate. To survive within the hearts of men suddenly seems a bad bargain. She has dispensed with immortality as a priestly con job, yet she knows suddenly that this “ruin dark and deep”—the third time she has used a version of this phrase, always in connection to separation from Laon—is a terrible prospect, which she cannot greet with hope. She is no longer able to sustain her metaphysical speculations, having glimpsed the darkness they were leading her into, and she retreats to skepticism:

These are blind fancies. Reason cannot know
What sense can neither feel nor thought conceive;
There is delusion in the world—and woe,
And fear, and pain—we know not whence we live,

Or why, or how. (IX, 33)

I do not wish to undermine Cythna’s courage or negate her efforts to avoid “gloom and misanthropy.” But her words provide an important foundation for the poem’s conclusion, when what neither sense can feel nor thought conceive is shown to us. Cythna’s toughminded refusal to proclaim at this moment any certainties which cannot be verified from experience, no matter how much she wishes to, will be crucial to our conception of Canto XII. In the context of Canto IX it shows her humanity as she realizes her own desires, and her last words are her most honest:
All that we are, or know, is darkly driven
Towards one gulf.—Lo! what a change is come
Since I first spake—but time shall be forgiven,
Though it change all but thee! (IX, 35)

Canto X returns us to society, if a world ravaged by famine, pestilence, and hate can be so called. In the first half of this section Shelley again describes graphic horrors, yet I find this Canto much less hyperbolic than Canto VI. We first see the Tyrant ordering his mass of mercenaries to find and kill the remaining "rebels." Othman out-Herods Herod; in his insecurity he fears that even the "weakest" among his subjects may yet be able to overthrow him. But he encounters reluctance, surprisingly, among his bloodthirsty soldiers, one of whom explains that the men "fear / The spirits of the night, and morn is drawing near." They are hallucinating, seeing visions of Laon and Cythna, and Othman reacts by demanding yet more slaughter. The "peace" the Tyrant wants he finally gets:

Peace in the desert fields and villages,
Between the glutted beasts and mangled dead!
Peace in the silent streets! (X, 7)

And there is more; in what are surely some of the poem’s finest lines Shelley relentlessly depicts the results of Othman’s reign:

Day after day the burning Sun rolled on
Over the death-polluted land. It came
Out of the east like fire, and fiercely shone
A lamp of autumn, ripening with its flame
The few lone ears of corn; the sky became
Stagnate with heat, so that each cloud and blast
Languished and died; the thirsting air did claim
All moisture, and a rotting vapor passed
From the unburied dead, invisible and fast. (X, 13)

The fish were poisoned in the streams; the birds
In the green wood perished; the insect race
Was withered up; the scattered flocks and herds
Who had survived the wild beasts’ hungry chase
Died moaning. (X, 15)

Amid the aerial minarets on high
The Ethiopian vultures fluttering fell
From their long line of brethren in the sky,
Startling the concourse of mankind. Too well
These signs the coming mischief did foretell. (X, 16)

There was no food; the corn was trampled down,
The flocks and herds had perished; on the shore
The dead and putrid fish were ever thrown;
The deeps were foodless, and the winds no more
Creaked with the weight of birds, but as before
Those winged things sprang forth, were void of shade;
The vines and orchards, autumn’s golden store,
Were burned; so that the meanest food was weighed
With gold, and avarice died before the god it made. (X, 18)
The horrors of Canto X are not Gothicisms, not feverish exaggerations. Rather, they are precise renderings of historical occurrences; Kenneth Neill Cameron notes that much in these descriptions derives from Shelley's travels in France in 1814 and 1816, after the Napoleonic wars, where he "saw for himself the war's devastation." The famine, which affects the poor far more deeply than the rich, is accompanied by a drought, and eventually water becomes a more desperate need than food. Soon dehydration brings insanity:

It was not thirst but madness! Many saw
Their own lean image everywhere—it went
A ghastlier self before them, till the awe
Of that dread sight to self-destruction sent
Those shrieking victims. (X, 22)
The progress of their madness reflects a familiar dynamic; like Laon on the column and the moonstruck sophist, these slaves can finally see only the most ugly parts of themselves.

As we have seen, Shelley repeatedly uses images of water to describe the multitude of humanity. In this dark ruin, where each man sees only himself and is driven to suicide or to a conviction that "the avenging Power his hell on earth has spread," there is no water. The only sympathies are "horrid," and the land that Laon earlier called "withered up" is now far more dessicated by the "brothers' blood" spilled in the streets and fields. We see how the people struggle towards the now futile places which had once sustained them:

Sometimes the living by the dead were hid.
Near the great fountain in the public square,
Where corpses made a crumbling pyramid
Under the sun, was heard one stifled prayer
For life, in the hot silence of the air. (X, 23)

The fountain, now empty, in the square, now filled with death, are both representive of "common sympathies" which are now almost dry, shriveled into silence. This pyramid, smothering the living and crumbling into dust, is a grim replica of the Altar of Canto V, where "divine Equality," is enthroned above the throngs. A short poem "The Tower of Famine," written in 1820, three years after the composition of The Revolt, contains lines strikingly similar to this description:

Amid the desolation of a city,
Which was the cradle and is now the grave
Of an extinguished people,—so that pity

Weeps o'er the shipwreck of oblivion's wave,
There stands the Tower of Famine. It is built
Upon some prison-homes, whose dwellers rave

For bread, and gold, and blood; pain linked to guilt,
Agitates the light flame of their hours,
Until its vital oil is spent or spilt.

There stands the pile, a tower amid the towers
And sacred domes,—each marble-ribbed roof,
The brazen-gated temples and the bowers
Of solitary wealth.

Famine arises from tyranny, just as in *The Revolt*; those who rave for gold and glory waste their own lives and starve their fellow citizens. And guilt only adds to the isolation of individuals, whose hunger feeds on itself and creates this overhanging structure which is part of the city it darkens. The Tower, like the crumbling Pyramid, is both sign and cause of human misery; it is built by men for their own destruction.

The pestilence which accompanies the famine invades the palace, and the soldier's strength becomes "frenzy" as he babbles "Strange truths—a dying seer of dark oppression's hell." The infernal has become real in this desert land, and the lies of priests become true as the people are driven to despair and death. Even the elite are trapped within their own devious fictions; now believing their "monstrous faith," in terror they kneel before their many gods and beg for mercy, even while obsequiously crying that God is just to punish them.

The people grovel, calling for their shadowy God, "their own heart's image," to come forth, and it is at this moment we have the advent of the Iberian Priest. Even Othman, destroyer of men's lives, is entranced by this destroyer of men's souls. The priest is consistently associated with speech; he is introduced as "a voice" piercing "like ice through every soul." for three stanzas Shelley describes this Priest, whose desire to crush "the unbelievers" has led him from a now somewhat enlightened Europe to the more repressive realm of Islam. He hates the Moslem faith, but hates "the clear light / Of wisdom and free thought" even more, and so enters into an unholy alliance
with Othman. Telling his audience "Peace! Peace!" he enjoins them to put aside their factionalism and wait until

the Day

Of Judgment comes; each fearfully shall pay

The errors of his faith in endless woe! (X, 35)

Note the syntactical ambiguity of the last line; it is no doubt unintended by the Priest, but "faith" in the poem does indeed lead to woe. He then tells Tyrant and people that the famine and pestilence are sent by God as punishment, for Laon and Cythna have not been captured and executed. Their prayers will not help them; only if they build a hideous Pyre on which to burn the revolutionaries can they be freed from their condition:

Pile high the pyre of expiation now!

A forest's spoil of boughs; and on the heap

Pour venomous gums, which sullenly and slow,

When touched by flame, shall burn, and melt, and flow,

A stream of clinging fire,—and fix on high

A net of iron, and spread forth below

A couch of snakes, and scorpions, and the fry

Of centipedes and worms, earth's hellish progeny! (X, 38)

The ugliness of this description is excelled only by the fact that the people follow the Priest's instructions. The multitude—the same citizens Laon and Cythna worked to liberate—build an instrument to torture them: "Ere night the pyre was piled, the net of iron / Was spread above, the fearful couch below." Yet their slavish adherence to the Priest is not condemned (or approved) by the narrator, who only reiterates their desperate state,
stricken as they are by plague and famine. Even when, impatient in their
eagerness to lay hold of Laon and Cythna, the people begin to accuse and kill
each other, the poet refuses to judge them:

Who shall dare to say

The deeds which night and fear brought forth, or weigh

In balance just the good and evil there? (X, 46)

The Iberian Priest's great power, like Laon's and Cythna's, derives from
his speech:

His voice was as a blast that burst the portal

Of fabled hell, and as he spake, each one

Saw gape beneath the chasms of fire immortal. (X, 40)

Using language to create hell, to enslave rather than liberate, the Priest
is Laon's, and the poet's, dark counterpart. He represents a more insidious
and dehumanizing element than the Tyrant's soldiers or even his gold. Othman
speaks hardly at all, only uttering five sentences in the poem, but the words
of the Iberian Priest determine much of the course of the poem's concluding
Cantos. The Priest is a threat to hope and human sympathy: "Fear killed in
every breast / All natural pity." He aspires to destroy the spirits just as
Othman has destroyed the bodies of the people, turning them into "homeless
beasts," "possessed" with "an inward fire," and thus making their minds and
hearts part of the death-polluted desert of tyranny.

