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POLITICAL TENDENCIES IN SELECTED ROMANTIC POETRY

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

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## **Anotace**

Tato práce se zabývá analýzou vybrané anglické romantické poezie z hlediska politických postojů autorů. V práci jsou rozebrána a zasazena do kontextu dobových politických událostí díla více básníků tohoto období. Hlavními tématy jsou politická pravice a levice, konflikt monarchismu a republikánství a kritika institucionalizovaného náboženství tak, jak jsou nazírány romantickými básníky. V případech, kdy se stejnou otázkou zabývá více autorů, jsou jejich přístupy porovnány.

## **Annotation**

This thesis analyses selected poetry of English Romantic poets in terms of their political opinions. The works of various poets are scrutinised and put into the context of important political events of the period. The main topics discussed are the left-right political spectrum, the conflict between monarchism and republicanism, and the critique of institutionalised religion in how the Romantic poets perceive them. In cases where more poets show interest in the same question, their ideas are compared.

## **Poděkování**

Na tomto místě bych chtěl poděkovat doc. PhDr. Ladislavu Nagyovi, Ph.D. za odborné vedení práce. Nemohla vzniknout bez jeho času, cenných rad a osobních konzultací, které ji neustále posouvaly dopředu.

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## 1 Introduction

One of the many possible ways to divide literary criticism concerned with Romantic poetry is through the question of its political engagement. Countless studies have been published about the supernatural, the aesthetics of the sublime, and other concepts more relevant for the inner worlds of the poets. But when in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, one of Shelley's most influential works, the poet asserted having "what a Scotch philosopher characteristically terms a 'passion for reforming the world'", he was far from being an exception in contemporary poetry. (Selected Poetry 228) The wave of renewed interest in political motives behind the poetry of Shelley and his contemporaries and predecessors, who may be understood to belong to the Romantic movement (although there never really was any integrated program the group might be said to have shared) was, as Cronin claims in *The Politics of Romantic Poetry*, revived only a few decades ago. He suggests it developed as "a reaction against the 'new criticism' of the 1950s and 60s", a critical approach attempting to view literary works as self-referential and with minimal interest in its historical context. (1) It is not the aim of this thesis to judge whether political opinion has an impact on the quality of a poem or whether it is merely a waypoint to be visited and abandoned on the road to creating better poetry; even if such questions were easily answerable, it would not necessarily have to be of importance. A method more fruitful to acquire a better general knowledge of the environment should be an analysis of the key political ideas and stances the poets in question express in their work, followed by their comparison in a broader context of the age. The segment of Romantic poetry typical for its contemplative, even escapist mood is by no means less significant. Quite the contrary is true; political ideas are not bound strictly to the most ostentatiously rebellious poetry, and a more subtle approach may contribute

to the reader's impression. Emphasising the investigation of social, historical, and political context is motivated by no desire to question the scholars who see these traits as crucial, for there is enough support for it if one prefers to scrutinise only the text in itself; but rather as an assertion of the possibility that political outrage and desire to ignite a flame of reform played a role much more crucial in the poetical creation of the period than it is often acknowledged. Naturally, as there were poets such as Wordsworth, whose career as a poet began with revolutionary vigour, only to end with disillusionment resulting in a switch to more conservative ideas and even distance from politics, it should always be borne in mind that not even the most politically engaged Romantics fueled their poetry solely by that; as Byron, for instance, regularly managed to write an intimate, lyrical poem even when in a dispute with political and literary enemies.

The most burning issues of the time are to be discussed, with the main focus on the republicanism of the radicals and the critique of institutionalised religion. All of the topics hold a significant position in the Romantic period; republican ideas were bolstered after the revolutions in America and France (including the Napoleonic wars and the oppressive atmosphere in Britain), doubts were increasing concerning the very goodness of God as raised by the Enlightenment thinkers; beginning industrialisation caused an even greater discrepancy between classes, thus opening the subject of their conflict and inequality Karl Marx later immortalised. Despite the concepts and problematics being from slightly differing fields, all of them are reflected in Romantic poetry. Proposing an integrated picture of political tendencies in the poetry of Romanticism together with their historical context will be aimed at.



## 2 Poetry in the Days of Revolution

### 2.1 Political Spirit of Romanticism

A vast majority of Romantic studies opens their subject matter up with an attempt to characterise the very age in which it took place. If knowledge of historical context is crucial for any historian desiring a deeper understanding of events, it is perhaps of even greater importance in the case of literary Romanticism. Nothing in the history of human ideas has been created out of a vacuum, and the same applies to the genesis of the Romantic mind. To what do we owe the unparalleled eruption of genius in poetry, music, or painting the era brought? In a letter to his publisher Charles Ollier from 1819, Shelley was defending himself against Southey's accusations of imitating Wordsworth:

It may as well be said that Lord Byron imitates Wordsworth, or that Wordsworth imitates Lord Byron, both being great poets, and deriving from the new springs of thought and feeling, which the great events of our age have exposed to view, a similar tone of sentiment, imagery, and expression. A certain similarity all the best writers of any particular age inevitably are marked with, from the spirit of that age acting on all." (Shelley and Ingpen 728)

Let us now put aside Shelley's remarkable awareness of the "spirit" of his day; what the poet does here is capture why the knowledge of a clime is crucial for grasping the phenomena it gives birth to. What Shelley calls a "certain similarity" in the sentiment or imagery may contribute to a much better insight into the poetry of his age centuries later. For that reason, it is necessary to look into whatever sparked the Romantic flame.

Apart from all the events universally known from history, another reason may be found to describe why is the Romantic period seen as one of great turbulence and unrest. It is the atmosphere of the 18th century Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, as

dubbed and made immortal by Thomas Paine, directly preceding the age of Romanticism, which entered history as:

an elegant century in which everything begins by being calm and smooth, rules are obeyed in life and in art, there is a general advance of reason, rationality is progressing, the Church is retreating, unreason is yielding to the great attacks upon it of the French *philosophes* ... (Roots 7)

In contrast, the first signs of English Romanticism may have appeared after the American Revolutionary War, continued through the French Revolution, witnessed the terror and bloodshed in its aftermath, the Napoleonic Wars, and was prevalent even for another decade or two after the battle of Waterloo. The genesis of the Romantic mind in England was greatly influenced by what Shelley calls “the spirit of the age”; the two great revolutions in America and France shook the foundations of long-lasting political regimes, the latter bringing two decades of conflict. Even though the battles of this period did not take place on English soil, the atmosphere was one of tension and caution; in the 1790s in the name of curbing any sympathies with the French Revolution and thus preventing it from jeopardising the monarchy; with the onset of the 19th century and Napoleon’s rise to power the caution shifted towards defence against and eventually defeat of the French emperor. With only a year of peace between the French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars, the state of war between Great Britain and France lasted from 1793 to 1815. For instance, for John Keats, it meant spending seventeen years of his life with his homeland engaged in war before he died aged twenty-five.

At this point, two essential traits, both to be frequently found in Romantic poetry, should be acknowledged. The first is a strong urge to set things in motion, progress, and innovate. These tendencies are most evident in the poetry of Byron and Shelley and

the earlier works of the Lake poets before the revolutionary vigour of their youth was substituted by reactionary positions. In this sense, there is an undeniable influence of William Godwin, one of the more influential political philosophers of the revolutionary era, whose ideas appealed to many who craved change. Godwin's political opinion would require many pages alone, yet it is, hopefully, safe to simplify one of the general messages from his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* for the purpose. Godwin's notorious belief that the very substance of state and government contradicts the freedom of the human mind and individual judgment is the message in question. In general, the central point of Godwinian philosophy, one which has been targeted by several critiques, is a belief in human nature very much in the Enlightenment fashion; he "adopted ... the Enlightenment ideal of man as fully rational, and capable of perfection through reason." (Court) This notion then, quite naturally, does not correspond with the nature of government, whose functioning is conditioned by usage of means, policies and measures often incompatible with pure reason. "The circumstance of all others most necessary", as Godwin terms it, "is that we should never stand still, that every thing most interesting to the general welfare, wholly delivered from restraint, should be in a state of change." Furthermore, Godwin asserts that "nothing can be more adverse to reason or inconsistent with the nature of man, than positive regulations tending to continue a certain mode of proceeding when its utility is gone." (Political Justice 317) In other words, borrowing an expression from contemporary literature, "there is no virtue at all in clinging as some do to tradition merely for its own sake" (The Remains of the Day 12), which forms a significant part of the philosopher's opinion. Godwin's hostility towards still air or a *status quo* maintained purely because the given situation does not require immediate rethinking for practical improvements is far from a solitary outcry shared by

none other in his day. Isaiah Berlin, observing a similar feeling in *Sturm und Drang* writer Jacob Lenz, sees the „sudden passion for action as such, [the] hatred of any established order, hatred of any kind of view of the universe as having a structure which calm (or even uncalm) perception is able to understand, contemplate, classify, describe and finally use“ as a mode of thinking typical for most German thinkers of the period. (Roots 64) There is a noticeable difference in choice of words and, perhaps, in motive, and yet Godwin’s urge to keep going forward, to progress towards the betterment of humanity through ongoing discussion, works on a similar basis of logic. The German notion, indeed even more radical than that of some later Romantics, detesting the desire to understand the universe to make it useful in some specific way, is in disagreement with Godwin’s political-philosophical willingness to do exactly that; nevertheless, the uneasiness both had felt in a self-satisfied stillness of mind was also felt by the Romantics.

