

POETIC THEOLOGY: DANTE AND THE BRITISH ROMANTIC POETS

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This dissertation follows the figure of Dante as a vehicle to chart a new literary history of poetic theology that discovers the Romantic revival of the Renaissance ideal of the poet-theologian. The Italian humanist conception of the *poeta theologus*, which retroactively named a tradition originating with Dante, sought to resolve the ongoing conflict between theology and poetry. Renaissance writers argued that theology is poetry about God, and that classical poetry, when read allegorically, is consonant with revealed Christianity. Like the humanists who turned to theology to justify poetry, the Romantics, responding to the Enlightenment imperative of truth, re-establish the model of poetic theology in order to defend poetry and its truth. This dissertation seeks to uncover a Romantic poetic theology that demonstrates the implicitly theological basis of late 18th and early 19th-century poetic form and theory. Each chapter begins with a conceptual link to Dante that frames an examination of poetic appropriation and implication of theological questions, including notions of form, language, inspiration, and allegory. Following a theoretical discussion of the function of poetic theology, Chapter One argues that Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, while reiterating Dante's vernacular poetic program, conceives of the vernacularization of poetic language as an incarnational process mirroring the descent of the divine vernacular, Christ as Word-made-flesh. Chapter Two asserts Byron's use of exile, particularly in his neglected poem, "The Prophecy of Dante," as a biographical trope characterizing the human underside of the experience of poetic

inspiration. Chapter Three contends that in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley emulates Dante's bold appropriation of the "allegory of the theologians," inscribing in the poem a fourfold allegorical structure. Chapter Four demonstrates Shelley's revision of Dante's poetic theology of love through his own figural Beatrice in *The Cenci*. Rather than viewing literary appropriations of biblical and theological resources as a simple process of secularization, this dissertation examines the very fact of poetry's consistent effort to draw itself alongside scripture to identify the working of poetic theology—poetry's self assertion as a theological modality.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jane E. Kim completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where she majored in English and in French. At Cornell, she concentrated on 18th and 19th-century British literature, with a focus on Romantic poetry and drama. She has taught courses on the British literary tradition, devotional literature, the figure of the fool, and stories of creation and apocalypse. Her work has appeared in *Studies in English Literature* and *European Romantic Review*.

To my parents for giving me life and teaching me how to live,
and to my sister for always loving me

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INTRODUCTION

“Pascal n’est donc pas simplement un poète, ou un théologien, mais un *poeta-theologus*, les deux à la fois, toujours entre les deux.” (Pascal is therefore not simply a poet, or a theologian, but a *poeta-theologus*, both at the same time, always between the two [translation mine].)

- John A. Gallucci¹

In the book of Acts, Paul, at the invitation of certain philosophers, presents the gospel before the Areopagus in Athens:

“People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us...”²

He continues, quoting the Stoic philosophers and poets Epimenides, Cleanthes, and Aratus: “‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.”³ Applying to the Christian God words originally used to refer to Zeus, Paul indicates knowledge of his audience’s intellectual tradition, appeals to the influence of cultural authorities recognized by his audience, and accords some

¹ John A. Gallucci. “Pascal poeta-theologus,” *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature* 17(1990): 151-70, 161.

² *The Holy Bible*, New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), Acts 17.22-7.

³ Acts 17.28-9

measure of truth—however limited, misdirected, or unwitting—to their poets. This gesture recognizing the wisdom of poets is repeated throughout the history of Christianity’s encounters with pagan poetry. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, pagan poetry was regarded as “containing at least some elements of Christian truth, either because the author consciously concealed a hidden truth below a deceptive surface or because the author received unconscious access to that truth through divine inspiration.” In this way, pagan poetry became “a kind of prophecy in need of interpretation to reveal its hidden meanings—a ‘poetic theology’ (*theologia poetica*).”⁴ Writers traced the linking of poets and theologians back to Aristotle,⁵ and encouraged reading poetry as allegories prefiguring later revealed truth. The fourteenth century prehumanist Albertino Mussato, thought to be the first scholar of the Renaissance to defend poetry, who emphasized the “continuity between ancient poetry and the Bible”⁶ was particularly influential in establishing the *poeta theologus*, or “the theory of the poet as theologian” as “the cornerstone of humanist poetics.”⁷ Boccaccio, echoing similar statements expressed by Petrarch in a letter to his brother, nearly equates poetry and theology, writing in his *Life of Dante*: “I say that theology and poetry may be said to be almost one thing when the subject is the same...theology

⁴ Craig Kallendorf. “From Virgil to Vida: The Poeta Theologus in Italian Renaissance Commentary,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56(1995): 41-62, 44.

⁵ See Kallendorf 44. Giovanni Boccaccio also writes: “Rather believe Aristotle, a most worthy authority for matters of weight, who affirms that he had found that poets were the first theologians” (*Life of Dante*, ed. G. R. Carpenter [New York: Grolier Club, 1900], p. 104.).

⁶ Ronald G. Witt. “Coluccio Salutati and the Conception of the *Poeta Theologus* in the Fourteenth Century,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 30(1977): 538-563, 542.

⁷ Kallendorf 45. Ernst Robert Curtius notes that “*theologus*” is not exactly synonymous with “theologian,” but perhaps something closer to *vates*, the Latin word for poet, seer, or prophet. (*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask [New York: Harper, 1963], p. 215). Still, the poetic theology of the *poeta theologus* is related to the revealed theology of the Christian theologian.

is nothing else than the poetry of God...It then clearly appears not only that poetry is theology, but that theology is poetry.”⁸ One of the most famous examples of poetic theology was the reading of Virgil’s *Eclogue* 4, which envisions a maid and a heaven-sent child of promise, as a messianic prophecy foretelling Christ’s birth. The “Messianic Eclogue’s” ability to convey a Christian truth is reinforced in Dante’s *Purgatorio* 22.64-73, where the poet Statius claims to have been converted to Christianity through the poem.

The Italian humanists were more hesitant than the scholars of the medieval period to attribute divine inspiration to the pagan poets.⁹ Coluccio Salutati finds a distinction between poetry and Scripture (which is equivalent to theology)¹⁰ that Scripture is divinely inspired, while poetry is a human creation: “A poem is man’s invention, a fiction or the relation of something fictitious; but Holy Scripture is not of human invention...but is absolute truth.”¹¹ Salutati, however, seems to leave room for the possibility of a divine agent at work in poetry by entrusting poets with truth, which, even when reached by natural reason or when presented by a poet incapable of understanding it as such, is always of divine origin: “Since the truth [of the poets] is true, it has a marvelous harmony with theological truth, nor is it to be excluded from the sanctuary of theology. Between truths and truths there is no dissension and

⁸ Boccaccio 104.

⁹ See Kallendorf 47-9. The fifteenth century Neoplatonists restore the notion of the poet’s divine inspiration, naming the Christian God as the source of what Plato described as the poet’s divine frenzy. See, e.g. Raphael Falco. “Marsilio Ficino and Vatic Myth,” *MLN* 122(2007): 101-122.

¹⁰ “The divine Scripture, which we call *theology*, sometimes under guise of history, sometimes as if by a vision, sometimes in the form of a lament, or in other manners, endeavors to show us the high mystery of the incarnation of the Divine Word, His life, the events which led to His death, glorious resurrection, and wonderful ascension, and all His other acts, through which we, taught by Him, may attain to that glory which He by His death and resurrection opened for us, after it had been long closed to us by the sin of the first man” (Boccaccio 98-9).

¹¹ Quoted in Witt 560.

nothing which makes them mutually destructive or exclusive.”

Truth is the high ground that Scripture, or revealed theology, occupies. As the humanist Cristoforo Landino explains: “[T]heology is twofold: There is one which is called ‘ancient,’” (which is poetic theology) “and the other is ours, which is not only esteemed as more true, but as so absolutely true that nothing can either be added to it or taken away from it.”¹² From the very beginning, poetry, however, has had to endure criticism for its fictions and for its “deleterious effects on morals and the pursuit of truth.”¹³ Critics argued that poetry had “less truth content than that of any other intellectual discipline” and poets asserted the “wealth of truth” in their poems when read allegorically. Poetry was a perpetual runner-up, or a kind of younger sibling, to Scripture, always looking to Scripture for its defense. Acknowledging that it was, on the surface, a liar, poetry could only claim allegorical truth to the extent that it was shown to be in agreement with scriptural truth, which it very often was, and presented itself, like Scripture, as a text to be interpreted. Boccaccio explains that Scripture and poetry have narrative passages that reveal both “text and a mystery underneath it,” allowing for the accommodation of the wise and the simple.¹⁴ The difference between Scripture and poetry is that Scripture possesses truth in both its inner and outer layers of meaning, while poetry, though sometimes having a hidden meaning that is true, always wraps it in falsehood.¹⁵ Because of their potential to communicate truth through fiction, poets have the ethical responsibility to “tell lies

¹² Kallendorf 50.

¹³ Witt 539.

¹⁴ Boccaccio 97.

¹⁵ There are exceptions, such as Jesus’ parables, in which Scripture’s literal sense is not true. These instances are still of a divine origin, however, and further support the possibility of poetic theology.

skillfully.”¹⁶

For the Italian humanists, truth is what is critically at stake in interpretations of Scripture and of poetry. As Erich Auerbach writes, truth is the sole imperative of Scripture—every aspect of its narration, text, and study is in service of it:

What [the Biblical narrator] produced then, was not primarily oriented toward “realism” (if he succeeded in being realistic, it was merely a means, not an end); it was oriented toward truth. Woe to the man who did not believe it! One can perfectly well entertain historical doubts on the subject of the Trojan War or of Odysseus’ wanderings, and still, when reading Homer, feel precisely the effects he sought to produce; but without believing in Abraham’s sacrifice, it is impossible to put the narrative of it to the use for which it was written. Indeed, we must go even further. The Bible’s claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer’s it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims.¹⁷

Poetic theology is fundamentally an effort to defend poetry’s truth and redeem its fictions by setting it alongside, and confirming it against, Scripture as the text of revealed truth. There is an inherent contradiction in poetic theology, as it both defies, and yet depends on, Scripture to define and remain truth. Thomas Hyde observes “the ambiguity of poetic theology itself, which can come about only when poets are considered in some sense *theologi* in a literary tradition in which Scripture provides an ultimate example of textual truth and therefore an ultimate model of poetic authority.”¹⁸ Poetic theology, then, presents a “truth-claim” with its fictions: it “implicitly claims for itself the status of Scripture.”¹⁹

This dissertation focuses on the English Romantic poets’ engagement with the tradition of poetic theology, especially as received through the figure of Dante, which

¹⁶ Aristotle. *Poetics*, xxiv, 9.

¹⁷ Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), 14.

¹⁸ Thomas Hyde. *The Poetic Theology of Love: Cupid in Renaissance Literature* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1986), 28.

¹⁹ Hyde 37.

has been described as the exemplification of the “entire tradition of poetic-theology.”²⁰ Dante was regarded by many of the humanists as the original *poeta theologus* for recognizing classical Virgil’s ability to lead readers to Christian truth, depicting the human experience as a journey to God,²¹ explicating Christian doctrine, and adopting a theological project for poetry of guiding his readers to a “moral regeneration.”²² The Romantic period coincided with a great surge of interest in Italian culture, and especially Dante (to which a number of factors contributed, including the anti-French feeling and reopening of routes of travel after the Napoleonic wars, which augmented the popularity of the Grand Tour), in England, as well as Europe. The Romantic poets’ encounters with Dante would have been mediated, at least in part, by the humanist interpretation of Dante. Important studies by C. P. Brand, Ralph Pite, Timothy Webb, Frederick Burwick, and Joseph Luzzi have examined the impact of the Romantic period’s intense attention to Dante and Italy. Critics have not much considered, however, the theological influence of the Dante whom Boccaccio described as untying the “hard knots of holy theology.”²³ While this dissertation considers the effects of the historical phenomenon of the Romantic period’s Dantemania, it is not a purely historicist study, but seeks to address issues of language, theology, truth, and the role of poetry and the poet.

Valuable studies by Anthony Harding, E. S. Shaffer, Ian Balfour, and Stephen

²⁰ Dennis John Costa. “Dante as a Poet-Theologian,” *Dante Studies*, 89(1971): 61-72, 65.

²¹ William A. Dyrness. *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 44.

²² Rhodes, James Francis. *Poetry does Theology: Chaucer, Grosseteste, and the Pearl-Poet*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 17.

²³ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio’s Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, trans. Charles G. Osgood (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), 53.

Prickett have examined questions of theology and poetry in the Romantic period, but most trace the influence and hermeneutics of German theologians, and do not consider the Italian tradition of poetic theology. Many scholars have also commented on the appeal of the topos of the poet-prophet for the Romantic poets. To be sure, there is a great deal of overlap between the ideas of the poet-prophet and the *poeta theologus*. The point of difference is that significance for the poet-prophet lies in divine afflatus and the experience of ecstatic utterance, while the poet-theologian, still acknowledging the poet's privileged position and sometimes inspiration, places more emphasis on truth and on Scripture as its textual embodiment. As Harding notes, the idea of possession in the Hebrew does not guarantee the truth of a statement, as false prophets may be similarly possessed or entranced.²⁴ Scripture often denounces the dangers of false visions from false prophets who are self-deluded and not divinely inspired.²⁵ Even as the Romantic period represents a response to the Enlightenment project's rationalism by revaluating considerations of feeling, it still bears the Enlightenment objective and commitment to truth.

The British philosopher Don Cupitt has called for a "poetical theology," or a telling of "old stories in new ways" that is free from the constraints of the authority of a dogma or system of thought, with artists able to infuse familiar stories with new meaning or personal expression without fear of profanation.²⁶ He writes that he derives the concept from the Roman scholar Marcus Varro, who declared that there were three branches of theology: mythical theology, the poets' handling of narratives

²⁴ Anthony John Harding. *Coleridge and the Inspired Word* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1985), 33.

²⁵ See, e.g. 2 Pet. 2. 1, Jer. 14.14, Jer. 23.16.

²⁶ Don Cupitt. *After God: The Future of Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 125.

concerning divine matters; political theology, dealing with how the gods relate to daily life and the state; and natural theology, the philosophers' study of the nature of the gods. Cupitt argues that, though Augustine quotes Varro in his *City of God*, he desired to suppress it in favor of his own view of theology. Since Christianity, Cupitt writes, has become obsolete as a dogma, it should be reborn as a tradition of art similar to the poetical theology of the Renaissance's treatment of the Greek and Roman mythological gods. A poetic theology treating the fables of a tradition that both poet and reader acknowledge as having been discredited is no poetic theology, however, but simply poetry or mythology. Where there is no concept of truth, there is no risk of desecration, but there is also no theology. Poetic theology exists where poetry can be shown to correspond with a held truth, belief, philosophy, or concept of reality, proving poetry's capacity to convey truth with fiction. Classical mythology could assert a poetic theology because it presented itself relative to Christian truth as an alternative version or vehicle for accepted truth, or as Hyde writes, a "temptation."²⁷ Without an established standard or touchstone of truth—whether Christian, scientific, ethical, or moral—to refer to for validation, poetic theology is weak to defend poetry's claim to truth.

Poststructuralist, deconstructionist, postmodernist views have led to a relegation of questions of truth, but I argue that the Romantic poets focus on a recuperation of poetic truth. Dante invents a poetic authority deriving from the theologians' authority and makes the strongest case for his poetry to be granted the status of Scripture by claiming the allegory of the theologians. As I will discuss in

²⁷ Hyde 37.

chapter three, this appropriation asserts the literal and historical truth of his poem—he refuses to make the universal poets’ avowal of the fictiveness of his narrative, but “feigns that his fiction is literally true.”²⁸ Either he is telling the truth about his divine visions, or he has, because of his desire to tell the truth, ironically become a double liar, telling a lie and then lying about having lied. For the Romantic poets, the model of textual truth is still Scripture, and they similarly seek to assert a textual authority by creating a kind of Bible of poetry.

In his *A Defence of Poetry*, Percy Shelley declares the poetry of Dante to be “the bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and ancient world.” Following the figure of Dante as just such a bridge, my dissertation discovers the Romantic revival of the Renaissance ideal of the poet-theologian, which itself recalls the Platonic notion of the poet’s divine frenzy and tells an origin myth likening the ancient theologian to the ancient poet. In so doing, my project charts a new literary history of poetic theology linking antiquity and early Renaissance humanism to the Romantic poets. The ideal commingling of poetry and theology was represented perfectly in the figure of Dante, whom early editors of the *Commedia* variously named the “divine poet” and “divine theologian” even before applying the adjective to the work. The Romantic poets also regarded Dante as both poet and theologian. I argue that the English Romantic poets, particularly William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley, invoke Dante’s initiation of a theological authority and agenda for poetry, reinterpreting his commitment to the vernacular, claim to divine inspiration, and appropriation of theological modes of

²⁸ Robert Hollander. “Dante *Theologus-Poeta*,” *Dante Studies* 118(2000): 261-302, 273.

scriptural exegesis. My purpose is not to examine Romantic readings of Dante, but to follow a Romantic inheritance of, and participation in, the tradition of poetic theology as represented through the figure of Dante. Each chapter begins with a conceptual link to Dante that frames an examination of poetic appropriation and implication of theological questions, including notions of form, language, inspiration, and allegory.

My first chapter asserts that Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, while reiterating Dante's vernacular poetic program, conceives of the vernacularization of poetic language as an incarnational process mirroring the descent of the divine vernacular, Christ as Word-made-flesh. As humanly apprehensible forms of divine communication, Scripture, and even Christ himself, may be interpreted as a kind of divine vernacular. God does not speak to humanity in a celestial or untranslatable pristine tongue, but rather in the language of men, even incarnating himself in the Word, taking on the language, form and flesh of men. Aligning himself with Dante, who wrote his *Comedy* (meaning "country song") in "the rude, living tongue intelligible to the lowest of the peasantry," Wordsworth seeks a poetic diction of "real language." Wordsworth envisions vernacular poetry as redemptive, capable of restoring a corrupted and artificial poetry to its original glory. The plain, rustic characters of the *Lyrical Ballads* embody and voice the purity and power of vernacular language.

My second chapter focuses on Byron's use of the theme of exile, particularly in his neglected poem "The Prophecy of Dante," in which he takes on the persona of Dante in order to lament his own exile. I contend that exile serves as a figure of both the poet's human condition and divine poetic inspiration, as exile characterizes the

human underside of the experience of inspiration. In this way, an emphasis on the poet's human suffering simultaneously reinforces his claim to, and loss of, transitory encounters with the divine. While Milton presented himself as a nightingale singing "darkling," using his blindness as an autobiographical trope authenticating his poetic calling, the bird enabling Byron's flights of inspiration is the bird of paradise, marked by its condition of exile from heaven. Byron draws upon the poet's isolation and exile, an experience he shares with his model Dante, to affirm his stature as an inspired poet-theologian. Conjuring his fellow exiles Dante and Christ, the poem depicts the poet's aspiring and temporary transfigurations as an unstable vacillating between humanity and divinity, bringing the unique responsibility of representing, while always being differentiated from, other men.

The third chapter uncovers Shelley's imitation of Dante's bold use of the "allegory of the theologians," which was traditionally denied the poets and reserved solely for the discerning of biblical texts' four senses. Dante's striking application of the medieval hermeneutic to poetry served to confuse and challenge the distinction between secular poetry and Scripture. Shelley, as devoted student of Dante, copies the appropriating gesture. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley employs the theologians' allegory, inscribing at the narrative level a series of unveilings, the biblical and classical figure for allegorical meaning, to mark and enact the drama's allegorical revelations. With each event of unveiling prefiguring the next, the unveilings collectively accomplish the unbinding of Prometheus and humankind, producing Shelley's vision of a transformed world. Applying a Christian hermeneutic to his drama's treatment of a classical myth, Shelley demonstrates the amalgamation of

pagan and Christian theology, as well as poetry's ability to sustain theological exegesis.

In the fourth and final chapter, I contend that Shelley emulates Dante's unique use of Beatrice as a figural type—as both a real historical person and as a signifier of spiritual salvation. Shelley also constructs a poetic typology in his own poetic theology of love, depicting, in his “Essay on Love,” the beloved as the “antitype” to the loving “type.” The beloved, namely Beatrice, is then not only a type of a higher spiritual ideal, but also a type of the lover. In *The Cenci*, Shelley imagines a union with his own real-life Beatrice, Beatrice Cenci, through the unifying type of Job, whom Dante also recalls in his *La Vita Nuova*. The typological link is not simple, however, as both Shelley and Beatrice change roles. Count Cenci also opposes Beatrice as an antitype (not a fulfillment of the type, but an anti-Job), and Giacomo and Marzio become figures of Job when Beatrice assumes the role of Job's God. Through the collapsing of characters allowed by typology, Shelley explores the different aspects of a shared type, as well as each individual's shifty ability to occupy multiple roles.

In tracing the Romantic inheritance of the humanist concept of the *poeta theologus*, I uncover what I call a Romantic poetic theology that demonstrates the implicitly theological basis of Romantic poetic form and theory. Claiming a similarly divine inspiration, the same modes of exegesis, and the theological capacity of poetic language, poetic theology argues for a leveling of poetry and Scripture in stature and linguistic function.

Thomas Hyde writes that poetic theology becomes meaningful during periods

of literary and religious transition (182). The important transition for the Romantic poets might be that which M. H. Abrams and others have identified as secularization, or the process of literary appropriation of theological and biblical concepts, modes, and patterns. Some scholars have noted, however, the need for a reexamination of the narrative of a simple secularization of biblical models. David Jasper acknowledges that “[a]t the very heart of Romanticism...lies an appropriation of the Bible and its ancient traditions of interpretation which had a profound effect upon the Romantic understanding of literature,” but he calls for “an abandonment of M. H. Abrams’ still-influential mode of historicism with its oversimplified vision of a Romantic secular theology.”²⁹ Charles Taylor also argues that in order for a “secular climate to come about,” there must arise a culture that both “marks a clear division between the “natural” and the “supernatural” and makes it “seem possible to live entirely within the natural.”³⁰ Taylor reads the Romantic movement, rather than fostering such a secular climate, as participating in “attempts to ‘reenchant’ the world” after the “disenchantment” of the Enlightenment. J. Robert Barth also questions Abrams’s thesis, arguing that instead of making natural the supernatural, the Romantic project was about making supernatural the natural:

Abrams contends—quoting Carlyle’s phrase, but referring it to the Romantic movement—“the general tendency was...to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine.” But is not Carlyle’s point—and Coleridge’s—just the opposite: that the natural is supernaturalized, the human is divinized?”³¹

²⁹ Jasper, David. *The Sacred and Secular Canon in Romanticism: Preserving the Sacred Truths* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 39, 114.

³⁰ Taylor, Charles. “Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. Eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010): 300-21, 304.

³¹ Barth, J. Robert. *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (New York: Fordham UP, 2001). Barth quotes from M. H. Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 68.

It is possible for movements to have strangely paradoxical effects, especially in regards to secularization. For example, we might consider the irony of the Protestant Reformation, which was that, though motivated by powerful religious convictions, the reform resulted in a move toward a larger social secularization, that is, the diminishment of the authority of the church and further sectarian division within religious communities. On the other hand, it is important to remember that, while reformers, such as Luther, may have “desacralized...the Catholic clergy, beginning with the pope,” the teaching of “ ‘the priesthood of all believers’ valorized,” and sacralized, “the ordinary Christian.”³²

We might also analyze Dante’s “secular” influence in a similar light. As a layman who wrote in the vernacular language in order to praise a (divine) woman rather than God, and who called for the secularization of political authority, Dante is often described as a “secular” poet. As with Luther, however, Dante’s challenging of the Pope in the *Monarchia* is produced through the sacralization of the “secular” power, by showing the state’s authority to be immediately derived from God rather than through the spiritual mediation of the church.

Dante also importantly brought theology to the people in an important way by producing characters that interweaved theology with materialized historical figures. Emmet Kennedy writes that Dante “transformed dry medieval theology into flesh and blood.”³³ His fleshing out of historical and individual figures is what leads Samuel Taylor Coleridge to assert that Dante is not an allegorist: “The Divina Commedia is a

³² Kennedy, Emmet. *Secularism and its Opponents from Augustine to Solzhenitsyn* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 40.

³³ Kennedy 39.

system of moral, political, and theological truths, with arbitrary personal exemplifications, which are not, in my opinion, allegorical.”³⁴ Barth explains that Coleridge interprets Dante’s work as adhering to the Christian model of a unified vision of the historical and mystical.

When Coleridge writes that Dante is “not allegorical,” he seems to mean allegorical in the sense of the poets’ allegory. Dante is, however, allegorical in terms of the allegory of the theologians, who viewed the events and figures of history as divinely guided to produce spiritual meaning. It is, in fact, the allegory of the theologians that allows for the union of the natural and the supernatural. As Hans Frei explains, the Bible’s unique authority and power rests in the coherence of the literal and figurative interpretations of the text.³⁵ This theological allegory, which makes possible the merging of the literal and the figurative in Scripture, is the precursor of the Romantic notion of the symbol.

The disconnection between the literal and the figurative senses is one of the central concerns of poetic theology. As indicated by his very nomination, the *poeta theologus* bears a dual identity. He not only links and mediates between poetry and theology, but he is also somewhat divided within himself. The split occurs along the line separating the literal and the figurative. In a literal sense, the poet-theologian is purely a poet, his work poetry. In the allegorical sense, however, he becomes a theologian, teaching divine truth. This situation consigns even poet theologians to the poets’ allegory, which Charles Singleton explains as an allegory of “this *for* that”—the outer lie endured for the truth that it conceals, the shell tolerated for the sake of the

³⁴ Cited in Barth 133.

³⁵ Frei, Hans. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974), 8.

kernel.³⁶ The “allegory of the theologians” is an allegory of “this *and* that,” as the literal sense not only signifies a figurative, spiritual sense, but is also itself literally and historically true.

The significance of Dante’s use of the theologians’ allegory is that he rejects this compromise. He believes so much in the theological soundness of his work that he is not willing to concede that he is a liar in the literal sense, to have a fiction occlude or detract from the truth of his claims. He desires to have the theological union of the literal and figurative senses. His solution is to claim that his poem is not fiction. As Singleton writes: “the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not fiction.”³⁷

The union of the literal and the figurative, or what Guy Raffa terms the “incarnational dialectic,” a dialectic of the “both-and,”³⁸ corresponds to Coleridge’s famous distinction between the allegory and the symbol:

Now an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a symbol . . . is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative. The others are but empty echoes which the fancy arbitrarily associates with apparitions of matter.³⁹

Coleridge’s allegory is the poets’ allegory in which the literal sense has no value in itself, but is merely an empty signifier of “abstract notions.” The symbol, however,

³⁶ Singleton, Charles S. “Dante’s Allegory.” *Speculum* 25(1950): 78-86, 80.

³⁷ Singleton, Charles. “The Irreducible Dove.” *Comparative Literature* 9(1957): 129-135, 129.

³⁸ Guy P. Raffa. *Divine Dialectic: Dante’s Incarnational Poetry* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000), p. 4.

³⁹ S. T. Coleridge. *The Statesman’s Manual* (BiblioLife), 40.

which is derived from a sacramental understanding, endeavors to reconcile the literal and figurative by presenting a literal meaning that both realizes and participates in the nature of the figurative meaning that it conveys. For Coleridge, Shakespeare's (and perhaps we might also include Dante's) characters portray the same "union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular" that is represented in the figures of the Bible.⁴⁰ Words and language, also, function as

a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*. These are the Wheels which Ezekiel beheld, when the hand of the Lord was upon him, and he saw visions of God as he sat among the captives by the river of Chebar.⁴¹

The poet's privileged use of the symbol of language allows him the opportunity of participation in divine truths. As Mary Anne Perkins explains, "it is in his theory of symbol that Coleridge most fully expresse[s] his view of the participation of human language in the divine Word."⁴² I will take up the question of human language and the divine Word in considering Wordsworth's "real language" in Chapter One.

The congruence and joining of the literal and figurative, then, constitutes the coherence and wholeness of theological truth. Barth suggests that, for Abrams, the divide between the natural and the supernatural is too great to allow for a truly symbolic mode,⁴³ but I would argue that the Romantic poets seek to produce this very incarnational combination in their poetry. By revaluing and reincorporating the real, the human, and the historical, they do not draw the supernatural down to the level of the natural, but rather they bring the literal into communion and participation with the

⁴⁰ Quoted in Jasper 16.

⁴¹ Quoted in Jasper 118.

⁴² Perkins, Mary Anne. *Coleridge's Philosophy: The Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 46. Quoted in Barth 13.

⁴³ Barth 139-40.

figurative with which it resonates. The project of Romantic poetic theology might then be described as the effort to achieve a poetic power through the invention of an allegory or symbolic mode that transgresses the border of fiction and truth and brings about their coherent union. By seeking to produce an embodied allegory that actualizes the literal and figurative senses, poets strain to claim theological truth and a real and present force in the world.

Looking to recover the truth of the literal sense by grounding meaning in reality, Wordsworth writes that poetic language should be relevant and true to the real experience of men. His accommodating stooping creates a poetic language that is the “real language of men.” Steven Knapp has described Wordsworth’s “quasi-allegorical but ostensibly natural figures as the Leech-gatherer, the Discharged Soldier, the Blind Beggar...” as an “ambiguous naturalization of allegory” that allows Wordsworth’s “sublime figures to inhabit the same narrative or discursive space as the poet himself.”⁴⁴ I would suggest, however, that the model for understanding Wordsworth’s “quasi-allegorical” figures is incarnation, which is the mystery that allows for God as author to “inhabit the...narrative” and physical “space” he has created in the same way that Dante the poet enters his text as Dante the character. Wordsworth does not seem to propose an incarnation of the author, however, but an incarnation of his language in his figures of “low and rustic” life, which act simultaneously as depictions of real people one might actually encounter in the English countryside and also as pastoral representations of a purer language and imagination.

Byron also seeks to validate the experiential reality of human life. Even in

⁴⁴ Steven Knapp. *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985), p. 99-100.

demonstrating the poet's figurative flights of inspiration, he emphasizes the lived human half—the exile and loss—of poetic inspiration. Shelley's use of the fourfold allegory and typology suggests that he follows Dante in asserting the historicity of his figural representations. He not only suggests the historical truth of mythological figures, like Prometheus, but, by inserting himself and Beatrice Cenci into a typology of Job, he seems also to ponder the possibility of himself becoming a true type, a real historical person with allegorical significance.

While the Romantic symbol, with its sacramental origin, may be interpreted as another instance of poetic appropriation of theological concepts, and therefore leveling of Scripture and literature, the appropriation may be brought about not by a distancing secularization, but rather by poetry's desire to cleave to and reproduce the model of textual truth as represented by Scripture. Poetic theology calls attention to the very fact of poetry's consistent effort to draw itself alongside, and to be compared to, Scripture. Appropriations that have been regarded as secularizing may equally indicate a kind of sacralization of literature, a renewed conception of literature's function in religious or theological terms. My project recasts what has been described as a process of secularization, as the working of poetic theology—poetry's self assertion as a theological modality. I suggest a revised history of secularization in the period, revealing that Romantic poetry, though not religious, is significantly biblical and theological in form.

The Romantic poets' legacy is of testing the theological capability of poetic language and form. Charles Taylor writes of the Romantic achievement: "Through language in its constitutive use (let's call it poetry), we open up contact with

something higher or deeper (be it God or the depths of human nature, desire, the will to Power, or whatever) through language.”⁴⁵ Readers also sense the Romantic poets’ desire for the truth of the imagination and the divine. Robert Ryan notes George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, and many others who are influenced by the Romantics, whether for belief or skepticism,⁴⁶ and C. S. Lewis writes of how the romantic influence produced in him longings without which his conversion to Christianity would have been more difficult.⁴⁷ Lewis’s testimony credits poetry’s potential for a theological register and impact. In this way, the Romantic poets do truly become poet-theologians—they become the Virgils, who, though perhaps even themselves unbelieving or unknowing, equip the next generation of Statiuses with a capacity to grasp and struggle with theological and scriptural questions of truth.

⁴⁵ Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 107.

⁴⁶ Robert Ryan. *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 227-30.

⁴⁷ C. S. Lewis. *Christianity and Culture*, 23.

CHAPTER ONE
WORDSWORTH'S POETIC VERNACULAR

“Just as Christ’s mastering descent into the soul is an act of love, a treading and melting, so the poetic act itself is a love-act, initiated by the masculine spur of delight.”

- Seamus Heaney, “The Fire i’ the Flint,” 92, 97

I.

Criticism has largely neglected to consider the link between Dante’s poetic vernacular project and Wordsworth’s program for a poetry of “real language,” through which he initiates, like Dante who introduced the *dolce stil novo*, a kind of new style. The connection is discussed by C. P. Brand, who briefly notes that “[f]undamentally Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s attempt to approximate their poetic diction to the ‘real’ spoken language, as contrasted with a traditional literary dialect, was a recurrence to the same principles which guided Dante and Chaucer,”¹ and by Joseph Luzzi, who similarly observes that “[t]he young Wordsworth shared with the young Dante the desire to find a literary language capable of reaching the general public as well as the learned,” citing “one of the few critics who,” in an 1818 essay in the *Edinburgh Review*, “intuited the affinities between the two poets”.²

The modern school, with Mr Wordsworth at its head, has a contempt for the established language of poetry; and he, it is well known, even goes so far as to propose the adoption of a low and familiar diction, approaching to the language of a vulgar prose. Now Dante seems to have apprehended all that was just and sound in this idea, and to have, moreover, perceived what Mr Wordsworth has not, the precise bounds and limits to which it ought to be carried. No diction can be more familiar, more the language of conversation, more taken out of the unnatural forms of a false poetic elevation, than his, yet

¹ C. P. Brand. *Italy and the English Romantics: The Italianate Fashion in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1957), p. 58.

² Joseph Luzzi. *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), p. 143.

none can be less vulgar, less childish, more constantly bearing the impression, and reflecting the images of a powerful, unwavering, and highly cultivated mind.³

While these studies remark the two poets' shared commitment to a more common and quotidian poetic diction, in this chapter, I focus on the theological dimension of Dante's and Wordsworth's valorization of a vernacular poetry. I assert that the shift towards the vernacular, and therefore a more ordinary poetic diction, is driven by a theological conception of poetic language—its purpose, function, and effect.

In laying out a theory for eloquence in the vernacular in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante defines vernacular language as the mother-tongue, “that which infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds...that which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses” (1.1.2).⁴ Compared to “grammatica,” the language acquired through study, the vernacular is nobler because it was original to the human race, it is universal (though pronunciations and vocabularies vary), and it is natural and not artificial (1.1.4). Adam would have been the first human to speak, and since, with his first words, he would have addressed, described, or responded to God, his vernacular would have been most aligned with the divine Logos, and his language would have been humankind's native tongue, “had it not been shattered through the fault of human presumption” (1.6.4). Dante goes on to recount the story of the Tower of Babel,

³ Cited in Luzzi p. 143-4. Robert Morehead, “Observations on the Poetical Character of Dante,” in Robert Woof, ed., vol. 1 of *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1020.

⁴ Dante Alighieri. “De Vulgari Eloquentia,” *Princeton Dante Project*. Accessed May 27, 2014 <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/>.

which he relates as a fall—the fall of language after the fall of man.⁵ In their arrogance, human beings, who then spoke a single language, sought to build an edifice by which “to climb up to heaven, intending in their foolishness not to equal but to excel their creator” (1.7.4), but God confused their efforts by dispersing them in groups with different languages. Dante’s poetic mission, then, is to work to restore fallen language. Beginning by identifying the major strains of languages in Europe, and by considering especially the many Italian dialects into which the primal vernacular was splintered, he seeks to arrive at a more pristine vernacular capable of reuniting the affinities of the diverse Italian dialects.⁶

In many ways, Dante might be regarded as a proto-reformer, and indeed Shelley nominates him “the first religious reformer,” surpassed by Luther “rather in the rudeness and acrimony than in the boldness of his censures of papal usurpation.”⁷ In an effort paralleling those of the mendicant orders, who were contemporaneously using vernacular materials to educate laypeople,⁸ Dante’s *Commedia* “strains to be a bridge” for the “almost unbridgeable...gulf” between the theologians and the laity in

⁵ Dante considers this event a third fall, following Adam’s sin and the corruption of Noah’s generation, which precipitated the destruction of the world by flood.

⁶ Giuseppe Mazzotta. *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1979), p. 299-300.

⁷ Shelley continues: “Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language, in itself music and persuasion, out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarians. He was the congregator of those great spirits who presided over the resurrection of learning; the Lucifer of that starry flock which in the thirteenth century shone forth from republican Italy, as from a heaven, into the darkness of the benighted world. His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with the lightning which has yet found no conductor.” (Shelley, Percy. “A Defence of Poetry” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. [New York: Norton, 2002], 509-535, 527-8.)