I argue that the Pyre is described in terms significantly reminiscent of
those employed to discuss the column-prison of Canto III and the Pyramid of
Canto V. The Pyre "overtopped the towers," just as the "dizzy height" of the
column almost surmounts "the cloud, the vulture, and the blast," and the
Pyramid which "to know its height the morning mists forbid." Both Pyre and Pyramid are built quickly by the "multitude," and while "devotion" inspires the latter and "Fear" the former, the structures express a similar psychology. As we have seen, the Pyramid and Laone's Hymn, though claiming to promote Equality, in fact express a subtler kind of tyranny. Pyre and Pyramid are by no means 'just alike;' Laone's is far more benevolent. Yet it remains dominance; it elevates Equality and would eventually have turned its Priestess into another version of the Iberian Priest. Any power which involves the exercise of one person's will over another is evil; any ideal may become enslaving Custom. Custom—Shelley's word—is Tyranny, and Tyranny is all that is essentially and inescapably coercive, making man always the victim of hate and fear, both of those he sees as having power over him and of those he tries to control. The column of egoism, the Pyramid of social control, the Pyre of cruelty—each elevates, isolates, and dominates. And thus each violates humanity, denies our common sympathies. Rejection of these structures is the heart and soul of Shelley's philosophical anarchism.

As we turn to Canto XI, we must examine the imagery of the first five verses. By adding fire to water Shelley takes the symbolism he has used thus far and transforms it, building towards the poem's conclusion. Cythna, gazing from her idyllic retreat, sees:

Gray mists poured forth from the unresting fountains
Of darkness in the North; the day was dying;
Sudden, the sun shone forth—its beams were lying
Like boiling gold on Ocean, strange to see,
And on the shattered vapors which, defying
The power of light in vain, tossed restlessly
In the red Heaven, like wrecks in a tempestuous sea. (XI, 2)
The images of water in this passage are unusual, having no particularly positive connotations, rather, the fountains are of darkness and the sea is but a canvas against which light and darkness are seen. The next stanza relates Cythna to the scene before her, but instead of being connected to the ocean, as she has traditionally been, she becomes a flame:

It was a stream of living beams, whose bank
On either side by the cloud's cleft were made;
And where its chasms that flood of glory drank,
It's waves gushed forth like fire, and as if swayed
By some mute tempest, rolled on her; the shade
Of her bright image floated on the river
Of liquid light, which then did end and fade,—
Her radiant shape upon its verge did shiver;
Aloft, her flowing hair like strings of flame did quiver. (XI, 3)

While this verse speaks only of the sunlight, it is described in liquid images, as if a fiery sea. In Canto X the ocean of human sympathy has dried up, but now we are given this river of liquid light. Enraptured by its beauty, which becomes her own Cythna is transfigured by the glory and

Absorbed the glories of the burning skies,
Which, mingling with her heart's deep ecstasies,
Burst from her looks and gestures; and a light
Of liquid tenderness, like love, did rise. (XI, 5)

Again, the subject is fire but the images are those of water; each of the verbs
in this passage has definite association with fluidity. And from this union arises what the citizens of the City lack, love's liquid tenderness.

And in that City, there is but "one hope" remaining for the victims of the drought. Shelley gives us a long list of what that hope is not; it is not life, which is filled with despair, not the future, which appears to hold only further terrors, not even death, for they are convinced they can already hear "the roar of Hell's sulphureous surge." "Lost / To sense of outward things," the panicked populace, like shipwrecked sailors, can see only one solution to their woe. We are not told explicitly what that solution is; filling in the ellipsis, we realize that their cherished hope is the capture and execution of Laon and Cythna.

So Laon goes to the Golden City and appears, disguised, before the Tyrant, the Priest, and their cohorts. In the final direct statement of the poem's theme, Laon briefly reviews past events, emphasizing that the attempt by the elite to control their 'subjects' has also resulted in their own slavery. Laon's rhetoric is now clear and concise; unlike many of his earlier narratives and declamations this speech is not cluttered with elaborate metaphors, clumsy allegory, or tiresome references to himself. He seems to be using some of the insights Cythna gained during her exile, for he had not previously demonstrated so rigorous a grasp of human psychology. As she told the sailors "the past is Death's, the future is thine own," so Laon entreats his hearers to "Fear not the future, weep not for the past." Even now they might be free, would they but resign their symbols of domination, their "purple, and gold, and steel." One of the most interesting aspects of Laon's argument is the depth of his respect for the humanity even of those who want to kill him. He
does not condone their vicious acts, but his criticism is based on his belief that they are accountable because they are not monsters but human beings. We have seen how much of the power of kings derives from our willingness to grant them that status; as P. M. S. Dawson, writing on *Prometheus Unbound*, states

repeated references to Jupiter as the supreme ruler do not record a state of affairs but constitute it. Jupiter is the King throughout Act I mainly because everyone says he is, the word (and its cognates, such as monarch and tyrant, are applied exclusively to him.\(^9\)

Laon now avoids monarchical language. At the beginning of his speech he refers to all his hearers as "Princes," but that is the sole hierarchical term used. Shelley does not even attack Kingship directly, either the institution or its representatives, changing his strategy from that employed in previous Cantos. Neither Shelley nor Laon has suddenly become reconciled to tyranny, but their vocabulary is extended to acknowledge that political establishments are not the sole sources of oppression. Laon addresses not just Othman and the Priest but an assembly, a "Senate." He speaks to his audience in the plural, implicating all listeners, not concentrating his denunciation on one person or one symbol.

Finally, however, Laon acknowledges that even his emotional appeal has had no effect, so he offers specific action. He is willing to give himself up, to "betray" Laon, if they vow to let Cythna go free. He tells the Court "Now I speak of things which ye can apprehend." Yet his attempt to bargain is a small part of his final words; somewhat surprisingly, considering the lack of
comprehension these men have shown for such ideas, Laon embarks on another discussion of "Freedom and Truth." Yet he is no longer speaking of these virtues in the abstract, or in direct connection with the revolution Othman has experienced. Rather, he describes a land where:

    in the desert there is built a home
    For Freedom . . . myriads assemble there,
    Whom the proud lords of man, in rage or fear,
    Drive from their wasted homes. The boon I pray
    Is this—that Cythna shall be conveyed there,—
    Nay, start not at the name—America! (XI, 24)

America functions here as a historical reality, as well as a "beautiful idealism of moral excellence." While it may not have been as fine a place as Shelley portrays it, this country was founded as an experiment in democracy, and was a reminder to the reader of 1817 (and today) that the principle of Liberty may be incarnated with at least partial success into an actual state. The entry of a historical phenomenon into this moment of The Revolt grounds the poem in actual, current political experience, much as much as the direct reference to France does in the poem's opening lines. Canto XI ends as Laon reveals his identity.

It is important to examine the language of Canto XII closely. Here we are told of the execution of the hero and heroine by the wicked tyrant and the cruel Priest; the reader might reasonably expect purple passages at least the equal of the wholesale slaughter (and Hermit-scalping) of Canto VI. Yet Shelley is remarkably restrained, declining to dwell on the horrors of the pyre, the wickedness of the rulers, or the suffering of Laon and Cythna. It is
not that realistic elements of this scene are undescribed, but that the tone is
calm, almost serene, as if the narrator, like Laon, is "exempt ... from
mortal hopes and fears"

The Canto opens by describing the reaction of the people to the fulfillment
of their one hope:

from his dull madness
The starveling waked, and died in joy; the dying,
Among the corpses in stark agony lying,
Just heard the happy tidings, and in hope
Closed their faint eyes. (XII, 1)

The procession of the Tyrant, his guards, and the priests, enters, and it
becomes clear that what joy and peacefulness the scene contains centers on
and emanates from Laon:

His head and feet are bare, his hands are bound
Behind with heavy chains, yet none do wreak
Their scoffs on him, though myriads throng around;
There are no sneers upon his lips which speak
That scorn or hate has made him bold; his cheek
Resolve has not turned pale; his eyes are mild
And calm, and, like the morn about to break,
Smile on mankind; his heart seems reconciled
To all things and itself. (XII, 3)

Laon is most content at the moment when the tyrant's triumph seems most
complete. He is not, I believe, "passive" or weak, for he can now impart some
of his freedom to the crowd:
Tumult was in the soul of all beside,

Ill joy, or doubt, or fear; but those who saw

Their tranquil victim pass felt wonder glide

Into their brain, and became calm with awe. (XII, 4)

Othman, now supposedly "a King indeed," cannot enjoy what should be his triumph: "The anxious Tyrant sits, enthroned on high." His physical elevation brings him no comfort, as the auto-da-fe can bring Laon no misery. Even the reptiles, part of the hideous accoutrements the priest demanded should compose the pyre, are "stingless." Suddenly, Cythna joins Laon. Her arrival terrifies the crowd, who see her as "God's Angel come to sweep / The lingering guilty to their fiery graves," and even the Tyrant leaps from his throne in dread. Shelley reiterates how they have all trapped themselves; they are "scared by the faith they feigned." But the Iberian Priest rallies the multitude, for he feels no awe at Cythna's presence. He sees only "in pain, and fear, and hate, something divine— / In love and beauty, no divinity;" and so persuades the King that piety demands they break their oath and execute Cythna also. So she too is bound upon the pyre, and Laon relates the events which follow in the same calm tone he has used to describe the procession and Cythna's arrival.

the mighty veil

Which doth divide the living and the dead

Was almost rent, the world grew dim and pale—

All light in Heaven or Earth beside our love did fail.