The second trait, and once again the more apparent the more the poet inclined to the idea of revolution, is a strong emphasis on the integrity of spirit, or, in other words, one’s faithfulness to ideals. More than anywhere else, this is evident from the turn of older poets to conservatism and the reaction of their younger contemporaries. The older Romantics were, already on the verge of adulthood, able to experience the French Revolution and inhale the great enthusiasm firsthand. Wordsworth, who visited Revolutionary France in 1791 himself, captured the yet unspoiled atmosphere of optimism in the eleventh book of *The Prelude*: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very Heaven!” (109-10) Yet it was very likely this opportunity to witness and relish it as an eyewitness account which would later amplify the great disappointment of the

following events. In a letter to his friend William Matthews from June 1794, Wordsworth's political standings already bear some resemblance to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: "The destruction of those Institutions which I condemn appears to me to be hastening on too rapidly. I recoil from the bare idea of a Revolution ..." (Knight 69)

Southey's shift towards conservatism had for some been absolute, "even more than [that] of Wordsworth and Coleridge", an alteration so apparent he was "branded by his enemies as a contemptible shallow 'turncoat'" (Raimond 1). Perhaps no proof of the gravity of Southey's "betrayal" is better-known than the dedication of Byron's most significant work, *Don Juan*, where he spoke for many of the enemies:

Bob Southey! You're a poet, poet laureate,  
And representative of all the race.  
Although 'tis true that you turned out a Tory at  
Last, yours has lately been a common case.  
And now my epic renegade, what are ye at  
With all the lakers, in and out of place? (Byron 53)

Almost the whole dedication is preoccupied with Southey, with occasional thrust aimed at the other "lakers" Wordsworth and Coleridge. As a demonstration of Byron's contempt, it would be worth quoting in its entirety. The second generation, whose loudest, and yet in terms of poetry least characteristic representative Byron was, may be said to have retained its revolutionary vigour due to a simple reason. As the oldest of the generation's three greatest poets (with Shelley and Keats being the other two), Byron was not two years old during the Storming of the Bastille; it can thus be safely said that it was not until at least fifteen years have passed from the event when they began to be interested in its significance and politics in general. Compared to Wordsworth's revolutionary fervour, both fostered and ruined by personal experience, the disillusion of By-

ron and his generation never resulted in a shift to conservative politics simply because they had been too young (or not born yet) to believe in the very same illusion.

Naturally, as deviation from one's long-held values or reassessment thereof does to some extent always deserve hostile reception as a sign of unfaithfulness, the younger Romantics were meeting it with straightforward hostility and a bitter feeling of betrayal. The notion that remaining true to oneself appears to be the centre of many Romantic motivations as well as the key to how Berlin understands them:

Suppose you had spoken in England to someone who had been influenced by ... Coleridge, or above all by Byron. ... You would have found that common sense, moderation, was very far from their thoughts. You would have found that they believed in the necessity of fighting for your beliefs to the last breath in your body, and you would have found that they believed in the value of martyrdom as such, no matter what the martyrdom was martyrdom for. (Roots 10)

A passage from Thomas Medwin's *Conversations of Lord Byron* captures this very notion from a slightly different angle. When Medwin recollects questioning Byron about the "contradictory opinions he had expressed of Napoleon in his poems" (223), the poet (who repeatedly shifted from admiration to critique of Napoleon in his works) laments the emperor's failure to die as he lived, fully and heroically:

I blame the manner of his death: he shewed that he possessed much of the Italian character in consenting to live. There he lost himself in his dramatic character ... He was master of his own destiny; of that, at least, his enemies could not deprive him. He should have gone of the stage like a hero: it was expected of him. (224)

Byron was bitterly disappointed with the manner of Napoleon's surrender. For a man of such tactical genius, surrounded by an almost mythical aura of invincibility, Byron saw his end unfitting; he would most likely expect him to fall in a battle against all odds, faithful to his conviction until victory or death, never succumbing and never deprived of being in control of his destiny. The value of staying true to oneself, as it may be deemed

crucial for Romantic liberals and radicals, comes out of the necessary comparison. Byron, once again, may be used as an ideal indicator. His attitude towards the harmless “turncoat” Southey was hostile and derisive, yet an emperor responsible for wars and countless lives (which, to do Byron justice, he spoke against in some of his poems) was admired by the poet for his integrity, genius and the strength of his spirit. Even though Byron’s view of Napoleon grew increasingly ambivalent, he never employed derision or mocking irony towards him as he did with Southey. He “felt Napoleon’s betrayal and cowardice too deeply for the simple response of scorn” (Woodring 3). Byron’s emotional shock preventing a simple rejection is the case of what Berlin had in mind when speaking about valuing “martyrdom in itself” more than its purpose; Napoleon’s behaviour following his downfall (yielding the martyrdom) simply meant too great a disappointment for him to dismiss it that easily.

If emotion, individuality, nature, or subjective experience are considered the key to contemplative Romanticism, the two scrutinised principles constitute the motivation behind its revolutionary counterpart. The urge to set things in motion (either acting directly or simply feeling the need) was felt by Blake, by Wordsworth, and Coleridge, most notably in the new approach to poetry they set in *Lyrical Ballads*, by Byron and Shelley in their various works targeting tyranny and inequality. The emphasis on individual integrity and devotion to either a cause, feeling, or intuition is an inseparable and much-valued part of the Romantic soul connected with the belief in an individual and their potential. Both are to be found to some degree wherever a Romantic poet uses their pen and attempts to reform the world or, if that is not successful, reflect its undesirable development.

Romantic poets and poetry may be divided into two groups based on political preferences. More dynamically and liberally oriented, the first group includes Byron, Shelley (to a lesser degree also Keats), and the Lake Poets in their brief pre-disillusion period of progressive enthusiasm. The second group, reactionary and conservative, would, in that case, consist of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey sometime from the French Revolutionary Wars on. Yet this division, motivated by a theoretical inclination towards any of the opposing parliamentary parties, must be taken with some reserve. Even though it was often motivated by a desire to preserve neutrality which was never very real, many poets stressed their independence on Whigs and the Tories. Southey, for instance, “in 1808 loudly declared he despised all parties” (Graham 11), Byron, though he eventually affiliated with the Whigs, “on taking his seat in the House of Lords ... refused to shake hands with Lord Eldon, because he did not wish to commit himself to party” (15) and even Shelley “believed himself hated by both parties, Oppositionist and Ministerial” (17). Another important fact is that Whigs and Tories then were far from what a political party stands for today. A “party membership” was defined more loosely and often shifted with the discussed topic. It has been shown as an essential trait of a Romantic in political matters always to preserve and value individual strength of spirit and remain nonconformist. As Walter Graham accurately observed, another “trait common to these poets was a certain Romantic individualism in politics; and the influence each exerted was often far from partisan”. (11) It is also because none of them is easily categorised based on political opinion. Placing the “Big six” of Romantic poetry on the Whig-Tory scale must thus be understood only as an indicator helpful to render the often complex political positions more comprehensive, but not one to be carved in stone.



## **2.2 Imagination**

The question of the political commitment of Romantic poetry has been raised in many studies, but the volume of the material concerned with its interpretation and criticism is even greater. Yet the area seems far from the “danger of being overworked”, as is Cronin concerned. (2) Imagination, for instance, a matter so crucial to Romantic creation of poetry, seems to be in most studies touched only as an instrument of pure aesthetic value; and it is only in a minority of these studies that it is recognised as something more. According to Cronin, there had been "a long critical tradition", with M. H. Abrams as its last representative, “that described the great Romantics as winning their poetic maturity by surrendering the political commitments that marked their youth in favour of a more dignified commitment to the life of the imagination” (1). This tradition, mainly within the New Criticism, unsurprisingly motivated many a scholar to reignite the relevance of the historical and social context of Romantic poetry. It seems almost ill-conceived to examine a subject so socially oriented as politics, although in the form of poetical symbols, metaphors, and allusions, as existing independently without considering its author’s milieu and other circumstances.

Yet the question does not stand only as a dichotomy between the text and the age it was written in. The idea that after a poet overcomes his desire to preoccupy himself with politics in his work, he may reach a life of dignified imagination (if such a thing exists) is problematic in itself. If a poet like Shelley never reached the point in life where he would abandon politics, would that mean he never poetically grew up despite being widely considered one of the greatest poets in English history? Or that, had he simply depoliticised his life and work, would he have been able to attain even more splendid imagination, albeit being already recognised as one of the most imaginative poets?

The question is about the succession of phenomena. The invention is either the peak of poetical accomplishment, an imaginary end of the journey, or merely one of the very signs of genius that bestow upon the poet the right to relish their place among public intellectuals. Either way, poetry and imagination today perceived as Romantic forte first had to fight for their existence in the accelerating world ruled by Utilitarian theories. Perhaps the most significant attack on imaginative poetry came, paradoxically enough, from Shelley's close friend, Thomas Love Peacock. Even though Shelley admired Peacock's intellect as a satirist and valued his opinion, the latter's essay *The Four Ages of Poetry* motivated him to write a response - *A Defence of Poetry*. In his brilliant critique of contemporary poetry, Peacock made several interesting points. Not that its utilitarian side would be the most groundbreaking, but surely one to provoke Shelley the most. He predicts that such poetry as that of his friends, unproductive and useless for progress, will no longer have its place, that soon a time comes when:

... the great and permanent interests of human society become more and more the main spring of intellectual pursuit; that in proportion as they become so, the subordinacy of the ornamental to the useful will be more and more seen and acknowledged, and that therefore the progress of useful art and science, and of moral and political knowledge, will continue more and more to withdraw attention from frivolous and uncondusive, to solid and conducive studies ...” (Peacock)

However, Peacock's prediction, though a prophecy of growing philistinism and materialism in which imaginative poetry can not prevail, is preoccupied with changing times and taste rather than with any general degradation of poetry. Such an end to poetry, where it is destined to descend lower and lower to find its audience, does not seem to please him, yet he deems it inevitable. There were, however, more uncompromising critics. Thomas Babington Macaulay, for instance, considered times when poetry was popular to be dark:

In an enlightened age there will be much intelligence, much science, much philosophy ... but little poetry. Men will judge and compare; but they will not create ... Poetry produces an illusion on the eye of the mind, as a magic lantern produces an illusion on the eye of the body. And, as the magic lantern acts best in a dark room, poetry effects its purpose most completely in a dark age. (8-9)

Both Peacock and Macaulay seem to operate to some degree with a similar assumption; Peacock claims that poetry teeming with the imagination of the daydreaming poets shall soon lose its place as the readership in the age of utilitarian thought values the useful more than the ornamental. To Macaulay, poetry is a matter of an unenlightened age, but it would be a misconception to accuse him of not considering Pope, for instance, a poet. His view of poetry seems to divide it into two contradictory parts. First, that of creativity and imagination, a symptom of a dark age. Second is the poetry of judgment, exhibiting reason and knowledge in order to be practically useful at the expense of creativity. But it should not be supposed that the poets had not felt that way. In the introduction to Byron's satires, Wright observes:

What is attractive to Byron about Pope, Dryden and others is not only a question of technical mastery ... it is, also, the idea that the poet should both entertain and perform a useful corrective function. This idea is derived ultimately from the classical Roman poet Horace and his view that poetry should be 'dulce et utile' - enjoyable and useful. (Selected Poems of Lord Byron 693)

If the idea of poetry having a corrective function to society was appealing to Byron, it is not entirely unexpected that Shelley would similarly defend a poet's usefulness to society. Poets, he claims in his *Defence*: "are not only the authors of language and of music ... they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society" (3). Shelley's comparison of the poet to prophet bears some resemblance to Blake, a self-pronounced poet-prophet himself. The former believed that in using "ornamental" language, the poet is

not simply elusive but useful in their unique way. He distinguishes between reason and imagination; the former is a human faculty of logical connection of phenomena, while the latter of a more profound perception, enabling man to see under the surface of things. "Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit..." (Defence 12). Poets in the age of science and technology, an age obsessed with progress through reason, thus fill, according to Shelley, a role of prophets uncovering in the present and the future what pure reason may not be sufficient to:

Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet ... comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. (19-20)

That a time will come when this kind of defence of poetry before a society obsessed with practical utility would be needed is what Blake had feared came true. In this sense, Macaulay, Peacock, and others with the same view on poetry epitomise the worst heritage of Locke and Newton, whom Blake had regarded "as those devils who killed the spirit by cutting reality into some kind of mathematically symmetrical pieces, whereas reality is a living whole which can be appreciated only in some non-mathematical fashion". (Roots 58) In *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats expresses hope through the narrator that:

... sure not all  
'Those melodies sung into the world's ear  
'Are useless: sure a poet is a sage;  
'A humanist, physician to all men.  
(189-192)

Byron, Shelley, and Keats understood the role of poetry in a similar way, although their modes may have differed. Shelley's was perhaps the most comprehensive repertoire of political and societal topics; Byron, inspired much by the neoclassical satire, employed humour where Shelley was serious, whereas Keats's way of performing the "corrective function" to society was more subtle and generally less ostentatious. Shelley's *Defence* is concluded by a proclamation of a poet's proper role:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. (90)

Whether the Romantic faith in the ability to write poetry capable of contributing to real-world reforms was right and the mission in their day successful is much harder to answer. With the ruling philosophy obsessed with progress and utility, poets as such found themselves pushed on the periphery of society in terms of influence. Although the Romantics were becoming aware that "to rely on vision to transform the world is to be limited to transforming it in vision while leaving it untouched in reality", it is indubitable that their "faith in the power of imaginative vision to transform the world is the source of some of their greatest achievements". (Dawson 23) The poets found themselves balancing between becoming visionary hermits detached from society and the danger of succumbing to the utilitarian reality. If successful, Dawson claims, the poet will become a prophet of an "alternative possibility" to the human community, which, in the end, may be seen as the "crucial political function of the imagination". (26)

### **3 The Radicals and the Establishment**

#### **3.1 Between Universal Liberty and Patriotism**

The question of Wordsworth's recoiling from revolutionary enthusiasm toward conservative policies does not itself raise many doubts about its verity, as the realia of his life are conclusive. However, it remains problematic to simplify his transformation, as it is often done, as a move caused by the fright of the French Terror, effectively turning the young liberal into a thoroughly conservative reactionary. The problematics of categorising poets (generally applying to anyone after all) as either Whigs or Tories, liberal or conservative without exception, and nothing in between has been emphasised earlier. But is there even any such dichotomy safe to work with? Some of the major studies concerned with Romantic politics assert the inconvenience of the strict bipolar division:

Among students of the English movement ... [the] grouping of Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge with Burke has been the most influential. Twentieth-century admirers of Burke have interpreted the conflict of Coleridge's day as one between mechanistic liberalism and romantic conservatism. (Woodring 26)

Woodring assumes that the "delimitation of Romanticism to its conservative phases" (26) is contra-productive, as it excludes too great a deal of English Romantic poetry, with the only true conservatives remaining after the purge would be Scott and the later Wordsworth, and vice versa with the "mechanistic" liberals. Late Southey should probably be added to Woodring's statement, but the objection is otherwise correct. Attempting to create a political theory that accommodates all the Romantic poets seems to be of little benefit. It is more helpful to dive into the practice to find specific phenomena, in this case, in the poems themselves. One of the possible dichotomies traceable in the poetry is based on two greatly resonating concepts of the revolutionary period: the universally applicable liberty and, as opposed to it, the conservative patrio-

tism. The former is characteristic of the poetry of the Revolution's enthusiastic supporters before the terror breaks out. It consists of the general love for even the most abstract notion of liberty and the belief that whatever the shape of liberty the French Revolution brings, it may serve as a beacon inspiring other tyrant-swayed nations. Both are very accurately conveyed in some of Coleridge's early poetry. Whatever resembles liberty is deeply loved and cared for:

Thou rising Sun! thou blue rejoicing Sky!  
Yea, every thing that is and will be free!  
Bear witness for me, wheresoe'er ye be,  
With what deep worship I have still adored  
The spirit of divinest Liberty.  
(Ode I)

And Coleridge is sure that the flame of liberty will be reignited in every freedom-desiring heart, anticipating doom for all tyrants:

... still my voice, unaltered, sang defeat  
To all that braved the tyrant-quelling lance,  
And shame too long delayed and vain retreat!  
For ne'er, O Liberty! with partial aim  
I dimmed thy light or damped thy holy flame ...  
(Ode II)

The concept of universal liberty has high hopes in the practicability of the American and French ways to all tyrannies regardless of context, which may not always work as intended. What is of great importance, though, is the way it is connected with the idea that it is a republic that, rather than a monarchy, allows its citizens the greatest liberty. Wordsworth shows it in his short poem *On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic*: "Venice, the eldest Child of Liberty. / She was a maiden City, bright and free; No guile seduced, no force could violate" (4-6). He feels that as such an inspiration to all governments, the Venetian Republic must be celebrated and never forgotten:

Yet shall some tribute of regret be paid  
When her long life hath reached its final day:  
Men are we, and must grieve when even the Shade  
Of that which once was great is passed away. (11-14)

By far, not enough is known about the context of this sonnet. Even the exact date of its creation, established to be the year 1802, has been questioned by some scholars. Hill claims that “there is no conclusive evidence to support a dating in 1802”, and the only definite boundaries are thus the fall of the republic in 1797 and February 1807, “when Wordsworth sent the sonnet to the printer along with other materials for inclusion in the *Poems in Two Volumes*.” (2) The French aggression co-responsible for the fall of Venice must have been among the first challenges to his liberal values. After the domestic terror around the person of Robespierre, the initially noble and freedom-centred ideas were transformed into a lust for conquest; and it is perhaps not to great surprise that the certain “hitherto-unknown French general” (2) who played a significant role in the division of the republic between France and Austria was Napoleon himself. When pondering the fall of Venice in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron managed to find consolation in nature:

In Venice, Tasso's echoes are no more,  
And silent rows the songless gondolier;  
Her palaces are crumbling to the shore,  
And music meets not always now the ear:  
Those days are gone—but beauty still is here.  
States fall, arts fade—but Nature doth not die...  
(84)

Finding no such consolation, only giving a solemn thought and celebration to the fallen state, Wordsworth's Venetian impression evokes a gloomier atmosphere; naturally, as Childe Harold's experience is based on Byron's visit to the city and has a distance of two decades from its downfall, the difference is perhaps expected. Knowing what the



development of Wordsworth's political thinking would be, his grief for Venice might also, to some degree, be ascribed to the way it ended. Firstly and more generally, the traditional republic, a symbol of the tradition of freedom, fell victim to an embodiment of *realpolitik* without any deeper meaning. Secondly, the responsible army belonging to the country he had long deemed the very beacon of universal liberty. Even if the uneasiness in Wordsworth's celebration of Venice on its extinction is not apparent to the eye, there are other poems of the formerly Jacobin Lake poets wherein the growing doubt may be traced. *France: An Ode* once more, composed by Coleridge in April 1798, invites the reader to experience the poet's development. It begins with revolutionary enthusiasm and high hopes for the universal liberty France may inspire in other countries:

When France in wrath her giant-limbs upreared,  
And with that oath, which smote air, earth, and sea,  
Stamped her strong foot and said she would be free,  
Bear witness for me, how I hoped and feared!