⁸ Timothy Kircher. *The Poet’s Wisdom: The Humanists, the Church, and the Formation of Philosophy in the Early Renaissance* (Boston: Brill, 2006).

the Middle Ages.⁹ While the *Commedia* does unite poetry and theology, allowing for the secular discussion of theological issues,¹⁰ Dante not only transports biblical and theological content, but also conveys the significance of scriptural style through his prizing of the vernacular. Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds write that Dante's Bible, Jerome's Vulgate, would have been "a writing against which all others were measured, and, what's more, a model for [Dante's] style just because it was not stylish—exalted, mouthable, polished—but rather transfiguratively 'low'." During the time of Jerome's work, Latin was the common language of the Roman Empire, able to be understood by those speaking Italian vernaculars until about the year 1000, and even then, Jerome's Latin was, compared to classical Latin, "undistinguished."¹¹ Even in its original languages, the Bible was ever found to be written in an unrefined style. Jerome admits to have thought, before coming to see the light, the style of the prophets "rude and repellent" when compared to that of his beloved Cicero, and Augustine, also, records his early disappointment with Scripture's style before learning to appreciate its marvelous lowliness, its "extremely accessible words and humble way of speaking."¹² Humility, a core concept of Christianity, also retained its older meaning of meanness, coming to be "one of the terms most frequently used to designate the low style: *sermo humilis*."¹³ The Vulgate, which had begun as a translation project intending to produce a style of accessibility had, in time, become a

⁹ Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds, eds., "Introduction," in *Dante in English* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. xxxv.

¹⁰ James Francis Rhodes. *Poetry does Theology: Chaucer, Grosseteste, and the Pearl-Poet* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2001), p. 3.

¹¹ Griffiths and Reynolds, lxxi.

¹² Cited in Griffiths and Reynolds lxxii. St. Augustine. *Confessions* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), 1.284.

¹³ Erich Auerbach. *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (1958) trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 40.

language of separation. Griffiths and Reynolds suggest that Dante's *Commedia* preserves "in part" the Vulgate's early aim of becoming "an exercise in dumbing-down" (lxxi). Dante's vernacular poetry, then, seeks to imitate, and bring to the people, the stylistic spirit of biblical language.

Wordsworth's agenda might similarly be aligned with that of the reformers, and Coleridge, perhaps, puts it particularly aptly when he writes that Wordsworth calls for a "reformation in our poetic diction."¹⁴ Wordsworth begins his 1802 *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* by making clear that his purpose is to challenge the established, but ultimately faulty, understanding of poetry. He recognizes that his reader, approaching the text with certain expectations for "gaudiness and inane phraseology"¹⁵ may find his verse unsettling, and admits that, though he sets out only to provide a suitable introduction to his "Poems so materially different from those, upon which general approbation is at present bestowed" (596), he has been counseled by his friends to "prefix a systematic defence of the theory, upon which the poems were written" (595). His task is original, revolutionary, and perhaps even dangerous, but the possible result is to alter entirely prevailing poetic judgment and also moral feeling:

"And if, in what I am about to say, it shall appear to some that my labour is unnecessary, and that I am like a man fighting a battle without enemies, I would remind such persons that, whatever may be the language outwardly holden by men, a practical faith in the opinions which I am wishing to establish is almost unknown. If my conclusions are admitted, and carried as far as they must be carried if admitted at all, our judgments concerning the

¹⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford UP, 1967), 2.28.

¹⁵ William Wordsworth. "Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802)" in *The Major Works: including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 595-615, 596.

works of the greatest Poets both ancient and modern will be so far different from what they are at present, both when we praise, and when we censure: and our moral feelings influencing, and influenced by these judgments will, I believe, be corrected and purified.

We might imagine Wordsworth's publishing of his *Preface* as a kind of posting of his own "Ninety-Five Theses" on the doors of the halls of poetry. In emphasizing his purposeful use of "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society,"¹⁶ he recalls Reformation arguments in favor of Bible translation for the sake of the common man. As the translators of the *King James Version* explain in the original printing's preface:

without translation into the vulgar tongue, the unlearned are but like children at Jacobs well (which was deepe) without a bucket or some thing to draw with: or as that person mentioned by Esau, to whom when a sealed booke was delivered, with this motion, Reade this, I pray thee, hee was faine to make this answere, I cannot, for it is sealed.¹⁷

The concern for the everyman as a central priority (guiding the work of Bible translators even through to modern editions, such as the *New American Standard Bible* and *English Standard Version*) and its resulting simple intelligibility are the virtues Wordsworth espouses. If the Vulgate served to provide the principles for Dante's vernacular, the Authorized Version is Wordsworth's model. He first adduces, in the "Note to *The Thorn*," poetry from the book of Judges to justify his use of repetition,¹⁸ and then, in the "Appendix to the Preface," calls the reader to compare Samuel Johnson's "metrical paraphrase" of Proverbs 6 to its rendering in the AV, passing

¹⁶ William Wordsworth. "Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads (1798)" in *The Major Works: including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 591-2, 591.

¹⁷ "The Translators to The Reader" in "King James Version Original Preface (1611)." Accessed May 27, 2014. <http://www.kjvbibles.com/kjppreface.htm>.

¹⁸ William Wordsworth. "Note to The Thorn (1800)" in *The Major Works: including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 593-4, 594.

“[f]rom this hubbub of words...to the original,” turning from the illustration of current “poetic diction” to that of plainness.¹⁹

William Tyndale, the translator of the first printed Bible in English, insists upon the need for Scripture’s comprehensibility, chastising the clergy for conducting services in a language that the people cannot understand:

And yet Paul (1 Corinthians 14) forbiddeth to speak in the church or congregation save in the tongue that all understand. For the lay man thereby is not edified or taught. How shall the lay man say amen (saith Paul) to the blessing or thanksgiving, when he wotteth not what thou sayest. He wotteth not whether thou bless or curse.²⁰

He cites Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians containing the explanation of spiritual charisms, or giftings—some to wisdom, faith, the speaking of tongues, or the interpretation of tongues—all of which, like different body parts, contribute to the makeup and unity of the body of Christ. Paul cautions against the overvaluing of the gift of tongues, instead emphasizing love (“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal”),²¹ and the ability to deliver an intelligible message for the building up of the church. For while the speaker of tongues may exalt in his glorious gift, it does not benefit those around him:

Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you...So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken?...Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speakeath shall be a barbarian unto me...Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others

¹⁹ William Wordsworth. “Appendix to the Preface (1802)” in *The Major Works: including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 616-9, 618.

²⁰ William Tyndale. *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, ed. David Daniell (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 90. See also pp. 15-9 for further arguments for the need for a vernacular Bible.

²¹ *The Holy Bible*, AV (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1979), 1 Corinthians, 13, 1.

also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. (1 Corinthians 14. 6, 9, 11, 19)

The goal of comprehensibility, then, is usefulness over prestige, unity over division, and community over exclusivity. The KJV translators similarly reject a self-contained understanding in favor of a generously shared knowledge, for at stake, ultimately, is the salvation of souls:

[y]et for all that the godly-learned [the early church] were not content to have the Scriptures in the Language which themselves understood, Greeke and Latine,...but also for the behoofe and edifying of the unlearned which hungred and thirsted after Righteousnesse, and had soules to be saved as well as they, they provided Translations into the vulgar for their Countreymen, insomuch that most nations under heaven did shortly after their conversion, heare Christ speaking unto them in their mother tongue, not by the voyce of their Minister onely, but also by the written word translated.

Wordsworth employs a similar logic when he calls for poets to write in a manner comprehensible to other men:

the Poet might then be allowed to use a peculiar language when expressing his feelings for his own gratification, or that of men like himself. But Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men. Unless therefore we are advocates for that admiration which depends upon ignorance, and that pleasure which arises from hearing what we do not understand..." (608)

Wordsworth treats poetry as comparable to the gift of tongues, which has meaning only insofar as it may be used for the good of the whole population. In applying to poetry Paul's teaching concerning the judicious use of tongues, Wordsworth combines Tyndale's criticism of privileged language becoming a communication barrier for an elite clerisy with the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino's poetic-theological concept of poetry as a Pauline charism.²²

The most important theological concept for Wordsworth's new theory of

²² Raphael Falco. "Marsilio Ficino and Vatic Myth," *MLN* 122 (2007): 101-122, 103.

poetry, however, is the idea of accommodation, which was greatly developed by John Calvin and which contends that the transcendent God condescends to bring himself within the grasp of human understanding. Christian thought teaches that God and humans are separated by a great chasm, and since humankind cannot lift itself above its own fallen condition, it is God who reaches down. Charles Taylor points out “the centrally Christian notion that God’s goodness consists in his stooping to seek the benefit of humans,”²³ and indeed this is the pattern of salvation offered throughout the Bible. God calls Moses, from within the burning bush, to lead the exodus—“I have surely seen the affliction of my people...and have heard their cry...for I know their sorrows; / And *I am come down* to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them...unto a land flowing with milk and honey”—and David also writes in his Psalms of how God descends to rescue him: “He bowed the heavens also, and *came down*: and darkness was under his feet...He sent from above, he took me, he drew me out of many waters” (Ex. 3.7-8, Ps. 18. 9,16 emphases added).²⁴

God most clearly makes himself known, accommodating himself to human comprehension, through his Word, which he gives, not in a celestial or divine tongue, but in human words, and even the human words of common style and language. Erich Auerbach describes how Christianity exploded the classical rule of separation between the sublime and low styles, instead creating an “antithetical fusion of the two,” which became its hallmark: “the true and distinctive greatness of Holy Scripture—namely, that it had created an entirely new kind of sublimity, in which the everyday and the

²³ Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), p. 315.

²⁴ See also e.g. Psalm 144.

low were included, not excluded, so that, in style as in content, it directly connected the lowest with the highest.”²⁵ Francois Rene de Chateaubriand, in his *The Genius of Christianity*, also published in 1802, highlights this strange mixture of high and low style and content as the marker of genius and a kind of reverse alchemy by which, in Scripture, divine speech is made human vernacular:

What can be compared to the opening of Genesis? That simplicity of language, which is in an inverse ratio to the magnificence of the objects, appears to us the utmost effort of genius. ‘In the beginning God created heaven and earth...’...Homer and Plato, who speak with so much sublimity of the gods, have nothing comparable to this majestic simplicity. God stoops to the language of men, to reduce his wonders to the level of their comprehension; but he still is God...[In the New Testament] the sublimity of the prophets is softened into a tenderness not less sublime; here love itself speaks; here the Word is really made flesh.²⁶

If the vernacular, as Dante defines it, is the language which infants learn by imitating their nurses, Calvin explains accommodation by characterizing God as a nurse who bends down to speak with infants:

The Anthropomorphites also, who dreamed of a corporeal God, because mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet are often ascribed to him in Scripture, are easily refuted. For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height.²⁷

Augustine corroborates the figure of Scripture as written for infant-like readers learning a mother tongue—“for the young in faith rest on and grow from the lowly

²⁵ Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), p. 153-4.

²⁶ Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand. *The Genius of Christianity; or the Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion*, ed. Charles I. White (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1856), p. 346.

²⁷ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), p. 66.

physicality of scriptural language, like children suckling at the breast”²⁸— and indeed the reader must begin with the attitude of a child, for, as Auerbach explains, the “point of departure” for Scripture was “that God had hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them unto babes (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21)” (154). Indeed a key concept in the New Testament is that God “chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong,” “[f]or the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”²⁹

The ultimate accommodation is, of course, the coming of Christ in human form, the incarnate divine vernacular, in which the Word truly descends to human language, life, and flesh.³⁰ John Milton also uses the figure of “stooping” to depict Christ’s self-limiting bending down: “He sov’ran Priest stooping his regall head / ... / Poor fleshly Tabernacle entered.”³¹ As with the vernacular translation of Scriptures, the result of divine lowering is human salvation, for Christ’s mediation finally bridges the gap between God and humans. Calvin writes: “Our iniquities, like a cloud intervening between him and us...But who could thus reach to him? Could any of the sons of Adam?...The case was certainly desperate, if the Godhead itself did not descend to us, it being impossible for us to ascend” (297).

There seem to be rare instances, however, when select individuals are singled out to, at least partially, rise up to God. We might remember, for example, Moses when he ascends Mount Sinai to convene with God. These encounters, however, are

²⁸ Confessions 2.354.

²⁹ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1 Corin. 1.27, 25.

³⁰ See John 1.1-18.

³¹ John Milton. “The Passion,” *The John Milton Reading Room*. Accessed January 2, 2015 https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/the_passion/text.shtml

neither permanent nor salvific, for him or for the people, and Moses instead participates in God's accommodation, redescending with tablets divinely engraved in the vernacular of the people.³² The idea is that those representative elect who are granted a certain degree of enlightenment or elevation should then reenact the downward motion of accommodation. Stephen Prickett's quotation of a defense of the *Good News Bible* (another translation for "the unsophisticated" or "average reader") demonstrates how Bible translators strive to mirror the divine descent: "since God 'stooped to the level of human language to communicate with his people' it was the translators' task to set forth the 'truth of the biblical revelation in language that is as clear and simple as possible.'"³³ In the same way, Luther's translation of the New Testament into the German is perceived as descending upon the people—"Erelong this Word will be seen descending from the Wartburg [where Luther completed his translation] with him; circulating among the people of Germany, and putting them in possession of those spiritual treasures hitherto shut up within the hearts of a few pious men"³⁴—and perhaps Dante, too, when he writes that he will try, "inspired by the Word that comes from above" (1.1.1), to speak meaningfully about the vulgar tongue, envisions his vernacular efforts as a repetition of the accommodating principle, as a word that comes down.

Wordsworth makes mention of accommodation in his "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface (1815)," seeming to suggest that through it poetry and religion are made

³² Ex. 32.16.

³³ Stephen Prickett. *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1988), p. 6.

³⁴ J. H. Merle D'Aubigne. *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, trans. H. White, 5 vols. (New York: American Tract Society, 1848), 3.30.

analogous:

The commerce between Man and his Maker cannot be carried on but by a process where much is represented in little, and the infinite Being accommodates himself to a finite capacity. In all this may be perceived the affinities between religion and poetry;—between religion—making up the deficiencies of reason by faith, and poetry—passionate for the instruction of reason; between religion—whose element is infinitude, and whose ultimate trust is the supreme of things, submitting herself to circumscription and reconciled to substitutions; and poetry—etherial and transcendant, yet incapable to sustain her existence without sensuous incarnation.³⁵

He also describes Shakespeare as one writer who accommodates:

A Dramatic Author, if he write for the Stage, must adapt himself to the taste of the Audience, or they will not endure him; accordingly the mighty genius of Shakespeare was listened to...that Shakespeare stooped to accommodate himself to the People, is sufficiently apparent; and one of the most striking proofs of his almost omnipotent genius, is, that he could turn to such glorious purpose those materials which the prepossessions of the age compelled him to make use of. (646)

While Shakespeare's "stoop[ing]" does draw his genius into greater relief, in this case, accommodation does not seem to act entirely positively, rather appearing to be a kind of necessary concession to the interests and preferences of the people. For one thing, Shakespeare's accommodation is not voluntary but rather "compelled," and even when exercised, his lesser rivals sometimes gain a popular advantage, "else how can we account for passages and scenes that exist in his works, unless upon a supposition that some of the grossest of them, a fact which in my own mind I have no doubt of, were foisted in by the Players, for the gratification of the many?" (646). Wordsworth also lists various authors guilty of the kind of negative accommodation that serves simply to cater to public interests: "what a small quantity of brain is necessary to procure a considerable stock of admiration, provided the aspirant will accommodate himself to

³⁵ William Wordsworth. "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface (1815)" in *The Major Works: including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 640-62, 643-4.

the likings and fashions of his day” (657). But Shakespeare is a “Dramatic Author,” forced to “adapt himself to the taste of the Audience,” while Wordsworth makes clear that he sets out to “creat[*e*] the taste by which...to be enjoyed” (657-8). (I will return to this point later in the chapter.) Wordsworth is not interested in producing an accommodation of compromise, nor does he assert a poetic theology, as do some writers in the Middle Ages, that makes his poetry a vernacular shorthand with which to catechize the laity or an arena in which to discuss theological issues.³⁶ His poetry becomes a kind of poetic theology because his goal is to produce a bending down of poetic language itself by which poetry emulates the accommodation of divine discourse.³⁷

Like Dante, who writes of Babel’s hubris and eventual confusion, Wordsworth, too, recounts the story of a fall—that of poetic language. He tells of a pristine beginning in which “The earliest Poets of all nations generally wrote from passion excited by real events; they wrote naturally, and as men: feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring, and figurative” (616). While their language was distinguished from “ordinary language, because it was the language of extraordinary occasions,” it was still the language “really spoken by men” (617). Later, “men ambitious of the fame of Poets,” and seeing the power of their language, began to artificially reproduce the poets’ figures with unnatural feelings and ideas: “A language was thus insensibly produced, differing materially from the real language of men in

³⁶ Rhodes 8.

³⁷ Wordsworth also seems to allude to accommodation when he describes the roles and relationship of “Fancy” and “Imagination”: “In what manner Fancy ambitiously aims at a rivalry with the Imagination, and Imagination stoops to work with the materials of Fancy, might be illustrated from the compositions of all eloquent writers, whether in prose or verse; and chiefly from those of our own Country” (William Wordsworth. “Preface to Poems (1815)” in *The Major Works: including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000], pp. 626-39, 637.

any situation” (616). Readers and hearers, who found themselves similarly affected by both the true and false strains of poetic language, were unable to distinguish between them, especially as poets set themselves up as elevated above other men, speaking “in the character of a man to be looked up to, a man of genius and authority” (616). With the addition of meter, poets distanced themselves still further from common life, using cheap tricks to unnaturally mimic the feelings and language of real life. Just as Babel is read as a recurrence of the original Adamic fall, so Wordsworth also figures the fall of poetry as occurring through an initial temptation to pride, which leads to a general corruption:

This was the great temptation to all the corruptions which have followed...they found that they could please by easier means: they became proud of a language which they themselves had invented, and which was uttered only by themselves; and, with the spirit of a fraternity, they arrogated it to themselves as their own. In process of time metre became a symbol or promise of this unusual language, and whoever took upon him to write in metre, according as he possessed more or less of true poetic genius, introduced less or more of this adulterated phraseology into his compositions and the true and the false became so inseparably interwoven that the taste of men was gradually perverted; and this language was received as a natural language... (617)

To illustrate the error of poets, Wordsworth gives the example of Alexander Pope, who perhaps would not have found the same public acclaim if he had remained true to the genuine poetry of his youth. His corruption allows him to claim an esteemed position, but Wordsworth identifies the false elevation as a fall:

Pope has for some time held a rank in literature, to which, if he had not been seduced by an over-love of immediate popularity, and had confided more in his native genius, he never could have descended. He bewitched the nation by his melody, and dazzled it by his polished style, and was himself blinded by his own success. Having wandered from humanity in his Eclogues with boyish inexperience, the praise, which these compositions obtained, tempted him into a belief that nature was not to be trusted, at least in pastoral Poetry. (650)

The fall of language is often interpreted as finding a “partial redemption”³⁸ at Pentecost, the New Testament event at which the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles was made manifest by the use of tongues, so that when the Galilean Apostles spoke, Jews who had gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world simultaneously heard their speech each in his own native language (Acts 2.1-21). Others have argued, however, that the Incarnation, the first descent of the Godhead, truly begins to repair the loss at Babel. Since the attempts to ascend through pride instead led to fall, both in Eden and at Babel, the restorative rise must be brought about by a humble descent.

Giuseppe Mazzotta writes:

Babel, the literal city of language and the radical emblem of chaos is, in Dante’s typology, the antitype of the Incarnation. If the Incarnation is the account of the descent into humility of the Word as it bridges the gap between Heaven and Earth, Babel is the allegory of the confusion of tongues, the narrative of the failure of language to bridge that gap. (73)³⁹

Yet if, as Moloch claims in *Paradise Lost*,⁴⁰ ascent is the more natural direction for the heaven-born fallen angels, and if, as Beatrice explains in the *Paradiso*, even man’s natural motion is heavenward, how much greater God’s natural inclination to height. Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermons describe the paradoxical combination of *humilitas* and *sublimitas* in Incarnation (the same antithetical mix of low and sublime found in the Bible) by which Christ discovers a way to even greater height through apparent

³⁸ George Steiner. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), p. 61.

³⁹ In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante attributes the initiation of the building of Babel to giants (namely Nimrod), whose very oversized bodies identify them as overreachers. Sometimes “[i]nterpreted by medieval exegetes as offspring of ‘the sons of God’ and ‘the daughters of men’ (Gen.6:2),” giants bear a perverse imitation of Christ’s incarnational “union of divine and human natures.” In the *Inferno*, giants are figures of pride, and Dante presents them as “incarnational parody through their visually halved bodies” (Guy P. Raffa. *Divine Dialectic: Dante’s Incarnational Poetry* [Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000], p. 56-7).

⁴⁰ John Milton. *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London, Pearson Longman, 2007), 2.75-81.

descent: “For Christ, having, by his divine nature, nowhither to grow or to ascend, because beyond God there is nothing, found by descending a way to grow, coming to be made flesh, to suffer, to die, that we should not die in eternity...”⁴¹ Following this same logic of fall and redemption, Wordsworth also commits to a restoration of a, now corrupted, original language of poetry through the descent of true accommodation.⁴²

Figures of descent appear throughout Wordsworth’s explanations of his project. He acknowledges that certain readers may think he has “descended too low, and that many of his expressions are too familiar, and not of sufficient dignity” (591) and that “some cannot bear to see delicate and refined feelings ascribed to men in low conditions of society” because of their “vanity and self-love,” while “others are disgusted with the naked language of some of the most interesting passions of men, because either it is indelicate, or gross, or [vu]lgar...”⁴³ He laments that “few ever consider books but with reference to their power of pleasing...men of a higher rank few descend lower among cottages and fields and among children” (622).

Wordsworth sets as his “principal object” (596), however, the relating of the events of common life in the language of real men, focusing especially on “low and rustic life” because he finds people in that condition plainer, speaking more simply, and more attuned to the “beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (597).

Coleridge objects to Wordsworth’s privileging of the language of rustic peasants, arguing that Wordsworth’s poetic diction would differ greatly from the

⁴¹ Quoted in Auerbach 152. See also Eph. 4.9-10. Wordsworth also reminds us that Christianity is “the religion of humility” (643).

⁴² St. Augustine writes in his *Confessions* about descending to Christ in order to ascend with him. ([Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979], 5.3. and 4.12. Raffa writes that “Dante imitates the humble descent of the divine Logos into humanity by rising with his human nature to the divine realm” (100).

⁴³ William Wordsworth. “Letter to John Wilson (7 June 1802)” in *The Major Works: including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 620-5, 621.

actual speech of uneducated people in the country, and disapproves of his use of the word “real” to describe language. He suggests instead “*ordinary*” or “*lingua communis*,” which he argues is “no more to be found in the phraseology of low and rustic life than in that of any other class...the *lingua communis* of every country, as Dante has well observed, exists every where in parts, and no where as a whole” (2.41-2). He also cites the example of “uncivilized tribes” (2.40) to demonstrate that a life spent communing with nature does not necessarily lead to the development of a rich language. Indigenous peoples are adapted to environments similar to those experienced by English peasants, and yet their lexicons are so poor that “finding words for the simplest moral and intellectual processes...has proved perhaps the weightiest obstacle to the progress of our most zealous and adroit missionaries” (2.40). While Coleridge offers this comparison to challenge Wordsworth’s selecting as exemplary the setting and language of humble life, it actually becomes a kind of parable of Wordsworth’s poetic purpose. The depiction of the missionary struggling to properly deliver a message of spiritual truth and beauty in a meager language is directly analogous to the position of the vernacular language poet and to God’s accommodation to human comprehension and language.⁴⁴

Wordsworth’s conception of the condition and language of rural life—perhaps as a closer approximation of the early state of men—is idealized, but he also sets the language of country people as his standard because it provides the constraints to which

⁴⁴ Colin Jager also relates Wordsworth’s “real language” to the language of Scripture: “If Herder turns scripture into the literature of a specific folk, Wordsworth will make the language of the folk (‘the language really used by men,’ he calls it in the ‘Preface’) into the secret, hidden scripture of humanity itself” (“This Detail, This History: Charles Taylor’s Romanticism.” Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun 166-92, 180).

he must accommodate his poetry.⁴⁵ The plain language of simple men is the truly high style, and yet also the low style. Rural peasants are not the exclusive purveyors of real language, but rustic life becomes a kind of representative setting, conducive to barer feelings and speech, in which Wordsworth can examine “ordinary things” in order to “trac[e] in them...the primary laws of our nature” (597). As David Ferry notes, when Wordsworth speaks of “common life” (596), he refers not only to the life of commoners, but also to that which is shared by all of humanity. His rustics are uncultured, but also representative of humankind: “His peasants are, in a sense, the lowest common denominator of mankind” living the fundamentally human experience.⁴⁶ In this way, Wordsworth’s “real language” also strives to attain to Dante’s vision for a vernacular that unifies dialects and peoples, remembering, through commonalities, the original forms of human nature and language.

Wordsworth also chooses to focus on the lower classes of society in order to emphasize and recreate the merging of disparate high and low styles and content in Scripture. Auerbach writes that Christ’s calling of “fisherman and publicans and such humble people as his first disciples...rather than men of rank or learning” (154) inaugurated a

new elevated style, which does not scorn everyday life and which is ready to absorb the sensorily realistic, even the ugly, the undignified, the physically base. Or—if anyone prefers to have it the other way around—a new *sermo humilis* is born, a low style...which now reaches out far beyond its original domain, and encroaches upon the deepest and the highest, the sublime and the eternal. (72)

⁴⁵ David Ferry writes: “Wordsworth is always being confused by the difference between his vision of man as ideal and his insistence that this ideal *in fact* exists in such persons as the shepherds of his home country” (*The Limits of Mortality: An essay on Wordsworth’s Major Poems* [Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1959], p. 95.).

⁴⁶ Ferry 96.

David Haney also identifies Scripture and the paradox of Incarnation as Wordsworth's models for a "mixed style."⁴⁷ He quotes M. H. Abrams:

The ultimate source of Wordsworth's discovery [of the interaction of high and low themes]...was the Bible, and especially the New Testament, which is grounded on the radical paradox that "the last shall be first," and dramatizes that fact in the central mystery of Christ incarnate as a lowly carpenter's son who takes fishermen for his disciples, consorts with beggars, publicans, and fallen women, and dies ignominiously, crucified with thieves. This interfusion of highest and lowest, the divine and the base, as Erich Auerbach has shown, had from the beginning been a stumbling-block to readers habituated to the classical separation of levels of subject matter and style.⁴⁸

For Wordsworth, the desire for elevation through separation—between styles, subject matter, and between the poet and reader—is what has created a false language of unnatural expressions and feelings. He protests this estrangement, opposing those poets "who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression" (597). He makes a case for identification, rather than separation, emphasizing the commonalities between poets and their readers. He defines a poet simply as "a man speaking to men" (603), who "thinks and feels in the spirit of the passions of men." Following the humble divine descent that reunites man with God, the poet must also "descend from this supposed height, and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves" (608). Just as the Incarnation redeems and revalues the human

⁴⁷ David P. Haney. *William Wordsworth and the Hermeneutics of Incarnation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1993), p. 2.

⁴⁸ M. H. Abrams. "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), pp. 91-119, 115.

body and language,⁴⁹ so the poet's descent also redeems human nature and the real language of men.

Wordsworth repeats the phrase "bring near" to describe the way in which he seeks to be identified with, or united to, the rest of mankind. He writes: "There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; I have taken as much pains to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it; this I have done for the reason already alleged, to *bring my language near* to the language of men," and later again, "Having thus explained a few of the reasons why I have written in verse, and why I have chosen subjects from common life, and endeavoured to *bring my language near* to the real language of men..." (600, 612 italics added). Nearness is an important biblical, and especially Old Testament, concept often used to locate God's presence, his proximity and accessibility to the people. The main idea is that nearness, even to physical markers of God's presence, is virtually impossible because God's holiness is entirely incompatible with the people's sin: "Whosoever cometh any thing near unto the tabernacle of the Lord shall die" (Num. 17.13).⁵⁰ For example, for the pivotal encounter at Sinai, Moses alone is summoned to "come near the Lord," while the others "shall not come nigh" (Ex. 24.2).⁵¹ "Nearness" continues to be the term used to designate rare occasions of privileged encounters with a set-apart God, as an elaborate system of rules dictates levels of access and ceremonial cleanness so that

⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas teaches the idea that Christ's Incarnation redeems human flesh. See Rhodes 46.

⁵⁰ Num. 18.22.

⁵¹ In fact, the people ask Moses to "go thou near" (Deut. 5.27) to God in their stead when they witness, and are frightened by, God's presence on the mountain. They are also afraid to "come nigh" (Ex. 34.30) to Moses when he returns to them, his face shining with the reflected radiance of God.

God's holiness may not be profaned.⁵² When Korah and his followers challenge Moses' unique relation to God, Moses tells them to be content with their degree of nearness:

Even to morrow the Lord will shew who are his, and who is holy; and will cause him to *come near* unto him: even him whom he hath chosen will he cause to *come near* unto him... Seemeth it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to *bring you near* to himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them? And he hath *brought thee near* to him, and all thy brethren the sons of Levi with thee: and seek ye the priesthood also? (Num. 16.5, 9-10, italics mine)

Given God's holiness, and the fear and trembling by which he is to be approached, we are meant to be stunned, then, by assertions of his actual nearness. He is, in fact, distinguished by his nearness—"For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for?" (Deut. 4.7)—and is characterized as one who draws near to those who call on him—"Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon thee: thou saidst, Fear not" (Lam. 3.57).⁵³

God's drawing near in spite of the separation compelled by his holiness demonstrates the weight of accommodation. Since mankind is not righteous enough to reach God, he instead draws near. As Moses tells the people, God has not required impossible effort from them, but has brought his word near:

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?... But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it. (Deut. 30.11-2, 14)

Paul interprets these verses typologically, reading Christ, and faith in him, as the word

⁵² See e.g. Numbers 18 and Leviticus 21-22 for specific rules on who may "come near" and in what condition.

⁵³ See also Ps. 69.18, Ps. 145.18, Hos. 11.4.

of salvation (Rom. 10.5-8) come near. Jesus, who himself absorbs the cost of nearness by dying—thereby paying the penalty prescribed by the law for man’s sin—also preaches his fulfillment of earlier promises of nearness: “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand [or “has come near” in the NIV]” (Matt. 3.2).⁵⁴ The 19th-century hymn tells the same story of God’s accommodating grace in view of the helpless supplicant’s plight:

Jesus, my Lord, to Thee I cry
Unless Thou help me, I must die
Oh, *bring Thy free salvation nigh,*
And take me as I am! (italics mine)⁵⁵

Much like the Old Testament promises of salvation—“I bring near my righteousness; it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry” (Is. 46.13)⁵⁶—Wordsworth’s “bring near” is a redemptive stooping. Wordsworth rejects the unnatural diction of the false poets who tantalize readers with the illusion of their elevation to the level of the poet:

[T]his extravagant and absurd language...depends upon...its influence in impressing a notion of the peculiarity and exaltation of the Poet’s character, and in flattering the Reader’s self-love by *bringing him nearer* to a sympathy with that character; an effect which is accomplished by unsettling ordinary habits of thinking, and thus assisting the Reader to approach to that perturbed and dizzy state of mind in which if he does not find himself, he imagines that he is *balked* of a peculiar enjoyment which poetry can, and ought to bestow. (617-8 first italics mine)

The poet should not seek to raise other men to an airy height, but should rather move

⁵⁴ The kingdom of heaven, promised throughout Scriptures, is to be completely realized at the last judgment, when “the Lord himself shall descend from heaven” (1 Thess. 4.16). The day of judgment is also characterized as near and fast approaching: “The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly” (Zeph. 1.14), “the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand” (Joel 2.1).

⁵⁵ The Church of England Hymnal https://archive.org/stream/englandhna00bell_djvu.txt.

⁵⁶ See Rom. 1.17, 3.22 and 2 Corin. 5.21.

himself towards them, freely descending to find them. The passions he evokes should “nearly resemble” those of real events, and, “[h]owever exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet...it will be the wish of the Poet to *bring his feelings near* to those of the persons whose feelings he describes” (604 italics mine). Indeed, Wordsworth advocates not simply a similarity, but so close a resemblance that the poet almost becomes united to his subject: “nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs” (604). The kind of sympathy that associates, becomes like, and finally unites, with the subject is also incarnational. Calvin describes the transformational merging of divinity with humanity:

Thus the Son of God behooved to become our Immanuel, i.e. God with us;...that by mutual union his divinity and our nature might be combined; otherwise, neither was the proximity near enough, nor the affinity strong enough, to give us hope that God would dwell with us; so great was the repugnance between our pollution and the spotless purity of God...That no one, therefore, may feel perplexed where to seek the Mediator, or by what means to reach him, the Spirit, by calling him man, reminds us that he is near, no, contiguous to us, inasmuch as he is our flesh. (297)

For Dante, closeness to man is another reason to write in the vernacular, as the mother-tongue is that which is “most especially” close to every man and which unites men to each other:

And just as a man’s mother-tongue is most close to him, so it is most united with him, for it alone is in his mind before he learns any other language, and not only is it essentially united with him but also contingently united with him, insofar as it is linked for him with the people who are most close to him, such as his kin, his fellow citizens, his own people. Such is a man’s mother-tongue, something not only close but most especially close to every man. Ad so...it is clear that such closeness has been one of the causes of the love I bear my mother-tongue, for it is closer to me than any other.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Cited in Luzzi xxxvi-xxxvii. Luzzi translates from *Convivio* 1.12, p. 51 in the edition of Franca Brambilla Ageno (Florence: Le Lettere, 1995).

Wordsworth shares Dante's poetic goal of drawing near, particularly through men's language: "I have proposed to myself...to adopt the *very* language of men" (600 italics mine). The "very" stands in for "real," which appears in other instances throughout the Preface, to mean "true" or "actual," but the word also carries "an echo of Biblical usage" (OED A.I.1) and appears especially in theological explications of the Incarnation. The mystery and paradox of the Incarnation is that Christ, who is fully God, is also simultaneously fully man. Guy Raffa explains the incarnational as a dialectic of the "both-and" (4); Christ unites in his being both human and divine natures, and his alignment with one does not lessen in any degree his participation in the other. It is necessary that he be both God and man because he must be *very*—truly, entirely, and exactly—man in order to take his place and atone for his sin, and *very* God in order to fulfill the law, living the sinless, perfect life of righteousness, which man could not attain, but which may be imputed to him through his faith in Christ.⁵⁸ Calvin, therefore, writes: "It deeply concerned us, that he who was to be our Mediator should be very God and very man" (297). The version of the Nicene Creed appearing in the Book of Common Prayer from 1622 declares belief in "one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God...God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God," while other readings from the Book of Common Prayer describe Christ as being "made very man." "Very" is also used to accentuate the extent of Christ's condescension and of the disparity which he unites in his being. Paul writes of the magnitude of Christ's humility, which enables one who is to the fullest extent God to descend, even to a full knowledge of the human experience, with all its pains and

⁵⁸ Rom. 10.4.

humiliations:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place... (Phil. 2.5-9 NIV)⁵⁹

Wordsworth's adopting the "very language of men" recalls Christ's taking on the "very nature" of men in order to indicate the degree to which he intends to accommodate and assimilate his poetry to men's real language.

While Wordsworth does emphasize the poet's similarity with other men, when he calls for the poet's accommodation, he cannot help but acknowledge the poet's inherent differentiation. After stating simply that a poet is "a man speaking to men," he clarifies the claim with various qualifications through which it soon becomes clear that a poet is somehow more than just a man. He has "more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness...a more comprehensive soul," he "rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him," and he has "a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present" (603). Importantly, he is able to, "without immediate external excitement" (604) "conjure up in himself passions" (603) closely resembling those produced by real events. This sensitivity to what is not apparent and ability to reinvigorate the thoughts and feelings of real life are what truly set the poet apart: "For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint

⁵⁹ I cite here the NIV, as this translation uses the biblical "very." The KJV uses "the form of" instead of "very nature": "Christ Jesus, Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2.5-7).

perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he possesses this capability” (599).⁶⁰ I will return to a discussion of this capability later in the essay, but for now, it is enough to observe that Wordsworth does regard poets as being elevated above ordinary men. The image of the exalted poet is not simply a myth, but while false poets attempt to maintain a perception of their aloof preeminence, genuine poets, recognizing their native distinction, bend down to speak with their fellow men.