Yet—yet—one brief relapse, like the last beam
Of dying flames, the stainless air around
Hung silent and serene—a blood red gleam
Burst upwards, hurling fiercely from the ground
The globed smoke; I heard the mighty sound
Of its uprise, like a tempestuous ocean:

And is this death?—the pyre has disappeared,
The Pestilence, the Tyrant, and the throng;
The flames grow silent. (XII, 15-17)

And after this silence we have the first impression of Paradise: "slowly there is heard / The music of a breath-suspending song." Laon continues his description, grounding it (like his story of his childhood) in sensory images. Initially he hears music, then feels the "warm touch" of Cythna's hand, which wakens him to see an untainted Eden, filled with "star-bright flowers" of marvelous scent, and wonderful trees laden with luminous fruit. Next, Cythna's child, who had recently died from the plague, arrives in an enchanted boat, in which all three then voyage to the Temple described at the conclusion of Canto I.

This entire remarkable sequence deserves closer examination, for the poem's concluding episodes are its most problematic. The surrenders of Laon and Cythna and their subsequent execution, followed by the extraordinary and extended description of their experiences in Paradise pose various challenges to our understanding. First, is their voluntary capitulation to the Tyrant and the Priest heroic, or foolhardy, melodramatic, and suicidal? Additionally, after the attacks Shelley has made on this concept, what are we to make of the
personal immortality gained by Laon and Cythna, the depiction of which concludes the poem?

The first of these problems has been largely neglected by previous critics, several of whom mistake the basic details of the plot by stating that Laon and Cythna were "captured." Those who have read The Revolt carefully enough to note that each protagonist surrenders without any apparent pressure (despite the Tyrant's orders there is no indication that the soldiers are having any success hunting them down) generally consider their actions "naive" and "melodramatic." Carlos Baker, who has one of the most thorough discussions of this incident available, typifies this view saying that: "Laon . . . seems to ask for martyrdom." Baker then extends his disdain for Laon to include Shelley, mounting the kind of attack that a reader familiar with Shelley critics will recognize:

[Laon] invites just such a disaster as occurs. One wonders if Shelley, who repeatedly hurled himself against the phalanx of bourgeois morals, was not by his own conduct doing likewise. [Laon is] a Shelleyesque hero, with a strong messianic complex.11

Finally, apparently believing with Falstaff that the better part of valor is discretion, Baker claims that for Laon

the will to self-sacrifice is stronger than the will to survive and triumph, or at least to continue to fight the good fight. He does not seem to have heard the maxim that a living dog is better than a dead lion.12

Baker states the case against Laon, and by extension Cythna, succinctly
enough. They are thus indicted for egocentrism, suicidal aspirations, and betraying the cause of Liberty by refusing to struggle any further. Each of these accusations can be refuted by a close examination of the reasons and the results of Laon's and Cythna's actions.

Laon does not reveal either his plan or his motives as he turns from Cythna and leaves for the Golden City in verse 7 of Canto XI, and the omniscient narrator who takes over from verse 8 to verse 15 of Canto XII, does not enlighten us as to Laon's mental processes. His actions and his words to the "Senate" must suffice as the source for his motives. His given reason—that he comes to bargain for Cythna's life—is rather flimsy; not only has neither been captured, but his presumption that she would be content with such an arrangement seems contradicted by all that we have seen of her, especially her statement in Canto IX claiming that "darkness and death, if death be true, must be / Dearer than life and hope if unenjoyed with thee." So, if Laon is not acting to preserve Cythna, is his capitulation, as Baker argues, a self-aggrandizing attempt to put himself in the center of the action once again? I think that Laon is indeed seeking martyrdom, but I hasten to add that Baker and I conceive of "martyrdom" quite differently. To him it is public suicide, but a more accurate definition is that martyrdom is the willingness to accept the consequences—even death—of living and acting on one's beliefs. It is thus quite correct to call Laon and Cythna martyrs without denigrating or undercutting the sincerity and courage of their actions.

But what of the "live dog" argument, Baker's contention that the revolutionaries should have remained alive to continue the struggle? I am finally unconvinced by this, primarily because it is unclear what precisely
they could have done. Shelley has been mocked for having put some of his youthful pamphlets into bottles and tossing them into the Bristol Channel, or launching them in balloons in an effort to spread his message; from their wooded retreat I cannot imagine that Laon and Cythna could have accomplished anything more practical. It is crucial to realize that there is no real chance of fomenting another revolution. The people who built the Pyre are not the sailors of Canto VIII, for they have been so deeply tortured both by the famine, drought, and pestilence and by the venomous theology of the Iberian Priest that the "poisonous rust" of tyranny has eaten too deeply into their souls for even the most eloquent oration on love and brotherhood to reach them. They have become "with an inward fire possessed," and the suggestion that Laon and Cythna could "fight the good fight" in these radically altered conditions is groundless. And even the idea of "the good fight" is one the poem, grounded in nonviolence and pacifism, does not promote; the revolutionaries do not aspire to struggle but to liberate, not to "survive and fight" like guerrilla warriors but to come forth and publically demonstrate virtue and sympathy, whatever the personal risks, allying themselves in suffering with the people of the Golden City. Finally, perhaps a live dog is not better than a dead lion, if we take these beasts to symbolize cowardice and courage. For Laon and Cythna to skulk in the hills and fail to live out their own principles of engagement with and committment to their fellow citizens would betray the ideals of the entire poem.

Before addressing the second point of Canto XII, the Paradise Laon and Cythna journey through after their execution, I wish to assess how Shelley viewed immortality. Shelley's writings on this subject are frequently
connected with his writings on Christianity, and it is important to examine carefully both his constant disdain for Heaven and Hell and his philosophically rigorous speculations on the possible existence of an afterlife. As regards the first of these, he wrote quite extensively on the deleterious effects of the carrot-and-stick claims of Christianity. In this typical quote, from the fragmentary *Essay on Christianity*, probably written in 1817 and thus contemporaneous with *The Revolt*, Shelley speaks of Hell as presented by the Church:

God has devised a scheme whereby the body shall live after its apparent dissolution, and be rendered capable of indefinite torture. He is said to have compared the agonies which the vicious shall then endure to the excruciations of a living body bound among the flames and being consumed sinew by sinew and bone by bone. And this is to be done, not because it is supposed (and the supposition would be sufficiently detestable) that the moral nature of the sufferer would be improved by his tortures. It is done because it is just to be done. My neighbor or my servant or my child has done me an injury and it is just that he should suffer an injury in return.

Shelley rejects such theology completely, and asserts that Jesus would also have done so:

The doctrine of what some fanatics have termed a peculiar Providence ... interfering to punish the vicious and reward the virtuous is explicitly denied by Jesus Christ. The absurd and execrable doctrine of vengeance seems to have been
contemplated in all its shapes by this great moralist with the utmost disapprobation... [Hell] is [a] doctrine which Jesus Christ summoned his whole resources of persuasion to oppose. 'Love your enemy, bless those who hate you.'

The Christian vision of the afterlife was unacceptable because it extends misery into eternity and is a part of the ecclesiastical (and monarchical) machinery used alternately to bribe and terrify the people into acceding to—and indeed fervently supporting—the status quo. Such justice was for Shelley no more than unending tyranny.

However, objections to the concepts of Heaven and Hell do not constitute Shelley's only writings on immortality. Moving from theology to philosophy, we see that he took a skeptical position on the possibility of a "future state."

It is said that it is possible that we should continue to exist in some mode totally inconceivable to us at present. This is a most unreasonable presumption. It casts on the adherents of annihilation the burden of proving the negative of a question, the affirmative of which is not supported by a single argument and which, by its very nature lies beyond the experience of the human understanding.

Immortality is attacked by Shelley on two fronts: ethically, it is a vicious system designed to instill obedience and servility, and philosophically it is grounded only in the marsh of speculation, theorizing on matters impossible to be known.

Yet Shelley had deep sympathy for the idea of immortality. He realized that we have constructed maps of the land from which no traveler returns
the desire to be forever as we are, the reluctance to a violent and unexpected change . . . is indeed the secret persuasion which has given birth to the opinions of a future state.