(II)

Writing the poem when he was already aware of his change in opinion might hint at an attempt to justify it by claiming he had always had his doubts about the French Revolution. However, it seems that he is not attempting to excuse himself for his former beliefs in the Ode. With admitting fear next to his hope in this poem, Coleridge is most likely speaking of the fright he felt of the French 'wrath', as its awakened strength also threatened his homeland. He asks the invaded Switzerland for forgiveness:

“Forgive me, Freedom! O forgive those dreams!  
I hear thy voice, I hear thy loud lament,  
From bleak Helvetia's icy caverns sent—  
I hear thy groans upon her blood-stained streams!  
(IV)

Not only does he apologise for ever supporting the French, but also for believing in the nobility of their cause; conceding the possibility that the idea of universal liberty might be a mere utopia: “forgive me, that I cherished / One thought that ever blessed your cruel foes!” (IV) Be it unreal forever or only temporarily remains a question. Still, Coleridge is aware it is not France who can be the true champion of freedom, for the betrayal of its principles:

Are these thy boasts, Champion of human kind?  
To mix with Kings in the low lust of sway,  
Yell in the hunt, and share the murderous prey;  
To insult the shrine of Liberty with spoils  
From freemen torn; to tempt and to betray? (IV)

The ode on France illustrates Coleridge's continual retreat from the idea of universal liberty. His other poem from the same year, *Fears in Solitude*, is a testament to his full embracement of the patriotic tone. With the French invasion of Switzerland, he became disgusted with their ‘lust of sway’, a brutal contradiction to the three main concepts of the Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. But when the threat of invasion reached his own country, giving the problem a much more realistic shape and the prospect of immediate danger, Coleridge's sense of patriotism and the love of his home isles grew louder: “There lives nor form nor feeling in my soul / Unborrow'd from my country! O divine / And beauteous island...” (Fears 10)

Wordsworth's development followed a very similar line as that of his fellow. He admits certain uneasiness about the prospect of his return from the French city busy

with working on the new dawn to the politically stationary England. In his own words, he at the time felt not much patriotism to his own country but rather that of all humanity.: “A patriot of the world, how could I glide / Into communion with her sylvan shades / Erewhile my tuneful haunt ...” (Prelude 10. 245-47) But he too would later, as it became impossible to be blind to Napoleon’s lust for conquest, celebrate England. Visiting Calais during the brief period of peace ensured by the Treaty of Amiens, which few expected to last long, he had already been very much aware that “England was the sole surviving hope of freedom in Europe, and that her fiercest struggle against Napoleon was ahead.” (Logan 3) From this last trip to France before the recommencement of war also comes one of Wordsworth’s most patriotic sonnets, *Composed by the Sea-side, near Calais*. England, in this piece, is a parable of a lonely star he watches shining over La Manche, the last bastion of freedom and hope in the west: “Fair Star of evening, Splendour of the west / Star of my Country!” Wordsworth writes, “There! that dusky spot / Beneath thee, that is England; there she lies. / Blessings be on you both” (Poems to National Independence 33)

This development, it might be argued, does not seem to have come as a result of reasoning and reevaluation of previous principles. Indeed, the two poets cannot be accused of finding much solace after their renunciation of universal liberty. The prayers for their country and the newly established patriotism never before seen in their poetry (at least to such an extent) were not induced by any philosophical disputation but by a genuine military threat to their liberty and possibly life. As Southey, who underwent the same development, remarked in a letter to his friend, clergyman, and schoolmaster Nicolas Lightfoot, in 1806:

Time you say moderates opinions as it mellows wine. My views & hopes are certainly altered, tho the heart & soul of my wishes continues the same. It is the world that has changed – not I. I look the same way in the afternoon that I did in the morning – but sunset & sunrise make a different scene. (To Lightfoot)

The assertion that the world has changed since he first felt the inclination to revolutionary beliefs probably cannot be opposed, nor can the notion of time moderating opinions. On the other hand, that Southey would raze most of the initial belief in universal freedom because of one (though critically) unsuccessful revolution does not help verify his defence. Although the world had changed without any doubt, this is not very convincing of his assertion that he had not; other writers initially optimistic about the revolution had to cope with the great disappointment, and in some cases even managed not to give up all hope the way Southey did. Mary Wollstonecraft, like many others, “was at first disappointed and then deeply disturbed that the French people, newly released from tyranny, failed to emerge virtuous”. So immense was her indignation that “later, as an Englishwoman in Paris, [she] had to be restrained by a passer-by from being too visibly horrified and angry when she passed the guillotine fresh with blood.” (Brody 28) There can thus be very little doubt about her disappointment. Yet Wollstonecraft went through the struggle and managed to emerge with optimism concerning humanity nevertheless:

Several acts of ferocious folly have justly brought much obloquy on the grand revolution, which has taken place in France; yet, I feel confident ... to prove, that the people are essentially good, and that knowledge is rapidly advancing to that degree of perfectibility, when the proud distinctions of sophisticating fools will be eclipsed by the mild rays of philosophy, and man be considered as man —acting with the dignity of an intelligent being. (Historical and Moral View 72)

This point sheds new light on Southey’s defence, as Wollstonecraft would have the better right to claim she remained unchanged, capable of believing in what she had had before even despite the developments, while the poet “turned coat”.

With Byron and Shelley, the shift is not so easily traceable as in the case of Wordsworth and Coleridge to patriotism or Southey to conservatism. The fact that both spent many years exiled from Britain might be given as a simple reason, but the matter would not bear such a simplification as some of their poems indicate. Childe Harold suppresses his melancholy after the departure from his homeland:

And fast the white rocks faded from his view,  
And soon were lost in circumambient foam;  
And then, it may be, of his wish to roam  
Repented he ... (Childe 8)

But besides his verifiably warm regard to England, Byron's patriotism as such is much harder to evaluate. In terms of his nation, he felt particular pride in its history and tradition, but he could not come to terms with so many of his compatriots that it eventually led to his estrangement. Perhaps the most accurate expression of his attitude comes from the letter to Alfred, count d'Orsay, where he admits that "though I love my country, I do not love my countrymen—at least, such as they now are". (Byron and Moore 6, letter 115) Overall, he did much to build his picture of the avatar of universal liberty:

To do good to mankind is the chivalrous plan,  
And, is always as nobly requited;  
Then battle for freedom wherever you can,  
And, if not shot or hang'd, you'll get knighted.  
(Stanzas)

There is little doubt about Shelley's belief in universal liberty, as some of his greatest works are its direct manifesto. It begins with *Queen Mab*, the earliest of his major works. There Shelley's concepts of Godwinian necessitarianism and nonviolent revolution intertwine, culminating in one of the greatest works of literary Romanticism, *Prometheus Unbound*. In its narrowest interpretation, the latter is a resounding voice of *titanism*, an expression of heroic and daring revolt against the worst of odds, the gods

themselves. Prometheus is willing to surrender everything to break the world free of Jupiter's tyranny, a struggle which, despite its mythical setting, can hardly be understood in any other way than as Shelley's call for human revolution. That is no unique, let alone arbitrary trait of Romantic poetry: "As complex as the poetic uses of politics were in the years shared by Wordsworth, Blake, and Hazlitt," as Woodring observes, "it may not be wrong to identify passionate individualism as the true voice of the era." (8) The myth is merely one of the ways widely employed by the Romantic poets to enhance the effect.

However, unlike Byron, whose peerage was to him a connection to the great history of Britain, Shelley's linkage to his country (despite being an aristocrat himself) seems to be weaker to the point that he may be considered the most authentic "citizen of the world" of all the poets. The Lake Poets found patriotic sentiment (however belatedly), and Byron struggled with his inner conflict between the love for Britain and the contempt for its people. Shelley's most reliable traces of patriotism are those of his care for all humanity as a patriot of the Earth. Rather than taking sides with anyone, Shelley denounces tyranny as a whole regardless of when or where it takes place. To what he especially attaches importance is the transitoriness of tyranny. "And when reason's voice, / Loud as the voice of nature, shall have waked the nations," The Fairy says in *Queen Mab*,

...kingly glare  
Will lose its power to dazzle; its authority  
Will silently pass by; the gorgeous throne  
Shall stand unnoticed in the regal hall,  
Fast falling to decay...  
(Selected Poetry 21-22)

In 1817, four years later after *Queen Mab* was published, the same notion is repeated in

Ozymandias:

And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.  
(Selected Poetry 194)

To Shelley, interestingly, tyrants are not only pernicious but also ridiculous in their arrogance; their conviction of utter superiority and timelessness must be answered by their subjects whenever and wherever it should occur. In that, Shelley is of all the poets the most prevalent in his clinging to the idea of universal liberty. "Not favoured spots alone, but the Whole Earth, / The beauty wore of promise," Wordsworth wrote in *The Prelude* about the period when he had yet shared the same belief. (XI. 118-119) Even though Wordsworth's enchantment gradually faded out as he commenced embracing the British establishment, Shelley still saw the "beauty of promise". His subject might have narrowed from the abstract, global, immense liberty down to the reform of current governments. Still, the idea of breaking free from the chains in Promethean fashion remained the same, perhaps only slightly adapted to the post-revolutionary context.

### 3.2 The Battle for George III.

However, the dichotomy suggested in the previous chapter did not end with each poet choosing their side (nor was it in all cases definite). Of the reality that the polarisation led to actual conflicts of the pen, few instances testify more aptly than Byron's parody of Southey's *A Vision of Judgement*. To Byron, a man quite easily provoked, the poet laureate's piece introduced two reasons for outrage (the offended being Byron, also revenge).