Wordsworth perhaps conveys a sense of the poets’ choosing to accommodate through his repeated use of the word “adopt” to mark the espousing of a simple poetic diction: “[Coleridge] believes that the language adopted in [The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere] has been equally intelligible for these three last centuries” (592); “The language, too, of [those in rural life] is adopted (purified...from...real defects...) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because...being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions” (597); “I have proposed to myself to imitate and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men” (600). Wordsworth’s “adopt” contrasts with the “mechanical adoption” (616) of figures and devices by counterfeit poets, who establish their own “fraternity” (617) and “family language which Writers in metre seem to lay claim to by prescription” (600). Because of his desire to write honestly and directly, Wordsworth views himself as being “cut off” or disinherited from this lineage of poets: “it has necessarily cut me off from a large portion of phrases and

⁶⁰ Wordsworth is influenced by Joanna Baillie, who writes in her *Introductory Discourse*, that strong passions are not motivated by external circumstances or stimuli.

figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets” (600-1). Eschewing the customs of the corrupt poets, who themselves established an illegitimate genealogy based on an unnatural appropriation of true poetic figures, Wordsworth’s “adopt” signals his aberration from the “father to son” genetic descent of other poets and his voluntary embracing of a new family language, that of other men.

Highly praising Wordsworth’s poetic discrimination as the best of any “man now living,” Coleridge compares the discerning between the true poet and the “usurper” (2.64) to the distinguishing of children from changelings:

For even as truth is its own light and evidence, discovering at once itself and falsehood, so is it the prerogative of poetic genius to distinguish by parental instinct its proper offspring from the changelings, which the gnomes of vanity or the fairies of fashion may have laid in its cradle or called by its names. Could a rule be given from *without*, poetry would cease to be poetry, and sink into a mechanical art. (2.64-5)

As though by “parental instinct,” Wordsworth recognizes the fraternity of poets to be false children of poetry. In a family in which all of the members are false, it is almost necessary to be adopted in order to be made true. This is, in part, the logic behind the New Testament’s valorization of adoption as a figure for salvation. Adoption represents the process by which estranged and fallen human beings become reconciled as children of God: “God sent forth his Son... To redeem... that we might receive the adoption of sons” (Gal. 4.5-6).⁶¹ As an alternative to biological descent, adoption also recalls the anomalous method by which Christ enters into the family of men. By disowning the lineage of artificial poets and rejoining the family of men, Wordsworth’s “adoption” indicates his choosing and revalidating of the original

⁶¹ See also Rom. 8.15 and Eph. 1.5.

poetry of the language of men.⁶²

Adoption, as a voluntary legitimization of that which is not natural by birth, also serves as a figure for the poetic process, which unites the organic with the deliberate. Coleridge describes this process as the balance and mixture of excitement and volition:

There must be not only a partnership, but a union; an interpenetration of passion and of will, of *spontaneous* impulse and of *voluntary* purpose. Again, this union can be manifested only in a frequency of forms and figures of speech (originally the offspring of passion, but now the adopted children of power) greater than would be desired or endured, where the emotion is not voluntarily encouraged or kept up for the sake of that pleasure, which such emotion, so tempered and mastered by the will, is found capable of communicating. (2.50)

The “offspring of passion” made “adopted children of power,” which also alludes to the biblical conversion metaphor—“Wherein in time past...we...were by nature the children of wrath...But God, who is rich in mercy...hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)” (Eph. 2.2-5)—demonstrates that poetic figures, though birthed in a spontaneous state of excitement, must be reclaimed through the harness of purpose. Wordsworth similarly describes poetry as originating in a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” to which the poet must add the labor of long and deep thought (598). Composition begins when the poet is able to rehearse and “recollect in tranquillity” (611) the natural passion, reviving in his mind a still genuine emotion that, though perhaps “fall[ing] far short” (604) of the language and passions produced in real life, closely resembles the feeling of the inspiring passion.

⁶² Dante also views relationships between poets as father-son relationships. As Mazzotta writes: “Poets beget poets” (217). In the world of literature, however, there is a “reversal of the paternal order, for it is the son who chooses the father; each poet...shapes his past and fathers his own tradition” (218). In the same way, Wordsworth chooses to be the heir of the original poets who spoke in the real language of men, instead of the newer, false poets.

By adopting the language and feelings of men, the poet chooses to make native that which is not originally his own in order to restore men's language to a purer state.

II.

In bringing his feelings near to those of his subjects, even to the point of finding his own feelings and thoughts indistinguishable from theirs, the poet becomes a kind of translator of other men. Unlike the bad "translator" who submits to his "general inferiority" to the original, however, the poet neither "trick[s] out" nor "elevate[s] nature" but endeavors to faithfully reproduce with his language passions similar to those provoked by real events (604).⁶³ Indeed, the poet not only imitates and transcribes for other men their own feelings, but he also translates himself, conjuring and processing within his own tranquil mind true passions, which may then be expressed. His utter identification with the person whom he describes may be likened to the translation theory proposed in Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" in which the fictional Menard sets out not to translate the *Don Quixote* but to, in a way, inhabit Cervantes so as to recreate the novel exactly:

Pierre Menard's first approach to the task of total translation or, one might more rigorously say, transubstantiation, was one of utter mimesis. But to *become* Cervantes... was really too facile a métier. Far more interesting was 'to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the *Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard', i.e. to put oneself so deeply in tune with Cervantes's being, with his ontological form, as to re-enact, inevitably, the exact sum of his realizations and statements... Menard assumes 'the mysterious duty'... of recreating deliberately and explicitly what was in Cervantes a spontaneous process...⁶⁴

⁶³ Wordsworth again compares the poet's powers of observation and description to the work of the "Translator or Engraver" (626) in the Preface to Poems (1815).

⁶⁴ Steiner 74. Steiner designates the short story "the most acute, most concentrated commentary anyone has offered on the business of translation" (73).

In order to make himself a proper conduit for translation, the translator draws near, incarnating himself in the nature of his subject in a way reminiscent of Christ, who as Word incarnate, translates God to man.

Wordsworth very interestingly figures the poet as a kind of translator especially for the language of science. While the work of “Men of Science...the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist” (606-7) is yet distant and separated from humankind, Wordsworth imagines the poet as mediating between humanity and science:

If the time should ever come when what is now called Science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man. (607)

The translation is to be effected, then, through an incarnation of science, as it puts on a “form of flesh and blood” that joins the “household of man.” This is no simple task, for, as James Rhodes writes, incarnation is the most serious challenge to any language (6), but this potential “form of flesh and blood” corresponds to Wordsworth’s earlier promise regarding the *Lyrical Ballads*—“I have wished to keep my Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him” (600)—and indicates his desire to have the language of science undergo the same incarnational accommodation that is effected through his new style of poetry.

The 17th and 18th centuries were a period in which natural philosophers and mathematicians sought to determine an appropriate scientific language that would lead

to a “*Babel* revers’d.”⁶⁵ Universal language schemes abounded, and mathematics, in particular, seemed to promise the possibility of an uncorrupted and plain semiotic system. Natural philosophers, whose study of an otherwise corrupt, postlapsarian world, was largely justified and underpinned by the metaphor of the two books—the book of Scriptures and the book of Nature⁶⁶—also viewed themselves as the scholars and theologians of the text of nature and encountered the theological question of how to study the texts of God’s word and creation through man’s fallen languages. Natural philosophers, such as Robert Boyle, prioritized the role of Scripture for the development of a scientific language, understanding scientific experimentation as an exegesis of nature.⁶⁷ Isaac Newton, however, favored the book of nature, thinking that the Scriptures had become corrupted (especially in regards to Trinitarian doctrine) through translation.⁶⁸ Both contributed greatly, however, to the development of a “physico-theology,” which Robert Markley defines as “the quest for a single system of representation that articulates its equally strong commitments to experimental philosophy and to theology” (7).

While Newton’s masterpiece, the *Principia Mathematica*, was, in fact, so esoteric that there were few people living who were learned enough to comprehend it, he still came to be perceived as a great mediator between God and man, a bringer of light, and one whose book complemented Scripture. Alexander Pope’s couplet—
“Nature and Nature’s Laws lay hid in Night; / God said, *Let Newton be!* And All was

⁶⁵ Cave Beck, *The Universal Character* (London, 1657), A64. Cited in Robert Markley. *Fallen Languages: Crises of Representation in Newtonian England, 1660-1740* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), p. 71.

⁶⁶ Markley 45, 97-9. See also e.g. Rom. 1.18-20 and Ps. 19:1-4.

⁶⁷ Markley 41.

⁶⁸ Markley 145-6.

*Light*⁶⁹—captures the notion of Newton as God’s agent for revelation. Newton emphasized particularly the use of experiments in developing a scientific method: “Analysis consists in making Experiments and Observations, and in drawing general Conclusions from them by Induction, and admitting of no Objections against the Conclusions, but such as are taken from Experiments, or other certain Truths.”⁷⁰

Newton’s 18th-century disciples, compelled by their leader’s enlightening spirit, and perhaps also the abstruseness of his theoretical work, were committed to bringing Newtonian thought to the public. They envisioned themselves as producing their own kind of reformation, arguing for scientific texts to be written not in Latin but in English for the sake of the “vulgar”: “some People argue for keeping the Sacred Books in an unknown Tongue: But we pretend to a Protestant Liberty, at least with respect to our Philosophy.”⁷¹ The Newtonian fervor for accessibility also led to lectures and abridged editions of texts targeting those who had not sufficient training, money, or time. The publication of Francesco Algarotti’s 1737 “Newtonism for Ladies” indicates the extent to which Newtonians sought to propagate even simplified versions of their learning to different social groups.

Wordsworth seems also to be a kind of Newtonian in that he calls for the men and language of science to be in greater sympathy with the rest of mankind. He compares the labor of the poet and of the scientist through the measure of pleasure. Naming the imparting of pleasure as the poet’s sole “purpose,” (604), “restriction”

⁶⁹ *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. Norman Ault and John Butt (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964), 6:317.

⁷⁰ Isaac Newton. *Opticks* (New York: Dover, 1952), p. 404.

⁷¹ Humphry Ditton. *The General Laws of Nature and Motion* <https://archive.org/stream/generallawsnatu00dittgoog#page/n14/mode/2up/search/unknown>. Cited in Markley 213.

(605), and “necessity” (605), Wordsworth uses biblical metaphors to elucidate the power of pleasure’s claim on the poet. Indeed, pleasure is the poet’s very God, for Wordsworth describes pleasure as “the grand elementary principle...by which [man] knows, and feels, and lives, and moves” (605), and the poet’s responsibility of producing pleasure as akin to the ease of Christ’s service: “it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love” (605).⁷² Sympathy is achieved through feelings of pleasure, and knowledge, too, as the man of science knows, is pleasure: “We have no knowledge...but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone. The Man of Science, the Chemist and Mathematician...know[s] and feel[s] this...he feels that his knowledge is pleasure; and where he has no pleasure he has no knowledge” (605). While both partake in this pleasure, the poet’s knowledge, in contrast to that of the man of science, unifies human beings with one another:

The knowledge both of the Poet and the Man of Science is pleasure; but the knowledge of the one cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance; the other is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings. The Man of Science seek truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude; the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. (606)

The accommodating posture of the Newton of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* illustrates the kind of change that Wordsworth desires for the man of science. As the narrator of the *Prelude* remembers the great men of Cambridge, he imagines a Newton that descends to the mundanities of daily life:

⁷² “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17.28); “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11.30).

Even the great Newton's own ethereal Self,
Seemed humbled in these precincts, thence to be
The more beloved, invested here with tasks
Of life's plain business, as a daily garb;
Dictators at the plough, a change that left
All genuine admiration unimpaired.⁷³

Although Wordsworth's overt reference to Newton in the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" is seemingly arbitrary ("Why take pains to prove that an ape is not a Newton, when it is self-evident that he is not a man?" [613]), he still looks to the Newtonian spirit as a guide for his own perceived role as a mediator between science and humankind. Wordsworth becomes a kind of scientist of human nature, as he models how to make knowledge take on "a form of flesh and blood" and become an engaging part of human life.

By identifying his *Lyrical Ballads* as an "experiment," Wordsworth immediately aligns his project with Newton's experimental scientific method: "It was published, as an experiment...to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart" (595). Wordsworth's diction also recalls the third of Newton's famous laws of motion—"To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction"⁷⁴—as he describes the way in which language and the human mind "act and re-act on each other" (596), the "fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the

⁷³ William Wordsworth. "The Prelude" in *The Major Works: including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 375-590, 3.270-5.

⁷⁴ Isaac Newton. *Newton's Principia: the mathematical principles of natural philosophy*, trans. Andrew Motte (New York: Daniel Adee, 1846), p. 83. Accessed July 1, 2014. <https://archive.org/details/100878576>. Andrew Motte published the first English translation of the *Principia* in 1729.

great and simple affections of our nature” (598), the “acting and re-acting upon each other” (605) of man and the objects around him, and the poet’s perception of objects “both as they exist in themselves and as re-acted upon by his own mind” (626).⁷⁵ Like the man of science who designs an experiment to stage a chemical or physical reaction, Wordsworth views the human mind as the laboratory in which to observe the operations and combinations of internal feelings with external stimuli. His experiment focuses on the production of pleasure, and like the chemist who calculates reactions in order to distill or titrate a desired substance, Wordsworth examines the interactions of language, feelings, and events in order to produce the element of pleasure in the test tubes of his own mind and that of his reader. Recollecting emotion in a calm state, the poet awaits “a species of reaction” by which an emotion, “qualified by various pleasures,” is produced, so that the poet’s mind continues to be in a “state of enjoyment.” The Poet also uses a combination of the harmony and pleasure of meter and rhyme and the language of real life in order to make up a “complex feeling of delight,” which “temper[s]” passion’s painful feelings in order to maintain an “overbalance of pleasure” (611) in the mind of his reader. Meter is an essential agent in this calibration, as it is the regular “co-presence” that modulates excessive pain in passion in order to produce “excitement in co-existence with an over-balance of pleasure” (609).⁷⁶

Wordsworth’s new poetic theory is also part of a larger reaction in which he seeks to “counteract” a predominant influence in men’s minds. Poets are able to know

⁷⁵ Coleridge also mentions the “flux and reflux of inmost nature” (2.120).

⁷⁶ Wordsworth writes that he would have developed further the relationship between meter and pleasure if he had sought to provide a “systematic defence” (610) of his theory. He also describes men as responding to ideas and sensations with an “overbalance of enjoyment” (606).

greater pleasure because of their sensibility, which renders them “capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants.” Writers ought, therefore, to devote themselves to “enlarg[ing] this capability” in others, but there are also a “multitude of causes” that “are now acting” to dull “the discriminating powers of the mind.” In spite of the “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation,” the *Lyrical Ballads* are poems in which the feelings ennoble the actions and events, and not the other way around (599). The general corruption is prevalent, but Wordsworth relies on the strength of an equal, if not stronger, and opposite force for good, whose eventual victory he nearly prophesies:

I should be oppressed with no dishonorable melancholy had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it, which are equally inherent and indestructible...the time is approaching when the evil will be systematically opposed...with far more distinguished success. (600)⁷⁷

For as he explains with the metaphor of survival: “there never has been a period...in which vicious poetry...has not excited more zealous admiration...but this advantage attends the good, that the *individual*, as well as the species, survives from age to age: whereas, of the depraved, though the species be immortal the individual quickly *perishes*” (661).

Wordsworth perhaps engages with the men of science in order to demonstrate that poetry can lead the way in attaining the theological principle of accommodation, and therefore developing a valid language that speaks to other men. Just as the poet should not be elevated or separated from other men, so also the man of science should not be alienated, but should descend, even become incarnate in order to make his

⁷⁷ See John 4.23.

words living and relevant for humanity. Wordsworth makes his poetry take on flesh and blood through individuated representations of people, language, and passions. His commitment to incarnation contrasts with his general rejection of personification as an “ordinary device to elevate the style, and raise it above prose” (600). Personification and incarnation both add flesh to larger, more “abstract ideas” (600), but while personification gestures upward to an elevation, incarnation performs an embodied descent. Like the Newtonians who worked to disseminate their message of enlightenment, Wordsworth becomes a kind of evangelist of his new gospel of poetry. As he calls for the mediation of the poet even in the realms of science, Wordsworth shows himself to be a “Poet charged with a new mission to extend its kingdom, and to augment and spread its enjoyments” (660).⁷⁸ Indeed he seems almost to seek to unite all of humankind under the universal knowledge and authority of poetry: “the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time” (606).

III.

In a letter to the young John Wilson, Wordsworth describes “natural objects” as an influence for good so that even those most “unhum[anized]” by evil cannot be “utterly insensible to the colours, forms, or smell of flowers, the [voices?] and motions of birds and beasts, the appearances of the sky and heavenly bodies...” (620). Indeed, the interactions with nature are formative and common to all men: “How dead soever many full-grown men may outwardly seem to these thi[ngs] they all are more or less

⁷⁸ Matt. 28.16-20.

affected by them, and in childhood, in the first practice and exercise of their senses, they must have been not the nourish[ers] merely, but often the fathers of their passions” (620). The natural “images of danger, melancholy, grandeur, or loveliness, softness, and ease” (620) form people’s characters, and it is the similar experiences of those living in a particular climate or region that contribute to “a uniformity of national character” (621). Due to the differences produced through a diversity of environments, social classes, and personal preferences, Wordsworth asserts that the way to understand the essence of human nature is to “strip our own hearts naked” and to “look out of ourselves to[wards me]n who lead the simplest lives most according to nature men who [ha]ve never known false refinements...or who, having known these [t]hings, have outgrown them” (622).

The rustics of the *Lyrical Ballads* represent Wordsworth’s attempt to portray a picture of a universal humankind by depicting men, women, and children who are raised by, and communicate with, nature. The poems’ peasants seem to demonstrate that the language of the scripture of nature is man’s original and purest vernacular. Many of the poems illustrate the dichotomy between the vernacular of nature, which is often articulated through the singing of birds or the voices of waterfalls, and the “*grammatica*,” or language of formal education. Coleridge’s “Foster-Mother’s Tale” tells the story of a young boy who resists his teachers, but speaks the language of nature: “A pretty boy, but most unteachable— / ... / But knew the names of birds, and mocked their notes, / And whistled, as he were a bird himself.” The child does, in time, become a “very learned youth” who “read[s], and read[s], and read[s],” but after a climactic experience, he returns to singing about green fields and lakes and finally

sails away to the new world to live and die “among the savage men.” Wordsworth’s “Ruth” similarly presents a prodigal child of nature who begins as “an Infant of the woods,” and after a failed romance, returns to live in the trees and fields. The babe of “The Nightingale,” though “capable of no articulate sound” and “mar[ring] all things with his imitative lisp,” cups his hand to his ear and listens to the bird’s song, while “The Mad Mother” promises that her babe “shalt sing / As merry as the birds in spring / ... / I’ll teach him how the owlet sings.” The “Idle Shepherd-Boys,” too, are helped by a poet, perhaps Wordsworth, “who loves the brooks / Far better than the sages’ books.” For characters such as these, the language of education and civilization is but a “foster-mother,” while nature teaches its own unfallen mother tongue.

One of the most often discussed characters in the poems is that of “The Idiot Boy,” who becomes lost in the night after being sent to call for the doctor as his mother nurses their sick neighbor. Although a number of critics, including John Wilson, disliked the poem, Wordsworth writes a particular defense of it, explaining: “I wrote the poem with exceeding delight and pleasure, and whenever I read it I read it with pleasure” (622). He imagines his boy to be, apart from certain imperfections, handsome in appearance, and asserts that the care of “idiots” is one of the purest expressions of love, the consideration of which dispels any possible feelings of “disgust and aversion”: “I have indeed often looked upon the conduct of fathers and mothers of the lower classes of society towards Idiots as the great triumph of the human heart” (623). Most importantly, however, Johnny speaks—“my Idiot is not one of those who cannot articulate and such as are usually disgusting in their persons”—and delivers a “last speech at the end of the poem” (624), which

Wordsworth called “the germ of the poem.”⁷⁹

We soon learn that Johnny’s words, which his mother well understands, “were not a few” (75), the narrator quotes the boy’s last speech to conclude the poem, and moreover, we are reminded throughout the poem that “his lips with joy they burr” (19). While Coleridge found the boy’s nonsensical mumbling distasteful, many other critics debated the meaning of “burring” and protested the bathos of his last speech. It is, perhaps, most important simply to note, however, that Johnny’s “burring” rhymes with the “curring” of the night’s owlets—“and Johnny’s in a merry tune, / The owlets hoot, the owlets curr, / And Johnny’s lips they burr, burr, burr” (113-5)—and much like the other characters who sing with the birds, or the “Boy of Winander” who mimics the cries of the owls, the “idiot boy” demonstrates a deep consonance with the voice and speech of nature.⁸⁰ As Claire Laville writes, the “to-who, to-who” of Johnny’s final speech, in which he mistakenly attributes the sounds of owls to “cocks,” also echoes the owl’s “Halloo! Halloo!” that begins the poem.⁸¹ Concealing a reciprocity with nature and an original purity in the foolish jabber of idiocy, Johnny’s speech is emblematic of Wordsworth’s mixing of the high and low, sublime and humble styles. Indeed, Wordsworth argues that “the language of the heavens” belongs to people like Johnny, “meek men” who are “unregarded by the world,”⁸² whose “idiocy” places him in the tradition of the “holy fool,” of whose

⁷⁹ Cited in Paul H. Fry. *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), p. 100.

⁸⁰ As Fry writes: “When [Johnny] does make noise again, it is as though from the depth of insight he utters the sound of universal being, a sound common to all the objects and beings in the scene, a sound that any of them might make, together with the owlets in the next stanza” (102).

⁸¹ Claire Laville. “Idiocy and Aberrancy: Disability, Paul de Man, and Wordsworth’s ‘Idiot Boy,’” *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* 47(2014): 187-202, 194.

⁸² William Wordsworth. *The Prelude (1850)* XIII.269-78. See “The Beatitudes” Matt. 5.1-12.

actions and words the spiritual significance is often misapprehended: “I have often applied to Idiots, in my own mind, that sublime expression of scripture that, ‘*their life is hidden with God*’” (623).⁸³

It is especially important that the narrator of the poem not only tells us that Johnny speaks, but also quotes him directly: “(His very words I give to you,) / ‘The cocks did crow to-who, to-who, / And the sun did shine so cold’” (459-61). The voicing of Johnny’s *very* words, which recalls the adopting of the *very* language of men, signals the narrator-poet’s sympathy for the boy, as he bends down to let the boy speak through him. The poet descends to a type of language that even the simplest reader might deride as drivel, but through it he is able to speak in the vernacular of nature. “The Pet-Lamb” similarly demonstrates the narrator’s self-humbling in his validation of, and even reliance on, the thoughts and words of his rustic characters. In the poem, the words and tone of a young shepherdess cause the speaker to “almost receiv[e] her heart into my own” (12). The speaker’s identification with the young girl is what allows him to relate the story of the lamb, for, as he later acknowledges, she co-composes the poem through him as he mingles her thoughts with his own:

This song to myself did I oftentimes repeat,
And it seem’d as I retrac’d the ballad line by line
That but half of it was hers, and one half of it was mine.
Again, and once again did I repeat the song,
“Nay” said I, “more than half to the Damsel must belong,
For she look’d with such a look, and she spake with such a tone,
That I almost receiv’d her heart into my own. (62-8)

“Hart-Leap Well” also contains a narrational descent that permits a consideration of what might be regarded as an inferior perspective. The first part of the poem recounts

⁸³ Col. 3.3.

the event of a great hunt, while the second part remembers the same hunt from the viewpoint of the hunted hart. The poem humanizes the heart by imagining the final thoughts of the “creature’s brain” and suggesting that it chooses as his “death-bed” the fountain from which he may have “first...drank / When he had wander’d from his mother’s side.” The valuation of even the stag’s sentiments and memories draws attention to the poet’s association with, and adoption of, the feelings and voices of the neglected and lowly.⁸⁴ Like the subjects of his poems, Wordsworth is himself a child reared especially by nature. *The Prelude* details how Nature, like an accommodating nurse, teaches him, from childhood, the intercourse of nature:

Nature, oftentimes, when she would frame
A favored Being, from his earliest dawn
Of infancy doth open out the clouds,
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
With gentlest visitation... (1.363-7)

In a way, Wordsworth’s peasant speakers of the true language of nature become the fulfillment of the words Tyndale is said to have declared to a priest who condemned his work of vernacular translation: “If God spare my life, before very long I shall cause a plough boy to know the scriptures better than you do!”

As Wordsworth seeks to help readers gain the maturity necessary to recognize poetry’s “magnificence,” which depends upon simplicity and not ornamentation (642), he also avows a moral purpose for his poetry. The poet must seek not only to

⁸⁴ David Perkins writes that a new sympathy for animals was growing because of a “general reenvisioning of human relations to the natural world” and that because hunting was an activity reserved for the privileged classes, it would be very easy to assert that the stag comes to represent “downtrodden humanity” (“Wordsworth and the Polemic Against Hunting: ‘Hart-Leap Well,’” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52[1998]: 421-45, 421, 433). The first canto of Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake* contains what Coleridge described as “the poorest Paraphrase-Parody of the Hart Leap Well” (cited in Perkins 432) and also has the narration of the hunt begin from the stag’s perspective. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* also has a hunt scene that temporarily shifts to the perspective of the prey.

faithfully represent human nature as it is, but also as it should be. Wordsworth envisions his poetry as enlarging the range of human feelings—“a great Poet...ought...to rectify men’s feelings...to render their feelings more sane pure and permanent...more consonant to...eternal nature” (622)—and, through characters such as the “idiot boy,” encouraging the humble descent of compassion and sympathy: “[It] is not enough for me as a poet, to delineate merely such feelings as all men *do* sympathize with but, it is also highly desirable to add to these others, such as all men *may* sympathise with, and such as there is reason to believe they would be better and moral beings if they did sympathize with” (624). While “divesting the Reader of the pride that induces him to dwell upon those points wherein Men differ from each other” and “establishing that dominion over the spirits of Readers by which they are to be humbled and humanized, in order that they may be purified and exalted” are noble outcomes, however, the true challenge of creating the taste by which “a truly original Poet is to be relished” (658) lies in “communicat[ing] *power*,” (659) which imparts knowledge and spurs the progress of the reader.

Wordsworth credits the variety of reactions—“the love, the admiration, the indifference, the slight, the aversion, and even the contempt”—to his poems as evidence that “I have not labored in vain (657).⁸⁵ We may conclude that, among his many readers, at least two of his fellow writers seem to have grasped his urging for a language of accommodation. In the Preface to *The Cenci*, Shelley combines the calls for Imagination’s incarnation, which unites and levels the high and the low, and for a poetry of the familiar and real language of men:

⁸⁵ Gal. 4.11 and 1 Corin. 15.58.

Imagination is as the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion. It is thus that the most remote and the most familiar imagery may alike be fit for dramatic purposes when employed in the illustration of strong feeling, which raises what is low and levels to the apprehension that which is lofty, casting over all the shadow of its own greatness. In other respects I have written more carelessly; that is, without an overfastidious and learned choice of words. In this respect I entirely agree with those modern critics who assert that in order to move men to true sympathy we must use the familiar language of men, and that our great ancestors the ancient English poets are the writers, a study of whom might incite us to do that for our own age which they have done for theirs. But it must be the real language of men in general and not that of any particular class to whose society the writer happens to belong.⁸⁶

Coleridge also figures Wordsworth as one who descends from above to take on an accommodating earthliness. Unlike Milton's Satan, who is content to "sit where [other angels] durst not soar!" (4.829), Wordsworth does not remain at a remote height, but rather descends in order to further demonstrate his greatness. Coleridge writes, after reading the second volume of the *Lyrical Ballads*, "If I die,...be sure to say—'Wordsworth descended on him...from Heaven; by showing to him what true Poetry was, he made him know, that he himself was no Poet.'" Yet for all of Wordsworth's sublimity, Coleridge also comments on Wordsworth's focus on the physical, "a something corporeal, a *matter-of-fact-ness*, a clinging to the palpable, or often to the petty, in his poetry...His genius was not a spirit that descended to him through the air; it sprung out of the ground like a flower..."⁸⁷ We may resolve this apparent contradiction of Wordsworth's heavenliness and earthliness by remembering the principle of Incarnation through which he grounds in tangible, physical

⁸⁶ Percy Shelley. "Preface to *The Cenci*" in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. [New York: Norton, 2002], 140-5, 143-5.

⁸⁷ William Hazlitt. *Hazlitt on English Literature: An Introduction to the Appreciation of Literature*, ed. Jacob Zeitlin (New York: Oxford UP, 1913), pp. 277-300, 293. Accessed May 27, 2014. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31132/31132-h/31132-h.htm#Page_277.

representations the power and spirit of his elevated genius.

CHAPTER TWO

BYRON AND DANTE: THE POET IN EXILE

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

- Psalm 137.1-4¹

“As Hippolytus was forced to flee from Athens...so shall you be forced to flee from Florence...You shall leave behind all you most dearly love, and that shall be the arrow first loosed from exile’s bow. You shall learn how salt is the taste of another man’s bread and how hard is the way, going down and then up another man’s stairs. But the heaviest burden your shoulders must bear shall be the companions, wicked and witless, among whom you shall fall in your descent...But soon enough they, not you, shall feel their faces blushing past their brows. Of their brutish state the results shall offer proof. And it shall bring you honor to have made a single party of yourself alone.”

- Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 17²

From discussing the poet’s humble stooping, I move to consider the poet’s condition of height and eminence, which, even when least acknowledged, must precede the possibility or need of any accommodating descent. During the Romantic period, the poet regarded as having achieved the highest stature was, arguably, Dante, whom Stendahl named the “supreme Romantic poet.”³ In spite of Voltaire’s premature declaration of the death of Dante’s influence in 1756—“On ne lit plus le Dante dans l’Europe [Nobody reads Dante anymore in Europe]”—the early nineteenth century saw a resurgence of interest in Italian literature and culture, and particularly in Dante.⁴ Writing in his diary in Italy in 1821, Lord Byron notes the adoration of Dante:

¹ *The Holy Bible*, AV (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1979).

² Dante Alighieri. “Commedia,” *Princeton Dante Project*, *Paradiso* 17.46, 48, 55-63, 65-9. Accessed August, 2 2014 <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/tpd/>.

³ Stendhal declares in 1823: “Le poète romantique par excellence, c’est le Dante,” (Stendhal. *Racine et Shakespeare* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1854), p. 39.

⁴ See Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass, eds. *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Joseph Luzzi. *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven: Yale

“Why, they talk Dante, write Dante, and think and dream Dante at this moment, to an excess which would be ridiculous, but that he deserves it.” As a figure for poetic ambition,⁵ Dante also becomes a kind of Miltonic Satan for Percy Shelley who describes Dante in his *A Defence of Poetry* as “the first awakener of entranced Europe”:

He created a language in itself music and persuasion out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms. He was the congregator of those great spirits who presided over the resurrection of learning; the Lucifer of that starry flock which in the thirteenth century shone forth from republican Italy, as from a heaven, into the darkness of the benighted world. His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor.⁶

The image of Dante’s words as living embers awaiting an appropriate “conductor” corresponds to Shelley’s depiction of the “mind in creation... as a fading coal” struggling to preserve its brightness “awaken[ed]” by an “invisible influence.” Inspiration, then, is imagined as an “inconstant wind” (531), and poets “[catch] the sacred inspiration” (528) in the way that a coal catches fire. It is because of poetry’s dependence on a wind of unaccountable origin, which is beyond the scope of human exertion, that Shelley declares that “Poetry is indeed something divine” (531).

Dante’s relationship with the “divine” elevates him even further. He is the author of the “*Divine*” *Comedy*, but indeed, as John Taaffe explains in his

UP, 2008); Nick Havely, ed. *Dante’s Modern Afterlife: reception and response from Blake to Heaney* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Ralph Pite. *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante’s Presence in English Romantic Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994); Timothy Webb. *The Violet in the Crucible: Shelley and Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); and C. P. Brand. *Italy and the English Romantics: The Italianate Fashion in Early 19th-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1957).

⁵ Ralph Pite. *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante’s Presence in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 2.

⁶ Percy Shelley. “A Defence of Poetry” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat [New York: Norton, 2002], pp. 510-35, 528.

commentary on the poem (which both Byron and Shelley read in manuscript form and which Byron recommended to his publisher for publication), the designation of “divine” was attributed first to the author and not to the work, whose original title page stated simply: “The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, A Florentine by Nation, Not Morals.” Taaffe writes:

This simple *Comedy* was long retained; at length some editors changed it into *The Comedy of the Divine Poet*, and others into *The Comedy of the Most Divine Theologian Dante Alighieri*; and at last, by shifting the adjective from the writer to his work, was produced the present form—*Divina Commedia*—*Divine Comedy*, which is too generally adopted for me not to adopt it also.⁷

Taaffe also explains the Italians’ awarding of the “epithet divine” to Dante’s work as a recompense for his having “raised Italian from that abject state” (64). Shelley also seems to recognize Dante’s contribution to the Italian language as a divine act, characterizing it as a form of creation (“He created a language...out of a chaos”) and resurrection (“He...presided over the resurrection of learning.”)

The interchangeable nomination of Dante as “poet” and “theologian,” especially with “divine” preceding both terms perhaps indicates a perceived duality in Dante’s nature and office. His efforts are not fragmented, however, for he performs both functions simultaneously and, indeed, with the same text. While, during the Renaissance, a poem could be labeled as “divine” if it dealt with a biblical subject, treated a matter of Christian doctrine, or was believed to be inspired of God, since the label is attached to Dante, the use of “divine” seems to be a claim to inspiration.⁸ The

⁷ John Taaffe. *A Comment on the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, Vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1822), p. 64-5.

⁸ John M. Steadman. *Milton’s Biblical and Classical Imagery* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1984), p.88. “Divine” could also refer to the classical concept of the poet as being possessed by a sacred fury, though this kind of inspiration would not be considered equivalent to the divine revelation of Scripture

applicability of the modifying “divine” to both poet and theologian points to inspiration as the key link between the two positions.

Byron would not have wanted to be called a “divine” poet. He expressed frustration with the more theological aspects of Dante’s work:

The *Divine Comedy* is a scientific treatise of some theological student... The poem is so obscure, tiresome, and insupportable, that no-one can read it for half an hour together without yawning, and going to sleep over it... and the hundred times I have made the attempt to read it, I have lost my labour.⁹

As Carla Pomarè writes, he “explicitly refused any identification with the figure of the poet-prophet cultivated in various guises by many of his contemporaries—from Blake to Wordsworth and Shelley.”¹⁰ Byron writes in one letter: “You have so many *divine* poems, is it nothing to have written a *Human* one?” and in another: “Religion does not make a part of my subject—it is something beyond human powers and has failed in all human hands except Milton’s and Dante’s—and even Dante’s powers are involved in his delineation of human passions—though in supernatural circumstances.”

Jerome McGann also observes Byron’s desire to align himself with a human poetry, even as he claims to be the true spiritual heir of another “divine” poet, John Milton. McGann reads in the “Dedication” to *Don Juan*—“For me, who, wandering with pedestrian Muses, / Contend not with you on the winged steed”¹¹—a reference to Milton’s invocation of Urania, the heavenly muse, of whom he requests a return to earth following his inspired flight:

Return me to my Native element:

(89).

⁹ Thomas Medwin. *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (London, 1847), II, pp.252-3.

¹⁰ Carla Pomarè. *Byron and the Discourses of History* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).

¹¹ Lord Byron. “Don Juan” in *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 373-879, 375 ll. 57-8.

Lest from this flying Steed enrein'd (as once
Bellerophon, though from a lower Clime)
 Dismounted, on th'*Aleian* Field I fall
 Erroneus there to wander and forlorne.
 Half yet remains unsung, but narrower bound
 Within the visible Diurnal Spheare;
 Standing on Earth, not rapt above the Pole
 More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchang'd
 To hoarce or mute, though fall'n on evil dayes,
 On evil dayes though fall'n and evil tongues;
 In darkness, and with dangers compast round,
 And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
 Visit'st my slumbers Nightly, or when Morn
 Purples the East: still govern thou my Song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few.¹²

McGann writes: “Meantime, while these bastard children (Southey and Wordsworth) of Milton soar in their illusory poetic heavens, Byron will gather himself back to his father and begin *Don Juan* under the aegis of the human books of *Paradise Lost*.”¹³

The focus on the experience of the poet as he returns from his heavenly ascent to the “Diurnal Spheare,” however, is no less an examination of inspiration. The human portion—the depressed periods before and after moments of divine transport—may be the less glorious underside of a poet’s experience, but the human is still an integral part of the entire process of inspiration. The realm of the human, during which the poet is only a fading coal, is the “half” that “yet remains unsung” (21). This

¹² John Milton. *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London, Pearson Longman, 2007), 7.16-31. McGann also highlights Byron’s “If, fallen in evil days on evil tongues” (line 74 of the “Dedication” to *Don Juan*) as an allusion to Milton’s “though fall’n on evil dayes, / On evil dayes though fall’n and evil tongues; / In darkness, and with dangers compast round” (7.25-7). Byron also speaks of “evil days” in *The Prophecy of Dante* 4.150 (Lord Byron. “The Prophecy of Dante” in *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Vol. 4 [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901], pp. 241-76.). Accessed August 2, 2014. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20158/20158-h/20158-h.htm>. Milton’s own “evil days” echoes Psalm 49.5. See also pp. 11-42 of John M. Steadman. *Moral Fiction in Milton and Spenser* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1995) for further discussion of *Urania* as the muse of divine poetry.