Kenneth Neill Cameron discusses this point, emphasizing Shelley's consistent contention that only our desires, not our reason or any reliable evidence, support our arguments for immortality:

So far as rational argument is concerned, there is no doubt, Shelley implies, that . . . the mind depends on its relationship with the body and dies with it. But Shelley is not convinced that this argument reflects the whole truth. There are two other factors that may have a bearing on the subject: man has "an inextinguishable thirst for immortality," and the utter degradation of death seems to conflict with the nature of humanity. Though man's obsession with immortality may signify nothing, it is nevertheless a fact and must have had some origin. The second concept . . . is spelled out in On Life: "man is a being of high aspirations . . . disclaiming alliance with transience and decay." Surely such a being could not end as a rotting corpse. 13

Cameron continues, suggesting some ideas which are relevant to our study of The Revolt of Islam:

Shelley's hopes for immortality were not only personal, but were also part of his hopes for humanity. Death was degradation for all; the vision of the untold millions of the
dead of the past and the thought that the present and the
future held nothing better appalled him. An egalitarian utopia
in which man was "born only to die" was still a society in
half-shadows.\textsuperscript{14}

Knowing Shelley's opinions on immortality, let us examine how this
complex issue is treated in \textit{The Revolt}. Surprisingly, this aspect of the
poem has received little critical attention, and those who have analyzed it tend
to consider it exclusively allegorical or "symbolic." Typical of such a view,
which holds that the last half of Canto XII is not a realistic narrative, is
Benjamin Kurtz who argues that:

the very definiteness of these pictures, the wealth of
crude detail lavished on them, their sheer extravagance of
imagery, might lead another reader to suspect that Shelley
never meant them to be taken literally, especially in view of
his known objections, both now and later, to confusing
anthropomorphic religious fairy-tales with fact. Rather,
their very extravagance of bliss is a symbol of the beauty
these spirits attained in life, a beauty that cannot die away
among men, but grows fragrant with time and memory; and a
poetic way of suggesting not what does actually lie beyond
death but what is the best possible idea a mortal mind can
achieve of a perfect mind. At any rate, they are a part of the
fairy-tale machinery of the poem, floating lightly in the
romantic and sentimental atmosphere . . . to be interpreted
figuratively, rather than literally.\textsuperscript{15}
The above passage is somewhat precious and intermittently unclear, but Kurtz seems to be arguing that we should read the conclusion allegorically. The confusion of his language, as when he refers to "another reader" suspecting Shelley of allegory, leads us to believe that he will argue for a more literal interpretation, which he does not. His analysis is fuzzy; for example, he uses "fairy-tale" to mean first something Shelley disdained, and then something he employed. More subtly, the tone of this passage swathes the poem in vagueness: Shelley's words are a "poetic way" of "suggesting" something unknowable. Kurtz finally throws up his hands and—despite his admission of its "definiteness" and "concrete imagery"—banishes Shelley's Paradise to an ethereal and "sentimental" void. Yet this discussion, inadequate as it is, comprises the most thorough analysis to date of immortality in *The Revolt of Islam*.

Returning to our close reading of the poem itself, it is remarkable that Shelley at no time makes a statement about the nature of his Paradise. He makes no attempt, in Canto XII, the Preface, or connected letters to argue for his deeply held opinions on this subject or to explain his reasons for including this unusual conclusion. Both Laon and Cythna have indeed made eloquent attacks on the idea of Heaven and Hell but now Laon simply describes the scenery. He consistently uses figures combining light and water, of which the following stanza is typical:

A scene of joy and wonder to behold,—
That river's shapes and shadows changing ever,
Where the broad sunrise filled with deepening gold
Its whirlpools where all hues did spread and quiver;
And where melodious falls did burst and shiver
Among rocks clad with flowers, the foam and spray
Sparkled like stars upon the sunny river;
Or, when the moonlight poured a holier day,
One vast and glittering lake around green islands lay. (XII, 34)

Water and light, humanity and love, are united in "this glorious earth," in this bright land.

I argue that the Paradise described in Canto XII is precisely as real as the rest of the poem. Shelley does not suddenly take the wings of allegory to pierce a heavenly wilderness and does not abandon the psychological realism he has consistently employed in order to trick out his conclusion in a pretty bit of "fairy-tale machinery." *The Revolt* recapitulates Shelley's position on immortality, delineating his opposition to the Christian afterlife, and his scepticism about what lies beyond "senseless death" as well as his realization that the desire for eternal life is deep and intense. And this presentation, through narrative rather than exposition, is consistent with Shelley's poetic theory; in the *Preface* he states that his poem is "narrative, not didactic," and "a succession of pictures," primarily meant to appeal to the reader's emotions—to our "common sympathies"—rather than presenting a "methodical and systematic argument."

The detailed descriptions and the pattern of the imagery in these final stanzas show that they are an integral and logical conclusion to the poem, the necessary consequences of the lives of Laon and Cythna. *The Revolt of Islam* is dedicated to "illustrating the growth and progress of individual minds aspiring after excellence and devoted to the love of mankind." And
consistency is the basis for the immortality; this poem has taught nonviolence, forgiveness both of self and others, and love, not because these actions would eventuate in a Utopia but because they constitute it. "Love is celebrated everywhere as the sole law which should govern the moral world" said Shelley of his poem, and in a letter written several years later wrote that "the destiny of man can scarcely be so degraded that he was born only to die." For Laon and Cythna, who have lived and died by this sole law to "fade in hideous ruin" would be an unsupportable contradiction. In the fragmentary essay "On Love" Shelley writes that Love is

a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness; a circle around its proper paradise, which pain, and sorrow, and evil dare not overlap... So soon as this want or power is dead man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the merest husk.

The Tyrant and the Priest are already dead, not damned by a vengeful Deity but withered up by their own hatred. Cythna has said that her aim is "to live as if to love and live were one" and since both she and Laon have learned to love so completely they cannot die.

Finally, it is crucial to understand that the Paradise is a sensory one; Laon and Cythna describe their experiences, what they see, hear, touch, etc. Epipsychidion is again reminiscent of The Revolt in its depiction of a union which combines eternal awareness with companionship:

Let us become the overhanging day,
The living soul of this Elysian isle,
Conscious, inseparable, one.
There is, as previously noted, no attempt to construct an ontology of this Paradise, nor do the speakers mention any abstractions. They simply delight in the pleasant sensations which surround them and in their companionship. Writing, like Shelley, in a speculative vein, Keats conjectured that “we shall enjoy ourselves hereafter by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated,” and this is what Laon and Cythna find.

Emphasizing the reality of the experience in the clearest possible terms, Cythna exclaims: “Ay, this is Paradise / And not a dream, and we are all united!” (emphasis added). She, who recognized in Canto IX her own desire for immortality as well as the evidence against it, does not now proclaim some theory that she and Laon will live on in the minds of men, nor in fact promulgate any sort of doctrine, but with “a wild and glad surprise” discovers that

    a deep shade was cleft, and we did know,

That virtue, though obscured on earth, not less

Survives all mortal change in lasting loveliness. (XII, 37)

These words recall the Preface, where Shelley reveals that his poem is dedicated to showing “the transient nature of ignorance and error and the eternity of genius and virtue.” In the Preface he also contends that “there is a reflux in the tide of human things which bears the shipwrecked hopes of men into a secure haven after the storms are past.” The last line of the poem, describing the arrival of Laon and Cythna at the Temple of the Spirit depicts the fulfillment of this hope: “the charmed boat approached, and there its haven found.” And Laon’s tentative and hesitant declaration that after death “if aught
survive, I deem, / it must be virtue and love, for they immortal seem' is confirmed by his experience; he awakes and finds it true.
NOTES

CHAPTER THREE


5 Haswell, p. 86.

6 Haswell, p. 86.


11 Baker, p. 81.

12 Baker, p. 82.
13 Cameron, p. 127.

14 Cameron, p. 128.

Chapter Four

The Revolt of Islam and Shelley’s Poetic Development

In A Defense of Poetry Shelley said that "all high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially." The ideas and language of great poems are thus not only enjoyable and beneficial in themselves, but contain the germs of further pleasure, what Shelley called "wisdom and delight." The Revolt of Islam is such an acorn, occupying a crucial place in Shelley’s poetic development. It is the transition, in philosophy and technique, between the shallow dualism of Queen Mab and the release from domination and hierarchy finally achieved in Prometheus Unbound.

Queen Mab, written four years before The Revolt, is didactic and the message is millenarial. While the goals it envisions for mankind are similar to those of The Revolt, and, for that matter, Prometheus Unbound, it preaches a dualistic and deterministic universe. The multitude, creatures of basically good natures, are enslaved by "kings and priests and statesmen," who will one day be overthrown by the inevitable operation of "Necessity." The subtlety of Shelley’s analysis of the workings of evil in the individual, of the ways in which all tyrannize, and his understanding of the difficulty of revolution are all absent from Queen Mab. The process, the means whereby the noble end of liberty can be reached by men and depicted in verse constitute the major difference between the poems of 1813 and 1817. The
former shows a grand and simplistic panorama, delivers a sermon from an omnipotent supernatural figure, while *The Revolt*, as we have seen, begins in such a vein, but struggles to escape it, to evade the tyranny of categorization.