The first reason was utterly personal: the content of Southey's preface and its irritated tone. That would, perhaps, be insufficient under ordinary circumstances, but this irritation was directly aimed at Byron. The author begins his preface in quite a politically neutral manner; he focuses on the defence of his innovative meter (hexameter consisting of trochaic and dactylic feet). Southey understood the dangers he might have been exposing himself to: "I am well aware that the public are peculiarly intolerant of such innovations ... would that this literary intolerance were under the influence of a saner judgement, and regarded the morals more than the manner of a composition; the spirit rather than the form!" (xvii) He then proceeds to denounce the poets who, as he termed it, have set up a school which "may properly be called the Satanic school". (xx) Byron knew that the following words belonged to him and Shelley most of all:

What then should be said of those for whom the thoughtlessness and inebriety of wanton youth can no longer be pleaded, but who have written in sober manhood and with deliberate purpose? Men of diseased hearts and depraved imaginations, who, forming a system of opinions to suit their own unhappy course of conduct, have rebelled against the holiest ordinances of human society... (xix-xx)



The second cause for Byron's response was, contrary to Southey's belief that the "intolerant public" would attack his form rather than the morals it conveyed, the very message of the poem. Southey's *Vision* is an apotheosis of the deceased King George III., whose poor health had him consent with entrusting his son (later King George IV.) the reign over the kingdom as the Prince Regent for nine years before his death. Byron thus clarifies his urge to respond in the preface of his parody, *The Vision of Judgment*:

[Southey] might have written hexameters, as he has written everything else, for aught that the writer cared — had they been upon another subject. But to attempt to canonise a monarch, who, whatever were his household virtues, was neither a successful nor a patriot king, — inasmuch as several years of his reign passed in war with America and Ireland, to say nothing of the aggression upon France — like all other exaggeration, necessarily begets opposition. In whatever manner he may be spoken of in this new *Vision*, his *public* career will not be more favourably transmitted by history. (iii)

The difference in the very conception of King George in both poems constitutes the basis the parody is built upon. Neither may serve as a very realistic account; Southey's eulogy is often almost unbearably obsequious, Byron's ridicule is typically headstrong and ostentatiously anti-royal. "Oh that my King could have known these things! could have witness'd how England / Check'd in its full career the force of her enemy's empire," laments Southey that the king's mental state did not allow him to celebrate Waterloo, "Oh that my King, ere he died, might have seen the fruit of his counsels!" (A Vision 10) Although Wellington's victory on the battlefield in 1815 might have to some extent been a result of long-term politics influenced by the king, Southey's praise of the counsel of the king who had at the time already been insane for three years seems overly ingratiating. Byron, to no great surprise, does not mince words:

In the first year of Freedom's second dawn  
Died George the Third; although no tyrant, one  
Who shielded tyrants, till each sense withdrawn  
Left him nor mental nor external sun:  
A better farmer ne'er brushed dew from lawn,  
A worse king never left a realm undone!  
(The Vision 6)

Aware of the poem's nature, Byron published it under the pseudonym "Quevedo Redivivus", and even though the authorship was no great riddle for the public, it was Byron's publisher John Hunt who was tried for libel. On the one hand, the poet himself emphasised it being a parody of Southey's work but liked to euphemise its audacity and impudence, as he did on 1. October 1821 in a letter to Thomas Moore:

I wonder if my 'Cain' has got safe to England. I have written since about sixty stanzas of a poem, in octave stanzas ... called 'The Vision of Judgment, by Quevedo Redivivus' ... In this it is my intent to put the said George's Apotheosis in a Whig point of view, not forgetting the Poet Laureate for his preface and other demerits. (Byron and Moore 6, letter 460)

Labelling a poem many could find impudent as one merely looking at the problem from a "whig point of view" seems like a deliberate trivialisation on Byron's part. Still, it does not change the political reality behind it. Thus he attacks Southey in his preface:

The gross flattery, the dull impudence, the renegado intolerance, and impious cant, of the poem by the author of "Wat Tyler," are something so stupendous as to form the sublime of himself — containing the quintessence of his own attributes. (The Vision i)

The authorship of *Wat Tyler* is not brought up by coincidence. Byron might have been disgusted by the "High Tory" point of view the Poet Laureate had shown in *A Vision*. Still, not even such a fiery temperament as that of his would make him exert himself with lengthy poetic ridicule of an ordinary political opponent. Southey's High Toryism was the more provoking when it was springing from someone who had previously been

writing revolutionary poetry, hence the reference to *Wat Tyler*. Byron was aware that among the liberal audience, *The Vision* would very likely meet positive reaction, and with reminding Southey's revolutionary youth, he aimed at damaging the Poet Laureate's credibility among the conservative establishment.

Yet even without Byron, Southey's poem could not boast universal praise from conservative (or tory-leaning) critics. The *Literary Gazette*, an influential weekly newspaper, could find few words of acclaim, albeit not strictly for political reasons. The review, written presumably by William Jerdan, the chief editor, raised two main arguments. The first commented on the bravery (or foolishness) of the poetic form Southey employed and was found pardonable: "We do not so much complain of the phantasy of endeavouring to torture hexameters into the form of English versification ..." (5:161). The second immediately followed and was much more grave. Of the envisioned commencement of the tribunal authorised to judge George's worthiness to enter heaven, the review says:

We are inclined to think that all serious people will agree with us, that this is really carrying licence too far. Like many other passages, (while we grant that no evil was meant) it approaches so near the edge of burlesque profanation, if not of blasphemy, that we must say, the impression upon our mind is of a very unpleasing character. (5:162)

The critique culminates with Wilkes and Junius entering as the king's accusers appointed by the Devil, a "detailed report of this strange prosecution, than which no poet, in straw and chains, ever wrote with chalk on Bedlam's walls aught more preposterous." (5:162) However harshly may the *Gazette* have condemned Southey's *Vision*, their even more deprecatory reaction to that of Byron illustrates the opinion the establishment and the mainstream society had of both their attempts. Perhaps only a short excerpt is needed to demonstrate the general view of Byron's radicalism in the magazine's redaction. On citing lengthy passages of *The Vision*, the author says: "We

may be censured for quoting too much, but we feel assured that no harm can be done by such trash ...” (6:657). Along with it, he expresses the belief that their readership will not disagree: “By the extent of our extracts, we have acted fairly towards the writer;— by the expression of our loathing, we have faintly pictured our own feelings, and, we trust, the sense of ten thousand readers to one ...” (6:658) Both reviews in the *Gazette* seem to touch specific political issues within the poems only superficially. Especially in Byron’s case, where the contempt of the reviewer appears not to be caused by the poetic form, but rather the content, deeper political analysis on the part of the magazine would be of great use to clarify their position, as they did with Southey. Since the Poet Laureate poem offers a celebration of the deceased king from the point of view of a “fully-paid-up member of the Tory establishment”, it remains to delve into Byron’s satirical response for concrete political issues. (Selected Poems of Byron 694)

The most resonating throughout *The Vision* is the question of religious freedom, an issue he had been interested in for almost all his adult life. Byron became disillusioned quite quickly in the House of Lords, an obstructionist institution at his time, and after a brief period of effort, his interest faded out. Nevertheless, he had managed to deliver three speeches before he realised its futility, one of which addressed the much-discussed Catholic emancipation, a political topic still miles far from being solved in the time of the speech, 21 April 1812. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars shifted the mood. It became apparent that whether Catholics are still to be seen as potential traitors to the kingdom might be reconsidered. Yet even though the domestic Jacobins, republicans, and Napoleon’s sympathisers became the new public enemy, it was no sooner than 1829 when a Catholic was permitted to hold a public office and more than four additional decades until the emancipation could be marked as complete.

Byron's speech, though perhaps less impactful in the House than it would have deserved, made several points:

It was an observation of the great Lord Peterborough, made within these walls, or with the walls where the Lords then assembled, that he was for a "parliamentary king and a parliamentary constitution, but not a parliamentary God and a parliamentary religion." The interval of a century has not weakened the force of the remark. (Debate 324)

He pointed out the absurdity of anti-catholic arguments, which were, according to him, self-contradictory:

The opponents of the Catholics may be divided into two classes; those who assert that the Catholics have too much already, and those who allege that the lower orders, at least, have nothing more to require. We are told by the former, that the Catholics never will be contented: by the latter, that they are already too happy. The last paradox is sufficiently refuted by the present as by all past Petitions: it might as well be said, that the Negroes did not desire to be emancipated... (324)

Had not George III. been a fierce opponent to Catholic liberties, Byron would have had much less ammunition to use in *The Vision*. But under the given circumstances, he saw no other way than to attempt a public castigation of one who has exalted the usurper of Catholic rights the most—the Poet Laureate Southey. The king's guilt is the subject of Satan's speech in front of the gates of Heaven:

Five millions of the primitive, who hold  
The faith which makes ye great on earth, implored  
A *part* of that vast *all* they held of old,—  
Freedom to worship — not alone your Lord,  
Michael, but you, and you, Saint Peter! Cold  
Must be your souls, if you have not abhorred  
The foe to Catholic participation  
In all the license of a Christian nation.  
(*The Vision* 19)

Southey's *Vision* is quick in dismissing any accusations of the sort as mere slogans of anti-royal politics:

Clamours arose as he came, a confusion of turbulent voices,  
Maledictions, and blatant tongues, and viperous hisses;  
And in the hubbub of senseless sounds the watchwords of faction,  
Freedom, Invaded Rights, Corruption, and War, and Oppression,  
Loudly enounced were heard.  
(A Vision 17)

After the king exchanges few polite remarks and thus quite easily reconciles with George Washington, who had been summoned as his accuser, no other barrier stands between the monarch and heaven. But whereas Southey's king is merely required to utter few words of serene repentance to be beatified, Byron's treatment of the matter brings up the last important point made in the satire: the absurdity of this kind of judgment in general.