¹³ Jerome McGann. *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), p. 34.

chapter asserts Byron's commitment to the human aspect of divine inspiration and his use of the theme of exile as a figure for poetic inspiration, which he understands not simply as a meaningless conventional gesture, but as a lived experience with human costs, feelings, and aftereffects.

I.

During the Renaissance, ideas of the divine origin of poetry and of the inspiration of poets not only contributed to the development of the *poeta theologus*, but also composed the primary defense of poetry. In the final two books of his popular *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, Giovanni Boccaccio offers an influential defense of poetry in which he asserts poetry's divine nature and sets parallel the wisdom, experiences, and texts of the poet and theologian. While he seems to make subtle distinctions between the inspiration of the biblical prophets and pagan poets:

And I think the poets of the Gentiles in their poetry—not perhaps without understanding—followed in the steps of these prophets; but whereas the holy men were filled with the Holy Ghost, and wrote under His impulse, the others were prompted by mere energy of mind, whence such a one is called “seer”¹⁴

he still validates the human genius of the poets as participants of divine inspiration by emphasizing the consonance of their work with the truth divinely revealed in

Scripture:

I believe that we could easily see that the ancient poets followed, so far as it is possible to human genius, the steps of the Holy Spirit, which, as we see in the divine scripture, by the mouths of many revealed to times to come its highest secrets, making them utter under a veil that which at the proper time it intended

¹⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio. *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, trans. Charles G. Osgood (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), p. 46.

to show, by works, without a veil.¹⁵

The association of gentile poets and biblical prophets leads even to a likening of poetic and biblical texts in which poetic fictions act as the veiled types of a coming truth.

Poetry also shares Scripture's ability to be simultaneously profound and simple, high and low, deep and shallow: "both [forms of writing] may be given the same praise, using the words of Gregory, who said of the Holy Scripture that which may still be said of poetry namely, that it in the same narrative passage reveals the text and a mystery underneath it."¹⁶

Boccaccio describes the working of poetry as a lifting up and elevation of men to a knowledge of the heavens:

Poetry devotes herself to something greater; for while she dwells in heaven, and mingles with the divine counsels, she moves the minds of a few men from on high to a yearning for the eternal, lifting them by her loveliness to high revery, drawing them away into the discovery of strange wonders, and pouring forth most exquisite discourse from her exalted mind...poets have chosen a science or pursuit of knowledge which by constant meditation draws them away into the region of stars, among the divinely adorned dwellings of the gods and their heavenly splendors. Whether this be true testimony let the poems of the prophets bear witness in their own words, written down as they are in excellent style by the pen of poets under direct impulse of this divine knowledge.¹⁷

The image of the poet "draw[n] away into the region of stars" matches the picture he presents of Dante in his *Life of Dante*—a popular text among the Romantic poets¹⁸—in which he also justifies his reconciliation of poetry and theology. He cites one epitaph, among the many that had been prepared for Dante upon his death: "Dante, the

¹⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio. *Life of Dante*, ed. G. R. Carpenter (New York: Grolier Club, 1900), p. 96. Accessed July 20, 2014. <https://archive.org/details/translationofgio00bocc>.

¹⁶ *Life of Dante*, 97.

¹⁷ *Boccaccio on Poetry*, 24-5.

¹⁸ Joseph Luzzi. *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), p. 98, 154.

theologian, unversed in no teaching that Philosophy may cherish in her illustrious bosom, the glory of the Muses...he returned to his stars.”¹⁹ The poet’s rapturous exaltation is his reward and glory, for which he sacrifices material comforts. To the charge against poetry that its “followers never get rich,”²⁰ Boccaccio responds:

...the deceit, and fraud, and lying, and robbery, and treachery which the majority of men practise to-day, seeking by diverse ways the same goal, namely, becoming rich, as if all success and honor and blessedness consist in that. Oh, foolish minds! One brief fragment of an hour, when the spirit is separated from the failing body, will bring to naught all these blameworthy toils.²¹

Written well over four hundred years after Boccaccio’s apologies for poetry, Shelley’s *Defence*, which has sometimes also been called the “defense of Dante,”²² still relies on his predecessor’s invocations of divinity and inspiration as the major mainstays of a defense of poetry. He identifies composition as a record of inspiration and describes the operation of poetry as a soaring above our earthly condition—“what were our consolations on this side of the grave—and what were our aspirations beyond it—if Poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar?” (531). The mysterious influence of inspiration, which allows for the poet’s aspiring transport, divides the poet, keeping the human side of the poet unable to predict or fully understand the movement of the divine “wind”—the “conscious portions of our natures...unprophetic either of its approach or its departure” (531). Shelley writes of the “evanescent...visitations of divinity,” which “elevate and delight beyond all

¹⁹ *Life of Dante*, 73.

²⁰ *Boccaccio on Poetry*, 24.

²¹ *Life of Dante*, 133-4.

²² See Alan Weinberg. *Shelley’s Italian Experience* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 13.

expression: so that even in the desire and the regret they leave, there cannot but be pleasure, participating as it does in the nature of its object. It is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own.” The fleeting inspiration passes gently leaving only the traces and footsteps “like those of a wind over a sea” (532). During the “intervals of inspiration,” however, the poet, previously possessed by divinity, again “becomes a man,” “abandoned to the sudden reflux” of ordinary feelings and influences. The sudden dropping into the ordinary human state produces a disorientation, and the poet, who is “more delicately organized than other men, and sensible to pain and pleasure...in a degree unknown to them,” may be misunderstood and “calumn[iated]” in his passion to “avoid the one,” that is, pain, and “pursue the other,” pleasure, especially as these “these objects of universal pursuit and flight,” which have “disguised themselves in one another’s garments” (534) are not always easily distinguished.

II.

In John Keats’s poem “A Dream, after reading Dante’s Episode of Paolo and Francesca,” the speaker, through his reading of Dante’s text, imagines himself departing from worldly cares and fleeing to “float with” the condemned lovers in “that second circle of sad Hell.”²³ As the poet who claimed visions of unearthly regions, Dante seems to serve as a kind of portal for poetic dreams and reveries. Indeed, Dante is, from the beginning, identified by his capacity for the poetic journey. Boccaccio recounts a story of how Dante, passing by a gathering of women, overhears one saying

²³ John Keats. “Sonnet, A Dream, after Reading Dante’s Episode of Paolo and Francesca” in *The Works of John Keats* (Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 331.

of him: “See the man who goes to hell, and returns when he pleases, and brings back news of those that are below.” Observing his thick, black beard, another responds, “Indeed, thou must speak the truth. Dost thou not see how his beard is crisped and his complexion browned by the heat and smoke that is below?”²⁴ Dante is pleased by their naïve belief in his abilities, but the women’s comments also raise the question of how poetic vision impacts and marks the poet’s physical person and reality. Are moments of inspiration meant to be understood as entirely isolated from the poet’s human existence and how might they affect the poet’s life? Timothy Kircher, by presenting the *poeta theologus* (which “both Petrarch and Boccaccio conceived of...the poet-theologian, who conveyed moral truths through poetic allegory”) as one who, in contrast to the “philosophical...sensibility that underscores the experiential path to self-awareness,” points to “*a priori*” truths, writes that the poet-theologian required a separation between the realms of experience and of moral truth and vision, “a retreat from the existential immediacy of...primal sensibility.”²⁵ I argue, however, that Byron conceives of a more human and experiential *poeta theologus*, or inspired poet, by uniting allegorical vision to the physical experience of inspiration. While other poets may sing of the ethereal visions of poetic flight, Byron is interested in the human life that sustains the impressions of “visitations of divinity.”

Still crediting Dante with an inspired journey, Byron begins his poem *The Prophecy of Dante* by introducing his Dante in the moment when, as Shelley writes,

²⁴ *Life of Dante*, 84-5.

²⁵ Timothy Kircher. *The Poet’s Wisdom: The Humanists, the Church, and the Formation of Philosophy in the Early Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 36.

the poet again “becomes a man.”²⁶ Byron’s Dante expresses the deflation of returning to the material, human world after being enraptured, for a time, to the divine by the Holy Spirit:

Once more in Man’s frail world! which I had left
So long that ‘twas forgotten; and I feel
The weight of clay again,—too soon bereft
Of the Immortal Vision which could heal
My earthly sorrow, and to God’s own skies
Lift me from that deep Gulf without repeal,
Where late my ears rung with the damned cries
Of souls in hopeless bale... (I.1-8)

The dedication to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* similarly begins with a return from a heavenly world, though the poet is amazed to find in Ianthe a beauty that surpasses even that of his dreams: “Not in those climes where I have late been straying, / ... / Hath aught like thee in truth or fancy seem’d” (1, 5).²⁷ The poet’s visionary journeying in these moments also recalls the movement in Milton’s unfinished poem, “The Passion,” in which the speaker is taken up and transported by the spirit of inspiration. In the posture of one conveyed spiritually to witness the scene of the Crucifixion, Milton writes: “See see the Chariot, and those rushing wheels, / That whirl’d the Prophet up at *Chebar* flood, My spirit som transporting / *Cherub* feels, To bear me where the Towers of [Jeru]Salem / stood...”²⁸ The prophet mentioned is the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, who is called to prophesy while in exile, and his messages about the fall of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple typify Jesus’

²⁶ Inspiration, perhaps, was one of the topics discussed in Shelley’s conversations with Byron at Venice in 1818.

²⁷ Lord Byron. “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” in *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 19-206, 21.

²⁸ John Milton. “The Passion,” *The John Milton Reading Room*. Accessed January 2, 2015 https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/the_passion/text.shtml

sorrow for his beloved city's lack of repentance, which Byron also alludes to in his poem (I.61-4). Unlike Milton, however, who calls for a return to his "native element" (*PL* 7.16), Byron's Dante does not welcome the descent to his corporeal condition. There is nothing "native" about his circumstances. He returns to the now-foreign and oppressive sensations of "encumbering clay" (4.22)—the sudden "weight upon my brow / The sense of earth and earthly things come back / Corrosive passions, feelings dull and low / The heart's quick throb upon the mental rack" (1.130-3)—and reassumes his status as an exile.

Byron casts his Dante as a reflection of himself. Like its author, the poem's speaker is separated from an unloving wife (in this, Byron indicates Boccaccio's influence, since Boccaccio asserts in his *Life of Dante*, with little evidence, that Dante was unhappy in his marriage).²⁹ More importantly, Byron uses the speaker to merge his identity with Dante's through their shared experience of exile. Though in *Don Juan* he imagines raising up Milton "Like Samuel from the grave, to freeze once more / The blood of monarchs with his prophecies,"³⁰ he instead conjures Dante in order to speak through him the anguish, grief, and remaining hope of an exile.

It would have been nearly impossible for Byron to escape thinking deeply about his own and Dante's exiles while writing in 1819. He had followed his mistress, the Countess Teresa Guiccioli, to Ravenna, and was writing, at her request, something

²⁹ Byron seems to find consolation in remembering that both Dante and Milton suffered from unhappy marriages: "The only two that in my recollection / Have sung of heaven and hell, or marriage, are / Dante and Milton, and of both the affection / Was hapless in their nuptials" (*DJ* 3.73-6). There are other traces of Boccaccio's thought in Byron's works. For example, much like Boccaccio, who credits Moses as the originator of poetry (*Boccaccio on Poetry* 42), Byron's Dante also highlights Moses as a divinely inspired poet (*Prophecy of Dante* 4.60-2). Byron also seems to echo Boccaccio in reproaching Florence for its mistreatment of its native son: "Ungrateful Florence! Dante sleeps afar" (*CHP* 4.505). Boccaccio often accuses Florence of being "ungrateful" (cf. *Life of Dante*, 34, 73, 74, 79).

³⁰ Dedication to *Don Juan*, 83-4.

on Dante. Ravenna was, of course, the place where Dante had completed his *Paradiso* and was buried. Byron would have been reminded daily of this fact, as the home that he leased looked out onto Dante's tomb, located only a matter of yards away.³¹ As he writes in *Don Juan*, "I pass each day where Dante's bones are laid" (4.825). Ravenna was also the hometown of one of Byron's (and Teresa Guiccioli's) favorite characters from the *Divine Comedy*, Francesca da Rimini. Byron translated the episode of Francesca and Paolo during his time in Ravenna and it is clear that he identified with her plight. Just as, in the *Inferno*, Francesca begins her introduction as one distanced from her home—"The Land, where I was born sits by the Seas"³²—Byron also presents himself in his poem's dedication as one cut off from his place of origin: "the cold and cloudy clime / Where I was born, but where I would not die." Byron also honors Ravenna as the setting of another of his favorite stories, John Dryden's translation of Boccaccio's fable of Theodore and Honoria: "Evergreen forest! which Boccaccio's lore / And Dryden's lay made haunted ground to me, / How have I loved the twilight hour and thee!" (*DJ* 3.934-6). In the story, which also deals with eternal punishment and sets in sharp relief the relatively bearable fate of Francesca and Paolo, Theodore who is perpetually scorned by his beloved Honoria encounters the ghost of a knight who is damned in hell to hunt and kill the fair lady to whom he bore an unrequited love during his life, while the proud lady is condemned to be renewed after each death to be chased and killed again. Ravenna, then, is a place where exiles converge through a layering of stories and historical events.

³¹ Thanks to Stuart Curran for alerting me to the particular proximity of Dante's tomb to Byron's home.

³² Lord Byron. "Francesca of Rimini" in *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), pp. 317-21. Accessed August 2, 2014. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20158/20158-h/20158-h.htm>

And so it is appropriate that Byron's neglected poem "The Prophecy of Dante," which he once described as "the best thing he ever wrote," is replete with figures of exile and suffering. Evoking the images of many famed exiles, including Jesus mourning for Jerusalem, Gaius Marius returning from exile with an army, Prometheus, John the Baptist, Tasso, whose exile he already treated in "The Lament of Tasso," and Moses, Byron suggests that the physical life of the poet must always be one of exile. Byron casts Dante in the tradition of the Old Testament poet-prophets who, more than acting as predictive oracles, call for reform and social justice in their current situations.³³ Boccaccio is influential, perhaps, in encouraging an almost genealogical link between Dante and the prophets by describing Dante's ancestors as leaders who, by divine providence, return from exile to rebuild a ruined Florence and reestablish its laws in the same manner as Nehemiah and Ezra, who restore Jerusalem.³⁴ Like the biblical prophets, who write laws, denounce kings, and return from exile to rebuild city walls, Byron perceives Dante as a "man of action," who, if raised in present-day Italy, would be an active participant in the cause for Italy's freedom and unification. Particularly meaningful, perhaps, for Guiccioli, whose family was involved in the Risorgimento movement, the prophecy of Byron's Dante is a clarion call for political and national freedom: "What is there wanting then to set thee free, / And show thy beauty in its fullest light? / ... and we, / Her Sons, may do this with one deed—Unite" (2.142-5). Byron aligns himself with these men of action, and perhaps even thought to effect, through his poem, an important development in

³³ Ellsworth Barnard also discusses Shelley's affinity for the Old Testament poet-prophets' commitment to social reform. See Barnard, Ellsworth. *Shelley's Religion* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1937).

³⁴ *Life of Dante* 36-7.

Italy's unification efforts. He seeks to hasten the publication of "The Prophecy of Dante," writing to his publisher in 1820, "the time for the Dante would be good now...as Italy is on the eve of great things." The publication was delayed, however, and appeared in a volume in 1821.

The poet's role is then paradoxically defined, for, in spite of his inherent condition of exclusion and exile, the poet must nonetheless fulfill an integral function for the causes of justice and freedom. It is important, I think, that the poem includes a prophecy of the birth of one who will liberate Italy: "The Being—and even yet he may be born— / The mortal Saviour who shall set thee free." The prophecy perhaps alludes to prophecies in the *Divine Comedy*, or to Virgil's *Eclogue 4*, later termed the "Messianic Eclogue," which predicts the birth of a heaven-sent "new-born Babe," or perhaps Byron even imagines himself as a contemporary incarnation of the spirit of Dante in the world, and therefore the one chosen to deliver and restore Italy. The character of a messiah, or Christ, is a helpful analogue in understanding the role of the poet, for despite being the elect intermediary between God and humankind, the Messiah, and his prophetic precursors, are destined to face rejection, especially that of their own. The first chapter of the book of John, which explains the Incarnation as the Word made flesh, also describes the rejection of the Christ: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (Jn. 1.10-1) or as Jesus explains it more succinctly, "Truly I tell you...no prophet is accepted in his hometown" (Lk. 4.24).

Incarnation itself is another figure for the liminal identity of the poet, as it

foregrounds what has been described as the paradoxical dialectic of the “Both/and.” It is feasible only to be either divine or human, either God or man, but incarnation claims the union in one being of both divinity and humanity, states that cannot ordinarily be mutually sustained. In a similar way, the poet has an almost incarnate body in that he is both human and a “participa[nt] in the divine nature,”³⁵ separated from, and yet united with humanity, exiled from, and yet most native to the land of his birth. While the poet must suffer the estrangement and disorientation of poetic exile, there is still a great privilege and ethical responsibility in occupying the metaphysically indeterminate position between humanity and divinity. Indeed, it is ironically because of the poet’s distance and separation from his home and even from the rest of humankind that he must become a kind of representative of humanity.

The final messianic duty is that of sacrificial death, and, in the end, Byron’s Dante looks toward his death. As an exile, he is “saddest of all prisoners,” because he is not restricted to a single despised location, but instead kept in the “dungeon” of the “whole world,” and “shut...from the sole small spot of earth” (4.131-2, 134), his place of birth where he might have died. Death promises the reward of reconciliation, however, as the speaker predicts that his posthumous recognition will redeem his suffering and his tomb. Death allows for the ultimate union, as Tasso’s explains with his final words in “The Lament of Tasso.” They may as well be spoken of Florence by Dante: “No power in death can tear our names apart, / As none in life could rend thee from my heart. / Yes, Leonora! It shall be our fate / To be entwined for ever—

³⁵ *Defence of Poetry*, 521.

but too late!”³⁶

It seems that, for Byron, exile is the necessary real-life cost for poets, who, as figures for revolution and reform, conflict perpetually with corrupt forms of power. He honors those who go “unlaurel’d” (*CHP* 931)³⁷ and reviles the poet-laureates, namely Robert Southey, who “turn [their] very talent to a crime,”³⁸ by lauding tyrants. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante describes exile as the price he has paid for the sake of the joy and glory of poetry: “And I myself have known how greatly [the illustrious vernacular] increases the glory of those who serve it, I who, for the sake of that glory’s sweetness, have the experience of exile behind me.”³⁹ He regards his hardships as being in service of his poetic mission, and characterizes himself as a martyr, or even as Christ, who “[f]or the joy set before him...endured the cross, scorning its shame.”⁴⁰ Byron, too, identifies his alienation with the separation to which Christ calls his believers: “I have not loved the world, nor the world me; / ... / ... I stood / Among them, but not of them; in a shroud / Of thoughts which were not their thoughts” (*CHP* 3.1049, 1054-6).⁴¹ It is not a charred beard or darkened complexion, but the harsh experiences of exile that the poet bears as the scars and stigmata that prove his identity as a poet who is drawn out of the world.

³⁶ Lord Byron. “The Lament of Tasso” in *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), pp. 141-52, 152, 8.244-7. Accessed August 2, 2014. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20158/20158-h/20158-h.htm>

³⁷ Of course, Dante was not laureled, a fact which Boccaccio greatly laments in his *Life of Dante*.

³⁸ Dedication to *Don Juan*, 79.

³⁹ Dante Alighieri. “De Vulgari Eloquentia,” *Princeton Dante Project*, 1.17.6. Accessed August 2, 2014 <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/>.

⁴⁰ Heb. 12.2.

⁴¹ See John 15.18-9, 1 John 2.15-7, Isaiah 55.8-9.

III.

Exile is not only the physical marker of the genuine poet, but it is also a figure for the wandering produced by inspiration, as the exile's emotions closely match those of the poet as he continually departs and reenters the realm of human consciousness. We can see the joining of the ideas of exile and inspiration particularly in the word "flight," as when Boccaccio upbraids Florence, writing: "Oh, ungrateful country, what madness, what forgetfulness possessed thee, when with unaccustomed cruelty thou didst put to flight thy dearest citizen...?"⁴² "Flight" certainly depicts Dante's exile as a fleeing, but it also evokes the classic trope of the poet's inspiration as a flight of fancy, or a spiritual ascent. Both Dante and Boccaccio employ images of sails, boats, and wings to indicate the poet's mental journey. Dante voyages to Purgatory in a boat, beginning his second cantica:

To run o'er better waters hoists its sail
The little vessel of my genius now,
That leaves behind itself a sea so cruel;
And of that second kingdom will I sing
Wherein the human spirit doth purge itself,
And to ascend to heaven becometh worthy. (1-6)

and Boccaccio also figures his beginning the work of the *Genealogy* as a setting out to sea:

At your behest, then, I...raw seaman that I am, embark in my frail little craft
on a stormy sea...little knowing whether my voyage will be worth the trouble.
For I may trace every shore and traverse every mountain grove; I may, if need
be...descend even to hell, or, like another Daedalus, go winging to the ether.⁴³

Byron preserves the figures of boats and winged flights, but to these moments

⁴² *Life of Dante* 74.

⁴³ *Boccaccio on Poetry* 10. See also, e.g. Asia's journey in her soul's "enchanted boat" to Demogorgon's cave in *Prometheus Unbound* (Shelley, Percy, *Prometheus Unbound in Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat [New York: Norton, 2002], p. 254, 2.5.72).

of inspired passage, he adds the affecting image of watching the receding shoreline of one's homeland. The restless Childe Harold seems to perceive leaving home as the beginning of an inspired journey, strumming an "untaught melody" (1.111) on his harp as he watches his home fade from view:

And now his fingers o'er it he did fling,
And tun'd his farewell in the dim twilight.
While flew the vessel on her snowy wing,
And fleeting shores receded from his sight,
Thus to the elements he pour'd his last 'Good night'. (1.13-7)

It seems almost that he becomes a poet in the moment that he enters his exile. Exile, however, is a perpetual signifier of the poet's experience. The poet is willing to be exiled from home in order to enter the exalted regions of poetry, but he must also endure another exile each time he redescends to his mortal state. In *The Two Foscari*, Jacopo compares the disappearing sight of home with the sudden loss of inspiration:

... Ah! you never yet
Were far away from Venice, never saw
Her beautiful towers in the receding distance,
While every furrow of the vessel's track
Seemed ploughing deep into your heart; you never
Saw day go down upon your native spires
So calmly with its gold and crimson glory,
And after dreaming a disturbed vision
Of them and theirs, awoke and found them not.⁴⁴

The exile's feelings of loss seem to mirror those of the poet in his dislocation as he moves suddenly between ordinary life and the regions of dream and vision.

Exile, then, is another figure for the limitations of the human condition, as poets who are confined to earth long for the transcendent ascent of divine inspiration:

⁴⁴ Lord Byron. "The Two Foscari: An Historical Tragedy" in *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Vol. 5 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), pp. 121-96, 3.1.206-14. Accessed August 2, 2014. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20158/20158-h/20158-h.htm>

Oh Love! O Glory! what are ye who fly
 Around us ever, rarely to alight?
 There's not a meteor in the Polar sky
 Of such transcendant and more fleeting flight.
 Chill, and chained to cold earth, we lift on high
 Our eyes in search of either lovely light;
 A thousand and a thousand colours they
 Assume, then leave us on our freezing way.⁴⁵

The corporeal body itself becomes a kind of internal prison from which the poet cannot escape (“What Exile from himself can flee?” [CHP 1.857]). Byron, writing the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* immediately after his own self-exile, describes Childe Harold as finding relief in temporary moments of transport. The same “clay,” of which Byron’s Dante also complained, however, weighs him down from his desired flight:

Like the Chaldean, he could watch the stars

 And human frailties, were forgotten quite:
 Could he have kept his spirit to that flight
 He had been happy; but this clay will sink
 Its spark immortal, envying it the light
 To which it mounts as if to break the link
 That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to its brink. (3.118, 121-6)

The poet looks forward to when he may shake off the bonds of mortal life and experience fully the temporary visions afforded by the “sacred glow” (CHP 2.8)⁴⁶ of inspiration:

With a fresh pinion; which I feel to spring,

 Spurning the clay-cold bonds which round our being cling.
 And when, at length, the mind shall be all free
 From what it hates in this degraded form,

⁴⁵ *DJ* 7.1-8. See also *CHP* 2.28.

⁴⁶ See also *CHP* 3.715, 4.1664.

... shall I not
Feel all I see, less dazzling, but more warm?
The bodiless thought? the Spirit of each spot?
Of which, even now, I share at times the immortal lot? (*CHP* 3.694,
697-9, 703-6)

The exile, then, yearns for the comforts of home, but the exiled poet those of heaven.

Shelley claimed to have found this heaven, terming Italy, where both he and Byron spent their years of exile, the “Paradise of exiles.”⁴⁷ Byron grants Italy a similar designation: “Thou, Italy! so fair that Paradise, / Revived in thee, blooms forth to man restored” (*Prophecy* 2.47-8). The very expression—“paradise of exiles”—seems inherently contradictory, as the position of exile already assumes an expulsion from paradise. In *Cain*, Lucifer tells Cain, who decries his exclusion from paradise, that paradise must be a relative state, given that a fallen nature bars human beings from the true paradise. Cain’s sufferings and “present state of sin,” he explains, are an Eden and paradise compared to the “redoubled wretchedness” his descendants will have to endure.⁴⁸ In *Don Juan*, it is love that helps lead to a paradise of exiles. Haidee and Juan regard each another as angels and earth as paradise (*DJ* 2.1632). Byron’s Dante also finds in Beatrice paradise, and indeed more than paradise, for, without her presence, heaven itself would fail to be paradise: “My Paradise had still been incomplete” (*Prophecy* 1.27). It is love also that aids the *Inferno*’s Francesca and Paolo. If there are any who succeed in making a heaven of hell, as Milton’s Satan promises to do, a case might be made for this couple who are, at least, exiled together. (Indeed, even Keats longs to join them in hell.) Of their shared fate, Byron writes:

⁴⁷ Percy Shelley. “Julian and Maddalo” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 119-135, 122, l. 57.

⁴⁸ Lord Byron. “Cain” In *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 881-938, 2.2.220, 224.

“Dante is more humane in his ‘Hell’ for he places his unfortunate lovers (Francesca of Rimini & Paolo) in company—and though they suffer—it is at least together,” and referring another time to the Francesca story, “It is true that, treating of the Christian Hades, or Hell, there is not much scope or site for gentleness—but who *but* Dante could have introduced any ‘gentleness’ at all into *Hell*? Is there any in Milton’s? No—and Dante’s Heaven is all love, and glory and majesty.” While Francesca and Paolo may be allowed this one comfort, still they must face the “greatest of all woes”—to be reminded of happy times in present misery—when Dante asks them to recount their story.⁴⁹ Retrospection is the exile’s inescapable pain. When Byron narrates Juan’s sorrow for all he leaves behind, he describes his tears, as well as those of “the captive Jews / By Babel’s waters” (*DJ* 2.121-2) who weep when their captors demand a “song of Zion” (Ps. 137.3). But the look back at what has been lost is also what produces the telling of their story. The backward step of Dante’s *terza rima*, which Byron adopts in his “Prophecy,” conveys the backward regard of the exiled poet, who must recapitulate in order to move forward.

In his descent from heaven in Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes of a solitude that is alleviated by a communion with his muse:

... though fall’n on evil dayes

 In darkness, and with dangers compast round,
 And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
 Visit’st my slumbers Nightly, or when Morn
 Purples the East: still govern thou my Song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few (7.25, 27-31)

Even when deserted in lesser settings and conditions, Milton finds solace in belonging

⁴⁹ “There is no greater sorrow than to recall our time of joy in wretchedness” (*Inferno* 5.121-3). Byron quotes this sentiment as the epigraph to *The Corsair*.

to and having participated, together with his muse, in a diviner nature. It is similarly through inspiration that poets achieve Francesca and Paolo's "togetherness," which constitutes the reprieve, or even the pleasure, of exile. As it has been the "lot" of "mightiest bards" (including Dante), to be "confin'd" to "distant homes" (*CHP* 630-1), Byron discovers with them the community of fellow exiles. Byron particularly installs his Dante in the company of "the great Seers of Israel" (2.8), making a claim to divine inspiration more serious than a superficial gesturing to the topos of the inspired poet through an invocation of a harmless and obsolete deity or inspiration, such as Apollo or the classical muse. While the claim on the Judeo-Christian God's inspiration might be overlooked as a convention accommodating Dante's deep religious conviction, Byron's great investment of autobiographical significance in his character of Dante brings further weight to the invocation. Byron not only claims divine inspiration but the *same* spirit—"That Spirit was on them, and is on me" (2.9)—tracing his poetic heritage through Dante, Milton, and the heroic poet-prophets of the Old Testament. It is this same continuity of inspiration that Boccaccio seeks in his *Life*—"I humbly pray Him who drew Dante by those lofty stairs, as we know, to see Him, that He will now aid me, and guide my genius and my feeble hand" (34)—and which the humanists claimed for the pagan poets by asserting that, although the pagan poets may not have been imbued with the Holy Spirit in the same way as the poet-theologians that wrote the Bible, they were nevertheless divinely gifted to prophesy Christian truth through God's sovereign orchestration throughout history. Byron uses the experience of exile as a marker of poetic inspiration to assemble a fellowship of likeminded and mutually reinforcing poets. Indeed, poets nearly merge as types of a single figure, as do Byron

and Dante, collapsing into each other through the mold of the exiled poet. Inspired by the same spirit, they meet, so to speak, “in the air,” as do believers with Christ on the last day before ascending to heaven.

While heaven itself cannot but be beyond the reach of human beings, poetry still represents the closest possible attainment—“If life eternal may await the lyre, / That only Heaven to which Earth’s children may aspire” (*CHP* 350-1)—and even imagines the possibility of creating a new paradise. For the poet’s own exile, poetry offers the hope of returning home through the influence of his work:

... and should I lay
My ashes in soil which is not mine,
My spirit shall resume it—if we may
Unbodied choose a sanctuary. I twine
My hopes of being remembered in my line
With my land’s language:... (*CHP* 4.73-8)

But Byron also conceives of his poetry as an effort to mitigate the larger general exile of the human condition—a labor for which he abandons the security of an ordinary life and embarks on poetry’s journeys. Like Isaac Newton, whom he depicts as a Christ-like antitype reversing Adam’s fault (“Man fell with apples, and with apples rose” [*DJ* 9.9]), he works to “counterbalance human woes” (*DJ* 9.13):

And wherefore this exordium?—Why, just now,
In taking up this paltry sheet of paper,
My bosom underwent a glorious glow,
And my internal spirit cut a caper:
And though so much inferior, as I know,
To those who, by the dint of glass and vapour,
Discover stars, and sail in the wind’s eye,
I wish to do as much by Poesy.
In the Wind’s Eye I have sailed, and sail; but for
The stars, I own my telescope is dim;
But at the least I have shunned the common shore,
And leaving land far out of sight, would skim

The ocean of Eternity: the roar
Of breakers has no daunted my slight, trim,
But *still* sea-worthy skiff; and she may float
Where ships have foundered, as doth many a boat. (*DJ* 9.17-32)

Shelley similarly calls upon poets to restore and recreate a paradise for exiles. He quotes from Dante's *Inferno* to demonstrate that Francesca and Paolo fall in love through a text, and therefore through language, and credits language with the power to reimagine the world: "The familiar appearance and proceedings of life became wonderful and heavenly; and a paradise was created as out of the wrecks of Eden. And as this creation itself is poetry, so its creators were poets; and language was the instrument of their art" (*Defence* 525). Also citing Milton's Satan's resolve to "make a heaven of hell," Shelley presents poetry as a divine agent of salvation and creation in a world fettered to dreary familiarity: "But poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions...It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration" (*Defence* 533).

Shelley also describes the "creat[ion]" of "a being within our being" (533) to reapprehend the world, and this is, I think, for Byron, the soul of inspired thought, which "create[s]... / A being more intense" that lives "[t]he life we imagine" (*CHP* 3.6-7, 9):

Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,
Invisible but gazing, as I glow
Mix'd with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,
And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feelings' dearth. (*CHP* 3.51-4)

It is the "beings of the Mind" that allow for an existence outside of the restraints of mortal clay:

The beings of the mind are not of clay;
Essentially immortal, they create
And multiply in us a brighter ray
And more beloved existence: that which Fate
Prohibits to dull life, in this our state
Of mortal bondage, by these spirits supplied
First exiles, then replaces what we hate;
Watering the heart whose early flowers have died,
And with a fresher growth replenishing the void. (*CHP* 4.37-45)

The immortal spirits of the mind “first exile,” in order to draw the poet out of the habits of “dull life,” but then, bringing about a reorientation of values, become for him “the refuge of our youth and age” (4.46).

IV.

When Shelley compares the skylark to a poet (“Like a Poet hidden / In the light of thought, / Singing hymns unbidden”),⁵⁰ he participates in the long tradition of figuring poets as birds, which embody the poets’ song, flight, and heavenly ascent. Various birds are called on to elucidate the particular nature and behavior of different poets, and so a poet’s alignment with a specific bird can be meaningful. For example, Du Bartas considers himself a swallow, while other poets, those who write in “briefer genres,” are nightingales, or birds of the spring;⁵¹ Shelley, who calls the poet “a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds” (*Defence* 516), portrays those poets who imitate greater poets as a “flock of mock-birds” (*Defence* 527); and Byron delineates Coleridge, whose great learning renders his writing abstruse, as “a hawk encumber’d with his hood,” and Southey and

⁵⁰ Percy Shelley. “To a Sky-Lark” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 304-7, 305.

⁵¹ See Steadman, *Moral Fiction* p. 23.

the other “Lakers” as the nursery rhyme’s “four and twenty blackbirds in a pie,” eager to serve the king.⁵² Byron also compares Dante, who, in his heavenly journey, is made capable of bearing increasingly brighter radiance, to the eagle, who soars unblinkingly toward the sun (*Prophecy* 3.70-2).⁵³ For Keats, the nightingale also acts as a constant spirit linking poets to predecessors or to those of fellow feeling:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn⁵⁴

It is Milton who truly substantiates the poet’s identification with a bird, namely the nightingale. The nightingale becomes for Milton a kind of “self-portrait as an artist,”⁵⁵ confirming his nightly visits to “where the Muses haunt” (*PL* 3.27) and associating him with other sightless poets and prophets:

... nor sometimes forget
 Those other two equal’d with me in Fate,
 So were I equal’d with them in renown,
 Blind *Thamyris* and blind *Mæonides*,
 And *Tiresias* and *Phineus* Prophets old.
 Then feed on thoughts, that voluntarie move
 Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful Bird
 Sings darkling, and in shadiest Covert hid
 Tunes her nocturnal Note. (*PL* 3.32-40)

While scholars may debate whether Milton sincerely believed in his own inspiration or simply performed it as a poetic convention, I believe that the significance of his

⁵² Dedication to *Don Juan*, ll. 6, 8, 14. In referring to the “Sing a song of sixpence” nursery rhyme to deride Southey, Byron follows George Steevens, who also used it to tease another poet laureate, Henry James Pye. Byron’s Dante also castigates those poets too subservient to power: “thus the Bard too near the throne / Quails from his inspiration, bound to *please*— / How servile is the task to please alone!” (*Prophecy* 3.85-7).

⁵³ The eagle, or the “sacred bird” (*Paradiso* 17.70), is also on the coat-of-arms of Dante’s patron, Can Grande della Scala.

⁵⁴ John Keats. “Ode to a Nightingale,” ll. 63-7.

⁵⁵ “Nightingale.” *Milton Quarterly* 42(2008): 133-7, 133.

physical blindness adds weight to his use of it as a figure of inspiration. The nightingale is the symbolic avatar in which the ideas of flight and spontaneous song merge with the burdens of the poet's actual life.

If Milton's bird foregrounds his use of blindness as an autobiographical trope authenticating his calling and inner poetic vision, Byron's bird is the bird of paradise, which is characterized by its condition of exile from heaven. Like true poets, birds of paradise "long to flee back to their native mansion," and soon finding that "Earth's mist with their pure pinions [do] not agree," they "die or are degraded" (*Prophecy* 3.169-72). Just as the bird of paradise's flights are actions of exile, the transporting movement of poetic inspiration causes the poet to oscillate between heaven and earth through temporary transfigurations, which lead continually to feelings of dissatisfaction and isolation. The bird of paradise and of exile, mirroring the poet's physical and mental exile, enables the poet's flight and validates his suffering as the sacrifice of a true poet.