The basic premise of *Queen Mab* is this: the disembodied soul of a "sinless" maiden, lanthe, is visited by the "fairy Mab," who shows her the gloomy past and present of humanity, and discourses on the glorious future which will soon arrive. It is immediately apparent that Shelley is not avoiding elitism but embracing it; the pure and virginal lanthe is chosen by an supernatural agent as the recipient of special knowledge. It is a clue to the poem, which for all its democratic talk actually presents a sectarian view of reform. Thomas Love Peacock, in *Nightmare Abbey*, caricatures such millenarian hopes by presenting "Scythrop," an exaggerated but recognizable portrait of his friend Shelley at the time he wrote *Queen Mab*:

He now became troubled with the passion for reforming the world. He built many castles in the air, and peopled them with secret tribunals, and bands of illuminati, who were always the imaginary instruments of his projected regeneration of the human species. As he intended to institute a perfect republic, he invested himself with absolute sovereignty over these mystical dispensers of liberty... "Knowledge is power [he stated]; it is in the hands of a few, who employ it to mislead the many, for their own selfish purposes of aggrandisement and appropriation. What if it were in the hands of a few who should employ it to lead the many?... Such were the views of those secret associations of illuminati, which were the terror
of superstition and tyranny, and which, carefully selecting
wisdom and genius from the great wilderness of society...
bound all human excellence in a chain, which, if it had not
been prematurely broken, would have commanded opinion and
regenerated the world."¹

Peacock very astutely chooses verbs for his reformer which show the coercion
underlying his utopian visions; the enlightened ones bind virtues in a chain and
wish to command as well as regenerate. This is precisely the sort of
philosophy Queen Mab preaches, and it is avoidance of the desire to invest
oneself with absolute sovereignty which is one of the great achievements of The
Revolt of Islam. We will consider this point in further detail below, but it is
also important to note that Queen Mab, like Canto I of The Revolt, considers
Good and Evil categorical and distinct.

Furthermore, Queen Mab, presenting as it does the intercourse of
spirits divorced from flesh, promotes another dualism, that of mind and body.
As lanthe's Soul ascend's with Mab to reach a spot sufficiently elevated to
enable her to perceive the truth, the narrator states that "the chains of earth's
immurement / Fell from lanthe's spirit." We are told that "each stain of
earthliness / Had passed away:" not only are soul and body distinct, but it is
clear which of the two, figuratively and literally, is superior. Mab's
"overhanging battlement" from which she and lanthe survey the earth below, is
a qualitatively different place from Laon and Cythna's Paradise, which Shelley
consistently describes in sensory images.

Both Queen Mab and its title character are confident, certain and, indeed,
strident. Aside from the rather marvelous descriptions of the ascents and
descents of Mab and lanthe from earth to heaven and back again, the poem is almost entirely composed of speeches, mostly by Mab, telling lanthe and the reader the truth about human existence. Mab is apparently omniscient; nothing, she says, is "unforeseen, unregistered by me." Though effectively a goddess herself, Mab begins her diatribe by showing how religion and avarice have caused immense grief throughout human history and lanthe, in an "ecstasy of admiration" sees "all knowledge of the past,"

Which dim tradition interruptedly

Teaches the credulous vulgar, [was] unfolded

In just perspective to the view;

Yet dim from their infinitude.

The Spirit seemed to stand

High on an isolated pinnacle. (II, 248-253)

This passage works against its own desire; "dim tradition" clearly is something Shelley believes we should dispense with, yet lanthe's pinnacle, like all those vertical structures in The Revoit, mandates the dimness of her own view, however infinite. The entire poem transpires at this ethereal level, never relating any particular events befalling any specific mortals. It is the inverse of The Revoit, in which what Shelley called the "supernatural interference," the journey to a mystical place, occurs at the beginning of the story but completely disappears, so that eleven Cantos out of twelve are devoted to the earthly experiences of Laon and Cythna.

Another revealing element of Queen Mab is the frequency with which Shelley refers to the "vulgar," for the term runs throughout the poem and shows a certain contempt for the mob it purports to be liberating. lanthe is
an elect soul, fit to be lifted above the masses and enlightened; like one of the illuminati, she is set apart from the credulous vulgar.

The poem shows us the present and the future, as well as the past, from this elevated perspective. Mab's purpose is twofold: to prove the wickedness of "kings and priests and statesmen"—a phrase which recurs with tedious frequency—and to preach the doctrine of Necessity. This latter element is perhaps the most dogmatic; in the Notes to Queen Mab Shelley argues that all events are rigidly determined by the events which precede them:

the moral and material universe [is composed of] an immense and uninterrupted chain of causes and effects, no one of which could occupy any other place than it does occupy, or act in any other place than it does act.

This Power rules the thoughts and destinies of man as rigidly as it controls the material universe:

Every human being is irresistibly impelled to act precisely as he does act; in the eternity which preceded his birth a chain of causes was generated, which operating under the name of motives, make it impossible that any thought of his mind or any action of his life should be other than it is.

This philosophy, which has gained wide credence in our own century under the promotion of B. F. Skinner, denies individual responsibility—liberty—since we are "irresistibly impelled" to behave as we do. Shelley unwaveringly embraces this position—an astonishing one for a reformer—declaring that the word liberty, as applied to mind, is analogous to the word chance as applied to matter; they spring from an ignorance of
the certainty of the conjunction of antecedents and consequences.

This conviction is the greatest difference between Queen Mab and Shelley’s later poems, for Necessity severely constrains the power of the individual to change either society or his own beliefs, while it is precisely that individual will on which Shelley will base all his hopes in his other great poems of reform.

It is important to note that while the notion of Necessity dominates Queen Mab,² it is named only once in The Revolt. In Canto IX Cythna, trying to account for the failure of the revolution, proclaims that:

\[
\text{One comes behind}
\]
\[
\text{Who aye the future to the past will bind—}
\]
\[
\text{Necessity, whose sightless strength forever}
\]
\[
\text{Evil with evil, good with good, must wind}
\]
\[
\text{In bands of union, which no power may sever;}
\]
\[
\text{They must bring forth their kind, and be divided never! (IX, 27)}
\]

As we remember from our analysis of Canto IX, this is the speech in which Cythna clutches at straws. Striving to comfort herself and Laon, Cythna apostrophizes Necessity in order to rescue something from “this dark ruin.” Yet this Necessity is hardly comforting, for under its rule evil must propagate evil, and there has been immense evil done and suffered already. Cythna has retreated into dualism. The verb “bind” is noteworthy here; it implies an absolute and irrevocable law of consequences. But Shelley will go on to say that the chains which “our spirit bind / [Are] brittle perchance as straw” (Julian and Maddalo, 181–82). And the theme of Prometheus Unbound is
precisely the demonstration of the process whereby evil can cease bringing forth its kind. Within the context of *The Revolt*, evil and good are bound together in Canto XII, where Cythna persuades the Tyrant's slaves to "bind" her to the pyre; only in willingness to efface the boundaries between Good and Evil can fanaticism cease.

Like *The Revolt*, this poem sympathizes even with the tyrants, arguing that they gain no joy from their evil actions. Envisioning such a king, Mab says that "to the meal / Of silence, grandeur and excess he drags / His palled unwilling appetite." However, the two works differ markedly in their analyses of the causes and cure of the evils of monarchy. *Queen Mab*, in accordance with the doctrine of Necessity, argues that the king,

like the vulgar, thinks, feels, acts, and lives
Just as his father did; the unconquered powers
Of precedent and custom interpose
Between a king and virtue. (III, 96-99)

The king is the slave of custom of circumstance; indeed, the king is the servant of Necessity! *The Revolt*, however, places the source of evil within the individual human will. Addressing Othman and his Senate, Laon does not view their deeds as inevitable offspring of tradition but as the results of their own choices: "ye Princes of the earth, ye sit aghast, / Amid the ruin which yourselves have made . . . dark Terror has obeyed / Your bidding." (IX, 15)

When Laon does refer to the power of tradition he makes it clear that the tyrants have acquiesced to their enslavement; they are "willing slaves to Custom old" (IX, 27, emphasis added). This is an important distinction, for it constitutes the difference between the determinism of *Queen Mab*, and the
theme of individual responsibility stressed in The Revolt. While this shift of focus from a grand, dim survey of the evils of society to beliefs about liberty rooted in specific human choices culminates in Prometheus Unbound, it is clearly rooted in The Revolt.

Having shown lanthe the evils of the past and present, Mab now essays to comfort her:

I see a shade of doubt and horror fleet  
Across thy stainless features; yet fear not;  
This is no unconnected misery,  
Nor stands uncaused and irretrievable.  
Man's evil nature, that apology  
Which kings who rule, and cowards who crouch, set up  
For their unnumbered crimes, sheds not the blood  
Which desolates the discord-wasted land.  
From kings and priests and statesmen war arose,  
Whose safety is man's deep unbettered woe,  
Whose grandeur his debasement. Let the axe  
Strike at the root, the poison-tree will fall. (IV, 73-83)

Distilling the poem's theory, this passage combines the familiar condemnation of those in authority with an argument for Necessity, rather than man's will, as the agent of social change. The points Shelley adduces to support his premise that no misery is unconnected are tautological: kings, etc., rather than our own capacity for evil, are responsible for our unhappiness, but the origin of tyrannical impulses in these beings is unexplained. Blaming rulers for our "debasement" sets up a dichotomy between monarch and man; kings
have, apparently, a different nature than do the multitude. Since this expectation makes rulers the source as well as the actors of evil, the next lines follow with chilling logic; the axe strikes at the supposed root and the guillotine beheads the king.