It has been pointed out that the Literary Gazette accused Southey of "carrying licence too far" in his imagination of the process of divine judgement, but can the same be said about Byron's response? His work is, after all, a satirical piece aimed at, except the noticeable political differences with Southey, the problematics of the law. Very relevant questions have been raised in comparative studies of the two poems as to Byron's reasons for keeping a great deal of Southey's frame intact. In other words, if the rules of satire do not dictate the exact extent to which its author must be faithful to the structure of the satirised subject, why did Byron not permit himself significantly greater freedom of satire but instead stuck to the pattern of Southey he deemed so foolish? The question is serious since adopting an original form for comical effect is nearer parody than satire. In terms of satire, Byron's *Vision* is thus a bit unusual. "Considering his low opinion of the English legal system," for instance, "we might reasonably wonder why Byron retains the judicial framework employed by his satirical target Robert Southey". (McKendry 525) And indeed, Southey's George III. undergoes a standard earthly judicial process and is admitted to heaven with all solemnity. In contrast, Byron's king takes advan-

tage of the general confusion and chaos caused by the ineffectual trial and enters heaven unnoticed:

All I saw farther, in the last confusion,  
Was, that King George slipped into Heaven for one;  
And when the tumult dwindled to a calm,  
I left him practising the hundredth psalm.  
(The Vision 39)

What may seem simple ridicule of the king's glorification written from the ranks of the opposing political faction, concluded with a reconciliatory happy-end, is a subtle attack on the organs and processes of earthly justice Byron deemed dysfunctional in the broader context. *The Vision* is not solely about "repudiating Southey's verdict," but about "reimagining the relationship between the courtroom and the public." The implementation of the Libel Act of 1792, urged by the Whig leader Charles James Fox, may have done a service to the ordinary people by giving the right of the verdict to the jury, but also "made trials increasingly dependent on the invocation of public opinion," an issue appearing after the right was taken from one and given to many. The problem involved all politically engaged writers, those of opposition naturally even more:

[I]n practice, effectively representing the reading public in the courtroom proved impossible, and libel prosecutions were required to make expansive claims (both implicit and explicit) to speak for the English people—claims that were unavoidably specious and unsubstantiated. In his *Vision*, Byron deliberately reproduces the central defect of contemporary libel trials, crucially premising the heavenly trial on an abortive invocation of "the people." (McKendry 526)

Byron summons Southey to demonstrate that the dependency of the legal system on public opinion in such cases is absurd and seldom brings a fair verdict. The Bard, as he names him, is brought to the trial to recite some of his verses to provide further documentation in the king's case:

Both Cherubim and Seraphim were heard  
To murmur loudly through their long array;  
And Michael rose ere he could get a word  
Of all his foundered verses under way,  
And cried, "For God's sake stop, my friend! 'twere best—  
'*Non Di, non homines*'— you know the rest."

The unfinished Latin phrase comes from Horace's *Ars Poetica* and translates as "mediocrity / In poets, no man, god or bookseller will accept. (372-373) Some form of humiliation of Southey in Byron's poem is expected from the very preface and is thus of little relevance to the topic; however, the result of the ridicule of the Poet Laureate's poetical qualities implies a key problem. However high or low those qualities are in reality, Southey's contribution at the tribunal is dismissed based on public opinion. "The Angels stopped their ears and plied their pinions; / The Devils ran howling, deafened, down to Hell" after his first three verses; the heavenly public denied the poet's testimony because it deemed the way he conveyed it substandard. (The Vision 37-38) Its content never mattered. The chaotic end of the hearing enables George to slip into heaven without a final verdict, signifying the failure of the law. McKendry summarises the overlooked question Byron's satire is raising:

[T]he failure of the trial hinges, above all, on the witnesses, on their inability to channel popular sentiments. It is no coincidence that Byron takes up this issue in 1822, when libel law was especially controversial. Crucially premising his trial on the testimony of the universal crowd, Byron foregrounds the question that libel trials unavoidably confronted in the decades that followed the 1792 Libel Act: can public opinion be represented in the courtroom? (545)

Though the view of Byron's *Vision* as a satirical response to Southey remains dominant, the judiciary context offers an alternative that is yet to be explored. The motivation behind it, asserted by the author himself, is indubitable; and yet the poem touches a range of topics broader than may be subordinated to the Byron-Southey rivalry.



### **3.3 Shelley's Nonviolent Insurrection**

In Shelley's poetry, a thick fog of symbols obscures the path to reform. While the tinge of political dissatisfaction is noticeable even to an untrained eye, Shelley's politically engaged poetry is challenging compared to Byron's. In Woodring's words, Shelley "observed event and detail, but lacked Byron's respect for fact as the point of origin in any search for truth. His intense interest in theories of man, society, politics, and history preceded his interest in the practical, daily workings of legislation and power. (230)

Where Byron was (or wished to be) akin to the society-correcting, fact-worshipping Augustan poets of the 18th century, Shelley's mythology and symbolism resemble Coleridge, sometimes to the point of being regarded "as a metaphysician who left political interests behind as he grew to Platonic idealism. (231) That is extremely hard to evaluate, but it does not seem necessary to do so. Like most other Romantics, Shelley was a man of conflicting ideas who underwent many developments throughout his life. An affectionate lyricist, metaphysical symbolist or poet of political commitment, either is valid for a certain period of his life. And even though Shelley as the rebellious poet is the most important for the present case, none of his other modes should be left out as insignificant.

Some of Shelley's poetry following the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 is, in a sense, a culmination of the later Romantic showdown with the establishment, and also the moment when some of the poetry leaves intellectual debate concerning the nature of politics behind and substitutes it with the call to populate the streets in protest. "The only good monarchy," says Ridenour of Shelley's idea of government, "is that of each man over himself, that is, when there is no monarchy at all". (4) Although the statement is undoubtedly oversimplified, this definition introduces Shelley's view on dominion in

general; that is, inherently evil, and striving for such by demanding obedience makes men moral evil. Two of the most famous political poems of Shelley's (both from 1819, his most productive year), *The Masque of Anarchy* and *England in 1819*, tackle the issue, and in the case of the former, even very systematically. *The Masque* may well be divided into three parts. In stanzas 1-34, Shelley develops the eschatological atmosphere; the English government officials "are commanded by Anarchy, an apocalyptic deity" (Selected Poetry xxxii) and its companions Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy and Destruction, not dissimilar to the horsemen of the apocalypse.

Last came Anarchy; he rode  
On a white horse, splashed with blood;  
He was pale even to the lips,  
Like Death in the Apocalypse.  
(Selected Poetry 388)

Shelley puts it as the reason behind the Peterloo as no man free of their influence could orchestrate this kind of bloodshed of the innocent. But in the second part, between stanzas 34-63, the sense of gloom diminishes. A maiden called Hope, who appeared in one of the previous stanzas, delivers a speech about various forms of freedom and the necessary steps to be made to gain (or preserve) it. Stanzas 37-38, where her address begins, became the poem's most famous lines:

'Men of England, heirs of Glory,  
Heroes of unwritten story,  
Nurslings of one mighty Mother,  
Hopes of her, and one another;

Here Hope tries to unite the scattered, oppressed people under what they all share—their country. Then she proceeds to the call to resistance:

‘Rise like Lions after slumber  
In unvanquishable number —  
Shake your chains to earth like dew  
Which in sleep had fallen on you —  
Ye are many — they are few.  
(Selected Poetry 392)

The third section of the poem, from stanza 64 onward, comes as a bit of a surprise; the militant spirit omnipresent until then is contrasted with Shelley’s pacifistic assertions. The cruelty, the poet suggests, must not be met with another act of cruelty. People are to form an assembly “On some spot of English ground / Where the plains stretch wide around”, but instead of violent resistance are to turn the other cheek:

‘Stand ye calm and resolute,  
Like a forest close and mute,  
With folded arms and looks which are  
Weapons of unvanquished war’  
(397, 399)

But there seems to have been an inner conflict or indecisiveness in Shelley at the time. It is hard not to notice the regularity of *The Masque*; it almost resembles a nursery rhyme, though on a grave topic, with the primary purpose of being remembered and recited by the masses. Along with that, it might be observed how is the poem’s purport superior to the form. The message must flow naturally, which the strict, regular rhyme pattern (in the present case rhyming couplets) may complicate. So Shelley frequently employs the eye rhyme: “Expecting, with a patient eye, / Murder, Fraud and Anarchy”. (390) But even though everything points at *The Masque* being written to be remembered and sung on the streets, in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* a few months later, Shelley dismisses the idea of ever desiring to write this type of poetry. He claims that despite being deeply interested in politics, it would be a mistake to suppose he dedicates his “poetical compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform”:

Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse. My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarise 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 ... 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. (Selected Poems 228)

It is known that Shelley wrote *The Masque* in outrage at the massacre in Manchester, the likes of which he desired to prevent with the kind of poetry of impact influencing people to answer with resistance. Perhaps he had never considered it a piece of ‘didactic’ poetry; perhaps after the short time, before writing the preface to *Prometheus*, his mind calmed a little, and he recoiled from writing such poetry of direct appeal to the people. Be it as it may, *The Masque* holds an important place in history. As an appeal to the people glorifying nonviolent resistance, the poem is one of the earliest of its kind in modern history.

Unfortunately, it could be of no impact after the Peterloo. Shelley sent it to *The Examiner* after he finished it in 1819, but Leigh Hunt, the journal editor, withheld it from publication. The poem did not come out until 1832, ten years after Shelley’s death, when Edward Moxon printed it with Hunt’s preface. That the poem was not published immediately came, as Hunt says, to no surprise to Shelley, who sent it “to be inserted or not in that journal, as I thought fit.” (v) Being a close friend of the poet, Hunt’s decision to delay the publication was not motivated by a personal grudge or anything of the sort, which he makes clear in the preface:

I did not insert it, because I thought that the public at large had not become sufficiently discerning to do justice to the sincerity and kind-heartedness of the spirit that walked in this flaming of verse ... yet I thought that even the suffering part of the people ... would believe a hundred-fold in his anger, to what they would in his good intention; and this made me fear that the common enemy would take advantage of the mistake to do them both a disservice. (v-vi)

The diplomatic language Hunt chose in these lines is noteworthy, though understandable under the given circumstances. As were his fellow radicals, he was aware of what the poem's actual consequences could have been. For, despite the wide resentment the violent suppression of the Manchester protesters brought, the political reality ended up far from what could be called an optimistic outlook. To prevent other future protests, the so-called Six Acts were passed in the British Parliament in the autumn of 1819, almost entirely prohibiting any meetings the government would deem pro-reform.