Byron also demonstrates an affinity for another wandering bird, Noah's dove, which searches for dry land after the flood. Byron's Dante calls his soul an "arkless dove" (*Prophecy* 1.24) without Beatrice, and Don Juan's ship is twice compared to "Noah's ark" (*DJ* 2.62, 526), out of which Juan is to be sent "like a dove of promise forth" (2.64). The ship is shipwrecked, however, and though a rainbow, God's sign to Noah of his covenant with all living things, appears, and a beautiful dove-like bird circles the sailors ("And had it been the dove from Noah's ark / ... / They would have eat her, olive-branch and all" [2.757, 760]), these seemingly good "omen[s]" (2.752)

do not deliver salvation.⁵⁶ The survivors of the storm resort to cannibalism, and all perish except for Juan, who abstained from human flesh. Byron refers to Ugolino (2.658), Dante's cannibal in hell, who, perhaps, began his cannibalism on earth when imprisoned with his sons. While starving to death, his sons ask their father to eat them, and Dante writes that Ugolino's hunger overpowers his sorrow (*Inferno* 33.75). Byron thought that Ugolino did eat his children, but Shelley refused this interpretation, believing instead that hunger killed Ugolino when grief could not. It is perhaps to demonstrate this ambiguity that Byron includes among the sailors two disparate portraits of fathers—one callous and the other devoted—who lose their sons. Upon reading *Don Juan*, Shelley writes to Byron on May 6, 1820: "What a strange and terrible storm is that at sea, and the two fathers, how true, yet how strong a contrast!" He adds what must have been, between the two poets, monumental praise: "Dante hardly exceeds it."

In *The Prisoner of Chillon*, also based on Ugolino's imprisonment, the speaker is temporarily comforted by a wandering bird, a "visitant from Paradise"⁵⁷ who reminds him of his brother who died beside him in prison. In *Heaven and Earth*, Byron's drama of the Noah story, also written at Ravenna, Japhet's wandering is like that of a homeless bird—"He said; but, as I fear, to bend his steps / Towards Anah's tents, round which he hovers nightly, / Like a dove round and round its pillaged

⁵⁶ Upon seeing a seagull while in a boat, Leigh Hunt is reminded of Coleridge's ancient mariner (p. 345). He also thinks of Noah's bird, comparing imagination's flight to that of the dove: "fancy taking wing like the dove of Noah..." (*Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries: with Recollections of the Author's Life and of the Visit to Italy* [London: Henry Colburn, 1828], p. 346.).

⁵⁷ Lord Byron. "The Prisoner of Chillon" in *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), pp. 7-29, 24, l. 284. Accessed August 2, 2014. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20158/20158-h/20158-h.htm>

nest”⁵⁸—while Jacopo’s exile is similarly compared to that of a bird:

Must I consume my own [heart], which never beat
For Venice but with such a yearning as
The dove has for her distant nest, when wheeling
High in the air on her return to greet
Her callow brood... (*Foscari* 3.1.10-4)

Images of suffering and wandering birds represent the condition of the poet. Byron depicts Childe Harold, previously described as a restless swallow (1.318), as an impaired and imprisoned falcon, weighted down by the weariness of exile:

But in Man’s dwellings he became a thing
Restless and worn, and stern and wearisome,
Droop’d as a wild-born falcon with clipt wing,
To whom the boundless air alone were home:
Then came his fit again, which to o’ercome,
As eagerly the barr’d-up bird will beat
His breast and beak against his wiry dome
Till the blood tinge his plumage, so the heat
Of his impeded soul would through his bosom eat.
Self-exiled Harold wanders forth again (*CHP* 3.127-36)⁵⁹

Finally, Byron presents his Dante as a homeless wanderer, one who envies even doves their nests:

A wanderer, while even wolves can find a den,
Ripped from all kindred, from all home, all things
That make communion sweet, and soften pain—
.....
To envy every dove his nest and wings (1.163-5, 168)

He recalls *Alastor*’s wandering poet, who wistfully observes a swan and longs for the home and mate that the bird enjoys:

His eyes pursued its flight.—“Thou hast a home,
Beautiful bird; thou voyagest to thine home,

⁵⁸ Lord Byron. “Heaven and Earth: A Mystery” in *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Vol. 5 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), pp. 285-321, 293, 1.2.86-8. Accessed August 2, 2014. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20158/20158-h/20158-h.htm>

⁵⁹ See *DJ* 10.350 and *Prophecy of Dante* 3.176 for images of the poet as a drooping bird.

Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck
With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes
Bright in the lustre of their own fond joy.
And what am I that I should linger here,
With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers
In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven
That echoes not my thoughts?"...⁶⁰

Both of these moments are reminiscent of Jesus' expression of his own homelessness on earth: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matt. 8.20). Jesus' statement is strangely echoed in 1950 by the American cartoonist Robert Ripley's "Ripley's Believe it or Not!" series in which a picture of Boatswain's, Byron's faithful dog's, grave appears with the caption: "Lord Byron's dog has a magnificent tomb while Lord Byron himself has none." While Boatswain does have an impressive monument at Newstead Abbey, Byron's estate, Ripley's assertion is not entirely true. Byron was, in fact, buried at the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Nottinghamshire after being refused a burial at Westminster Abbey in 1824. (Westminster Abbey finally built a memorial to him in 1969.) Lord Byron's life and death in (self-imposed) exile and the belatedness of his native homeland's reception parallel the circumstances of Dante's life. Dante lived for nearly 20 years as an exile from his beloved Florence, dying and being buried in Ravenna in 1321. Florence later regretted its treatment of the poet and made repeated attempts to recover his body. These efforts were thwarted, however, by the custodians

⁶⁰ Percy Shelley. "Alastor" in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 72-90, 81, ll.280-90. Byron's Dante is separated from his wife, who does not join him in exile. Byron, however, describes Don Juan and Haidée repeatedly as paired birds (*DJ* 2.1340, 2.1518, 4.108-10, 4.222). After their separation, he refuses the sultana's advances, saying "The prison'd eagle will not pair" (*DJ* 5.1007).

at Ravenna, who even hid his bones in a false wall of the church where he lay buried. While a tomb, which has remained empty, was built for Dante in Florence in 1829, he remained an exile even in death for many years, as the city only formally revoked Dante's exile sentence in June 2008. It is, perhaps, appropriate that Dante's tomb in Florence remains empty. Empty tombs portend resurrection and new life, and as the poet who remains in exile, Dante inspires other poetic exiles in their pursuit of love, freedom, and inspired vision.

Making his only acknowledgement of a contemporary poet, William Blake dedicates "The Ghost of Abel" to Byron, the author of *Cain*, writing: "To Lord Byron in the Wilderness: What doest thou here, Elijah? Can a Poet doubt the Visions of Jehovah? Nature has no Outline, But Imagination has. Nature has no Tune, but Imagination has. Nature has no Supernatural, and dissolves: Imagination is Eternity."⁶¹ Blake alludes to God's encounter with Elijah at Mount Horeb, where an exiled Elijah has given up on his life and where God asks Elijah why he has fled in despair (1 Kings 19). With his question, Blake seems to endorse Byron as a poet-prophet, but perhaps we may also ask: where but in exile could the poet be? As a poet of exile, Byron accomplishes for future poets what Dante did for him. In 1823, Lorenzo da Ponte, librettist of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and expatriate scholar of Italian literature, published a translation of Byron's *Prophecy of Dante* into Italian, enacting a circuitous route back to Dante through Byron. Stuart Curran reads Da Ponte's attempt to unite with Byron, as Byron did with Dante, through their shared experiences of loss (Da Ponte writes that Byron's poem helps him to grieve the loss of his son) and exile:

⁶¹ William Blake. "The Ghost of Abel" in *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. John E. Grant and Mary Lynn Johnson (New York: Norton, 2007).

As Dante surveys the future of Italy, he at last melds into Byron, a brother poet also surveying its future from a vantage point belated and extended so as to include Europe, England too. Da Ponte assimilates the strategy to his own life, in his dedicatory verses “A Lord Byron,” and openly draws both Dante and Byron together in the process. Certain as it is that all three have suffered exile, it is clear too that Byron, not Dante, has crossed mountains, seas, and rivers and in two great poems has depicted life as a process of endless exile...As Byron looks into the mirror of Dante, so Da Ponte reads his fate against Byron’s wanderer over eternity: “I, too...” he repeats at the beginning and end of his “Address.” It takes one not just to know one, but to translate one—to carry one across boundaries of language, of time, of geography.⁶²

While emphasizing the poet’s human aspect and experientializing the phenomenon of inspiration, Byron also conjures an image of the poet as universal and divine, transcending the boundaries of time, geography, and mortality.

⁶² Stuart Curran. “Byron and Da Ponte” in *Rereading Byron*, ed. A. Levine and R. N. Keane (Garland, 1993), 223-237, 229.

CHAPTER THREE

DANTEAN ALLEGORY IN SHELLEY'S *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

“T’unbind the Charms that in slight Fables lie, / And teach that Truth is truest Poesie.”

- Abraham Cowley, *Davideis*
41-2

“The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called the anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation. The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text: one they called allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called anagogical, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included the most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have a chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature.”

- Flannery O’Connor,
Mystery 72-3

For many years, scholars have remarked the numerous Dantean echoes and allusions pervading Percy Shelley’s works, even recognizing him as “up to this time Dante’s best reader and closest emulator in a British context.”¹ In view of Shelley’s profound assimilation of Dante’s spirit and thought, critics have not much considered what might have been his understanding of Dante’s, arguably, most original move as poet-theologian—the bold claiming of the “allegory of the theologians.” In the *Epistle to Can Grande*, in which he introduces and dedicates his *Paradiso* to his patron, Dante calls for the application of biblical exegesis to his non-biblical *Commedia*,

¹ Curran, Stuart. “Commentary for *Alastor* Volume Poems,” in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, eds. Donald H. Reiman, Neil Fraistat, and Nora Crook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 3:429-465, 444. Oscar Kuhns writes: “It is impossible to do full justice to this influence of Dante on Shelley. It reveals itself on almost every page; it hovers like an atmosphere over his entire later works; it rises in his theories of love, in visions of abstract beauty; it reveals itself by sudden flashes in metaphor and figure, or even single words and expressions...In him more than any other English poet do we find direct reference, allusion, translation, or imitation and adaptation of thought, figure, description; even examples of the peculiar metrical form of the *Divine Comedy*, the *terza rima*, are not wanting” (“Dante’s Influence on Shelley.” *Modern Language Notes* 13(1898): 161-165, 165, 161). Kuhns distinguishes *Prometheus Unbound* as the work most profoundly influenced by Dante (162, 163).

transgressing the divide upheld by St. Thomas Aquinas between the modes of allegory for theologians and for poets. Dante's letter specifically delineates the working of the fourfold method of scriptural interpretation, adducing the now well-known explication of Psalm 114:1-2. The psalmist's recalling of Israel's exodus from Egypt can be read as polysemous: the literal sense relates the historical event of the exodus, the allegorical (or typological) Christ's salvation of the lost, the moral (or tropological) the soul's conversion from sin to grace, and the anagogical the deliverance from the corruption of earth to eternal glory. Citing a scriptural example to illustrate all four senses, he makes clear that he means to interpret the work according to the allegory of the theologians, thereby presenting a strikingly unique declaration. While other authors may have suggested a hermeneutic similar to the fourfold interpretive method, none before Dante asserts the exact suitability of biblical exegesis for secular literature.²

Whether Shelley was familiar with the *Epistle to Can Grande* is uncertain. Since the first manuscript commentary mentioning the letter (and Dante as its author) was written in the 1340s,³ and the first complete version of the text published at Venice in 1700, we might expect that from these points forward, the letter accompanied discussions of the poet's work.⁴ Shelley owned the 1793 Gatti edition of

² Robert Hollander argues for the exceptionality of Dante's claim in "Dante *Theologus-Poeta*." *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 94(1976): 91-136, 92-95. For Hollander, the claim's very originality defends the letter's authenticity: "The uniqueness of the claim is another reason for believing that it was surely written by Dante...One of the ways we can recognize hackwork is to see its derivative character. No one has ever found any other document which makes a specific claim for the relevance of *fourfold biblical exegesis* to a secular work of literature before Dante made that claim."

³ Barański, Zygmunt G. "The *Epistle to Can Grande*," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, eds. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2:583-589, 589.

⁴ See Paget Toynbee's *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae: The Letters of Dante* (London: Oxford Press, 1966), xxxvi-xlii for the letter's early publishing history. The epistle's authenticity has been challenged in

Delle Opere di Dante Alighieri, which does not include the “Epistle,” but he could have encountered the letter through Antonio Zatta’s editions, which were highly prized by British Italophiles for their illustrations of the *Commedia*.⁵ Shelley also may have learned of the letter through his friend, John Taafe, who makes reference to the Epistle in his commentary *Comment on the Divine Comedy of Dante*—published in 1822 “largely at [Byron’s] instigation”⁶—which both Shelley and Lord Byron read in manuscript form.⁷ If Shelley did know of the letter and its important claim, it would certainly have made an impression on him and also, perhaps, on his *Prometheus Unbound*, which a number of critics have described as “Shelley’s *Divine Comedy*,”⁸ and whose fourth act was almost undoubtedly added because of Shelley’s “re-reading of the *Paradiso*.”⁹

Even if Shelley had no knowledge of the epistle, however, he may still have discerned Dante’s deep interest in the fourfold medieval allegory through reading *The Convivio*, parts of which he translated, and in which Dante, without overtly claiming the allegory of the theologians, still seems to toy with the possibility of doing so. While recommending the four senses as the general heuristic by which “writings can be understood and ought to be expounded,”¹⁰ *The Convivio* yet appears to maintain the

recent years (see Barański), but I am concerned mainly with whether Shelley and his contemporaries would have attributed the letter to Dante.

⁵ Much thanks to Professor Nick Havely for informing me about the Zatta editions. The epistle appears in the Venice 1757-8 edition in vol. 4, pp. 400-8 and in the 1760 edition in vol. 5, pp. 469-80.

⁶ Taylor, Beverly. “Byron’s Use of Dante in *The Prophecy of Dante*.” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 28(1979): 102-119, 103 n. 7.

⁷ Pite, Ralph. *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante’s Presence in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 44. Shelley also urged his publisher Charles Ollier to publish Taafe’s book on Dante (Hughs, Daniel. “Review of Shelley Revalued.” *Studies in Romanticism* 24(1985): 565-72, 568.

⁸ Alan Weinberg quotes Sarah Dyck in *Shelley’s Italian Experience* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 119.

⁹ Weinberg 119.

¹⁰ Dante. *Dante’s Il Convivio*, trans. Richard Lansing (Garland, 1990), 2:1.

traditional distinction between the interpretation of theologians and poets. Dante illustrates the first two senses, which he can safely assert as the allegory of the poets, with poetic examples—“the fables of the poets” as instances of the literal sense and the truth “hidden beneath the cloak of these fables” as the allegorical—but turns to Scripture to characterize the moral (“the third...is the sense that teachers...seek to discover throughout the scriptures”) and anagogical (“this occurs when a scripture is expounded in a spiritual sense”), apparently maintaining that the third and fourth senses are inaccessible to poetry. Remaining conservative, Dante states outright his decision to make use of the allegory of the poets—“Indeed the theologians take [the allegorical] sense otherwise than do the poets; but since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets.” By declaring a position that would have been assumed implicitly, he makes room for something more daring. The very notion of a choice (as though the allegory of the theologians were even an option) is unusual and hints at the potential for pursuing another kind of allegory in a secular poetic text.¹¹

What is at stake in the distinction between the allegory of the theologians and that of the poets is the matter of divine authorship, or indeed even inspiration, of a text. Because the only book acknowledged by medieval audiences as having a human and a divine author was the Bible, it alone could have both a literal and a spiritual sense—the literal communicated by the human author and the spiritual the divine.¹²

¹¹ Hollander writes: “The fact that a working medieval poet-critic could insist that he had it in his power to make such a choice, and even to combine the two modes, as Dante goes on to assert...is [certainly] of some importance...to our sense of Dante” (92). Hollander also suggests the possibility that Dante wrote the *Vita Nuova* according to the allegory of the theologians (100-102).

¹² Stephen Manning. “Scriptural Exegesis and the Literary Critic” in *Typology and Early American*

The literal is not inferior or separate from the spiritual senses, but is rather essential for establishing the divine origin and meaning of the text, for while words signify events, historical events themselves are authored by God, who “use[s] events as men use words.”¹³ A human author may recount a historical event, but it is God who brings about the event and imbues it with spiritual significance, often producing a corresponding event to fulfill the initial type or sign. Thus the key difference between the two modes of allegory, and therefore between scriptural and secular texts, lies mainly in the historicity of the text’s first and literal sense.¹⁴ In scripture, the first sense is nearly always historical, while the literal sense of the poets is not.¹⁵ Even in the work of a *poeta theologus* that presents truth consonant with the truth of divinely inspired texts, the fictiveness of the literal sense is acknowledged and justified for the sake of the hidden, allegorical meaning. The allegory of the poets is therefore an allegory of “this *for* that,” since the outer literal sense exists only to signify an inner

Literature. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972): 47-66, 54.

¹³ Singleton, Charles S. “Dante’s Allegory.” *Speculum* 25(1950): 78-86, 80.

¹⁴ Scripture’s literal sense is ever the historical for medieval allegorists, but Reformation reformers rejected the fourfold allegory, arguing that Scripture had only a literal sense, and that the allegorical, moral, and anagogical were multiple applications of this one sense. The “literal” did not simply refer to the letter of the text, but to what was signified by the letter, so that the figurative was included in the literal. William Tyndale, who most insists on the single literal sense, writes that since God spoke spiritual meanings through men’s words, “that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense” (quoted in Harris, Victor. “Allegory to Analogy.” *Philological Quarterly* 45(1966): 1-23, 7). The reformers sought to recover the devalued literal sense to delimit allegorical signification, for “in removing the sign from its literal, historical context...there seemed to be no way of governing how the texts could signify” (Dickson, Donald. “The Complexities of Biblical Typology in the Seventeenth Century.” *Renaissance and Reformation* 23(1987): 253-272, 266). Victor Harris writes that, since the reformers encouraged typology, “an actual instance of the literal” (Harris 7), over allegory, though “residual fragments of the fourfold division” (Harris 9) remained in the seventeenth century, the fourfold was completely obsolete by the eighteenth century (Harris 14). Donald Dickson emphasizes, however, the survival of the fourfold exegesis within the complex levels of typological signification in the seventeenth century. Though more grounded in the literal text, the three kinds of types—Christological, sacramental, and eschatological—parallel the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses of the fourfold mode. Indeed, typology seems to preserve the fourfold allegory in subsuming it into its classification of types.

¹⁵ Scripture may also sometimes present a literal sense that is not historical, as in the case of Jesus’ parables.

true sense. The allegory of the theologians, however, is an allegory of “this *and* that,”¹⁶ as the literal sense not only points to a spiritual sense, but is also itself historically true.¹⁷

If we are to accept Dante’s claim to the allegory of the theologians, then we must understand that he also insists on the historicity, and therefore, perhaps, the divine authorship, of his narrative. If the literal sense is to be regarded as true, then Dante reaches even farther than the *poeta theologus*, setting his *Divine Comedy*, not as ancillary, but comparable, if perhaps not quite equal, to the Bible. To accommodate the alleged historicity of Dante’s work, scholars have posited that “the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not fiction.”¹⁸ That is, that Dante, unwilling to concede that a poet is firstly a liar, proffers (however winkingly) “a fiction which he pretends to consider not to be literally fictitious, while at the same time contriving to share the knowledge with us that it is precisely fictional.”¹⁹ Singleton translates Benvenuto da Imola’s commentary: “Let it not seem improper to you, reader, that this journey of a living man into the world beyond is presented to you in its first sense as literally and historically true. And if you say: ‘I do not believe that Dante ever went to the other world,’ then I say that with those who deny what a poem asks be granted, there is no

¹⁶ Singleton, 80.

¹⁷ Not every historical event in Scripture figures an additional spiritual sense, and “it is this fact which best shows that the literal historical meaning of Scriptures was not necessarily a sense *in the service of* another sense, not therefore a matter of ‘this for that.’” (Singleton 81). This difference in the literal sense between the allegory of theologians and of poets also leads to a difference in interpreting the allegorical sense, which Dante alludes to in *The Convivio*. Poets understand the allegorical meaning to be that which is concealed by the literal fiction, but because the theologians depend on the veracity of the literal sense, the allegorical (or typological) sense very often signifies an aspect of the historical Christ, the ideal antitype (Lansing 2.1 n. 1).

¹⁸ Singleton, Charles. “The Irreducible Dove.” *Comparative Literature* 9(1957): 129-135, 129.

¹⁹ Hollander 119.

further disputing.”²⁰

Following Dante, Boccaccio also “partially elides the difference between the historical and the fabulous”²¹ by applying the fourfold exegetical method to the myth of Perseus, as though it were a biblical story, in his encyclopedic *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*. Of course, the medieval exegetical mode would have been general knowledge for Boccaccio, but he was also familiar with the *Epistle to Cangrande* and “followed its interpretive pronouncements in his public readings.”²² While it is not clear whether Boccaccio believed the letter to be authentic, Jason Houston notes that his favoring, in the *Accessus* to his *Expositions*, of the term “bark” over “veil”²³ to refer to the literal, fictive sense indicates a reserve in employing biblical exposition for Dante’s work: “That Boccaccio prefers ‘*cortecchia*’ to the term ‘*velo*,’ resonant with biblical significance, for his interpretive task establishes...his interest in avoiding...a biblical explication of the *Commedia*.”²⁴ Boccaccio offers that his own work “removes the veil from these [poetic] inventions,” however, justifying his own assigning of a historical sense to fables with the principle of euhemerism, which views mythological events and characters as glorifications of real historical events and persons.²⁵ Because of myth’s historical basis and the *poeta theologus*’s belief that

²⁰ Singleton, “Dante’s Allegory,” 83.

²¹ Mazzotta, Giuseppe F. “Boccaccio: The Mythographer of the City,” in *Interpretation & Allegory*, ed. Jon Whitman (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 349-364, 360.

²² Houston, Jason M. *Building a Monument to Dante: Boccaccio as Dantista* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 135. See Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Boccaccio’s Expositions on Dante’s Comedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 605 n. 6 for references to studies discussing Boccaccio’s use of the *Epistle* in his *Expositions* and *Life of Dante*.

²³ Boccaccio uses the term “*cortecchia litterale*” with far greater frequency than “*poetico velo*.”

²⁴ Houston 138.

²⁵ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio’s Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, trans. Charles G. Osgood (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), 105. The Renaissance humanist Marsilio Ficino demonstrates a similar euhemerism in attributing authorship of the *Orphic Hymns*, Greek poems of uncertain origin, to the

ancient literature often shadows forth meanings consistent with Christian truth, Boccaccio unflinchingly treats the story of Perseus, who “killed the Gorgon, and flew away victorious into the air,” according to the allegory of the theologians: “[The story] may be understood superficially in its literal or historical sense. In the moral sense it shows a wise man’s triumph over vice and his attainment of virtue. Allegorically it figures the pious man who scorns worldly delight and lifts his mind to heavenly things. It admits also an anagogical sense, since it symbolizes Christ’s victory over the Prince of this World, and his Ascension.”²⁶ Boccaccio asserts a fourfold meaning for each of the myths but, like many medieval commentators, does not offer a full four-sense explication of each story. His treatment of Prometheus, a “rare instance of anagogy,”²⁷ presents Prometheus as, historically, a great teacher who retired to the summit of the Caucasus to devote himself to meditation and study, and, mystically, a figure of God as creator, one “raising his fellows to civilization in morals, knowledge, and virtue.”²⁸

That Shelley was a great admirer of Boccaccio is very clear. He writes to Leigh Hunt on 27 September 1819: “I have been lately reading this most divine writer [Boccaccio]. He is, in a high sense of the word, a poet, and his language has the rhythm and harmony of verse. I think him not equal certainly to Dante or Petrarch, but far superior to Tasso and Ariosto...How much do I admire Boccaccio!...His more

mythic Orpheus himself (Falco, Raphael. “Marsilio Ficino and Vatic Myth.” *Modern Language Notes* 122(2007): 101-122, 105.)

²⁶ Quoted in Osgood, Charles G. “Introduction,” in *Boccaccio on Poetry*, xi-xlix, xviii.

²⁷ Osgood xviii n. 12.

²⁸ Osgood xxiv.

serious theories of love agree especially with mine.”²⁹ He would almost certainly have been familiar with the *Genealogy*, copies of which were easily obtainable in Italy and whose “traces are everywhere recurrent in the literature of the Renaissance,”³⁰ as a reference book for mythology and its interpretation, as well as for its influential defense of poetry. The *Genealogy*, which begins by introducing the figure of Demogorgon as the ultimate progenitor of the pagan gods, is also especially important as the main source for the Demogorgon in *Prometheus Unbound*. Asia’s passage into Demogorgon’s cave mirrors “Boccaccio’s imagined descent ‘into the bowels of the earth’”³¹ where he encounters the originary deity. Whereas Boccaccio is led to the underworld in his search for God and rejects Demogorgon as a pagan superstition in the light of the true God of Christianity, Shelley “inverts Boccaccio’s Christian thesis by accepting the pagan god whose existence Boccaccio had attributed to the absence of Christian revelation and to the barbaric ignorance that deified natural forces.”³²

Alan Weinberg has noted that “The Dantean influence on *Prometheus Unbound* is almost universally acknowledged by critics, and yet seldom closely examined” (119). Ellen Brown Herson also mentions that even in identifying resemblances between the two poets’ works, there can be a lack of a “convincing reason...for Shelley’s use of Dante.”³³ In this chapter I would like to consider the Dantean allegory, that is, the application of the fourfold allegory to poetry, as a

²⁹ Shelley, Percy. *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*. (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), 2:227-228.

³⁰ Oxgood xlv.

³¹ Weinberg 127.

³² Wasserman, Earl R. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 333.

³³ “Oxymoron and Dante’s Gates of Hell in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*.” *Studies in Romanticism* 29 (Fall 1990): 371-93, 375 n. 7.

significant point of interest that may have added to the allure of the *Commedia* for Shelley. Emulating Dante's and Boccaccio's example, Shelley also lays claim to the fourfold biblical exegesis for the *Prometheus Unbound*. The import of the imitation is that Shelley also asserts the poet as theologian and exerts his theological authority to appropriate the traditionally characteristic interpretive mode of the theologians. Like Dante's example of Israel's emancipation from Egypt, Shelley tells the story of a momentous unshackling and setting free. The fourfold mode enables Shelley to envision a liberation that is completely fulfilled in every sense, with the anagogical sense, especially, allowing him to effect his apocalyptic vision. Subsuming even biblical exegesis into the allegory of his syncretic work, Shelley ultimately seeks to raise his work to the stature of Scripture.

Earl Wasserman's influential essay on *Adonais* may provide support for the idea that Shelley was interested in polysemous allegory. Wasserman seems to present a reading of the poem as polysemous (although he does not use this term, but rather "progressive revelation" to express the arrival at a composite meaning through the gradual integration of different branches of reference):³⁴

The condition that makes possible the poetic development of this tentative theme is Shelley's fusion of the various planes of reference in the name "Adonais": Keats (the special person); Adonis (the legendary Greek who universalizes the person Keats); and Adonai-Adonis (the godhead who, as the spirit of animation, defines the protagonist as the great but perishable vitalizing power of the universe)...The one set of elegiac conventions can therefore perform at all three levels at the same time: as biography, myth, and symbolism...As the poem opens we learn that Adonais' head is bound with frost (3); and this image reaches out in the three dimensions of reference: the frost is that of the cold body of Keats, the frost binds his head because frost

³⁴ "Adonais: Progressive Revelation as a Poetic Mode." *ELH* 21(1954): 274-326. The influence of the *Commedia*, and especially the *Paradiso*, on *Adonais* was first noted by John Taaffe (Weinberg 181). See also Weinberg 173-201 for more on the relationship between the *Commedia* and *Adonais*.

binds (holds inert) Nature in the dead winter of the year, and, by suggesting the crown of thorns, the band of frost becomes the sign of the god of animate Nature, the wintry death of which is also the death of the god. (282)

It might even be possible, by differentiating between Adonis and a personified Nature, to revise Wasserman's argument and argue for a kind of fourfold interpretation in which Adonais simultaneously represents Keats, Christ, nature, and Adonis. The *Prometheus Unbound*, however, records Shelley's more deliberate and systematic attempt to incorporate the fourfold mode of exegesis. Like *Adonais*, *Prometheus Unbound* does sometimes present a single image or process that contains multiple planes of reference, but the drama's senses are also evident at the narrative level, in keeping with God's authoring of historical events to signify and prefigure subsequent events, with each sense prompting, and allowing for, the next in a series of corresponding and interlinking narrative events. Shelley appropriately marks and enacts the operation of the drama's allegorical, or mystical, senses (those other than the literal or superficial) with an unveiling, which draws upon the veil's laden significance as a biblical and classical figure of allegorical meaning. Like the antitype that illuminates the meaning of what came before it, "remov[ing] the mystery of its type,"³⁵ the cumulative work of each successive unveiling finally produces the unbinding of Prometheus, humanity, and the world.

It may be challenging to consider a historical, or even literal, sense for so abstract a closet drama, operating in the language of "emblem" (1.594), "type" (1.645), and "prophecy" (1.706), with various groupings of spirits singing and floating in chorus. We might, however, impute to Shelley Boccaccio's mythological

³⁵ Korshin, Paul J. *Typologies in England: 1650-1820*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 364.

euemerism, which would undergird the characters and their actions with some degree of historicity. The mythic tale tells that Prometheus' freedom from his exile is first prophesied, and then accomplished. Boccaccio's historicization of Prometheus as a kind of hermit withdrawing for contemplation and study may have influenced Shelley's view of Prometheus' exile as self-imposed. Shelley seems to regard Prometheus as a willful (in both senses of the word) participant in Jupiter's torture, as he possesses all along the ability to free himself by choosing to love.

Like Dante who used preceding literary characters as historical figures, Shelley also might have viewed Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (and his fragment *Prometheus Unbound*) as a kind of "Old Testament" preserving and verifying the real existence of the central figures and events. Shelley's text would be a kind of counterpart testament to which Aeschylus' prequel would signify, with both dramas having a specific literary history. Shelley actually does (jokingly) demonstrate this treatment of earlier literary figures as types in the Prologue to *Peter Bell the Third* in which his Peter Bell is the typological fulfillment of the Peter Bells of William Wordsworth and John Hamilton Reynolds.³⁶ Moreover, Shelley imbues the scenes and settings of his work with the historical realities of his own Roman experiences. Shelley writes in his Preface that "[t]his Poem was chiefly written upon the mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla... The bright blue sky of Rome, and the effect of the vigorous awakening of spring in that divinest climate, and the new life with which it drenches the spirits

³⁶ "The first Peter—he who was / Like the shadow in the glass / Of the second, yet unripe, / His substantial antitype.— / ... / And the third is he who has / O'er the grave been forced to pass" (Shelley, Percy, *Peter Bell the Third in Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat [New York: Norton, 2002], pp. 341-65, ll. 13-6, 23-4.)

even to intoxication, were the inspiration of this drama.”³⁷ Like Dante, who claims to recount his own experiential journey, Shelley’s own sights and travels are documented in those of his characters: Asia and Panthea’s voyage to Demogorgon’s cave is influenced by Shelley’s trip to Vesuvius and to the volcanic Phlegraean Fields near Naples; the forest leading to Demogorgon’s domain recalls Shelley’s visit to the Astroni crater; and the Vatican Museum’s Sala della Biga inspires the depiction of the Grecian temple in Act III Scene iv.³⁸ Of course, the images with which the Furies torment Prometheus also depict the realities of the terrors of the French Revolution.

Paul Korshin particularly identifies *Prometheus Unbound* as a work whose “subject and mythic associations...are conducive to typological methods and interpretation.”³⁹ Indeed, Shelley ambitiously envisions Prometheus as a kind of ur-type capable of sustaining all types, figures, and exegetical systems, describing him as “the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends.”⁴⁰ Prometheus is both the promising type and the realizing antitype; the spirits repeatedly remind him of “the prophecy / Which begins and ends in thee!”⁴¹

As a type, Prometheus, who is introduced as a cruciform sufferer, most evidently figures Jesus Christ. As the Furies torture Prometheus, they conjure an image nearly reflecting him of “a youth / With patient looks nailed to a crucifix”

³⁷ Shelley, Percy. “Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. (New York: Norton, 2002), 206-209, 207.

³⁸ Weinberg 108-11.

³⁹ Korshin 98.

⁴⁰ Preface, Norton 207

⁴¹ Shelley, Percy, *Prometheus Unbound* in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat [New York: Norton, 2002], pp. 209-286, 1.690-91, 706-707, 799-800. Subsequent references to *Prometheus Unbound* will be to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line numbers.

(1.584-5) from whose “white and quivering brow . . . drops of bloody agony flow” (1.564-5). Prometheus’ Christological identification is further supported by his figuring of the transfigured Christ. Panthea’s dream of an unfettered and glorified Prometheus recalls the New Testament account of Christ’s Transfiguration, where atop a mountain, Jesus suddenly allows his divinity, formerly masked by his humanity, to shine brilliantly, stunning his disciples.⁴² Just as his transfiguration causes Christ’s face to “shine as the sun” and his “raiment [to be] white as the light” (Matt. 17.2, KJV), Prometheus’ transformation produces a similar change:

But in the other his pale wound-worn limbs
Fell from Prometheus, and the azure night
Grew radiant with the glory of that form
Which lives unchanged within (2.1.62-5)

The glimpse of glory is anticipatory. As Jesus’ heavenly nature previews the grandeur of his coming kingdom, Panthea’s dream prophesies Prometheus’ imminent freedom and restored divinity.

The veil is not only a figure of the hermeneutic function of typology, but is itself also a typological symbol. The revelation of Christ corresponds to the moment in the Old Testament where Moses descends from Mt. Sinai with the Decalogue after convening with God. The reflected radiance of God shines in his face, however, and the people are afraid to come near him. Moses, then, covers his face while addressing the people, and removes it only to enter the presence of God.⁴³ Paul interprets the veil of Moses, which served to distance the people from even the vestigial incandescence of God’s presence, as contributing to humankind’s inability to comprehend God’s

⁴² Dante also cites the moment of Christ’s Transfiguration as he details the senses of the fourfold exegesis in the *Convivio* (*Convivio* 2.1, p. 64).

⁴³ Exodus 34.29-35.

nature and sanctity. It is the veil, however, that makes possible the unveiling. As Thomas Davis writes, “In order to reveal himself, then, it was necessary for God to ‘veil’ his majesty in signs and symbols which men could comprehend. Hence, Revelation involves an original ‘veiling’ and necessitates a subsequent ‘unveiling.’”⁴⁴ Moses’ law is obscuring when read literally, but when deciphered as a system of types and shadows that figure the law-fulfilling representative of the New Testament, the veil is lifted through Christ:

Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?...Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: And not as Moses, which put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: But their minds were blinded: for until the day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Corin. 3:6-8, 12-8)

The New Covenant reveals the spiritual meaning of the Old Covenant and frees those indentured to the letter of the law to live according to the spirit of the law. Christ also removes another important veil. At the moment of his death, the veil cordoning off the holiest part of the temple (the “holy of holies”) is “rent in the midst” (Luke 23.45). Paul again construes the event typologically, naming Christ as the torn curtain through whom the saved may now approach God without priestly mediation:

⁴⁴ Davis, Thomas M. “The Traditions of Puritan Typology” in *Typology and Early American Literature*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972): 11-45, 38-9.

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10.19-22).

Not content to transfigure only Prometheus, the text completes the typological unveiling by returning to Moses through the figure of Asia (herself a type mirroring Prometheus). “On top of a snowy Mountain” (2.5.s.d) Panthea wonders at a marvelous light that fills the cloud in spite of the absence of the sun. The Spirit of the Hour responds that the light is emanating from Asia, and when Panthea realizes this, she reacts with commingled anxiety and praise:

How thou art changed! I dare not look on thee;
I feel but see thee not. I scarce endure
The radiance of thy beauty. Some good chance
Is working in the elements, which suffer
Thy presence thus *unveiled*. (2.5.16-20, emphasis added)

Asia elicits the same apprehension that led to the installation of the veil, but it is clear that Asia is an unveiled Moses.⁴⁵ In the context of biblical unveiling, Prometheus’ and Asia’s transfigurations, mimicking Christ’s freeing from the bondage of law to life in the spirit, represent a greater spiritual freedom and a more profound understanding of the truth.