Mab continues in this vein, emphasizing that "kings, priests, and statesmen blast the human flower." If by some chance the message that these rulers are directly responsible for all human wickedness, Mab, like a good preacher, repeats her point again and again. But nowhere is the origin of evil actually revealed; the kings, etc. are by definition iniquitous, and evil is a simple, static, category just as the Woman in Canto I of The Revolt conceives of the Eagle / Comet. "All natural good" and "bright reason's ray" are stifled by this evil, which apparently by main force, takes over the souls of the vulgar multitude. While The Revolt also advocates the abolition of hierarchies, it recognizes, especially in its latter sections, the tendency of each person to desire domination, and thus realizes that tyrants are the nodes of oppression and not its only source and sole embodiment.

Not surprisingly, Mab has much to say on the subject of religion. Like Cythna, she argues that religion is a tool of the Establishment (kings, priests, and statesmen) to delude and control the masses. Indeed, she goes so far as to say that kings would be powerless

but for thy aid,

Religion! but for thee, prolific fiend,

Who peoplest earth with demons, hell with men,

And heaven with slaves!

Thou taintest all thou lookest upon! (VI, 68-72)
But we encounter the same problem in attacking "Religion" as in condemning "Monarchy." Shelley hates the circumstance without showing the cause, as if Faith suddenly appears out of nowhere and begins to wreak havoc. The attack on Christianity is fierce and emotional, calling Moses a "murderer" and Jesus a "parish demagogue." These glib labels make effectively inflammatory rhetoric but do not constitute an argument, and this defect pervades not only Shelley's absolute condemnation of Christianity but all of Queen Mab, which indulges in name-calling at the expense of proof.

Finally we are shown the blissful future soon to be delivered by Necessity, a future characterized mainly by the absence of kings and priests and statesmen. In lines which reveal a desire for safety over freedom, Shelley states that, after the millennium, we will be as peaceful as the birds which

"their sweet lives sing away," for

All things are void of terror; man has lost

His terrible prerogative, and stands

An equal amidst equals. (VIII, 225-27)

Man will be happy to give up his ability to choose evil (which, following Necessity, he lacked in any case) and live "blest from his birth with all bland impulses / Which gently in his noble bosom wake."

I have emphasized the determinism, didacticism, and shallowness of Queen Mab, yet it is a thoughtful and energetic poem, which was, it is important to remember, written by Shelley at the age of twenty. Much of the verse has a fierce vigor, and the poem's ideas, except for Necessity, essentially remain constant throughout Shelley's career. The following passage, for example, expresses the concepts of philosophical anarchism as
vividly as Cythna or Prometheus could:

Nature rejects the monarch, not the man;
The subject, not the citizen, for kings
And subjects, mutual foes, forever play
A losing game into each other's hands,
Whose stakes are vice and misery. The man
Of virtuous soul commands not, nor obeys.
Power, like a desolating pestilence,
Pollutes whate'er it touches; and obedience,
Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,
Makes slaves of men, and of the human frame
A mechanized automaton. (III, 170-80)

What distinguishes *Queen Mab* from the greater works which follow it is that it violates its own formula; in its willingness to categorize, divide and oppose and in proclaiming the power of Necessity it also makes men automata. The poem attacks, rather than persuades; instead of seeking to appeal to the common sympathies of its readers it drowns them in the rhetoric of rage.

Before comparing *Prometheus Unbound* to *The Revolt*, we will examine the themes of human will and revolutionary language in two of Shelley's other poems, *Julian and Maddalo* and the "Ode To Liberty." In contrast to *Queen Mab*, these later poems demonstrate a new emphasis on the power of the individual and an increasing understanding of the complexity of the task of reform. Throughout our study of *The Revolt* we have focussed on the difficulties faced by the revolutionaries. Both Laon and Cythna have had difficulty avoiding becoming tyrants themselves; as domination in "thought and
language dwells, they have struggled with the temptations of using their ideas and words to elevate equality and mandate freedom. While this problem is most fully addressed in *Prometheus*, virtually all of Shelley’s post-Revolt verse demonstrates these concerns.

*Julian and Maddalo*, composed in 1818 and thus written a year after *The Revolt* and at the same time as *Prometheus Unbound*, is the first significant poem written after the completion of *The Revolt*. Set in Venice and written in heroic couplets, it is a series of dialogues, interspersed with lyrical but precise descriptions of the city. The speakers are Count Maddalo, modeled on Byron, and Julian, representing Shelley. Typifying the urbanity of the poem, the "Preface" expresses great admiration for certain aspects of Maddalo’s personality while gently mocking Julian:

in social life no human being can be more gentle, patient and unassuming than Maddalo. He is cheerful, frank, and witty. His more serious conversation is a sort of intoxication; men are held to it as by a spell. He has travelled much, and there is an inexpressible charm in his relations of his adventures in different countries.

Julian is an Englishman of good family, passionately attached to those philosophical notions which assert the power of man over his own mind, and the immense improvements which, by the extinction of certain moral superstitions, human society may be yet susceptible. Without concealing the evil in the world, he is forever speculating on how the good may be made superior. He is a complete infidel
and scoffer at all things reputed holy . . . Julian, in spite of his heterodox opinions, is conjectured by his friends to possess some good qualities. How far this is possible the pious reader will determine.

This description gives us an excellent picture of Shelley's beliefs, about himself as well as mankind, in the period between The Revolt and the poems of 1819. Necessity has vanished altogether, and while he continues to attack Custom—"certain moral superstitions"—the human will is made the determinant of the world, rather than the reverse. And these points, as well as Shelley's adoption of a less tense and shrill tone towards his own mission, make the poem less dogmatic and more accessible and pleasant.

Julian and Maddalo is essentially a debate, between the Count, who takes a gloomy view of humanity, and Julian (who narrates), with his belief in immense improvements. While Julian enunciates the more typically Shelleyan position, Earl Wasserman discerned that

Shelley recognized [in Maddalo] the enviably heroic but negating side of himself . . . Julian and Maddalo are Shelley's divided and conflicting selves, confronting each other . . . the poem, in effect, is Shelley's debate with himself. 3

Thus neither speaker is altogether correct; unlike Queen Mab we are not given one privileged position but a dialogue, just as The Revolt represents increasing revisions and refinements of the theory of revolution in the face of contradictory circumstances.

The argument begins when Maddalo points out a sight he finds more convincing than any number of perfectibilian theories:
'Look, Julian, on the west, and listen well
If you hear not a deep and dreary bell.'
I looked, and saw between us and the sun
A building on an island,—such a one
As age to age might add, for uses vile,
A windowless, deformed, and dreary pile;
And on the top an open tower, where hung
A bell, which in the radiance swayed and swung;
We could just hear its hoarse and iron tongue;
The broad sun sank behind it, and it tolled
In strong and black relief. (96-106)

This is a familiar sight. It is the Tower of Famine, the column of Laon's imprisonment, the Pyramid of liberty and of crumbling corpses. In this context it is a madhouse, and with terrible eloquence Maddalo uses it to attack his optimistic friend:

'What we behold
Shall be the madhouse and the belfry tower,'
Said Maddalo; 'and ever at this hour
Those who may cross the water hear that bell,
Which calls the maniacs each one from his cell
To vespers.'—'As much skill as need to pray
In thanks or hope for their dark lot have they
To their stern Maker,' I replied. 'O ho!
You talk as in years past,' said Maddalo.
'Tis strange men change not. You were ever still
Among Christ’s flock a perilous infidel,
A wolf for the meek lambs—if you can’t swim,
Beware of Providence.’ I looked on him
But the gay smile had faded in his eye,—
‘And such,’ he cried, ‘is our mortality;
And this must be the emblem and the sign
Of what should be eternal and divine!
And, like that black and dreary bell, the soul,
Hung in a heaven-illumined tower, must toll
Our thoughts and our desires to meet below
Round the rent heart and pray—as madmen do
For what? they know not till the night of death
As sunset that strange vision, severeth
Our memory from itself, and us from all
We sought, and yet were baffled. (106-130)

Maddalo’s nihilistic eloquence is not easily countered, since he reasons from an irrefutable fact, mortality. Julian begins his argument by specifically rejecting the notion which Shelley had articulated so strongly in Queen Mab: that we are molded completely by circumstance

If man be

The passive thing you say, I should not see
Much harm in the religions and old saws,
(Though I may never own such leaden laws)
Which break a teachless nature to the yoke.
Mine is another faith. (160-65)
If man did not possess free will religion could not pervert him; if his nature were essentially unchangeable—"teachless"—then the deadening effect of Custom would not be deleterious. The different faith which Julian, like Cythna, holds is that "[man's] will has power when all beside is gone" (Revolt, VIII, 26). Shelley continues this point, not claiming that God or Necessity, through some vast plan, will solve the problems of mankind, but that

'It is our will
That thus enchains us to permitted ill.
We might be otherwise; we might be all
We dream of, happy, high, majestic.
Where is the love, beauty and truth we seek,
But in our mind? and if we were not weak,
Should we be less in deed than in desire?'
'Ay, if we were not weak—and we aspire
How vainly to be strong!' said Maddalo;
'You talk Utopia.' 'It remains to know,'
I then rejoined, 'and those who try may find
How strong the chains are which our spirit bind;
Brittle perchance as straw.' (170-82)

But while Julian provides some ground for rejecting Maddalo's pessimism, he cannot outline a fully satisfactory alternative, and the poem does not finally advocate the position of one speaker over another.4 Hoping to "prove the induction" Julian and Maddalo visit the madhouse, which is in itself a self-defeating action, for expecting logic from lunatics is an enterprise of considerable contradiction. The Maniac with whom they speak is unable to
decide the argument, yet it is significant that his madness derives from a loss of love. The weakness in Julian’s position lies in his neglect of the factors which influence our will, freeing or enchainning it. In the Preface to Prometheus Unbound Shelley addresses this question directly, in terms which should be very familiar to the reader of The Revolt:

It is a mistake to suppose that I dedicate my poetical compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform, or that I consider them in any degree as constituting a reasoned system on the theory of human life. Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse. My purpose has hitherto been to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that, until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconcious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness.