Whether a timely publication of *The Masque* could have contributed to the political climate's softening (or the contrary) is impossible to say. However, Shelley's lifelong consistency in terms of pacifism and nonviolence must, at this place, be emphasised. In *The Declaration of Rights* from 1812, one of his earlier political essays, he claims he establishes the fundamental right of the governed, claiming that "all have a right to an equal share in the benefits and burdens of Government. Any disabilities for opinion, imply by their existence, barefaced tyranny on the side of government, ignorant slavishness on the side of the governed. (Selected Poetry 557) The necessity to emphasise what is considered indisputable in democratic countries today implies England of his time was far from taking it for granted. He was, however, aware that such disability of opinion must not be opposed by violence. After the radical reformer and speaker for reform who was present in the Manchester massacre Richard Carlile was found guilty for blasphemy and seditious libel, Shelley "did not for a moment believe this would divert the inevitable course of radical reform", as Holmes says. Still, he

believed that it made the chances of a bloody and insurrectionary confrontation more likely between the popular party and the government. Such a confrontation he felt — as he had always felt — made the danger of a military despotism very great, in which the mass of the people would be no better off and no more democratically represented than before. (ch. 22)

In *A Philosophical View of Reform* from 1820, though unpublished until 1920, he goes even further and claims that the government should dissolve its armed forces:

The last resort of resistance is undoubtedly insurrection. The right of insurrection is derived from the employment of armed force to counteract the will of the nation. Let the government disband the standing army, and the purpose of resistance would be sufficiently fulfilled by the incessant agitation of the points of dispute before the courts of common law, and by an unwarlike display of the irresistible number and union of the people. (Selected Poetry 633)

The point Shelley makes is not illogical, as, without an army, such an event as the Peterloo would likely be prevented in the future. However, his idealistic view neglects the possibility of an attack from the outside, an idea indeed unthinkable so soon after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, when the danger had been more than real. But to do no injustice to Shelley, his call for such large-scale demilitarisation seems to be motivated by his desire to prevent the misuse of the army in battles where there is a great disproportion in power, as in the case of the opposition being a crowd of unarmed civilians. Though certainly sympathising with the utopian idea of there being no armies at all, Shelley's moral philosophy does not banish the military in general. In *England in 1819*, his accusation aims at "An army, whom liberticide and prey / Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield," condemning it for murdering liberty. (Selected Poetry 407) An army is thus evil when it murders liberty by suppressing public opinion, when soldiers are bloodthirsty machines, and government corruption is endless. That is the case of liberticide, one of Shelley's favourite terms. But an army may also be deployed to preser-

ve liberty, to defend the country and the people from other tyrants, which, though justifiable only in a grave situation, Shelley does not raise his voice against.

## 4 Political Atheism

### 4.1 Shelley's Grounds

Encountering atheism is an experience common in our time to the extent that few seem to consider the beginnings of its rise in popularity a historical milestone. Paradoxically, the religious freedom the western world can boast of today is, due to the unprecedented number of atheists, less relevant than it would perhaps have been in the centuries when religion was an inseparable part of life. British history is, in this sense, especially colourful. Another paradox lies in the fact that the devotees of a different interpretation of the Scripture, perhaps because absolute atheism was utterly unthinkable, often found themselves in greater danger than unbelievers. These are, according to Priestman, words of Unitarian reformer Joseph Priestley. As he points out, Priestley is

referring to the series of laws and legal precedents based on William and Mary's Toleration Act of 1689, supposedly the cornerstone of English religious freedom but specifically debarring non-believers in the Trinity as well as Roman Catholics from the protection of the law. (13)

The treatment of Catholics under the rule of George III. has been explored in previous chapters, and also found to serve as ammunition for Byron's scathing satire. The present chapter aims to show that inclinations toward forms of irreligion in order to avoid oppression from the state church are a recurrent topic in later Romantic poetry. Although attempts to reorganise religion and faith may be found in perhaps all ages since man commenced worshipping deities, it would be wrong not to label Enlightenment as the cradle of its modern shape.

First and foremost, it is imperative that the term *atheism* be defined in order to prevent confusion. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as "a lack of belief or a



strong disbelief in the existence of a god or any gods”. (Atheism) As generally acknowledged as this definition might be, there is an important detail often not taken into account. The definition assumes that in order to have a lack of belief or disbelief, one must first acknowledge the idea of God and then deliberately reject his existence. This means that mere ignorance or unconcern, as it is often mistakenly understood today, does not imply atheism. It is at the same time fallacious to deem the great thinkers of Enlightenment atheists. Some, indeed, did not mince words in pronouncing the folly of religious faith, as did Baron d’Holbach: “Religion has ever filled the mind of man with darkness, and kept him in ignorance of his real duties and true interests. It is only by dispelling the clouds and phantoms of Religion, that we shall discover Truth, Reason, and Morality. (140) Voices of the kind, however, found themselves in a minority, with the majority clinging to deistic views. Both atheism and deism may be classified as subgroups of irreligious standpoints, but only the proponents of the former openly reject the existence of deities and the meaning thereof. Deists are typically less radical, and only refuse the aspects of religion they deem incompatible with reason, such as performing miracles or the authority of the Church.

The latter is essential for the scrutiny of atheism in Romantic poetry. Although the topic shares some aspects with the issues of theology, it is the notion that both the Church and the government use God to justify oppression which makes it a topic primarily political. Concerns of this kind are the core of a great deal of Shelley’s poetry.

The starting point of Shelley’s preoccupation with religion and the consequent refusal of God is his pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). That a public declaration of the kind would be a bold (and perhaps foolish) act in his day has been suf-

ficiently proven by the consequences Shelley had to face: the expulsion from Oxford. Had he renounced his authorship and any sympathy towards such opinion, he may have very likely achieved mitigation of the punishment. Refusing to comply, it is safe to claim that his firmness of conviction (and stubbornness) played a significant role in his later friendship with the similarly oriented Byron. Not only did Shelley refuse to renounce his authorship of the essay, but he also kept elaborating upon the topic throughout his whole life. In 1813, he edited *The Necessity* and included it as one of the commentary notes to *Queen Mab*. Calling it *There is no God* from the eponymous line in the poem, he could not possibly have chosen more laconic a name. Shelley makes a distinction in its very first sentence. “The negation,” he refers to the title, “must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit, coeternal with the universe, remains unshaken.” (Selected poetry 83) This claim confuses the matter since the very beginning. Shelley constructs a text preoccupied with atheism, the absence of belief in the existence of deities, asserting the nonexistence of God in its very title, only to concede in its very first sentence that he actually does believe in their existence. He makes a distinction that seems self-contradictory but is essential to his understanding of the topic. It is challenging to grasp Shelley’s concept in this case, but the term “creative deity” should serve as a clue. Either he does not consider the “pervading Spirit, coeternal with the universe” a deity, or he refuses only this creative deity while not minding the others. The latter seems more probable but would indicate not being an atheist in the broader sense of the definition. What may otherwise be a complex matter Shelley clarifies in a letter to Miss Hitchener in 1812:

“I have lately had some conversation with Southey which has elicited my true opinions of God. He says I ought not to call myself an atheist, since in reality I believe that the Universe is God. I tell him I believe that ‘God’ is another signification for ‘the Universe.’ “ (Select Letters 12)

Shelley’s argument is built on the basis of rational science, of the Lockean “epistemological confinement of each man to his own experience.” (Woodring 326). He assumes that if there is a God, the human belief in his existence must be verifiable upon evidence. “Belief, then,” he claims, “is a passion, the strength of which, like every other passion, is in precise proportion to the degrees of excitement”. Those are, according to Shelley, three. Human senses are the strongest, followed by the “decision of the mind, founded upon our own experience,” and the “experience of others,” which “occupies the lowest degree”, is the third. (Selected Poetry 83) He himself sees the last one as the least ideal testimony to the existence of a deity, simply because anyone may lie about witnessing a miracle or have their senses deceived. Because he has no evidence of the existence of God, nor believes that anyone ever had a genuine one, Shelley claims that “the mind *cannot* believe the existence of a creative God”. Furthermore, and this is where religion becomes political, he argues, that “as belief is a passion of the mind, no degree of criminality is attachable to disbelief”. (85)

If simplified to this degree, the result truly sounds alarming. If a rational man, as Shelley thinks, truly cannot believe in the existence of a creative God, then any punishment of disbelief seems absurd, even more so after a century of an unprecedented upswing of rationalism and science. Perhaps this is what Shelley wants to accentuate when he borrows the words of the famous phrase of Isaac Newton: “I frame no hypotheses; for whatever is not deduced from the phenomena is to be called an hypothesis;

and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, whether of occult qualities or mechanical, have no place in experimental philosophy.” (Newton 506-507) The poet here implies that religion should be treated the same, meaning no information should be derived which cannot be observed from specific phenomena. Shelley thus attacks the criminalisation of atheism on the part of the government as an obsolete measure based on such hypotheses, one used to prevent libertarian thinking—and therefore freedom in itself.

In its discourse with the Fairy in the seventh book of *Queen Mab*, the Spirit remembers having witnessed a death sentence for an atheist: “I was an infant when my mother went / To see an atheist burned. She took me there ...” The spirit remembers having its weeps comforted by its mother’s words: “Weep not, child! ... for that man / Has said, There is no God.” (Selected Poetry 45) That is certainly a curious remark to ease shock and sorrow in a child who has just witnessed a man being burned to death. But Shelley’s intention in the scene is to bring consolation through the sense of truth. The mother is sure that the man died for what he had believed in, and what was, as subsequently confirmed by the fairy, also true: “There is no God! / Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed”. (45) It seems that in *Queen Mab* Shelley likens a convinced atheist to a martyr for the truth similar to Jan Hus. It is, of course, in a sense absurd, because Hus was a deeply religious man, a theologian and priest. But if we view both within the context of their supposed transgressions and punishments, the similarity is certainly there. From the theological point of view, the difference in their sins is, naturally, substantial, as it is not the same to refuse God as a whole or only one of the interpretations of his word. From a point of view unaffected by religion, though, both suffer for

the same reason, which is resisting to comply with authoritarian conventions of the established Church that contradict (and punish) free human reasoning.