Moses not only acts as the veiled precursor of the transfigured Christ, but he is also shown conversing with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration in a dramatic meeting of type and antitype. The prophet Elijah (representing the tradition of the

⁴⁵ Bryan Shelley also notes the allusion to Moses (*Shelley and Scripture*. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], p.110). A number of critics have remarked that Asia’s transfiguration also recalls Beatrice’s glorified beauty, “which changes from heaven to heaven and becomes too splendid for Dante to gaze upon” (Kuhns 164) in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

prophets) stands with them, and, while Wasserman credits Panthea's presence at Prometheus' transfiguration as "apostolic,"⁴⁶ placing her among the disciples who witnessed the Transfiguration, I would like to suggest that Shelley casts Panthea in the prophetic role of Elijah. Known as the revolutionary leader who called down fire from heaven during a period of persecution, Elijah seems a relevant figure in a Promethean story. Panthea's relation of her satisfaction to the slaking effect of rain ("As the bare green hill / When some soft cloud vanishes into rain, / Laughs with a thousand drops of sunny water" [4.181-3]) might allude to the small cloud that answers Elijah's prayer to end a drought, and Panthea is even taken up into the clouds in a chariot "inlaid with crimson fire" (2.4.157) similar to the "chariot of fire and horses of fire" (2 Kings 2.11 KJV) that take Elijah up to heaven at the end of his life. More significantly, Panthea performs the prophetic function of carrying dream visions for Asia to read through her mirror-like eyes. Like the prophetic type, which does not fully grasp its own prefiguring of the antitype, Panthea seems innocently unaware of her visionary gift. Still, just as Old Testament prophecy foretells the return of Elijah to prepare people's hearts for the day of judgment,⁴⁷ Panthea readies Asia for Prometheus' delivery with the dream of his transfiguration.

Elijah experiences his own face-to-face encounter with God, when, while seeking refuge from persecution, God instructs him to stand on a mountain and wait for his presence to pass by: "And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord" (1 Kings

⁴⁶ Wasserman, *Shelley*, 298.

⁴⁷ "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers..." (Malachi 4.5-6).

19.11). Following the wind, there is an earthquake and a fire—but the Lord is not in any of them. At last the Lord comes in a “still small voice” (1 Kings 19.12), which Wasserman writes “must have seemed to Shelley the Judaic motto of nonviolent revolution” (384), as Elijah draws his cloak over his face.⁴⁸ This event bears comparison to Prometheus’s conjuring of Jupiter’s Phantasm. At the sound of the Phantasm’s approach, Panthea says, “The sound is of whirlwind underground, / Earthquake, and fire, and mountains cloven” (1.231-2). Ione has already covered her eyes and ears with her wings, and urges her sister, at the approach of the Furies, to “close thy plumes over thine eyes / Lest thou behold and die” (1.439-40). The Phantasm speaks with an “empty voice” (1.249), however, highlighting the absence of the quiet strains of true omnipotence.

The search for the divine voice implicitly guides Asia and Panthea throughout the drama. The sisters follow the spirit echoes to awaken “a voice unspoken” (2.1.191) and meet Demogorgon who articulates the need for a voice to explain the deep mysteries: “—If the Abyss / Could vomit forth its secrets: — but a voice / Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless” (2.4.114-6). It is interesting to consider here the figure of John the Baptist, whom Jesus identifies as the typological fulfillment of the prophecy concerning Elijah, a kind of second Elijah.⁴⁹ John, in turn, aligns himself with a prophecy in Isaiah—“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye

⁴⁸ In the Old Testament, to look upon God with an uncovered face would result in instantaneous death (“And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live” [Exodus 33.20].). Shelley also alludes to this episode of God’s “still, small voice” in *Epipsychidion* (line 331) and *Hellas* (line 728).

⁴⁹ “And if ye will receive it, [John] is Elias, which was for to come” (Matt. 11.14). The angel who announces John’s birth also introduces him as the new Elijah: “And [John] shall go before[the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1.17).

the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God...And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together..." (Isaiah 40.3, 5)—which explains his mission as a kind of harbinger for Jesus' ministry and emphasizes the transforming power of a call or voice.⁵⁰

The quest for a true voice preparing humankind for divine revelation also leads to the moral sense of the text. Demogorgon, who tells Asia that "All spirits are enslaved which serve things evil" (2.4.110), reveals that love alone is truly supreme and free: "All things are subject but eternal Love" (2.4.120). It is, then, the "low voice of love, almost unheard" (3.3.45), whose "familiar voice wearies not ever" (2.5.41), which effects reform for the human condition. Prometheus is the first to choose to embrace love, recalling his curse and renouncing his hatred: "I wish no living thing to suffer pain" (1.305). His self-initiated decision to love liberates him from his hatred for Jupiter and sets in motion the love that inspires moral change. Prometheus charges the Spirit of the Hour with the task of carrying the "curved shell, which Proteus old / Made Asia's nuptial boon" (3.3.65-6), which has "lulled music sleeping" (3.3.71) within it, to the "cities of mankind" (3.3.76). The shell has "breathing within it / A voice to be accomplished" (3.3.66-7), and "[l]oosening its mighty music" (3.3.81) over the earth, love alters the realm of human life. The Spirit of the Earth reports a sound "more sweet / than any voice but [Asia's], sweetest of all" (3.4.55-6) that causes all the people to leap into the streets, "Looking in wonder up to Heaven, while yet / The music pealed along" (3.4.60-61). Galvanized by the emancipating music of love, the human shapes that had been so despicable are transfigured to reveal the "fair being

⁵⁰ As discussed below in Chapter Four, Dante, in *La Vita Nuova*, also presents a lady named Joan as a type of John the Baptist because she walks before Beatrice, the type of Christ.

whom spirits call man” (3.4.45), previously hidden beneath “the dull sneer of self-loved ignorance / or other such foul masks” (3.4.43-4). Prometheus envisions a future mutual love with humankind, as well as a flowering of culture and the arts: “. . .love, by him and us / Given and returned, swift shapes and sounds which grow / More fair and soft as man grows wise and kind, / And veil by veil evil and error fall . . .” (3.3.59-62).

The sound that filled the skies and brought about man’s alteration produces another change. Though the Spirit is, at first, “disappointed not to see / Such mighty change as I had felt within / Expressed in outward things” (3.4.128-30), he soon sees corrupt social conventions and habits cast off in the creation of a new and harmonious social order:

Behold, thrones were kingless, and men walked
One with the other even as spirits do
None fawned, none trampled; hate, disdain or fear,
Self-love or self-contempt on human brows
No more inscribed, as o’er the gate of hell,
“All hope abandon, ye who enter here”;
None frowned, none trembled, none with eager fear
Gazed on another’s eye of cold command
Until the subject of a tyrant’s will
Became, worse fate, the abject of his own
Which spurred him, like an outspent horse, to death.
.....
Speaking the wisdom once they could not think,
Looking emotions once they feared to feel,
And changed to all which once they dared not be, (3.4.131-41, 157-9)

The end of Act III depicts the expunging of hierarchies and divisions:

The painted veil, by those who were, called life,
Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,
All men believed and hoped, is torn aside—
The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains

Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man:
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationess,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree,—the King
Over himself; just, gentle, wise—but man: (3.4.190-7)

It is important to remember that this external change follows the internal one. Social reform does not constitute the achievement of freedom, but is rather a consequence or benefit of an internal liberation.⁵¹ Social change may also require time, being a more gradual process, whereas individual change may be as instantaneous as conversion.

Shelley has sometimes been represented by critics as a single-minded iconoclast who believed that an ideal social order could be reached simply through the overthrow of oppressive social institutions and conventions. Mary Shelley's note to *Prometheus Unbound* may have contributed to this view. She writes: "The prominent feature of Shelley's theory of the destiny of the human species was that evil is not inherent in the system of the creation, but an accident that might be expelled... Shelley believed that man had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none." While acknowledging that he very well may have had the conviction that the human will could accomplish this change (of course, it is no easy "only"), Ellsworth Barnard presents a thorough argument against perceiving Shelley as believing, at least consistently, in a basically good humankind intimidated and bound by constricting social structures:

[E]vil was for Shelley a reality far too painful and all-pervading to be easily escaped, least of all by any mere abolition of political institutions, religious

⁵¹ This accords with Milton's view that man's internal enslavement to sin after the Fall causes an external loss of freedom: "Since thy original lapse, true liberty / Is lost... / ... / Reason in man obscured, or not obeyed, / Immediately inordinate desires / And upstart passions catch the government / From reason, and to servitude reduce / Man till then free. Therefore since he permits / Within himself unworthy powers to reign / Over free reason, God in judgment just / Subjects him from without to violent lords; / Who oft as undeservedly enthrall / His outward freedom" (*Paradise Lost* 12.83-4, 86-95).

dogmas, or social conventions... Shelley was not such a fool as to think that a world so completely corrupt could be purified overnight by a dose of Reason or a new suit of clothes. He saw, or at any rate soon came to see, ... that human nature weaves the cloth and cuts the patterns of the garments which society wears.⁵²

Shelley does not persist in subscribing to Godwinian thought that evil action is a result of circumstance, necessity, or even ignorance. It is the perverted aspects of human nature that engender evil and establish misleading institutions, which aggravate, but are not the sole cause of, social ills.⁵³

Where, then, does evil begin? Barnard, returning to Mary's "[m]an had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none," places evil's origin within the human will: "But if evil can be removed by an act of will, it must have come into existence by a similar act. And this is Shelley's view."⁵⁴ This is why Shelley emphasizes humanity's freedom of will, and therefore responsibility, to choose good: "Man, one harmonious Soul of many a soul / Whose nature is its own divine controul" (4.400-1). While Promethean accounts depict the gift of fire as "a bad master but good servant," Shelley views the human will, "A spirit ill to guide, but mighty to obey" (4.408), as the original Promethean gift. By giving them deliberation of their own, Prometheus performs the messianic function of freeing the slaves of earth from sin and guilt and making them capable of good. Free will is something that even the gods do not possess. Prometheus tells Jupiter: "Thou art omnipotent. / O'er all things but thyself I gave thee power, / And my own will" (1.272-4); Mercury, too, exhibits

⁵² *Shelley's Religion*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1936), pp. 110-11.

⁵³ Barnard adduces Count Cenci as the embodiment of the evil in human nature. Cenci's depravity is individual and not a result of social coercion (126-7). Barnard also quotes from the preface to *The Revolt of Islam*: "...I have avoided all flattery to those violent and malignant passions of our nature which are ever on the watch to mingle with and to alloy the most beneficial innovations" (121).

⁵⁴ Barnard 129.

his inability to exercise his own will: “Awful Sufferer! / To thee unwilling, most unwillingly / I come, by the great Father’s will driven down” (1.352-4).⁵⁵

The exertion of the will presupposes a possibility of choice, which itself implies a moral conflict or a competition of impulses. In depicting internal striving, Barnard invokes Paul’s classic confession of continued struggle against sin:⁵⁶

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?⁵⁷

Critics have commented on Shelley’s seeming inability to even conceive of just such a conscience or self torn between desires, and therefore his limited understanding of the role of the will.⁵⁸ Barnard argues, however, that *Prometheus Unbound* may be the work presenting the exception. Prometheus is one who has finally realized, through his years of torment and suffering, self-governance over his hateful passions. He tells the Furies: “Yet am I king over myself, and rule / The torturing and conflicting throngs within, / As Jove rules you when Hell grows mutinous” (1.492-4).

⁵⁵ The distinction between humankind’s will and beliefs forms the basis of one of Shelley’s major contentions with Christianity. He did not agree with the church’s insistence on believing in the Gospel in order to be saved, and, influenced by John Locke’s “Essay on the Human Understanding” and David Hume’s “Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,” Shelley explains the apparent injustice of the requirement in his note to “I Will Beget a Son” (*Queen Mab*): “A human being can only be supposed accountable for those actions which are influenced by his will. But belief is utterly distinct from and unconnected with volition... Belief is a passion... Volition is essential to merit or demerit” (Shelley, *Works* 105).

⁵⁶ Barnard 146

⁵⁷ Romans 7.18-24.

⁵⁸ Barnard writes that this view is somewhat understandable since Shelley seems to show no signs of “inner discord” about his own morally questionable actions. Beatrice Cenci, also, “undergoes no struggle, feels no doubts, suffers no remorse” (147, 8).

Humankind, similarly, must learn to battle and master its own ignoble tendencies through the will to love: “His Will, with all mean passions, bad delights, / And selfish cares, its trembling satellites, / ... / Is as a tempest-winged ship, whose helm / Love rules, through waves which dare not overwhelm, / Forcing Life’s wildest shores to own its sovereign sway” (4.406-7, 409-11).

Barnard’s quotation of the Pauline struggle between the natures of the flesh and of the Spirit is very apt. The desire to sin is only the residual habits and longings of the old sinful nature. Like a widow who is no longer legally “bound” to her deceased husband, the Christian who has put to death the nature of the flesh through the death of Christ is no longer enslaved to sin, but is “loosed” and free to live according to the nature of the Spirit (Rom. 7.2). Seize then, Paul exhorts, this freedom that is already yours: “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5.1). In calling for an unbinding from the rule of the old nature in order to live the freedom of the new, Paul uses the expressions of “putting on” and “putting off”: “That ye *put off* concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye *put on* the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another” (Eph. 4.22-5, emphases added). Paul repeats the use of these phrases elsewhere in the New Testament: “But now ye also *put off* all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have *put off* the old man with his deeds; And have *put on* the new man,

which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Col. 3.8-10, emphases added).⁵⁹ Just as speaking truth is identified as a particular change produced by spiritual conversion, Shelley also emphasizes how mankind’s transformation allows for a newfound integrity: “None wrought his lips in truth-entangling lines / Which smiled the lie his tongue disdained to speak; / ... / None talked that common, false, cold, hollow talk / Which makes the heart deny the *yes* it breathes” (3.4.142-3, 149-50).

Satan in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* also borrows the language of “putting on and off” to promise Eve a transformation through the eating of the fruit: “So ye shall die perhaps, by *putting off* / Human, to *put on* gods, death to be wished, / Though threatened, which no worse than this can bring” (9.713-5, emphases added). What Adam and Eve put on, however, is a fallen nature, for in their prelapsarian nakedness, there had been no need for a “*putting off*” of the clothing or “*troublesome disguises* which we wear” (4.739-40, emphasis added). Shelley recalls this Pauline and Miltonic tradition, as he records a moral transfiguration where humankind is renewed to a state of original goodness:

Some *foul disguise* had fallen, and *all*
Were somewhat changed...

 with little change of shape or hue:
 All things had *put* their evil nature *off*. (3.4.70-1, 76-7, emphases added).

⁵⁹ Paul also uses the expression of “putting on” to urge the imitation of Christ: “[L]et us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us *put on* the armour of light. ... But *put ye on* the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof” (Romans 13.12, 14, emphases added); “For as many of you as have been baptized in Christ have *put on* Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.27-8, emphases added).

It is the music of love, dispersed from the sky, that takes the place of the “last trump” and brings about the great change:

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but *we shall all be changed*, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and *we shall be changed*. For this corruptible must *put on* incorruption, and this mortal must *put on* immortality. So when this corruptible shall have *put on* incorruption, and this mortal shall have *put on* immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. (1 Corin. 15.51-4, emphases added)

As with the transfigurative unveilings of Prometheus and Asia, mankind’s change is not a reworking of his nature, but rather an uncovering that exposes attributes that have always already existed. Prometheus’ transfiguration reveals the glory “which lives unchanged within” (2.1.65), Asia’s radiance is her own essence, and man does not “become,” but instead “remains / Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man” (3.4.193). Because of Prometheus’ example of self-abnegating love and his gift of free will, Shelley’s humankind, then, begins in the state of the post-conversion Christian—having the ability to cast off the slavery of evil through the will to be free and to love. Evil does not continue because of an ignorance of, or inability to choose, good, but because of a lack of love for good. In his Preface, Shelley makes clear that he seeks to activate the human potential for moral change:

Didactic poetry is my abhorrence. . . . My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness.⁶⁰

With Love as “[t]he great secret of morals,” the imagination as “[t]he great instrument

⁶⁰ Shelley, “Preface,” 209.

of moral good,” and poetry as that which expands the imagination, Shelley intends for *Prometheus Unbound* to inspire great moral effort.⁶¹

Finally, the text’s significance at the anagogical sense, the one dealing with eternity and with future glory, has been discussed by scholars identifying the drama’s apocalyptic themes. The ideas of Apocalypse and Millennium, the era of peace expected to follow the turmoil of the last days, held a particular fascination for the Romantic period. The violent upheaval of the revolution in France signaled for many an impending end, and the Romantic poets, eager to follow Milton’s example in mythologizing biblical narratives, appropriated the mystical and prophetic language and imagery of Revelation. Many imagine cataclysmic disasters and New Jerusalems, borrowing the symbolic elements of trumpets, earthquakes, awesome creatures, riders, a glorious woman and her child, and a beast or dragon.

Shelley’s drama employs many of the same markers of biblical Apocalypse: there are earthquakes, whirlwinds, and fires, and Death passes on a pale, while horse (1.782). Morton Paley finds *Prometheus Unbound* distinctive among the Romantic works dealing with Apocalypse and Millennium, however, as it is “the most ambitious and least unsuccessful Romantic attempt to unite apocalypse and millennium.”⁶² As the early indicators of apocalypse in the 1790s brought on only tyranny and war, Romantic writers began to question whether the apocalypse would necessarily be accompanied or followed by the millennium. Shelley maintains an unwavering anticipation of heaven on earth through his conviction that human, and not divine, will

⁶¹ Shelley, Percy. “A Defence of Poetry” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. (New York: Norton, 2002), 510-535, 517.

⁶² Paley, Morton D. *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 275.

would bring about a society of love and harmony. It is important to distinguish here between millenarianism, the belief that the second coming of Jesus Christ would usher in the new age of harmony, and millennialism, the theory that a divinely guided gradual progression of history would lead to a perfect and holy society. Millennialism removed the necessity of Jesus Christ in the millennium, and therefore, millennialists were comprised not only of religious groups, but also of secular radicals. By displacing the roles of God and Christ, Apocalypse and millennium are no longer dependent on a divine will but can be humanly inspired and effected.

Following Shelley's belief in a potential cosmic transformation, the text's sequence of varied unveilings leads to the ultimate unveiling of the Apocalypse that is truly an *apocalypsis* (meaning in the Greek "the lifting of the veil"). Demogorgon's throne is unveiled and the other "mysteries of the universe" (3.4.105) begin to be disclosed. The deceitful "painted veil" (3.4.190) that was considered Life, and that misled men's hopes and beliefs is "torn aside" (3.4.192), and even the veil of Death is lifted (3.3.113-4). The Earth's oceans, deserts, and abysses "laugh with a vast and inextinguishable laughter" (4.334), springs of knowledge are "unsealed" (4.115),⁶³ spirits unite in ethereal song, and heaven comes to earth: "heaven and earth united now" (4.273). Panthea describes how the secrets of the earth's deep heart are made bare (4.279), and man, now a kind of Adamic divinity in a reborn universe, understands and names not only all animals,⁶⁴ but even stars:⁶⁵

⁶³ The breaking of seven seals on a sacred scroll in Revelation unfolds the action of the last days. The chosen people are also marked with the seal of God, and Demogorgon names "Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance" (4.562) as the "seals" (4.563) of love's new kingdom.

⁶⁴ "And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field" (Gen. 2.20).

The lightning is his slave; heaven's utmost deep
Gives up her stars, and like a flock of sheep
They pass before his eye, are numbered, and roll on!
The tempest is his steed, he strides the air;
And the abyss shouts from her depth laid bare,
Heaven hast thou secrets? Man unveils me; I have none. (4.418-23)

Shelley illustrates man's achievement of the hypothetical inner paradise, contingent upon his ability to join love and wisdom, promised to Milton's Adam by the angel Michael, even as he escorts Adam from Eden:

Of wisdom; hope no higher, though all the stars
Thou knew'st by name, and all th'etereal powers,
All secrets of the deep, all nature's works,
Or works of God in heav'n, air, earth, or sea,
And all the riches of this world enjoy'dst,
And all the rule, one empire; only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,
Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,
By name to come called charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far. (12.576-87)

The unveiling and laying bare of the earth also demonstrates the realization of biblical prophecies of the Apocalypse in which “the heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be *laid bare*” (2 Pet. 3.10, NIV emphasis added). It is not for God that the world is uncovered, however (“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” [Hebrews 4.13, NIV]), but rather for a deified Man.⁶⁶

The apocalypse does not end with simply clearing away “the old order of

⁶⁵ “[God] telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names” (Ps. 147.4 and Isa. 40.26).

⁶⁶ For God's “laying bare” of the earth and of men's hearts, see also 2 Sam. 22.16, Ps. 18.15, Ps. 29.9, 1 Cor. 14.25, NIV.

things” (Rev. 21.4 NIV),⁶⁷ but it ushers in a new millennial world. Early in the text, Asia’s and Prometheus’ hopeful waiting is marked by millennial expectations. Asia’s greeting of her sister’s and the dawn’s concurrent arrival is a veritable maranatha:

“This is the season, this the day, the hour; / At sunrise thou shouldst come, sweet sister mine,... / Too long desired, too long delaying, come!...” (2.1.13-5), and she imploringly questions Demogorgon: “When shall the destined hour arrive?” (2.4.128). Demogorgon replies with the prophetic “Behold,” reminiscent of Revelation’s “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21.5), which sets in motion the changes wrought by the Spirit of the Hour.

Like John of Patmos’s vision of the millennium—“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea” (Rev. 21.1)—the Earth is made “like Heaven” (3.4.160) and the spirits “build a new earth and sea, / And a heaven where yet heaven could never be” (4.164-5). The promise for the New Jerusalem is that “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Rev 21.4 KJV). Drawing upon the gestures of God in reproducing the comfort of heaven, Prometheus similarly assures Asia: “And if ye sigh, then I will smile; and thou, / Ione, shalt chant

⁶⁷ Earlier in the drama, Shelley recalls the similar wiping away of creation in the Flood, when God first aborted his creation in order to begin anew: “... the blue globe / Wrapped deluge round it like a cloak, and they / Yelled, gasped, and were abolished; or some God / Whose throne was in a comet, passed, and cried, / ‘Be not!’ And like my words they were no more (4.314-318). Not surprisingly, Shelley recounts the biospheric devastation of the flood in the language of veils, representing the water as a “cloak” that covers the Earth. Prometheus’s regret of his curse, which leads to the drama’s apocalypse, resembles God’s grief over humankind’s sin and desire to begin creation again. Terence Hoagwood explains that Prometheus “hears the Phantasm repeat the curse and immediately revokes it: ‘It doth repent me: words are quick and vain; / Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine. / I wish no living thing to suffer pain’ (1.303-5). Shelley has carefully chosen those words: *repent* has a biblical rather than classical origin. The Hebrew God repents himself in Genesis 6:6” (144).

fragments of sea-music, / Until I weep, when ye shall smile away / The tears she brought, which yet were sweet to shed (3.3.26-29). The New Jerusalem is not only the site of God's love, but also the figure of the beloved, and, like Asia, whose "nuptial boon" (3.3.66) was the "fairest shell of Ocean" (3.3.74) containing the voice of love, the New Jerusalem is portrayed as a bride: "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21.2). Shelley replicates a divine wedding in the marriage of Prometheus and Asia, the drama's two incarnations of love. To close the apocalypse and herald the new millennium in Revelation, the triumphant Jesus blesses and commands the recreated earth. In similar fashion, the curtain of the drama falls on Demogorgon's benediction for the new world. All the spirits and voices join together in calling upon him: "Speak: thy strong words may never pass away" (4.553), evoking Jesus' own promise: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24.35). In addition to appropriating biblical language and modes of exegesis, Shelley finally claims the property of eternity, traditionally attributed only to the Living Word, for his own poetry.

Of course, Shelley would have been familiar with the fourfold mode of biblical exegesis even before encountering it in the works of Dante or Boccaccio. The fourfold would still have been a central system of interpretation for the theologians and clergy of his day. Stephen Prickett, reading a fourfold significance in the gated garden scene of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, terms it the "old-fashioned typology" and asserts that this was the method of exegesis that Austen would have learned

“every Sunday from the pulpit.”⁶⁸ Reevaluating the familiar exegetical mode in light of Dante’s and Boccaccio’s use of it in a time when its appropriation was illicit, however, renders Shelley’s turning to it more meaningful. Bearing the spirit of the *poeta theologus*, Shelley also seeks to assert the theological capacity of poetry. When Boccaccio lauds Dante for his ability to untie the “hard knots of holy theology,”⁶⁹ the word he uses is “*solventum*, meaning to ‘unyoke,’ ‘to release a thing from what holds it together,’ or ‘to free something from restrictions.’”⁷⁰ For Shelley, the unyoking or unbinding of Prometheus is accomplished through a poet’s theological unveiling of the veils of Scripture.

Since many biblical books served as models of the highest poetry for Shelley, in striving to demonstrate the sophistication and value of his poetry, Shelley assays to show his work equal to the complexity and richness of the Bible. While allusion and reference to certain ideas or content often acts as an acknowledgement of continuity with the haunting presence of formative precursors, the appropriation of a definitive reading tradition seems far more formal and elemental, a recognition of a standard by which one has learned to define and understand one’s nature and function. Shelley’s use of the mode also contributes to a larger move toward secularizing and abstracting hermeneutical tools originating in the arena of theology. Korshin writes that the transfer of the (overlapping and sometimes interchangeably described) fourfold mode and typology from biblical to literary studies has a tremendous impact: “Typology,

⁶⁸ Prickett, Stephen. *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic appropriation of the Bible*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.133. Colin Jager also reads fourfold significance in Wordsworth’s *Peter Bell (The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era*. [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007], p. 164-6).

⁶⁹ Osgood 53.

⁷⁰ Rhodes, James Francis. *Poetry does Theology: Chaucer, Grosseteste, and the Pearl-Poet*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 15.

originally a single technique in the armory of biblical scholarship, expands into a system of reference and a literary-historical code ripe for deciphering.”⁷¹ Colin Jager also argues that “it is only during the romantic era that the ‘poetic resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition’ come to be recognized as such—that is, as honorable expressions of a universal human striving that can now at last be stripped of its associations with a particular tradition and made available to all inquiring spirits.”⁷² If the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the period during which the Bible began “to be interpreted and explain’d by the same Rules which we observe in reading and studying other Books,”⁷³ perhaps, conversely, it may be seen that the exegetical practices for reading the Bible began to be applied to literature, as well. This further blurring of the division between Scripture and secular texts would have agreed with Shelley’s goal for a syncretic text, enveloping Christian thought and tradition along with various other pagan and poetic myths. Writing in 1819 to Thomas Peacock of the completion of the first act of *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley explains that his desire is to “conceive a great work, embodying the discoveries of all ages, & harmonizing the contending creeds by which mankind have been ruled.”⁷⁴

In his confrontation with the Furies, Prometheus declares that “The sights with which thou torturest gird my soul / With new endurance, till the hour arrives / When they shall be no types of things which are” (1.643-5). The statement means that Prometheus will wait for the time when the disheartening images that the Furies show

⁷¹ Korshin 74.

⁷² Jager, Colin. “Romanticism/Secularization/Secularism.” *Literature Compass* 5/4 (2008): 791-806, 801-2.

⁷³ Cited in Harris 19.

⁷⁴ Scholars have scanned the syncretic work’s diverse components, treating influences from pagan rituals (Zoroastrianism among them), classical mythology, Islam, Hinduism, *Paradise Lost*, and the Bible.

him will no longer accurately typify, or reflect, the condition of the world. The verb tenses and chronology of this pronouncement, however, feel somehow irregular or jumbled. Prometheus is yet awaiting the apocalyptic “hour” of his release, and he expects types, which usually look forward to the future, to themselves be eliminated (“shall be no types”) in relation to what is already in the present (“things which are”). Taken alone and separated from the specific scenes conjured by the Furies, line 645 seems to suggest that Prometheus waits for the time when types are no longer necessary to point toward a more perfect future because all types and prophecies have been fulfilled in the present. Types usually presage things that “will be,” but here, types are juxtaposed to things “which are.” The unexpected verb tense recalls Christ’s strikingly anachronistic claim: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8.58). (A similarly strange moment is when John the Baptist says of Christ, “This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me” [John 1.30].) The statement is not, “Before Abraham was, I was,” but “I am,” indicating a kind of eternal present, which does not conform to regular frames of temporal reference, and is never before or after, past or future, but now. For Shelley, the potential for transformation is always within the grasp of the soul, a kind of latent eternal present that can be unleashed and unbound. Just as the antitype accomplishes the type, rendering it obsolete,⁷⁵ Shelley systematically unveils the forward-looking allegorical senses to show that all of these may be enacted in the present. Like Francis Bacon, one of Shelley’s heroes, who presents the golden age not as existing in a mythic past but in a “not unattainable future,” the typological structure

⁷⁵ For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known (1 Corin. 13.12).

of *Prometheus Unbound* demonstrates that the system of prophetic and typological waiting is no longer necessary. Types need not be fulfilled or finished in a mythical past or unattainable future, but in the eternal present.

CHAPTER FOUR
JOBIAN TYPOLOGY IN DANTE AND SHELLEY

In discovering the story of Beatrice Cenci during his travels in Italy, the superstitiously minded Shelley could hardly have escaped the notion that he had come upon his own Beatrice. Like Dante, who claims to have begun writing his love poetry after a profound meeting during which Beatrice greeted him, Shelley, in the Preface to *The Cenci*, emphasizes the moment of his personal encounter with “the most beautiful creature than you can conceive”¹ through the painting of Beatrice (then attributed to Guido Reni) in the Colonna Palace.² He discerns through physiognomical analysis *La Cenci*’s patience, gentleness, imagination, sensibility, and dignity—in short, determining her “one of the loveliest specimens of the workmanship of Nature.” Mary Shelley credits this striking vision of Beatrice as that which caused “Shelley’s imagination [to become] strongly excited,” spurring the composition of the drama. The widely held belief that Dante was aged twenty-six when he began work on *La Vita Nuova* shortly after his Beatrice’s death,³ would only have contributed to the twenty-six-year-old Shelley’s sense of a fortunate, if not fated, following after his model.

Similar to Dante’s muse, Shelley’s Beatrice in *The Cenci* epitomizes purity,

¹ Percy Shelley to Peacock, Livorno, [ca. 20] July 1819, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:101-3, 103

² See Reeve Parker’s “Reading Shelley’s Delicacy” in *Romantic Tragedies: The Dark Employments of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 180-221 for an interesting examination of the impact of the Reni painting on Shelley.

³ Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1943), p. 17.

grace, and love. Often characterized by her powerful eyes, the Dantean lady “miraculously makes gracious whatever she looks upon.”⁴ Beatrice Cenci possesses the same quality of imputing her own grace to her object. Cardinal Camillo urges Count Cenci toward his daughter’s influence—“Methinks her sweet looks, which make all things else / Beauteous and glad, might kill the fiend within you” (1.1.44-45)—and Bernardo grieves for his sister’s bea(u)tifying gaze:

.....To see
 That perfect mirror of pure innocence
 Wherein I gazed, and grew happy and good,
 Shivered to dust! To see thee, Beatrice,
 Who made all lovely thou didst look upon...
 Thee, light of life...dead, dark! (V.iv.129-34)⁵

Beatrician eyes also express a moral authority. In the *Commedia*, Dante is alternately shamed, uplifted, and led by his lady’s eyes, while Orsino fears Beatrice Cenci’s “awe-inspiring gaze, / Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve / And lay me bare, and make me blush to see / My hidden thoughts” (I.ii.84-7). It is with her eyes that Beatrice Cenci finally coerces Marzio to rescind his accusation. Her directive to “Fix thine eyes on mine” results in his capitulation: “Let her not look on me!” (V.ii.81,90).

As a figure for Jesus Christ, the “True Light” (52), Beatrice’s beneficent aspect

⁴ Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Mark Musa, (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1957), 39. John Milton’s Adam also credits Eve’s regard as improving him: “I from the influence of thy looks receive / Access in every virtue, in thy sight / More wise, more watchful, stronger if need were / Of outward strength while Shame, thou looking on / (Shame to be overcome or overreached) / Would utmost vigor raise and, raised, unite” (*Paradise Lost* [New York: Norton, 2005], 9.309-14).

⁵ These lines seem almost to be written by Dante of his Beatrice. The Moon of *Epipsychidion*, associated with Mary, also “makes all beautiful on which she smiles” (282). Remarking Shelley’s description of Beatrice as “light of life” (5.4.134), which is also applied to Asia in *Prometheus Unbound* (3.3.6), Fred L. Milne writes: “Beatrice Cenci, like both Asia and the heavenly Beatrice in Dante’s *Paradiso*, appears to embody that capacity to love which alone could counterbalance the opposing force centred in Count Cenci” (“Shelley’s *The Cenci*: The Ice Motif and the Ninth Circle of Dante’s Hell,” *Tennessee Studies in Literature* XXII: 117-32, 122).

both exemplifies and derives from the light of God's own face.⁶ Dante closes the *Vita Nuova* with the image of Beatrice "in glory gaz[ing] upon the countenance of [God]" (86), as he expresses his desire to behold her once more. Likening Beatrice's grace-imparting gaze to the New Testament picture of Christ, who conforms to his likeness those who look upon him,⁷ Shelley crafts the trope of the transforming gaze by which the act of looking generates a simultaneous becoming like the object of one's gaze. In works such as *Prometheus Unbound*, the gravity of a stare appears to pull its participants into closer proximity and fashion them as reflections of each other. Prometheus, observing the Furies, who, themselves, "gaze on one another" (1.466) with the delight of lovers, worries, "Whilst I behold such execrable shapes, / Methinks I grow like what I contemplate" (1.449-50). The moon, also, "Gazing, an insatiate bride, / On [the Earth's] form from every side" (4.470-72) grows to resemble the object of her careful watch:

Drinking from thy sense and sight
 Beauty, majesty, and might,
 As a lover or a chameleon
 Grows like what it looks upon
 As a violet's gentle eye
 Gazes on the azure sky
 Until its hue grow like what it beholds (4.481-7)

⁶ A classic blessing often appearing in the Old Testament is: "The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace" (Numbers 6.25-6 KJV, see also Psalm 4.6). Christ's face also emits light: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corin. 4.6).

⁷ "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corin. 3.18 KJV). The NIV translates: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." The equating of vision to reflection also appears in 1 John 3.2: "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." Psalm 17.15 also hints at a connection between sight and resemblance: "As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness" (KJV).

Rather than a narcissistic or impressionable passivity, the resemblance produced by the shared gaze of lovers indicates a yearning for affinity and an active emulating of a desired vision. The observer's ability to himself enact a reflection of his chosen ideal allows for a kind of self-molding or creation. When Demogorgon prescribes "hope till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates" (4.573-4), he demonstrates the power to become, through contemplation, the very thing envisioned. The reciprocal gaze of counterparts leads not only to a mirroring but also a merging of identities. Prometheus and Jupiter, when locked in a hateful staring match, not only resemble each other, but also reach a "strange fusion of the two."⁸ In renouncing hatred and embracing love, Prometheus achieves a union with Asia: a profound "commingl[ing]" (2.1.205) such that each is unable to sustain a self independent of the other ("[Asia's] presence—which would fade / If it were mingled not with [Prometheus']" [1.832-3]). Barbara Gelpi writes, "Prometheus does not desire Asia as an object, nor does he even desire to be with Asia; he desires to *be* Asia" (174).

Depicting himself standing face-to-face with the portrait of Beatrice, Shelley also participates in the progress from beholding to becoming. Scholars have been fascinated by the resemblance apparent in the portraits of Beatrice and Shelley. Richard Holmes suggests that Amelia Curran, who painted Shelley's portrait, and of whom Shelley requested a copy of the Reni portrait, subconsciously discerned his sympathy for his heroine through her painting.⁹ Shelley, in this way, perhaps circuitously effects a likeness between himself and Beatrice, drawing out a physical

⁸ Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi. *Shelley's Goddess: Maternity, Language, and Subjectivity* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 145.

⁹ Richard Holmes, *Shelley: the Pursuit* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1975), p. 517.

similitude to highlight a deeper personal identification.¹⁰ If Dante wished to look upon and be with Beatrice, Shelley wishes to look upon and become Beatrice. The affinity for Beatrice, succeeding his early devotion to his look-alike sister, Elizabeth, and cousin and sometime fiancée, Harriet Grove,¹¹ establishes a pattern of adoring women who mirror him. Although the seeking out of a twin may seem an idiosyncratic habit, Shelley, in his essay, “On Love,” understands it as a universal longing, indeed as the principle of love: “We are born into the world and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness.”¹² The finding, he writes, of the being who wholly sympathizes and corresponds with the self is the discovery by the “type” of its “antitype” (504).¹³

Significantly, in denoting a relation of reflection and correspondence, Shelley uses the language of typology, the theological system of exegesis by which the events and personages of the Old Testament are interpreted as prefiguring those of the New Testament. Like the literal sense of the fourfold mode, the type and the antitype it signifies are not mere signs or allegories representing a higher truth, but maintain in

¹⁰ Shelley’s personal involvement in Beatrice’s story is evidenced by the sense of “dramatized autobiography” (Holmes p. 516) in not only Beatrice’s monologues, but also those of Giacomo and Orsino, which actually contain previously written autobiographic lines (Holmes p. 524).

¹¹ A young officer at Field Place notices that “His resemblance to his sister, Elizabeth, was as striking as if they had been twins” (Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* [London: E. Moxon, 1858], p. 547), while Holmes, describing Shelley and Harriet, writes, “The curious thing was that the cousins looked very much alike, and Shelley seems to revel in this sense of twinship” (29?).

¹² Percy Shelley, “On Love” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 503-4, 504.