This belief, which we will examine further below, necessitates that the poet appeal to the sympathies of his readers, rather than trying to argue them into virtue. The Maniac cannot be cured by logic or Necessity but by love, but of this Julian is evidently unaware.

A later work, the “Ode to Liberty,” which was written in 1820, employs a familiar concept of tyranny while continuing to assert the power of man over his own mind. The poem traces human history from a violent and chaotic past
to the present, which, while yet filled with tyrannies and injustice, is gradually becoming more free. Unlike Queen Mab, liberation will not come in an instant, nor are a handful of rulers responsible for all evil. Verse 3, in which Liberty is addressed, describes how monarchy—the rule of a few—inevitably follows from competition and possessiveness among the many:

Man, the imperial shape, then multiplied

His generations under the pavilion

Of the Sun's throne; palace and pyramid,

Temple and prison, to many a swarming million

Were as to mountain wolves their ragged caves.

This living human multitude

Was savage, cunning, blind, and rude,

For thou wert not; but o'er the populous solitude,

Like one fierce cloud over a waste of waves,

Hung Tyranny; beneath; sate deified

The sister-pest, congregator of slaves;

Into the shadow of her pinions wide

Anarchs and priests who feed on gold and blood

Till with the stain their inmost souls are dyed,

Drove the astonished herds of men from every side.

This verse, packed with monarchical terms, argues a familiar theme—that the desire to rule and dominate is the source of human misery. Man is immediately defined as "imperial" and the lines which follow describe the consequences of that state. The miserable beings in this Hobbesian "populous solitude" live in an intensely hierarchical universe; under "the Sun's throne"
they build their own cages, which are precisely the structures we have seen so often in the Golden City. Particularly interesting is the "pyramid," which is of the same nature as the prisons and palaces. This direct association of "pyramid" with these other structures of oppression supports my previous analysis of the Altar-Pyramid of *The Revolt*; it is a place where tyranny, perhaps masking as "divine Equality," sits deified. And the reference to the multitude as "ragged wolves" resembles strongly Shelley's words in Canto X of *The Revolt*, where he describes those beguiled by the Iberian Priest into hating Laon and Cythna as "homeless beasts."

Having established that rule of one person over another leads to kingship and oppression, Shelley then demonstrates that this desire for rule is deeply rooted in our language as well as our behavior. Words acquire the power of tyrants; wishing to abolish tyranny Shelley does not call for the guillotining of a man but for a revision of our language:

Oh, that the free would stamp the impious name
Of King into the dust! or write it there,
So that this blot upon the page of fame
Were as a serpent's path, which the light air
Erases, and the flat sands close behind!
Ye the oracle have heard.
Lift the victory-flashing sword,
And cut the snaky knots of this foul gordian word,
Which, weak itself as stubble, yet can bind
Into a mass, irrefragably firm,
The axes and the rods which awe mankind.
Words represent thoughts, and as long as we employ the name of King we are enthralled by the concept it represents: as Shelley said, "the sound has poison in it."

But even as he cries for the erasure of such sounds and meanings Shelley admits the impossibility of his desire, for the passage is in the subjunctive mood; what one "would" see accomplished is frequently something one cannot do. Now instead of trying to eliminate words of power he turns them to his own ends, combining this action with a plea for precise language and enjoining that:

the words which make the thoughts obscure
From which they spring, as clouds of glimmering dew
From a white lake blot heaven's blue portraiture,
[Should be] stripped of their thin masks and various hue
And frowns and smiles and splendors not their own,
Till in the nakedness of false and true
They stand before their Lord, each to receive its due.

It is crucial to realize that Shelley is not arguing for the abolition of language but for the principle that words must embody as accurately as possible the thoughts of the speaker. Like describing the "minute and remote distinctions" which Shelley believed constituted his poetic talent, language must be as particular as possible in order to allow communication.

Even as he emphasizes the necessity of careful wording Shelley rather surprisingly embodies his desire for accuracy in a monarchical image, portaying words as evaluated by a "Lord." This apparent contradiction—between wishing to eliminate the name of King and using a ruler to judge language—is resolved when we realize that the Lord is not an
external authority but is the individual consciousness of each human being. Language and ideas would be free from tyranny if

human thoughts might kneel alone,

Each before the judgment-throne

Of its own aweless soul.

Considerable attention has been given to this problem: the difficulty of finding a revolutionary language. P. M. S. Dawson, writing on Shelley's attempt to create a truly free speech, shows that

cancepts like rule, power, conquest, empire, and domination have for Shelley a positive context, and that he deliberately invokes them in in expounding his own view of man and of the properly human society. Such concepts are, of course, customarily used in ways to which Shelley was totally opposed, but where the Shelley of Queen Mab rejected the concepts themselves, the Shelley of Prometheus was able to oppose his own position to the perverted acceptations in general currency.5

This is an insightful observation, limited only by its implication that there is no middle stage between the two poems. While Prometheus is where Shelley is able to speak of man as "king over himself," we have seen his concern with the language of domination in The Revolt. Laone's apostrophe of Divine Equality does not moderate "the perverted acceptations" of language, for she posits a power outside the self which must take precedence over all else; "Wisdom and Love are but the slaves of thee!" But these grand personifications vanish from the poem, and the concluding Cantos are
remarkable for their lack of dogmatic assertions. As in much else, the transition from the language of *Queen Mab* to the successfully anarchistic language of certain later poems transpires in *The Revolt*.

An extensive amount of excellent criticism has been written on *Prometheus Unbound*, which was Shelley's own favorite composition, and which is his greatest achievement. But remarkably little attention has been given to the relationship between it and *The Revolt of Islam*, although the advances Shelley makes in thought and expression in 1817 make the latter poem—written a year later—possible.

Michael Scrivener's reading of *Prometheus* resembles my reading of *The Revolt*: he sees the poem as an attempt to portray

that critical moment when humanity abolishes the tyrannical *principle*—not just particular tyrannies, but tyranny altogether. The poem investigates the preconditions and consequences of the abolition. What must humanity do, think, feel and imagine, before it can free itself from hierarchy and domination in all their guises? 6

The answer to this question involves the relationship between Prometheus and Jupiter, between the tyrant and his apparently innocent victim. It has been recognized that Jupiter is in fact not an external tyrant but the dominating principle within Prometheus himself, even though he is seen as the personified abstraction of evil. Thus the curse which Prometheus spoke is repeated by the Phantasm of Jupiter, for the hatred expressed in that curse demonstrates the Jupiterian part of Prometheus. Earl Wasserman's analysis makes it apparent that in the retraction scene we
recognize this as the actual identification of the execrating Prometheus with Jupiter, the god he made in his image. Not only does the audience watch the Phantasm uttering Prometheus' curse against him of whom it is the phantom; it also observes Prometheus facing his own former self in Jupiter's ghost, since all of Jupiter's nature—pride, coldness, defiance, calm hatred, self-mocking despair—existed in Prometheus when he cursed his oppressor. 7

By cursing Jupiter Prometheus perpetuated the tyrannical relationship, seeing himself as Good and Jupiter as Evil he is thinking in absolute and indeed fanatical ways.

Since the retraction of the curse is the central moment of Prometheus Unbound, I find a short poem (not intended for publication and not published in Shelley's lifetime), "To the Lord Chancellor" of particular interest. Written in August, 1817, during composition of The Revolt of Islam, this poem is an emotional reaction to Lord Eldon's decree denying Shelley custody of his children by his first marriage (his estranged wife having drowned herself the previous December). The decision to give the children—a son and a daughter—to their maternal grandparents rather than their father was unprecedented, and Shelley concluded, rightly, that it was based on the Chancellor's fear and disdain for Shelley's radical views on politics and religion. Shelley's rage is expressed in twenty-six stanzas, of which the following is typical:

Oh, let a father's curse be on thy soul
And let a daughter's hope be on thy tomb;

Be both, on thy grey head, a leaden cowl

To weigh thee down to thine approaching doom!

There are remarkable similarities between these lines and Prometheus' curse of Jupiter:

I curse thee! Let a sufferer's curse

Clasp thee, his torture, like remorse;

Till thine infinity shall be

A robe of envenomed agony;

And thine Omnipotence a crown of pain

To cling like burning gold round thy dissolving brain!

Shelley continues to attack the Lord Chancellor, rising in his final verses to a high pitch of emotion:

By all the hate which checks a father's love—

By all the scorn which kills a father's care—

By those most impious hands which dared remove

Nature's high bounds—by thee—and by despair—

Yes, the despair which bids a father groan.

And cry, 'My children are no longer mine'—

The blood within these veins may be mine own,

But, Tyrant, their polluted souls are thine;—

I curse thee, though I hate thee not.