¹³ Shelley explains that in solitude or the absence of sympathetic company, those seeking love find in nature “a secret correspondence with [the] heart” (504). The lonely poet of *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*, the work perhaps most concerned with the search for likeness, illustrates the turning to nature for the comfort of reflection. Projecting himself onto the external world, he sees “in nature an image of his own mind” (William Keach, “Reflexive Imagery in Shelley,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 24[1975]: 49-69, 52), telling the stream: “Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness, / ... / Thy searchless fountain, and invisible course / Have each their *type* in me” (505, 507-8, emphasis added).

themselves a historical and physical realness.¹⁴ Dante's literary use of Beatrice is very much as type, or figure,¹⁵ for her symbolism of nobility, the spiritual life, and even salvation does not occlude her actual existence as a 13th century Florentine woman.¹⁶ Typology not only juxtaposes similar figures but also allows for their telescopic overlapping (such that Christ in his capacity as a second Adam does, in a sense, *become* Adam). With the historical Beatrice Cenci, a potential open type awaiting a direction in which to signify, Shelley uses typology to attain a reflective union with his beloved Beatrice. The biblical Job is an apt figure for the longsuffering Beatrice, and also one with whom Shelley himself identifies. In this chapter I argue that Shelley builds a Jobian typology into *The Cenci*, using the figure of Job as the mediating type by which Shelley, Beatrice, and the other persons of the drama are reconciled. Since Dante already identifies Beatrice as a type of Christ (even extending the typological

¹⁴ The signifier's realness and its participation in the signified is also the condition for the Coleridgean symbol: "In the Scriptures therefore both Facts and Persons must of necessity have a two-fold significance, a past and a future, a temporary and a perpetual, a particular and a universal application. They must be at once Portraits and Ideals. . . a Symbol. . . is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from *The Statesman's Manual* [December 1816]). Williams also explains Beatrice's meeting of Coleridge's expectations of a symbol (p. 7).

¹⁵ See Erich Auerbach, "'Figura,'" in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), pp. 11-76 for an explanation of the use of the word "figure" in the context of Christian typology.

¹⁶ Petrarch disagreed with Dante's "figural" method entailing "a mutual dependence between sign and object" (Marguerite R. Waller, *Petrarch's Poetics and Literary History* [Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1980], p. 25), "often suggesting that his Laura was an elusive ideal or symbol, rather than a distinct personage" (Alan M. Weinberg, *Shelley's Italian Experience* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991], p. 151). Like Dante's Beatrice and Beatrice Cenci, Emilia Viviani is a real woman who embodies a higher ideal. Comparing *Epipsychidion* to the *Vita Nuova* in his Advertisement, Shelley seems to highlight the "matter-of-fact history" on which the poem is based, asserting that his work would have "a true meaning" even when stripped of "the garb of metaphor or rhetorical figure" (Percy Shelley, "Epipsychidion" in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat [New York: Norton, 2002], pp. 392-407, 392, n. 3). See Weinberg pp. 135-172 and Timothy Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible: Shelley and Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 291-309 for further discussion of the influence of the *Vita Nuova* on *Epipsychidion*.

perspective to nominate the lady Joan a type of John the Baptist because of her walking before Beatrice [51-2]), Shelley inserts Job, who is himself a major type of Christ, into the collapsing sequence of figures.¹⁷ Asserting with Dante Beatrice's biblical typification, Shelley imagines his text to have a typological relationship, and therefore intersignify, with Scripture.

Critics have largely failed to notice Job's relevance for the *Vita Nuova*, in which Dante endures the travails of love and mourns for an unnamed lady, Beatrice's father, and finally for Beatrice, has largely escaped critical notice. Ronald Martinez has argued for the importance of the book of Lamentations, which Dante cites upon Beatrice's death, as "a model and intertext that illuminates the *Vita nuova*."¹⁸ The Dantean threnody surely also recalls, however, the book of Job, whose themes and complaints often run parallel to those of Lamentations, and which is the only other Old Testament poetical book that centers on the problem of suffering.¹⁹ As a type of Job, Dante imitates him in his various postures, declaiming his many grievances, longing for death, and physically manifesting the effects of his adversity in enervation and illness.²⁰ Dante's perception that "Love" has injured him so completely "That my life

¹⁷ In *Moralia in Job*, one of the most influential commentaries of the Medieval period, Gregory the Great distinguishes Job as "the most complete Old Testament type of Christ." Exegetical tradition also especially relates Adam, Job, and Christ together for their temptation experiences with Satan (Barbara K. Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic: the Genre, Meaning, and Art of Paradise Regained* [Providence: Brown UP, 1966], pp. 178-9).

¹⁸ "Mourning Beatrice: The Rhetoric of Threnody in the *Vita nuova*," *MLN* 113(1998):1-29, 2.

¹⁹ The book of Job is concerned with undeserved personal suffering, whereas Lamentations focuses on the judgment of a nation because of sin.

²⁰ Like Job (see e.g. Job 29-30), Dante reminisces about the joys of his blessed past and challenges his reader to discover "any man whose grief surpasses mine" (9). While Job asks: "Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come" (Job 3.20-1 NIV), "there is blended out of all [Dante's] sighs / A chorus of beseeching / That constantly keeps calling upon death" (70). In addition to the sores covering his body, Job also describes various other physical ailments (e.g. Job 30.16-7, 30); Dante also frequently refers to his bouts of illness, weakness, and paralyzing pain (7, 43).

would all but abandon me / Were it not for one last surviving spirit, / Allowed to live because it speaks of you” (28) also seems to allude to the single witness habitually left to testify to each of Job’s persecutions (Job 1.15, 16, 17, 19), as well as to the devastation’s real survivor—Job himself—whose life God commands to be spared so that he may ruminate upon God’s judgment. Interestingly, both Job and Dante turn to God and Love, their perceived aggressors, for restoration. Dante addresses Love, whom he has just described as striking him, “I come to you expecting to be healed” (28), while Job tells God, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (Job 13.15).

Like Job, whose well-meaning but pedantic friends end by aggravating him, Dante is also troubled by the attentions of those around him. Some friends truly seek to comfort, while others come with “malicious curiosity” (7) or ridicule him in his suffering (23). As Job reproaches his friends (“A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends” [Job 6.14]), so Dante rebukes those who lack compassion: “That soul sins which can see my desperate state / And make no move to comfort my torn heart” (26). Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Life of Dante*, with which Shelley very well may have been familiar, also records the ineffectiveness of friends and relatives in helping the disconsolate Dante in his Jobian suffering.²¹ Martinez reads in Boccaccio’s text the poet’s family’s reproof of his “excessive” mourning for Beatrice, also citing as evidence the *Vita Nuova*’s “canzone of mourning where the poet acknowledges being shunned because of his shameless public lamentation” (The poem reads: “That every man who sees my fading face / It seems cries out to me, ‘I cast you

²¹ Dante’s physical transformation, unending flow of tears, and confusion of day and night (Giovanni Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, trans. G. R. Carpenter [New York: Grolier Club, 1900], pp. 48-9.) relate to Job’s condition (cf Job 2.11; 3.4-9, 24; 7.4; 17.11-2).

out” [65].)²²

The book of Job also would have played an important part in Dante’s formal mourning because of Job’s role in the liturgy of the service called the Office of the Dead.²³ It was during the longest of the three canonical hours (vespers, matins, and lauds), the Matins of the Dead, which itself is divided into three separate three-hour nocturns, that nine passages from Job were recited, with three “lessons” for each nocturn.²⁴ Martinez writes: “That Dante had a close familiarity with the Office of the Dead is certain: he surely heard it recited not only during the several funerals he reports as occurring in the *Vita nova*...but also during the typical repetitions of the Office on the third, seventh, and thirtieth day after decease, and on their respective anniversaries” (2002, p. 6).²⁵ Although all of the selected passages are words voiced by Job, “The protagonist in these readings is not Job, the Old Testament character, nor the medieval saint Job, but the person for whom the vigil—later the Office of the Dead—was celebrated.”²⁶ Job becomes a kind of speaker for the dead, as his words are imagined as being uttered by the dying or the deceased. The mourners also

²² Ronald L. Martinez, “Dante’s Forese, the Book of Job, and the Office of the Dead: A Note on Purgatorio 23,” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 120(2002): 1-16, 2.

²³ Beginning in the eighth century, the Office of the Dead became increasingly renowned, with epidemics of the plague calling for its frequent observance. The office varied greatly in each church until the text used at Salisbury Cathedral had become nearly the standard by the late eleventh century (Lawrence L. Besserman, *The Legend of Job in the Middle Ages* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979], pp. 57-8).

²⁴ Besserman 58. The nine passages, constituting an abridged version of the book of Job, came to be called “le petit Job” or “Pety Job” in France and England. “That ‘little Job’ is found in the English primer, the layman’s prayer book, as well as in Latin service books, indicates how widely available this version of the Job story was, compared to the much less accessible complete version in the Vulgate” (Besserman 59). The various divisions of three’s and nine’s in the service would have appealed to Dante who placed symbolic significance on the two numbers. Dante repeatedly associates Beatrice with the number nine (see especially p. 61 of *Vita*), while the number three represents the Trinity and is fundamental to the triadic structure of the *Commedia* and to the *terza rima* form.

²⁵ Martinez suggests that Dante also may have had access to the text of the Office of the Dead through “privately owned Psalter-Hours and Books of Hours” (2002, p. 7).

²⁶ Knud Ottosen, *The Responsories and Versicles of the Latin Office of the Dead* (Aarhus: Aarhus UP, 1993), p. 54.

become united to Job, as, intoning his words, they meditate upon their own mortality and sin. In this way, all parties are unified in Job, for the office is recited for the dead by the mourners and through Job's cries for deliverance. Whether or not Shelley was aware of Job's function in the Office of the Dead, he understands Job as a similarly subsuming figure.²⁷

Similar to Dante's period of mourning for Beatrice, the summer of 1819, during which Shelley wrote *The Cenci*, was a time of concentrated distress and bereavement in the poet's household. The preceding months had seen an accumulation of sorrows in unrelenting succession: Clara died in September 1818, Claire lost custody of Allegra in October 1818, Shelley left Elena Adelaide behind in February 1819, and, finally, Shelley's favorite child, William, died in June 1819.²⁸ Mary blamed her husband, in part, for the death of their children, and the strain produced another loss—a greater emotional distance between the grieving parents.²⁹ The combined pressures of childlessness and marital alienation, in addition to his troubled health, perhaps led Shelley to regard himself a victim of divine persecution.

²⁷ Interestingly, Job is also a unifying type in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Both Frankenstein and his creature present themselves as Jobian figures in the mutual suffering they, both directly and indirectly, cause each other.

²⁸ Elena Adelaide later dies in June of 1820. Shelley writes to John and Maria Gisborne: "My Neapolitan charge is dead. It seems as if the destruction that is consuming me were as an atmosphere which wrapt & infected everything connected with me" (Percy Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964], 2:211).

²⁹ Richard Holmes identifies Shelley's "carelessness and unconcern" (Richard Holmes, *Shelley: the Pursuit* [New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1975], p. 447) as distinct contributors to Clara's death, and reads an unconscious blaming of Shelley (p. 519) when Mary writes in June of 1819: "We came to Italy thinking to do Shelley's health good—but the Climate is not any means warm enough to be of benefit to him & yet it is that that has destroyed my two children" (Mary Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980], p. 101). After a long period of neglecting her journal, Mary makes her first entry on 4 August 1819, Shelley's twenty-seventh birthday, and seems regretful of her life with Shelley: "I begin my Journal on Shelley's birthday. We have now lived five years together; and if all the events of the five years were blotted out, I might be happy; but to have won, and then cruelly to have lost, the associations of four years, is not an accident to which the human mind can bend without much suffering" (Mary Shelley, *Mary Shelley's Journal*, ed. Frederick L. Jones [Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1947], p. 122).

He wrote Thomas Love Peacock soon after William's death as one "hunted by calamity" and made weary by a growing burden of trouble: "How heavy a weight when misfortune is added to exile & solitude, as if the measure were not full, heaped high on both."³⁰

During this time, it is likely that Shelley contemplated the bearing on his life of the book of Job, the scriptural text dealing with undeserved and unexplained suffering. Mary's journals often record his reading aloud from various books of the Bible, particularly in 1817 and 1820, and Leigh Hunt sets apart Job as one of Shelley's preferred selections: "His book was generally Plato, or Homer, or one of the Greek tragedians, or the Bible, in which last he took a great, though peculiar, and often admiring interest. One of his favourite parts was the book of Job."³¹ Shelley makes clear his veneration of the book of Job, declaring it to be of the "highest poetry" and a "sublime strain...not to be surpassed by anything ancient, much less modern."³² His letters also demonstrate his easy familiarity with the text. He writes to John Gisborne: "Were not the Greeks a glorious people? What is there, as Job says of the Leviathan, like unto them?" and to Horace Smith: "The reviews & journals they say continue to attack me, but I value neither the fame they can give, nor the fame they can take away,

³⁰ Percy Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock, Rome, 8 June 1819, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:97; and Percy Shelley to Peacock, Livorno, [?20-1] June 1819, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:98-9, 98.

³¹ Leigh Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt: with Reminiscences of Friends and Contemporaries*, ed. Roger Ingpen (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1903), p. 36.

³² Percy Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Verse and Prose*, ed. Harry Buxton Forman, 8 vols. (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880), 7:99-144, 104; and Percy Shelley, "On the Devil, and Devils" in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. H. Buxton Forman, 4 vols. (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880), 2:383-406, 392. Shelley also describes Job as a "model[] of poetical sublimity & pathos" (Percy Shelley to the Editor of *The Examiner* [Leigh Hunt], Florence, 3 November 1819, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:136-48, 140). He further credits "[t]he Sublime dramatic poem" with "familiariz[ing] [Jesus Christ's] imagination with the boldest imagery afforded by the human mind and the material world" (Percy Shelley, "Essay on Christianity," in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:339-74, 340-1).

therefore blessed be the name of the Reviews.”³³ His notebook, however, intimates a more personal identification with Job’s plight. Ann Wroe reads Shelley’s quotations from Job in 1821—“Thou shalt be hidden from the scourge of the tongue—thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field”; “Thou makest me to *possess* the iniquities of my youth”—as a ventriloquizing of his own emotions in difficult circumstances, demonstrating a deep empathy for the afflicted protagonist.³⁴

Mary Shelley’s journals also note her reading of the Bible in March 1819, and her letters likewise exhibit her knowledge of the book of Job. In 1824, she borrows the words of Job to describe her despondency: “but to live for no one, to be necessary to none; to know that—‘Where is now my hope? For my hope, who shall see it? They shall go down to the bars of the pit, when our rest together is in the dust’—But change of scene & the sun of Italy will restore my energy, the very thought of it smooths my brow”; and in 1827: “Tell him I pray heartily...that his happiness and joys may be greater than Jobs [*sic*] after his temptation.”³⁵ Mary’s interest in Job is especially important considering her influential, and nearly collaborative, role in the writing of

³³ Percy Shelley to John Gisborne, Florence, 16 November 1819, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:156-7, 156; and Percy Shelley to Horace Smith, Pisa, 25 January 1821, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:378-9, 379. The scriptural passage to which Shelley alludes in his letter to Gisborne is “Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear” (*The Holy Bible*, AV [Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1979], Job 41.33). All subsequent references to the AV are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically within the text and endnotes by book, chapter, verse, and version. The scriptural passage to which Shelley alludes in his letter to Smith is “And [Job] said, Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21 [AV]).

³⁴ Percy Shelley, *The Faust draft notebook: a Facsimile of Bodleian MSS Shelley adds e.18*, ed. Nora Crook and Timothy Webb (New York: Garland, 1997), pp. 302-3 [p. 160]. The page number in brackets refers to Percy Shelley’s original manuscript numbering. (Shelley cites Job 5.21 and 23, and Job 13.26); and Ann Wroe, *Being Shelley: The Poet’s Search for Himself* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), pp. 64 and 89.

³⁵ Job 17:15-6 (AV). Mary Shelley slightly misquotes Job here. The verses actually read: “And where is now my hope? as for my hope, who shall see it? / They shall go down to the bars of the pit, when our rest together is in the dust”; Mary Shelley to Marianne Hunt, Kentish Town, 10 October [1824], in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 1:451-3, 452; and Mary Shelley to Jane Williams Hogg, Sompting, 7 August 1827, in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 1:558-9, 559.

The Cenci. In her “Note on the Cenci,” Mary discloses that Shelley originally encouraged her to pursue the dramatization of the account of the Cenci family. Though he then took the task upon himself, Shelley worked and adapted his drama from “The Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci,” which Mary copied into “a small, dark calf notebook in a rounded copper-plate hand for Shelley to brood on” in May 1818.³⁶ He evidently acknowledged the importance of his wife’s contribution, making the exceptional decision to involve Mary in the writing of *The Cenci*. Mary Shelley confirms this when she writes: “This tragedy is the only one of his works that he communicated to me during its progress. We talked over the arrangement of the scenes together.”³⁷ Shelley also mentions Mary’s estimation of *The Cenci* in commissioning an engraving of the portrait of Beatrice. He writes to Amelia Curran, “I have nearly finished my Cenci—which Mary likes.”³⁸ The attenuating “nearly” and pause of the dash perhaps contain the slight diffidence of the poet, hesitant to unveil his latest effort before a judging world. Shelley is quick to add, and even visually bolster with the stroke, the affirming stay of Mary’s approbation.

Around the time that Shelley was completing *The Cenci*, Mary was retreating into the writing of *Mathilda*, her own autobiographical story of despair and father-daughter incest. Representing her estrangement from her father and her sense of isolation and exile, the heroine invokes Job to express her hopelessness. Mary Shelley writes, “In life there was no escape for me: why then I must die. I shuddered; I dared

³⁶ Holmes, pp. 425-6. Truman Guy Steffan suggests that Mary looked at an Italian “Relation” and an Italian’s English translation of it, and made comparisons and revisions as she copied (“Seven Accounts of the Cenci and Shelley’s Drama,” *SEL* 9, 4 [Autumn 1969]: 601-618, 603).

³⁷ Mary Shelley, “Note on the Cenci, by Mrs. Shelley.” In *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, by Percy Shelley, ed. William Michael Rossetti, 2 vols. (London: E. Moxon, 1870), 1:459-62, 460.

³⁸ Percy Shelley to Amelia Curran, Livorno, 5 August 1819, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:106-7, 107.

not die even though the cold grave held all I loved; although I might say with Job ‘Where now is my hope? For my hope who shall see it? They shall go down together to the bars of the pit, when our rest together is in the dust—.’”³⁹ Given that *Mathilda* and *The Cenci* were analogous projects, providing the means for self evaluation and reflection during this time of grief, Mary’s reference further emphasizes the creative influence of Job in the Shelleys’ collective consciousness. Indeed, Shelley’s engagement with the book of Job was such that he intended to write on the subject. Mary’s “Note on Prometheus Unbound” mentions that Shelley “meditated three subjects as the groundwork for lyrical dramas. One was the story of Tasso; of this a slight fragment of a song of Tasso remains. The other one was founded on the book of Job, which he never abandoned in idea, but of which no trace remains among his papers. The third was the Prometheus Unbound.”⁴⁰ These project schemes, though apparently disparate and distinct, may be regarded as multiple manifestations conceived of a common thematic interest. A number of Shelley’s works bear the imprint of his fascination with Jobian subjects: Stuart Curran identifies the story of Tasso as bearing “many similarities” to that of Job; *Prometheus Unbound* depicts the struggle between a forbearing sufferer and an omnipotent oppressor; and Bryan Shelley describes Peter of Shelley’s *Peter Bell the Third*, written in autumn of 1819, as “an overly pious version of Job, an oily-haired evangelical who falls ill (l. 12) and

³⁹ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda* in *British Literature 1780-1830*, ed. Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlak (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1996), pp. 1339-76, 1360. Mary Shelley slightly misquotes Job 17:15-6 (AV) again here.

⁴⁰ Mary Shelley, “Note on Prometheus Unbound, by Mrs. Shelley,” in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:377-81, 378.

must endure the company of his ‘holy friends’ (l. 16).”⁴¹ Of all these, it is perhaps *The Cenci* that most carefully and compassionately considers Job’s predicament, filling the place of Shelley’s intended drama on Job, of which he left “no trace.”

The universe of *The Cenci* has a clear Jobian structure. In the role of the innocent victims of oppression are Lucretia and the Cenci children, with the pure Beatrice as the particular counterpart of the “perfect” Job,⁴² while Orsino and Camillo fill the place of Job’s myopic and misleading friends (Job 1:1 [AV]). Count Cenci is repeatedly confirmed as the figure of Satan throughout the drama. Camillo rebukes him: “Hell’s most abandoned fiend / Did never, in the drunkenness of guilt, / Speak to his heart as now you speak to me”; Lucretia speaks of the “devil...that lives in him”; and Beatrice rationalizes that his murder “Will but dislodge a spirit of deep hell / Out of a human form.”⁴³ Even Cenci himself seems to recognize his function as authorized persecutor in the Jobian story: “I do not feel as if I were a man, / But like a fiend appointed to chastise / The offences of some unremembered world” (IV.i.160-2). In his essay “On the Devil and Devils,” Shelley specifically examines the Satan

⁴¹ Curran, p. 37; Bryan Shelley, *Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), p. 91; and Percy Shelley, *Peter Bell the Third*, in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: H. Frowde, 1905), p. 344, qtd. in Bryan Shelley.

⁴² Many readers of Percy Shelley’s *The Cenci* have very justly examined the text alongside his other 1819 drama, *Prometheus Unbound*. Earl R. Wasserman calls for the two works to be “read against each other,” as “they represent, taken together, the antinomies of the skeptical context as it was waged in Shelley’s own mind” (*Shelley: A Critical Reading* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971], p. 128). Other studies providing excellent comparison of the two texts include Stuart Curran, *Shelley’s Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino CA: Huntington Library, 1975), pp. 120-30; Jean Hall, “The Socialized Imagination: Shelley’s ‘The Cenci’ and ‘Prometheus Unbound,’” *SIR* 23.3 (Fall 1984), 339-50; Stuart M. Sperry, *Shelley’s Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 131-5; and Young-Ok An, “Beatrice’s Gaze Revisited: Anatomizing *The Cenci*,” *Criticism* 38, 1 (Winter 1996): 27-33. I am proposing the model of Job as an alternative to the Promethean ideal to which Beatrice has often been compared.

⁴³ Percy Shelley, *The Cenci* in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 140-202, I.i.117-9, II.i.45, and IV.ii.7-8. Subsequent references to *The Cenci* will be to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line numbers.

(whose name means “Accuser”) of the book of Job, describing him as “the Informer, the Attorney General, and the jailor of the Celestial tribunal.”⁴⁴ Satan demonstrates his litigious nature when he proposes a trial of Job’s righteousness. God accepts the challenge and sets the boundaries for Satan’s harassment on two occasions: at first God permits Satan to demolish Job’s possessions, but when Satan later protests that he must strike the man himself, God instructs him to spare Job’s life.⁴⁵ Job is not the only one being tried, however, for God, too, risks his word on the faith of his prized “servant,” and, by his delimited sanctions of Satan’s activity, leaves himself liable to accusations of indirect persecution of innocence and inaction in the face of injustice (Job 1:8 [AV]). The resultant casuistry of causal attribution is the main stake of the biblical text, for the trying of Job takes place only to determine whether Job will, as Satan taunts, curse God for his many afflictions or, as God maintains, remain faithful in spite of them.⁴⁶

As though sensing the trial in the heavens, Job’s laments take on a distinctly legal tone as he questions the lawfulness of his undeserved misfortune. A “composite of a lawsuit (several legal terms are frequently used by Job, his friends, and God), a controversy dialogue or wisdom disputation, and a lament,” the book of Job presents Job’s predicament in the setting of a courtroom.⁴⁷ Job’s friends initially advise him to bring his case before God (“But if it were I, I would appeal to God; I would lay my

⁴⁴ Percy Shelley, “On the Devil, and Devils,” p. 392.

⁴⁵ “And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put forth thine hand”; “And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life” (Job 1:12 and 2:6 [AV]).

⁴⁶ “But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face”; and “But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face” (Job 1:11 and 2:5 [AV]).

⁴⁷ Roy B. Zuck, “Job,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), pp. 715-77, 716.

cause before him”), but Job comprehends the impossibility of attaining a fair trial, for he could never address God as an equal.⁴⁸ “He is not a man like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court. / If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both, / someone to remove God’s rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more. / Then I would speak up without fear of him, but as it now stands with me, I cannot” (Job 9:32-5 [NIV]). The disparity prevents Job from effectively challenging God, who is not only the other party in the case but also the court’s judge: “How then can I dispute with him? How can I find words to argue with him? / Though I were innocent, I could not answer him; I could only plead with my Judge for mercy. / Even if I summoned him and he responded, I do not believe he would give me a hearing” (Job 9:14-6 [NIV]). As his resentment deepens, however, Job launches into his complaint (“I will say to God: Do not condemn me, but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me... though you know that I am not guilty and that no one can rescue me from your hand?”), and advocates his right to seek justice (“But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God... I will surely defend my ways to his face”; “Oh, that I had some to hear me! I sign now my defense—let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing” (Job 10:2-3, 7, 13:3, 15 and 31:35 [NIV])). Job confidently offers to meet with God either as plaintiff or defendant so long as he may reason with him: “Then summon me and I will answer, or let me speak, and you reply” (Job 13:22 [NIV]). Job quickly finds the situation reversed,

⁴⁸ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), Job 5.8. Subsequent references to the NIV are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically within the text by book, chapter, verse, and version. I choose for these selections the NIV, which makes clearer the legal resonances of the arguments.

however, when his friends turn from comforting to rebuking him for his incredible claims to preternatural innocence. Surely no man, they reason in cross-examination, could be so faultless as to denounce as unfounded the punishment of a just God. It is Job's very confidence in his cause that produces the disbelief of his friends, and God, too, places Job on trial, at last answering, "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. / Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:7-8 [NIV]).

The legal focus of Job's arguments and pleas is mirrored in Beatrice's inability to obtain legal retribution for the wrongs she and her family have suffered. She entrusts Orsino with a petition for the Pope and testifies of her adversity before her father's guests, commending herself to the authorities present—Prince Colonna as a "kinsman," the Cardinal as "the Pope's chamberlain," and Camillo as "chief justiciary" (I.iii.126-8). Her formal efforts to be recognized before the law fail:

.....Can one tyrant overbear
The sense of many best and wisest men?
Or is it that I sue not in some form
Of scrupulous law, that ye deny my suit? (I.iii.133-6)

Beatrice concludes that "There is no vindication and no law / Which can adjudge and execute the doom / Of that through which I suffer"⁴⁹ (III.i.135-7). She turns instead to those outside of the law ("outlaws") and the power of death ("Thou double visaged shadow! Only judge! / Rightfullest arbiter!") to accomplish what she believes Earth and Heaven "acquit" as "consenting arbiters" (III.i.233, III.i.178-9, IV.iv.25, and

⁴⁹ Giacomo mirrors Beatrice's dissatisfaction with the pitiless workings of the legal system. When Camillo tells him "There is an obsolete and doubtful law" that might provide food and clothing for his family, he responds: "Nothing more? Alas! / Bare must be the provision which strict law / Awards, and aged, sullen avarice pays" (II.ii.1 and 3-5).

IV.iv.24). Like Job, however, she finds herself transformed from accuser to accused because of her claims to an impossible innocence: “Guilty! Who dares talk of guilt? My Lord, / I am more innocent of parricide / Than is a child born fatherless”

(IV.iv.112-4). The weight of crime is additionally turned upon her for the appalling nature of her charges, which so dispel credibility. Orsino lies when he explains the Pope’s rejection of Beatrice’s petition:

It was returned unanswered. I doubt not
But that the strange and execrable deeds
Alledged in it—in truth they might well baffle
Any belief—have turned the Pope’s displeasure
Upon the accusers from the criminal (II.ii.62-6),

Beatrice, too, admits that the implausibility of her contentions mutes her accusation:

“And the strange horror of the accuser’s tale, / Baffling belief, and overpowering
speech; / Scarce whispered, unimaginable, wrapt / In hideous hints.” (III.i.163-6).

Cenci’s crimes, then, not only damage his victims and repulse justice, but they also initiate judicial condemnation for the already injured party:

.....If because our wrongs,
For that they are, unnatural, strange and monstrous,
Exceed all measure of belief? Oh God!
If, for the very reasons which should make
Redress most swift and sure, our injurer triumphs?
And we the victims, bear worse punishment
Than that appointed for their torturer? (III.i.187-193).

The inversion is completed when Beatrice herself is finally placed on trial after being denied the hearing for which she pleaded. She decries the contrariness of the transposition:

Rather will ye who are their ministers,
Bar all access to retribution first,
And then, when heaven doth interpose to do

What ye neglect, arming familiar things
To the redress of an unwonted crime,
Make ye the victims who demanded it
Culprits? 'Tis ye are culprits! (IV.iv.118-124)

Still the soldiers arrest her for carrying out the execution they have come to accomplish.

In another unlikely reversal, Shelley models Count Cenci, the oppressor and tyrant of his household, as a type of Job. Rather more an anti-Job, however, Cenci is placed in mirroring contrast with the biblical character to mimic and yet subvert Beatrice's claim to the figure of Job.⁵⁰ While Job is characterized as a helper of the widow and fatherless, Cenci makes widows and orphans (1.1.61-5, 106-8); unlike Job who abides by his own vows against lust, Cenci longs for the sensual pleasure of his youth when "lust was sweeter than revenge" (1.1.98).⁵¹ Cenci's backward alignment with Job is further highlighted by the strangely similar yet discrepant circumstances of both men's tragedies. What most intensifies Job's agony is the fact that numerous calamities befall him in a single day. Seemingly within a matter of minutes, Job learns that his oxen, donkeys, and camels were carried off by marauding attackers, his servants were killed, his sheep were burned up by a fire from the sky, and his ten sons and daughters were crushed when the house in which they were feasting collapsed. Cenci, too, has both of his sons killed "[a]ll in the self-same hour of the same night," although he seems to believe that this "shews that Heaven has special care of me" (I.iii.64-5). The common refrain repeated by all of the messengers bringing Job news

⁵⁰ By referring to Count Cenci as an "anti-Job," I do not mean to say that he is the antitype to which Job, as type, points. He is Job's antitype in the sense that he is Job's opposite.

⁵¹ Defending his righteousness, Job presents his record of care and patronage for the widow and orphan (Job 29.12-3, 31.16-8) and proclaims his innocence against lust (Job 31.1, 9-12).

of each successive disaster—"I only am escaped alone to tell thee"—finds a perverse echo in *The Cenci*, where Rocco is the only one "crushed...to a mummy" while "The rest escaped unhurt" (Job 1.15, 16, 17, 19 [AV]; and I.iii.60-1). Another unlucky target, an innocent Cristofano receives a fatal blow "in error" while the intended victim lives unharmed (I.iii.62).

Cenci also resembles Job in that both are very much identified as fathers. Prior to his suffering, Job is credited with a single defining action—that of praying that God may forgive his children if they have sinned. Interestingly, the sin against which he prays is the very sin to which Satan incites him—that of cursing God: "Job sent and sanctified [his children], and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually" (Job 1:5 [AV]). Cenci, too, prays for his children:

If, when a parent from a parent's heart
Lifts from this earth to the great father of all
A prayer, both when he lays him down to sleep,
And when he rises up from dreaming it;
One supplication, one desire, one hope,
That he would grant a wish for his two sons
Even all that he demands in their regard—
And suddenly beyond his dearest hope,
It is accomplished, he should then rejoice,
And call his friends and kinsmen to a feast (I.iii.22-31).

His paternal prayers, however, are rather "a father's curses," which he hopes may "[c]limb with swift wings after [his] children's souls, / And drag them from the very throne of Heaven" (I.iii.84-6). With his prayerful curses, Cenci organizes the systematic ruination of first his children, then his possessions, and finally his legacy:

.....Rocco and Cristofano my curse
 Strangled: and Giacomo, I think, will find
 Life a worse Hell than that beyond the grave:
 Beatrice shall, if there be skill in hate
 Die in despair, blaspheming: to Bernardo,
 He is so innocent, I will bequeath
 The memory of these deeds, and make his youth
 The sepulchre of hope, where evil thoughts
 Shall grow like weeds on a neglected tomb.
 When all is done, out in the wide Campagna,
 I will pile up my silver and my gold;
 My costly robes, paintings and tapestries;
 My parchments and all records of my wealth,
 And make a bonfire in my joy, and leave
 Of my possessions nothing but my name;
 Which shall be an inheritance to strip
 Its wearer bare as infamy. That done,
 My soul, which is a scourge, will I resign
 Be it for its own punishment or theirs,
 He will not ask it of me till the lash
 Be broken in its last and deepest wound;
 Until its hate be all inflicted. (IV.i.46-67)

In all his machinations, Cenci seems to believe that he is acting on behalf of a higher purpose. His soul is a “scourge,” and it is as this instrument of divine chastisement that he denies Giacomo his promised employment: “[Cenci] came to upbraid and curse, / Mocking our poverty, and telling us / Such was God’s scourge for disobedient sons” (III.i.314-6). Cenci’s zeal to portray the arm of God’s affliction toward the Job-like Beatrice does not spare him, however, from fellow suffering. He acknowledges that his masochistic self-ruination endangers and spites not only those around him but also himself—“My soul, which is a scourge, will I resign / Into the hands of him who wielded it; / Be it for its own punishment or theirs”—but he submits to the “He” who commands him. Beatrice would assert that he is a demon sent to torture her, but Cenci himself is confident that he is the one who serves God (IV.i.63-5 and 66). As a joint

Satan-Job figure, Cenci prays for a misery that falls on him, but seems to take pleasure in his own demise. Indeed, Cenci himself plants the exact scheme of his murder in the minds of his yet undesigning family:

You were not here conspiring? You said nothing
Of how I might be dungeoned as a madman;
Or be condemned to death for some offence,
And you would be the witnesses?—This failing,
How just it were to hire assassins, or
Put sudden poison in my evening drink?
Or smother me when overcome by wine?
Seeing we had no other judge but God,
And he had sentenced me, and there were none
But you to be the executioners
Of his decree enregistered in heaven?
Oh, no! You said not this? (II.i.137-148).

Cenci makes apparent an element, if only a corruption, of Job—something to be pitied—in the person of the suicidal oppressor devising his own destruction.

After devastating everything belonging to Job, Satan is allowed, in the second phase of Job's trial, to torment the longsuffering victim's physical person. Satan chooses to cover the man's body with "sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown" so that he sits among the ashes scraping his running lesions with broken pottery (Job 2:7 [AV]).⁵² Shelley represents this escalation of anguish and the pollution of the body through the rape of Beatrice. Cenci, who understands how to dominate the body in order further to aggravate the soul, early tells Camillo: "I rarely kill the body which preserves, / Like a strong prison, the soul within my power, / Wherein I feed it with the breath of fear / For hourly pain" (I.i.114-7). Beatrice confirms this when she describes the effects of her physical contamination as reaching

⁵² Shelley contracted a similar skin condition when, in 1821 in Pisa, his own face "erupt[ed], like Job's with boils" (Wroe p. 25).

her soul:

I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
My fingers and my limbs to one another,
And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!

.....
(*More wildly.*) No, I am dead! These putrefying limbs
Shut round and sepulchre the panting soul
Which would burst forth into the wandering air! (III.i.19-23, 26-8)

Though Cenci seeks generally to taint Beatrice's person, he also imagines the infection engendering a specific symptom. Emphasizing the rape's significance as the final act of intensification in a process of torture, Cenci recalls in Beatrice the image of Job's bodily condition. He declares that Beatrice's "spirit shall approach the throne of God / Plague-spotted with my curses. I will make / Body and soul a monstrous lump of ruin" (IV.i.93-5), and prays:

Earth, in the name of God, let her food be
Poison, until she be encrusted round
With leprous stains! Heaven, rain upon her head
The blistering drops of the Maremma's dew,
Till she be speckled like a toad. (IV.i.128-132).

Cenci's motivation for all of his torture is to estrange his daughter from her God ("As she shall die unshrived and unforgiven / A rebel to her father and her God") by provoking her to blasphemy. Apportioning his diabolical will for each of his children, Cenci boldly proclaims his desire for Beatrice to profane and turn from God: "Beatrice shall, if there be skill in hate / Die in despair, *blaspheming*" (IV.i.89-90 and 49-50, emphasis added).⁵³ Cenci's efforts to effect blasphemy may be read as

⁵³ The charge of blasphemy appears a number of times throughout the play. Cenci twice accuses Lucretia of blasphemy: "Blaspheming liar! You are damned for this!"; "Vile palterer with the sacred truth of God, / Be thy soul choked with that blaspheming lie!"; and Orsino also warns her "Blaspheme

analogous to Satan's inciting Job to curse God. Job's embittered wife, whom Cenci also evokes, joins Satan in pressing Job to curse God—"Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God, and die"—but Job refuses, saying, "What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:9 and 10 [AV]).⁵⁴ Job never succumbs to the temptation of cursing God, and though he accuses God of injustice, he waits upon God to relieve his suffering. When God meets with him, giving Job the opportunity to contest him, the finite man grasps the limitations of his finite understanding before the infinite God: "therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not" (Job 42:3 [AV]). He chooses the humility of silence: "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. / Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further" and repents of his pride (Job 40.4-5 [AV]). God then restores to Job twice the amount of his former wealth and blesses him again with ten children.

Beatrice begins the play with a faith like Job's, reassuring Lucretia that God's omnipotent justice surely prevails over the ploys of her father: "It is not true!—Dear lady, pray look up. / Had it been true, there is a God in Heaven, / He would not live to boast of such a boon" (I.iii.51-3). By the end of the play, however, Beatrice gestures

not!" (II.i.162, IV.i.73-4, and III.i.181). Cenci seeks to condemn Beatrice's soul by goading her to the unforgivable sin (Matt.12:31). While the occasion of a saved lost soul prompts rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:7), Cenci seeks to inspire the antithesis: "O multitudinous Hell, the fiends will shake / Thine arches with the laughter of their joy! / There shall be lamentation heard in Heaven / As o'er an angel fallen" (IV.1.183-6).

⁵⁴ Job famously curses instead the day of his birth: "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived," later saying, "I should have been as though I had not been; I should have been carried from the womb to the grave" (Job 3:3 and 10.19 [AV]). Shelley includes this token Jobian lament in Giacomo's cry, "Oh, that I had never been!" and expresses Job's longing for the grave in Beatrice's "Oh God! That I were buried with my brothers! / And that the flowers of this departed spring / Were fading on my grave!" (III.ii.92, Job 3:22, 14:13, 17:13 [AV], and I.iii.137-9).

toward a charge against God for his passive allowance of Cenci's crimes:

Or wilt thou rather tax high judging God
That he permitted such an act as that
Which I have suffered, and which he beheld;
Made it unutterable, and took from it
All refuge, all revenge, all consequence,
But that which thou hast called my father's death? (V.iii.78-83).

Although she stops short of indicting God, Beatrice's former confidence has not been substantiated, and her final stance before her death reveals a callous heart that has lost hope for God's interventive relief in a situation of injustice: "I / Have met with much injustice in this world; / No difference has been made by God or man" (V.iv.80-2).

When Lucretia entreats Beatrice to trust in God, she replies, "You do well telling me to trust in God, / I hope I do trust in him. In whom else / Can any trust? And yet my heart is cold" (V.iv.87-9).

The progression of the waning of Beatrice's faith is unclear and difficult to trace. Of course, it might be explained that Beatrice maintains her hope in God after the rape because she believes herself to be acting on behalf of God when she plots Cenci's murder, and that she loses her faith when he does not deliver her at her trial. Still, Beatrice's murderous impulse, even as a potentially justifiable means of expiation, seems to belie her claims to a holy allegiance, particularly when she restrains herself from suicide on account of her religion: "Self-murder...no, that might be no escape, / For thy decree yawns like a Hell between / Our will and it" (III.i.132-4, ellipses in original). Her despondency at the prospect of death—"My God! Can it be possible I have / To die so suddenly? So young to go / Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground!" (V.iv.48-50)—also does not accord with her previous

longings for death and the grave and would not afford sufficient cause for turning from God, seeing as she appears to hope in heaven: “I was just dreaming / That we were all in Paradise” (I.iii.137, II.i.57, and V.iii.9-10). It is, perhaps, a far more sinister and measured subversion than God’s simple inaction that corrodes Beatrice’s conviction.

In order to determine the shift in Beatrice’s spiritual assurance, it is helpful to track the fluctuations of her mental state. Though a steady and resilient character whose “firm mind” provides the “only refuge and defence” of her family, Beatrice uncharacteristically loses her composure on three occasions, nearly lapsing into the madness of despair (II.i.48-9). The first moment of wavering equanimity occurs when Lucretia notices a change in Beatrice’s demeanor:

How pale you look; you tremble, and you stand
Wrapped in some fixed and fearful meditation,
As if one thought were over strong for you:
Your eyes have a chill glare; O, dearest child!
Are you gone mad? If not, pray speak to me (II.i.29-33).

Beatrice attributes her transfixion to a single utterance by her father—“It was one word, Mother, one little word; / One look, one smile”—but does not elucidate what Cenci conveyed (II.i.63-4). Whatever the word, its meaning clearly forewarns a trouble exceeding even her previous suffering and surpassing the bounds of her endurance:

(Wildly.) Oh! He has trampled me
Under his feet, and made the blood stream down
My pallid cheeks. And he has given us all
Ditch water, and the fever-stricken flesh
Of buffaloes, and bade us eat or starve,
And we have eaten.—He has made me look
On my beloved Bernardo, when the rust

Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs,
And I have never yet despaired—but now!
What would I say? (II.i.64-73)

While Cenci's threat might be interpreted as a premonition of the imminent rape, I would like to consider the "one word" in conjunction with a moment in Job, when Job's friend Eliphaz recounts a dream. Eliphaz claims to have been visited, "In thoughts from the visions of the night," by a spirit bearing a message: "Now a thing was secretly brought to me, and mine ear received a little thereof" (Job 4.13 and 12 [AV]). The NIV translates verse 12: "A word was secretly brought to me, my ears caught a whisper of it").⁵⁵ The message causes Eliphaz to "trembl[e], which made all my bones to shake...the hair of my flesh stood up," for a voice tells him that God is unconcerned with the affairs of humankind (Job 4:14-5 [AV]): "Behold, he put no trust in his servants; and his angels he charged with folly: / How much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth? / They are destroyed from morning to evening: they perish for ever without any regarding it" (Job 4.18-20 [AV]). Shelley himself must have been impressed by this idea, for he copies the verses into his notebook, rephrasing them:

If God preserve not from the disgrace
of failure the regents of the planets
& the suns. — if he will not defend
from ruin the Angel who governs
all our visible & imaginable World
how much less man — chap 4. V.18.⁵⁶

It is this message of God's supposed indifference that Cenci implants in Beatrice's mind. The one word of doubt succeeds in shaking her faith, for the trauma of the rape,

⁵⁵ Lucretia also tells, though falsely, of a vision Beatrice had in which a divine voice presaged Cenci's impending death (IV.i.32-7).

⁵⁶ Shelley, *Faust*, pp. 306-3 (p. 160).

which plunges her into her next bout of madness, is inflicted as much for the physical violation as for the act's corroboration that God will not interpose justice in her situation. Even in her frantic flailing, Beatrice comprehends that Cenci seems to have proven God apathetic:

.....Yet speak it not:
For then if this be truth, that other too
Must be a truth, a firm enduring truth,
Linked with each lasting circumstance of life,
Never to change, never to pass away." (III.i.59-63)

While the rape may signify that God will not act to save her from her troubles, Beatrice appears to convince herself that he will also not punish her for executing, what she believes, he ought to have done. Even in prison, she comforts her family: "Take cheer! The God who knew my wrong, and made / Our speedy act the angel of his wrath, / Seems, and but seems to have abandoned us" (V.iii.113-5). Camillo's failure to obtain the Pope's pardon serves as the final confirmation of Cenci's insinuation, however, and Beatrice gives way again to wildness, indicating the dashing of her security in God: "What? O, where am I? Let me not go mad! / Sweet Heaven, forgive weak thoughts! If there should be / No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world" (V.iv.56-8). While Beatrice lorded the authority of moral superiority over Cenci when she thought herself sustained by God, now that the very existence of God has been brought into question, she begins to fear Cenci's unchecked power: "For was he not alone omnipotent / On Earth, and ever present? Even though dead, / Does not his spirit live in all that breathe, / And work for me and mine still the same ruin" (V.iv.68-72).

If Beatrice loses faith in God, there is another figure of good whom she

refuses, with a religious devotion, to repudiate—herself. Beatrice’s nearly delusional arrogance of innocence and strange beguiling of Marzio have been likened to Cenci’s megalomania, and, to a certain degree, there appears to be an underlying sameness between the two characters. Beatrice imitates Cenci’s bewildering assuredness of divine right when she justifies parricide as action in the service of God: “Thou wert a weapon in the hand of God / To a just use” (IV.iii.54-5).⁵⁷ Also like Cenci, who declares himself God’s peer—“He does his will, I mine!”—Beatrice seems to view her own will and judgment as matching God’s (IV.i.139): “I have prayed / To God, and I have talked with my own heart, / And have unraveled my entangled will, / And have at length determined what is right” (III.i.218-221). I would like to consider, however, whether her obdurate resistance of guilt is not a clinging to a source of good that may combat her father’s evil—a sacred good against which she refuses to blaspheme. As her belief in God fades, she begins to view herself as symbolic of perfect innocence. Even when her family importunes her confession, Beatrice never avows her transgression: “Say what ye will. I shall deny no more. / If ye desire it thus, thus let it be, / ... / No other pains shall force another word” (V.iii.86-7, 89).

Silence at one’s own trial recollects not only Job, but also the prosecution and suffering of another innocent, his great antitype, Jesus Christ, who, though judged by the religious assembly and later by the Governor, refrains from speaking in his defense: “And [Jesus] answered [Pilate] to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly” (Matt. 27:14 [AV]). Enlisting the imagery of Jesus’ trial, Shelley

⁵⁷ Robert F. Whitman also notes: “Both father and daughter see themselves as agents of the Deity and find in Him justification for their actions” (“Beatrice’s ‘Pernicious Mistake’ in the Cenci.” *PMLA* 74[June 1959]: 249-53, 252).

associates the “man of sorrows” with Beatrice, “that most perfect image of God’s love / That ever came sorrowing upon the earth” (Isa. 53:3 [AV] and V.ii.67-8). In place of the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus are the two outlaws Marzio and Olimpio. Marzio repeats the repentant thief’s confession of his own guilt and Christ’s innocence—“we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss”—when he asserts Beatrice’s innocence: “I here declare those whom I did accuse / are innocent. ‘Tis I alone am guilty” (Luke 23:41 [AV] and V.ii.158-9). Jesus’ promise to the thief—“Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise”—is voiced by Lucretia, who comforts Beatrice: “Trust in God’s sweet love, / The tender promises of Christ: ere night / Think we shall be in Paradise” (Luke 23:43 [AV] and V.iv.75-7). Jesus’ words of forgiveness for his oppressors—“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34 [AV])—are implied in Beatrice’s exclamation: “O, white innocence, / That thou shouldst wear the mask of guilt to hide / Thine awful and serenest countenance / From those who know thee not!” (V.iii.24-7). The Pope fulfills the function of Pontius Pilate, who, acknowledges Christ’s innocence, but nonetheless condemns him for political purposes. Pilate excuses himself from responsibility by washing his hands, but he sins in his inaction, much like the Pope who maintains “blameless neutrality” (Matt. 27:24 [AV] and II.ii.40):

He looked as calm and keen as is the engine
Which tortures and which kills, exempt itself
From aught that it inflicts; a marble form,
A rite, a law, a custom: not a man. (V.iv.2-5)

Beatrice’s farewell to Bernardo is also reminiscent of Jesus’ parting words to his

disciples before his crucifixion:⁵⁸

One thing more, my child,
For thine own sake be constant to the love
Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,
Though wrapt in a strange cloud of crime and shame,
Lived ever holy and unstained. And though
Ill tongues shall wound me, and our common name
Be as a mark stamped on thine innocent brow
For men to point at as they pass, do thou
Forbear, and never think a thought unkind
Of those, who perhaps love thee in their graves. (V.iv.145-154)

In spite of Jesus' silence, the varied accusations brought against him at his hearing prove false. Interestingly, the charge for which he is finally convicted is blasphemy. Frustrated by his reticence, the high priest commands Jesus to answer only if he is the son of God, and censures him when Jesus affirms his divinity: "Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? Behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy" (Matt. 26:62-3 and 65 [AV]).⁵⁹ Since claiming, and not only cursing, deity constitutes blasphemy, Cenci, in spite of Beatrice's attempts to defend and cleave to what is good, nevertheless succeeds in coercing her blasphemy with the "skill" of his hate, for if Jesus' declaration of the Godhead is striking, Beatrice's assertions are no less extraordinary (IV.i.49). Beatrice's calm apotheosizing of her purity beyond the reach of conscience or judgment signals a movement in which she herself, and not God, has become the absolute standard of her morality:

⁵⁸ "Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him. / If God be glorified in him, God shall also glorify him in himself, and shall straightway glorify him. / Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you. / A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13.31-5 [AV]).

⁵⁹ Stephen, the first martyr, is also falsely condemned for blasphemy (Acts 6.8-15 [AV]).

..... ‘Tis like a truant child
 To fear that others know what thou hast done,

 The deed is done,
 And what may follow now regards not me.
 I am as universal as the light;
 Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm
 As the world’s centre. Consequence, to me,
 Is as the wind which strikes the solid rock
 But shakes it not. (IV.iv.36-7, 46-52)

Most critical to Beatrice’s reaching toward divinity, however, is her successful manipulation of the criminal Marzio. Earlier in the play, Beatrice had shouldered divine authority to pardon sin when she absolved Marzio of the murder (“If thou hast crimes, repent: this deed is none”); but it is in her interrogation of Marzio that Beatrice effectively steps into the place of God (IV.iii.56).⁶⁰ Subjugating Marzio as a puppet Job suffering the literal torture of the rack, Beatrice fully discards her own Jobian posture and assumes an attitude of transcendent, sovereign condescension. Like the God of the book of Job who emerges to ask who dare question him—“Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? / Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me”—Beatrice speaks as one affronted to be indicted by a mere mortal (Job 38:2-3 [AV]):

Come near. And who art thou, thus chosen forth
 Out of the multitude of living men,
 To kill the innocent?...
Fix thine eyes on mine;
 Answer to what I ask. (V.ii.78-82).

⁶⁰ Beatrice’s move to remit sin is blasphemous, for Jesus, too, is accused of blasphemy when he forgives the sins of a paralytic man: “Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only?” (Mark 2.7 [AV]). Beatrice further exhibits her confusion of her own identity with God’s when she tells Marzio: “Thou wert a weapon in the hand of God” (IV.iii.54), but later seems to regard him her own weapon: “do you think / I should have left this two edged instrument / Of my misdeed; this man, this bloody knife, / With my own name engraven on the heft, / Lying unsheathed amid’ a world of foes, / For my own death?” (V.ii.96-101).

When, again like God, Beatrice establishes that Marzio cannot comprehend, and therefore lacks the right to condemn, her, Marzio responds like Job, owning his guilt and shame at having spoken wrongfully:⁶¹

I am a guilty miserable wretch;
I have said all I know; now, let me die!
.....
I here declare those whom I did accuse
Are innocent. 'Tis I alone am guilty. (V.ii.91-2, 158-9)⁶²

In addition to a natural sympathy for Beatrice, however, Shelley seems to encode a curious identification with Cenci. He is careful to include the specific date celebrated by Cenci as the holiday of his sons' deaths: the "twenty-seventh of December" (I.iii.68). Although nowhere to be found in Shelley's source material, 27 December is the date that he registers as the date of birth of his "Neapolitan charge," Elena Adelaide Shelley, widely believed to be his illegitimate child. 27 December is also the date on which certain scholars believe Claire miscarried Shelley's child.⁶³

Richard Holmes makes the case that Shelley chose to memorialize 27 December

⁶¹ In demonstrating to Job his ignorance and inability to judge God, God questions him in matters concerning the creation and governance of the universe. God makes particular reference to his most fearsome creature: the leviathan. An animal symbolizing "chaotic evil" in the ancient Near East, the leviathan has been "variously interpreted as the seven-headed sea monster Lotan of Ugaritic mythology, the whale, the dolphin, a marine dinosaur that survived the Flood, and, most likely, the crocodile" (Zuck p. 772). Job alludes to the Ugaritic mythology, which claimed the dragon, when awakened, would swallow the sun or moon, when he curses his birthday: "May those who curse days curse that day; those who are ready to rouse Leviathan" (Zuck, p. 723 and Job 3:8 [I cite here the NIV, as the AV does not refer to the leviathan by name in this verse]). The Bible also describes the leviathan as a sea dragon and a "piercing" and "crooked" serpent that "None is so fierce that dare stir him up" (Isa. 27:1 [AV] and Job 41:10 [AV]). Shelley relates Cenci to the leviathan when Lucretia tells Savella: "I dare not rouse him: I know none who dare ... / 'Twere perilous; ... you might as safely waken / A serpent; ..." (IV.iv.14-6, ellipses in original).

⁶² Job answers God: "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth," and later, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. / Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 40:4, 42:5-6 [AV]).

⁶³ Mary writes in her journal on 27 December 1818 simply that Claire is "not well" (*Mary Shelley's Journal*, p. 114). If Claire were pregnant, her condition would have been kept a secret from Mary, who seems to have believed that Claire suffered from a menstruation-related illness (James Bieri, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008], p. 436).

because of “*the loss of two of his own children*, both delivered on the same night—one by Claire through miscarriage, and the other by Elise, through the marriage and machinations of Paolo Foggi. Two children lost to him on 27 December, through Heaven’s special care.”⁶⁴ Although James Bieri contends that Elena Adelaide’s mother could not have been Elise Foggi, but rather a mysterious lady who moved in the world of fashion, he does not dispute Claire’s potential miscarriage or the possibility that Shelley fathered two children during this period.⁶⁵ It would not be the first time that he awaited the concurrent arrival of two children. Holmes recalls his impregnation of both Harriet and Mary several years earlier: “Finally, if it is objected that Shelley would never have made two women pregnant simultaneously, and certainly not in the same household, it is as well to consider his situation in the winter of 1814-15. Harriet’s and Mary’s babies were born at approximately two and a half months interval; moreover Mary’s being only seven months was so premature that it was virtually a miscarriage, and of course it died. The similarity could hardly have escaped Shelley, and his sense of being hounded by fate—if not by anything more diabolic—could hardly have been lessened.”⁶⁶ The private significance of 27 December is doubly resonant because of Shelley’s creation of a personal mythology concerning the number 27. Shelley had a propensity for fixating on certain numbers, and his curious association of 27 December with death, and its counterpart 27 June with life and rebirth, can be traced back “perhaps as early as 1810, certainly by

⁶⁴ Holmes, p. 483. Holmes later comes to believe that “the maid [Elise Foggi] is irrelevant, and that Elena was impulsively adopted to compensate Claire for this miscarriage” (Nora Crook and Derek Guiton, *Shelley’s Venomed Melody* [New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986], p. 54).

⁶⁵ Bieri, *Biography*, pp. 439-46.

⁶⁶ Holmes, p. 483.

1814.”⁶⁷ An edit, likely made by Shelley to the preface of *Adonais* as it appears in the 1839 *Poetical Works*, marks John Keats’s death as “the 27th of December 1820, and an entry written by Percy in Mary’s journal reads: “Mary told me that this was my birthday; I thought it had been the 27th June.”⁶⁸ I would like to suggest, however, that for the twenty-six-year-old Shelley, who turned twenty-seven during the writing of *The Cenci*, twenty-seven also marked a symbolic turning point in his perception of himself. The portentous numeral seems to have accompanied the ever idealistic and free-loving youth’s gradual initiation into the mold of the traditional father. Although he had previously denigrated marriage, he reluctantly agreed to be translated again into husband in order to legitimize William and gain custody of Charles and Ianthe. William Godwin received Shelley into his home on 27 December 1816, the first time since his elopement with Mary on 27 July 1814 (Shelley had “revealed their love to Godwin” one month earlier on 27 June), and went with him to obtain a marriage license the next day.⁶⁹ The gesture of marriage did little to counteract Shelley’s liberal reputation, however, and the courts denied him his children on 27 March 1817, leaving him with the burden and guilt of paternal failure. The documentation concerning Elena Adelaide is also characterized by the number 27—this time perhaps by Shelley’s deliberate maneuvering rather than by coincidence. Elena’s date of birth is recorded as 27 December, her baptismal date is 27 February 1819, and Mary, the

⁶⁷ Holmes, p. 438.

⁶⁸ Percy Shelley, *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mary Shelley (London: E. Moxon, 1839), p. 286, qtd. in Crook and Guiton, p. 53; and Mary Shelley, entry for 4 August 1814, *Mary Shelley’s Journal*, p. 5, qtd. in Crook and Guiton, p. 55.

⁶⁹ Holmes, p. 232.

alleged mother, is incorrectly registered as being “aged twenty-seven.”⁷⁰ The meaningful number again seems to contain Shelley’s great regret for his unfulfilled duty toward his children.⁷¹

Shelley wrestles with fundamental concerns of flawed fatherhood and illegitimacy through his drama. Though Job was a good father, *The Cenci* examines a hierarchy of bad fathers. Cenci, of course, commits the ultimate betrayal of the office of the father in his incestuous rape of Beatrice, but “the Holy Father” the Pope and God, whom Beatrice calls upon as a father (“Thou, great God, / Whose image upon earth a father is, / Dost thou indeed abandon me!”), also forsake her through their negligence and abuse of trust. Earl R. Wasserman calls attention to the ambiguity of Beatrice’s lament of “paternal chastisement” that “blur[s] all distinction between the Count and God” (II.i.24, 16-8 and I.iii.113).⁷²

I have borne much, and kissed the sacred hand
Which crushed us to the earth, and thought its stroke
Was perhaps some paternal chastisement!
Have excused much, doubted; and when no doubt
Remained, have sought by patience, love and tears
To soften him, and when this could not be
I have knelt down through the long sleepless nights
And lifted up to God, the father of all
Passionate prayers: and when these were not heard
I have still borne. (I.iii.111-20).

Her cry—“Great God! That such a father should be mine!”—similarly rebukes each of the members of the paternal trinity, the three orders of fathers who wrong her (I.ii.54). The implication is that these fathers act in cooperation and, indeed, the

⁷⁰ Bieri, *Biography*, p. 437.

⁷¹ Interestingly Shelley lists his own age correctly: “twenty-six.” It may be that he was required to verify his age for the birth registration, but the number perhaps also emphasizes Shelley’s feeling of verging toward the destined marker of 27.

⁷² Wasserman, pp. 84-128, 89.

fathers join hands in oppressive conspiracy, upholding one another for their mutual claim to a paternal authority. Cenci exploits his commonality with the heavenly father, emphasizing their solidarity as parents to compel God's partiality—

With what but with a father's curse doth God
Panic-strike armed victory, and make pale
Cities in their prosperity? The world's Father
Must grant a parent's prayer against his child (IV.i.104-7)

—and to pretend to an equal footing with God: “He does his will, I mine!” (IV.i.139).

Cenci's behavior only defiles the honored title: “A father who is all a tyrant seems, / Were the prophaner for his sacred name,” but still he remains “sheltered by a father's hoary hair” and “shielded by a father's holy name” (II.ii.80-1, I.iii.101, and II.ii.73). It is the unsound assumption of a father's inherent morality that moves the Pope to sympathize with Cenci:

Children are disobedient, and they sting
Their fathers' hearts to madness and despair
Requiting years of care with contumely.
I pity the Count Cenci from my heart;
His outraged love perhaps awakened hate,
And thus he is exasperated to ill. (II.ii.32-7)⁷³

Though the Pope declares himself neutral “[i]n the great war between the old and young” (II.ii.38), Cardinal Camillo, who reports the Holy Father's words, discerns his superior's self-interest in the case: “He holds it of most dangerous example / In aught to weaken the paternal power, / Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own” (II.ii.54-6).

For his own preservation, the Pope sides with the fathers, telling Cardinal Camillo, “Parricide grows so rife / That soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young / Will

⁷³ This deduction of the guilt of one party based on the other party's infallibility follows the example of Job's friends, who assume Job's guilt because of God's blamelessness. Of course, fathers are not God, and the book of Job demonstrates that matters of suffering are much more complex than simple guilt or innocence.

strangle us all, dozing in our chairs” (V.iv.20-2).

The unquestioned authority, no matter how undeserved, of anyone assuming the “dread name” of father was a matter of personal frustration for Shelley, who regarded his own father as a kind of tyrant (III.i.144).⁷⁴ Society conferred infallibility on fathers, but Shelley was contemptuous of the tendency to justify, and even elevate, paternal failings simply because of the status of the father: “The institutions of society have made you, tho’ liable to be misled by passion and prejudice like others, the *Head of the family*; and I confess it is almost natural for minds not of the highest order to value even the errors whence they derive their importance.”⁷⁵ Shelley’s paternal hatred, which led him even to hint at parricide (“Father are you a Christian? judge not then lest you be judged.—Remember the forgiveness of injuries which Christians profess and if my crime were even deadlier than parricide, forgiveness is your duty”), was perhaps founded on Timothy Shelley’s religious and sexual hypocrisy.⁷⁶ Shelley often accused Timothy of a disingenuous Christianity: “How then can your boasted professions of Christianity appear to the world, since if you forgive not you can be no Christian—do not rather these hypocritical assumptions of the Christian character lower you in real virtue beneath the *libertine* atheist,” but more deeply rooted, perhaps, was Shelley’s resentment for Timothy’s favoring of his illegitimate son,

⁷⁴ Thomas Medwin writes that “Sir Timothy was a man entertaining high notions of genitorial rights, but of a very capricious temper; at one moment too indulgent, at another tyrannically severe to his children. He was subject to gout, and during its paroxysms, it was almost dangerous to approach him, and he would often throw the first thing that came to hand at their heads” (*The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. H. Buxton Forman [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1913], pp. 102-3).

⁷⁵ Percy Shelley to Timothy Shelley, [*Postmark*: York], [12 October 1811], in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:146-7.

⁷⁶ Percy Shelley to Timothy Shelley, Edinburgh, 27 September 1811, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:142.

Shelley's unnamed, unidentified older half-brother.⁷⁷ Shelley incorporates the question of illegitimacy, a serious complication within a patriarchal society, into his drama in the form of the Pope's many "nephews," among whom Cardinal Camillo is prominent (I.i.28 and V.iv.24). Camillo now holds a position of influence and has entered the ranks of the fathers, both biological and clerical. Beatrice appeals to Camillo's fatherly feeling to stir support for her case:

And you were told: "Confess that you did poison
Your little nephew; that fair blue-eyed child
Who was the loadstar of your life:"—and though
All see, since his most swift and piteous death,
That day and night, and heaven and earth, and time,
And all the things hoped for or done therein
Are changed to you, through your exceeding grief,
Yet you would say, "I confess any thing." (V.ii.48-55)

She knows, perhaps, that her resemblance to his own illegitimate son will move him: "I would as soon have tortured mine own nephew: / (If he now lived he would be just her age; / His hair, too, was her colour, and his eyes / Like hers in shape, but blue and not so deep)" (V.ii.63-6).

It is telling that Shelley chooses to cast Camillo's "nephew," who bears the likeness of Beatrice, also in the image of his own William, his favorite child, who was born illegitimate. Shelley remembers again that he, too, has become a father and that he cannot perpetually identify himself in the position of the persecuted child. For all his anger towards Timothy, he now bears his own share of responsibility and blame

⁷⁷ Percy Shelley to Timothy Shelley, *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:142; and Bieri, *Biography*, pp. 30-3. According to Medwin, Timothy was unapologetic about acknowledging his illegitimate son: "he once told his son, Percy Bysshe, in my presence, that he would provide for as many natural children as he chose to get, but that he would never forgive his making a *mésalliance*; a sentiment which excited in Shelley anything but respect for his sire" (p. 13). Bieri makes the case for the existence of Shelley's brother in "Shelley's Older Brother." *KSJ* 39 (1990): 29-33.

for replicating the errors of his father. It is perhaps this newfound understanding that he can no longer figure himself solely as an innocent child in righteous opposition against an evil father that Shelley magnifies the role of Giacomo. Despite Giacomo's minor role in the original Cenci account, Shelley has his lines fill one-sixth of the drama.⁷⁸ The special regard must certainly have been attracted by a general similarity of circumstance: "Beatrice's brother, twenty-eight-year-old Giacomo, like twenty-seven-year-old Shelley, was the eldest son in a wealthy family whose wife, in 'bitter words' complains that her husband does not adequately support her or their children."⁷⁹

A comparison of age, however, may yield more than an understanding of the two men's resemblance. Although the "Relation" describes Giacomo as "not more than twenty-eight years of age," it should be remembered that Giacomo's younger brother, Bernardo, is "six-and-twenty years old."⁸⁰ The twenty-seven-year-old Shelley could perhaps quite as easily have identified with Bernardo as with Giacomo. The significant difference in Shelley's treatment of the two brothers, however, one as guilty man and the other as innocent child, despite their proximity in age, reinforces his notion of 27 as a sort of hinge number upon which identity and allotted outcomes pivot. Shelley particularly distinguishes Giacomo as a vehicle to consider his own dilemma as a man moving between the incompatible identities of father and son,

⁷⁸ Paul Smith, "Restless Casuistry: Shelley's Composition of *The Cenci*," *KSJ* 13 (Winter 1964): 77-85, 84.

⁷⁹ Shelley, *Cenci*, III.ii.56; and Bieri, *Biography*, p. 473. Just as Giacomo is rendered unable to provide for his family, Shelley was also denied monetary support by his father when he secretly eloped with Harriet Westbrook. Shelley's sense of betrayal by his father led him to "experience[] persecutory feelings seemingly bordering occasionally on the delusional" (p. 169).

⁸⁰ Alfred Forman and H. Buxton Forman, eds., "Appendix: Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci," in *The Cenci: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, (London: Reeves and Turner, 1886), pp. 93-107, 107.

oppressor and oppressed. Like Shelley, Giacomo realizes that, while reproving the sins of his father, he has become yet another Count Cenci to his own children in a seemingly fated emulation of his father. Of course, his faults as a father are engineered by Cenci's dishonesty, but to Giacomo's children, his desertion and disregard for their needs are as unjust as Cenci's abuse:

Yet not so soon but that my wife had taught
My children her harsh thoughts, and they all cried,
"Give us clothes, father! Give us better food!
What you in one night squander were enough
For months!" I looked, and saw that home was hell. (III.i.326-330)

Giacomo is akin to Job in this, for, though a good father, Job is an unwitting cause in his children's death, for it is God's singling him out that brings about his family's annihilation.

By cruelly constructing him as a bad father, Cenci finds the way to torment Giacomo long after his death, which Giacomo plots in retribution. In an effort to mitigate his guilt and to face his father as an equal, Giacomo disowns Cenci: "We / Are now no more, as once, parent and child, / But man to man; the oppressor to the oppressed; / The slanderer to the slandered; foe to foe" (III.i.282-5). By rejecting any remnant of his identity as a son, however, Giacomo steps fully into the loathed role of the father. There is now the haunting thought that his own children may one day avenge their grievances against him:

The hours crawl on; and when my hairs are white,
My son will then perhaps be waiting thus,
Tortured between just hate and vain remorse;
Chiding the tardy messenger of news
Like those which I expect. (III.ii.25-9)

Shelley must have remembered here his children by Harriet, whom he had in effect

abandoned, though not with malicious intent, and who would likely harbor much bitterness against him. They would hate him as he had hated his father, and as Timothy Shelley had hated and feared his own father, Bysshe Shelley.⁸¹ Shelley appears to question if parricide, then, is simply the natural way of the world, as sons grow into the fathers they despised and beget a new generation of despising sons.

Shelley's reconsideration of the Cenci story's paternal persecution from the perspectives of both child and father offers no solution to the question of injustice and persistent suffering. There is Job's course of patient waiting on the justice and vindication of God, and, for those who lose faith in God's deliverance, there is Beatrice's path of taking justice into one's own hands. The situation is made still more complex by the duality of character that Shelley discovers in Cenci, who amalgamates the roles of Satan and Job, and in Beatrice who, rising from excruciating Jobian suffering to magisterial impunity, fulfills both the functions of Job and God. The same duality is displayed by those crossing the treacherous passage from the position of son to father. Identifying with Beatrice and Job, Shelley would have appreciated becoming, by extension, a type of Christ, with whom he felt a sense of rivalry, as well as "intense identification."⁸² He also finds himself, however, taking on the image of the Father over that of the suffering Son. Shelley meditates his direction as he evaluates the Jobian spectrum of who he was, who he is, and who he may become in the reflections of Beatrice, Giacomo, and Count Cenci. As a father, Shelley

⁸¹ Bieri identifies anger as promoting the "link" between "old Bysshe, Timothy, and Shelley," even suggesting that perhaps "the poet's was the fifth generation of father-son conflict" in the Shelley family (*Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography: Youth's Unextinguished Fire, 1792-1816* [Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2004], pp. 37, 31).

⁸² Teddi Chichester Bonca, *Shelley's Mirrors of Love: Narcissism, Sacrifice, and Sorority* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1999), p. 17.

acknowledges now his own part in the tyranny against which he has always rebelled, and *The Cenci* leaves the mark of the poet's grappling for his bearings in a time of transition and pain. In depicting suffering, both Shelley and Dante turn to the figure of Job, finding in him a type able to comprise and unite multiple, and even conflicting, counterparts. Through typology, characters freely traverse ego boundaries, shifting identities and roles, while remaining aligned with a shared, subsuming mold.

CONCLUSION

In his 1935 essay “Religion and Literature,” T. S. Eliot writes:

“The Bible has had a *literary* influence upon English literature *not* because it has been considered as literature, but because it has been considered as the report of the Word of God. And the fact that men of letters now discuss it as ‘literature’ probably indicates the *end* of its literary influence.”¹

Why should a text that is received as “literature” cease to have a “literary” influence? Eliot seems to suggest that literature itself inherently possesses, if not always the ability, at least the ambition and potential for, religious and theological significance. The Bible’s literary influence was and is only a kind of secondary consequence of literature’s turning to Scripture to clarify and discover a deeper plane, a shared spiritual register. Indeed, Eliot insists that literature should not, and cannot, be judged purely by literary standards:

Literary criticism should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint... The ‘greatness’ of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards.²

In spite of what Eliot terms the “gradual secularization of literature,” he rejects the possibility of a total estrangement of literature and religion:

I am convinced that we fail to realize how completely, and yet how irrationally, we separate our literary from our religious judgments. If there could be a complete separation, perhaps it might not matter: but the separation is not, and never can be, complete.³

He reminds us that even

[i]f we, as readers, keep our religion and moral convictions in one compartment and take our reading merely for entertainment, or for aesthetic

¹ Eliot, T. S. *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt, 1975.

² Eliot 97.

³ Eliot 100.

pleasure,...the author recognizes no such distinctions. The author is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not.⁴

Literature always “affects our moral and religious existence.”⁵

Eliot’s prediction that a loss of regard for the Bible as the divine Word will result in a loss of interest in the Bible as literature points to the impulse of poetic theology, which identifies poetry’s innately comparative, and competitive, nature. Poetry has no need for, and is not drawn to, that which it already so easily occupies, but poetry seeks to strive with, and define itself in relation to, that which is perceived as possessing a higher, more solid, and deeper truth.

Throughout much of the history of Western literature, the more coherent and whole model of truth and text with and against which poetry identified itself has been the Bible. I believe that “poetic theology”—an old concept that can be traced back through the Renaissance, Middle Ages, and antiquity—is ripe for recovery as a new area for current literary studies. Poetic theology, which claims for poetry divine inspiration, modes of biblical exegesis, and a theological linguistic capacity, raises the

⁴ Eliot 100. As the reader comes to grasp the author’s moral code and view of life by the attitudes and behavior championed in his work, Eliot stresses that an appreciation for the author’s perspective is instructive only when the reader can discern his own thoughts from those of the author. Eliot describes the intoxicating sway the author holds over the adolescent reader who has not yet gained the maturity to differentiate between his own beliefs and the author’s as a kind of spiritual possession or invasion: “Everyone can remember some moment in youth when he or she was completely carried away by the work of one poet...What happens is a kind of inundation, of invasion of the undeveloped personality by the stronger personality of the poet” (102). In “The Music of Poetry,” Eliot admits to a period in his own youth when he himself was captivated by Shelley: “When we imitated Shelley, it was not so much from a desire to write as he did, as from an invasion of the adolescent self by Shelley, which made Shelley’s way, for the time, the only way in which to write” (108-109). Eliot explains that his infatuation with Shelley was a fleeting “affair of adolescence” (81) in “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism.” He later finds Shelley’s ideas “repellent” (81), and “I am inclined to think that the reason why I was intoxicated by Shelley’s poetry at the age of fifteen, and now find it almost unreadable, is not so much that at that age I accepted his ideas, and have since come to reject them, as that at that age ‘the question of belief or disbelief’ did not arise” (86).

⁵ Eliot 103.

question of why poetry persistently bears the marks of “secularization” and revises the general understanding of secularization as a simple, progressive removal of religious belief and ideology with a vision of a much more complex and integral imbrication of literature and theology.

“Poetic theology” also conceives of a larger theoretical framing of the formal, textual, conceptual, and hermeneutic interconnections and interpenetrations of literature and theology, for which I have used Dante as a kind of shorthand. While my research focuses primarily on the relationship of poetry and classical and Christian theology, I believe that the theory of poetic theology will also have important parallels and meaningful implications for the study of literary and sacred texts in the Jewish and Islamic traditions. My hope is that this project will lead to further studies that continue to develop our understanding of the relationship of literature, religion, and theology.

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