The qualification of that concluding clause is not believable; Shelley hated Lord Eldon deeply, as Prometheus hated Jupiter. Knowing the intensity of such
feelings for Shelley, realizing their base in his own experience, makes his conquest of them in *Prometheus* the more remarkable, and I believe that the process of this conquest, of establishing kingship over himself, begins in *The Revolt*, which is devoted to demonstrating the danger of establishing and attacking tyrants. The Paradise which Laon and Cythna find is a consequence, not of their having fought the good fight against the Tyrant, but of their joining themselves in imaginative sympathy with the people of the Golden City, including Othman and his Senate. And it is this sympathy which delivers Laon and Cythna from the "dark oppressors hell" of Cantos X and XI of *The Revolt*. When they return to the City from the false heaven of their mountain retreat, renouncing their separation from the people, they find the true Paradise, the place where there are no Priests and no Tyrants.

Scrivener's analysis of *Prometheus* recognizes the importance of sympathy. Prometheus is waiting for the moment of Jupiter's doom, which

As some dark Priest hales the reluctant victim—

Shall drag thee, cruel King, to kiss the blood

From these pale feet, which then might trample thee

If they disdained not such a prostrate slave.

Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee. (1, 49-53)

Promethean hope has been based on hatred and revenge, knowing that Jupiter's reign was finite. Suddenly, however, Prometheus realizes that if Jupiter falls by means of Promethean hatred, then they will simply exchange roles. The sadistic image Prometheus evokes reproduces the torture
Jupiter has always inflicted. To trample and enslave Jupiter is to resurrect tyranny in a new form, perpetuating the long history of hierarchical domination from the time of Saturn. What startles Prometheus out of his hatred is imaginative sympathy, putting himself in the place of Jupiter and identifying with his fate.  

The power of sympathy which allows Prometheus to stop hating Jupiter is directly responsible for his liberation and the end of the tyrant.

One element in particular of *Prometheus* is reminiscent of *The Revolt*. In Act III, following his liberation, Prometheus describes a cave where he and his love, Asia, will retire to live in bliss. Scrivener’s remarks on this occasion are also excellent:

It strikes some readers as peculiar for the champion of humanity to retreat so quickly from a social orientation into a purely aesthetic repose. First, however, one has to recognize the dramatic and poetic tasks with which Shelley is faced in Act III, after Jupiter is deposed. If the poet were writing of a *coup d'etat*, then the transition from the old to the new would be simple: Prometheus would take Jupiter’s place on the throne, ruling in a ‘Promethean’ way. Shelley, however, is writing an anarchist poem; he is concerned with the abolition of domination and hierarchy. Prometheus cannot “seize power,” because power has been abolished and does not exist as something that can be seized. Therefore, Shelley has to create images and dramatic actions that embody
authentically Promethean values, not a new code of laws . . .

With hints of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, Shelley's cave is a symbol for divine creativity.⁹

This cave is strikingly like the Paradise of *The Revolt*, which works to the same purpose. The place Laon and Cythna find themselves also echoes *Kubla Khan*:

And round about sloped many a lawny mountain
With incense-bearing forests and rich caves
Of marble radiance, to that mighty fountain;
And where the flood its own bright margin laves,
Their echoes talk with its eternal waves,
Which from the depths whose jagged caverns breed
Their interposing strife it lifts and heaves,
Till through a chasm of hills they roll and feed

A river deep, which flies with smooth but arrowy speed. (XII, 19)

And Shelley, as we have noted, does not give us a theology for this Paradise, does not pronounce a code of laws or enunciate an ontology. The apparent lack of concern for the Golden City which marks the description of Paradise is not callousness but successful revolution at last; for Laon and Cythna have finally reached a place of pure experience. *The Revolt* finally advocates a process, imaginative sympathy, rather than a product. We do not even return to the narrator who opens the poem; by leaving us with Laon's words Shelley implies that the world has indeed been renovated, as Cythna called for in Canto VIII.

There is one final point of comparison among Shelley's poems of reform, narrative technique. *Queen Mab*, while purporting to be a dialogue, is
actually a series of speeches by a figure Shelley otherwise vehemently opposed, an omniscient supernatural authority. But by *Prometheus* we have a play, a variety of views presented, and in *Julian and Maddalo* we have a true dialogue. *The Revolt*, emphasizing as it does narrative and conversation, is the transition between the dogmatism of Shelley's early verse and the flexibility of his later productions. Mab talks down to us, but Prometheus and Asia speak like us, changing and learning throughout the drama. As *The Revolt* opens, and as it has been read, two static categories, represented by the Eagle and the Serpent, wage an eternal war. But Laon and Cythna discover that these clear categories are insufficient, and this

Prometheus' ability to refrain from taking the tyrant's place at the top of a hierarchy, and thus becoming a tyrant himself, is precisely the accomplishment learned by Laon and Cythna. The process of liberation takes place throughout the poem, which starts with the certain, dualistic voice of *Mab* and ends with the anarchistic Paradise of *Prometheus*. The quickness with which the latter unbinds himself, the seeming ease with which liberation arrives, is due to the progress Shelley made in learning to speak a truly free language and describe actions governed only by love through writing the twelve Cantos of *The Revolt of Islam*.

It is Shelley's longest poem because the ideas in it are the most difficult; it seems strange that the poem either does not end showing the apparently successful revolution of Canto V or after Cythna's inspiring speech in IX asserting that the failure of the revolution has paved the way for another effort in the future. The agony of Cantos X and XI seems superfluous; we know
that the wicked tyrant has returned, his reign is necessarily evil, why need it be described in such detail? The answer is that not until these Cantos do we see self-sacrifice rather than self-assertion by Laon and Cythna. In Canto III Laon’s revolutionary ideals about the brotherhood of man dissolve as he is confronted by the slaves who abduct Cythna. Like Queen Mab’s axe which strikes at tyrants, Laon’s small knife deprives three of his countrymen of their lives.

Physical violence is avoided in Canto V; Laon persuades the revolutionaries not to take revenge on Othman. Yet Laone countenances the building of an Altar to divine Equality, and permits herself to be worshipped as its priestess, and her speech reveals that hierarchy is not abolished, and thus Jupiter, the tyrannical principle, still lives and reigns. This is why the revolution fails, for it has truly been only a revolution, only an exchange of one tyrant, one Deity, for a more benevolent but equally absolute one. Scrivener says that Prometheus is remarkable because it “does not have a ruling class, a philosopher-king who makes sure everyone is ‘free.’”10 Shelley’s elimination of such a coercive Protector of Liberty was possible because he worked through the installation and removal of Laone; The Revolt cannot end after Canto V because the dynamic of domination remains in force.

In Canto IX the last grand theory of the poem dies. Cythna, having clutched at Necessity and tried to derive comfort from the notion that their ideas are deathless, realizes that individual love, particular experience, are the reasons for existence. This does not invalidate her claim—or Shelley’s—to care for humanity, rather it places that claim in a more genuine perspective. Laon’s and Cythna’s willingness to risk even their life together just when they
have realized how wonderful that experience is stamps with reality their concern for humanity, far more than do the dictums of Queen Mab from her safely elevated battlement.

Finally, Canto XII anticipates the liberated earth created by Prometheus. Only after showing the process whereby individual liberty is finally gained can Shelley fashion his Paradise. Through love evil may be eliminated, but Shelley's image as a simplistic utopian who believes that the solutions to human misery are easily achieved is inaccurate. Louis McNeice states that Shelley "may lack the tragic vision of the power of evil, evil overcome only with difficulty through the cooperation of heroic energy and intelligence with some mysterious grace." But McNeice is mistaken, for Shelley's understanding of the immense power of evil was very acute, and he believed it could be eliminated not by invoking some external grace but by understanding—emotionally—the kinship of self with others. Mary Shelley also oversimplifies Percy's view of the problem of evil; writing of Prometheus she says that "the subject he loved best to dwell on was the image of One warring with the the Evil Principle . . . such he had depicted in his last poem [The Revolt of Islam], when he made Laon the enemy and victim of tyrants." We have seen the inaccuracy of this in both contexts, that so long as Prometheus and Laon see themselves as enemies and victims they remain incapable of reforming anything. There is no "Evil Principle," no god or devil, except the impulses of revenge or love within each individual heart.

And by making "common sympathies" his central concern, Shelley emphasizes his desire to appeal both to his readers' emotions and to their shared experiences. In A Defense of Poetry Shelley would repeat this
Ethical science . . . propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life: nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise, and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. . . . The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature . . . A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination, and poetry administers to the effect by enlarging upon the cause.

This resembles another famous statement of Romanticism, Keats' "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." While Shelley's words appear to be concerned with ethical values and Keats with aesthetics, both statements share much. Shelley's "going out of our own nature" and Keats' willingness to submerge ego are essentially the same philosophy. In *Endymion* Keats spoke of how "love and friendship," as well as beauty, are "self-destroying," because they obliterate the distinction between consciousness and experience, eliminating what Cythna called "the dark idolatry of self." *The Revolt of Islam,* in going beyond dualism and easy labels, demonstrates negative capability, and such a process has major implications for society, for through poetry, through the fine spell of words, we may learn sympathy and avoid the fanaticism of categories, the irritable
reaching after certainties.
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