For both Shelley and earlier Church reformers as Hus, there seems to be one unifying element: the disapproval of the Church's immense political power. For Hus, it signified diversion from the true ways of God, making way for earthly sins (such as selling indulgences). For Shelley, it is more of an abuse of tradition to control the masses, siding with the powerful and pursuing political goals:

Earth groans beneath religion's iron age,  
And priests dare to babble of a God of peace,  
Even whilst their hands are red with guiltless blood,  
Murdering the while, uprooting every germ  
Of truth, exterminating, spoiling all,  
Making the earth a slaughter-house!

(46)

The struggle here lies in a simple case of inverse proportionality: the greater the power of the institution, the more powerless are the people compelled to obey its orders. Shelley is convinced that both the Church and the government belong to those institutions for whom human freedom is an enemy. Being aware of the dangers the liberty of its subjects poses for them, they use whatever means necessary to suppress it. As Burke says in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, "liberty, when men act in bodies, is power." (6) To Shelley, though himself no passionate follower of Burke, this notion is also essential. His atheism is to almost no degree a matter of spiritual struggle, but an initial phase of a greater battle to come—the battle for the ultimate liberation of man and their spirit from all coercion.

## 4.2 Religious Anarchism

The bases of Shelley's political atheism sometimes seem overworked, perhaps for the reason of their relative clarity which encourages scholars to dive into the topic. After all, the main arguments need not be derived from sources indirectly, for the evidence is rich in the very works of the poet. Many scholars, however, seem to focus on the investigation of his irreligious principles as a result of the poet's personal experience and disappointment with the domestic political situation. While the approach is definitely plausible, it must not be forgotten that Shelley's atheism does not grow solely from the abuse of power on the part of the Church and the state. That would, in a religious person, perhaps suffice to desire a reform. But if one does not think that God, whatever the way the concept is understood, is to blame for the misconduct of the worshippers, a 'true belief' is not to fall because of the misconception of some interpreters.

Shelley attempts to solidify the idea of the nonexistence of God by pointing out some absurd patterns in his deeds as described in The Bible, and thus disown the Christian deity based on its own alleged acts. The spirit in the seventh book of *Queen Mab*, inquiring persistently about the existence of the Maker, finds the answer from Ahasuerus, whom the fairy has called forth to answer its questions. And his words mark an important moment in the poem: "Is there a God? ay, an Almighty God, / And vengeful as Almighty!" (Selected Poetry 47) With the attribute of vengeful, the accusation of God finds a specific shape for the first time. In this short monologue, Ahasuerus pronounces an indictment of the deity which is peaceful only for the blind and unquestioning:

... Once his voice  
Was heard on earth; earth shuddered at the sound;  
The fiery-visaged firmament expressed  
Abhorrence, and the grave of Nature yawned  
To swallow all the dauntless and the good  
That dared to hurl defiance at his throne.  
(Selected Poetry 47)

This notion is an example of *dystheism*, a belief, though its interpretation varies with different thinkers, that there are cases when God may not only be seen as good but may even be considered directly evil. Perhaps the best description of Shelley's view of this issue is formed by the Russian revolutionary anarchist and socialist Mikhail Bakunin. Though the poet could have never read him, as he drowned in the sea when the Russian was only ten years old, there are reasons to presume he would have found much common ground with the atheist propositions of his fellow anarchist. In *God and the State*, Bakunin describes the fundamental opposition between God and human liberty.

They say in a single breath: "God and the liberty of man," "God and the dignity, justice, equality, fraternity, prosperity of men"—regardless of the fatal logic by virtue of which, if God exists, all these things are condemned to non-existence. For, if God is, he is necessarily the eternal, supreme, absolute master, and, if such a master exists, man is a slave; now, if he is a slave, neither justice, nor equality, nor fraternity, nor prosperity are possible for him. (27)

In other words, as he observes in simple logic, "a master, whoever he may be and however liberal he may desire to show himself, remains nonetheless always a master. His existence necessarily implies the slavery of all that is beneath him. Therefore, if God existed, only in one way could he serve human liberty—by ceasing to exist. (27-28) Bakunin concludes this passage with the reversal of the famous words of Voltaire, who spoke of inventing God: "A jealous lover of human liberty, and deeming it the absolute

condition of all that we admire and respect in humanity, I reverse the phrase of Voltaire, and say that, if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him.” (28)

These words are essential. What Bakunin implies is that if a man designated to govern a country, the King of England, for instance, acted as God had acted on some occasions, it would be imperative to dethrone him for tyranny, or put him out of the law. To support Shelley’s connection with Bakunin which has been proposed it is not necessary to go very far. The poet expresses similar thoughts of the evil deity in his *Necessity*. There Shelley begins with the argument that the majority of people of his day hold a positive opinion of God simply because they were taught to do so by countless generations of their elders, with the eldest being compelled to worship by the clergy or other authority.

It is only by hearsay ... that whole peoples adore the God of their fathers and of their priests: authority, confidence, submission and custom with them take the place of conviction or of proofs: they prostrate themselves and pray, because their fathers taught them to prostrate themselves and pray: but why did their fathers fall on their knees? That is because, in primitive times, their legislators and their guides made it their duty. (The Necessity)

Shelley seems convinced that the belief in God was never a genuine and free act of the mind, for it was never a matter of personal choice whether to believe or not, but a duty imposed upon the masses for their easier control. Where Shelley sounds in unison with Bakunin is in the words immediately following. “ ‘Adore and believe,’ they said, ‘the gods whom you cannot understand,’ ” Shelley claims,

But why should I come to you? It is because God willed it thus; it is because God will punish you if you dare to resist ... All religious nations are founded solely on authority; all the religions of the world forbid examination and do not want one to reason; authority wants one to believe in God; this God is himself founded only on the authority of a few men who pretend to know him, and to come in his name and announce him on earth. A God made by man undoubtedly has need of man to make himself known to man. (The Necessity)



Both Shelley and Bakunin arrive at nearly identical conclusions. The only difference between them is in the rhetoric used. The Russian leaves the question of existence open but is strict in claiming that if there truly is such God, he is an outlaw whom no man should desire to have anything in common with. Shelley is of the same opinion, but he leaves out the possibility of his existence entirely, dismissing it as a simple political construct enabling the dominion of one group over another.

Furthermore, Shelley's Ahasuerus points out that God is not only ruthless when he punishes the guilty, but that he also deliberately creates situations for men to sin so that he may quench his thirst for blood.

"From an eternity of idleness  
I, God, awoke; in seven days' toil made earth  
From nothing; rested, and created man;  
I placed him in a paradise, and there  
Planted the tree of evil, so that he  
Might eat and perish, and my soul procure  
Wherewith to sate its malice ...  
(Selected Poetry 48)

With this protest, Shelley's voice is not solitary among the Romantic poets. Byron's religion should be included in the debate only with the greatest caution, and certainly without any attempt to connect him with atheism, if only for his Calvinist upbringing.

Lord Byron has been called an atheist and an infidel. He was neither. These charges were doubtless made by people ... who had formed hasty opinions with the reading of Byronic poetry ... It seems that Byron, being a man who enjoyed shocking people, might have enjoyed being called an atheist, but such was not the case. (Cridlin 46-47)

Indeed, Byron's letters and detached thoughts preserved on paper testify of his faith: "I am always most religious upon a sunshiny day," reads one of his thoughts, "as if there was some association between an internal approach to greater light and purity—and the kindler of this dark lantern of our external existence." (Major Works 1017) His attitude may then perhaps the best described in his own words from a letter to Francis

Hodgson: “there is something Pagan in me that I cannot shake off. In short, I deny nothing, but doubt everything.” (Hodgson 217) In earlier correspondence with Hodgson, whom we would discuss spiritual matters with on a frequent basis, he expressed certain doubts about the so-called ‘revealed religion’—that where the principal religious knowledge comes from divine revelation rather than reason.

As to revealed religion, Christ came to save men; but a good Pagan will go to heaven, and a bad Nazarene to hell ... why are not all men Christians? or why are any? If mankind may be saved who never heard or dreamt, at Timbuctoo, Otaheite...of Galilee and its Prophet, Christianity is of no avail ... It is a little hard to send a man preaching to Judæa, and leave the rest of the world—niggers and what not ... without a ray of light ... and who will believe that God will damn men for not knowing what they were never taught? (Hodgson 194-195)

Byron’s *Cain* (1821) is built on the argument of injustice, a life of endless toil never asked for. In this drama, Adam is the first to acknowledge, though perhaps inadvertently, that it was his father who planted the tree of knowledge that lead to the Original Sin.

EVE. Alas!

The fruit of our forbidden tree begins  
To fall.

ADAM. And we must gather it again.

Oh God! why didst thou plant the tree of knowledge?

CAIN. And wherefore plucked ye not the tree of life?

Ye might have then defied him.

ADAM. Oh! My son,

Blaspheme not: these are serpent’s words.

(Major Works 884)

At first, Cain does not blame God for planting the tree (or does so only indirectly), but rather his parents for plucking its forbidden fruit. What he questions is the justice of his life. He perceives that he serves his punishment for a crime he never committed.

CAIN (solus). And this is  
Life?—Toil! and wherefore should I toil?—because  
My father could not keep his place in Eden?  
What had *I* done in this?—I was unborn:  
I sought not to be born ... (885)

A few lines later, he gets to the absurdity of God's acts. Has The Lord no self-reflection to concede that his is a part of the guilt?

Why did he [Adam]  
Yield to the serpent and the woman? or,  
Yielding, why suffer? What was there in this?  
The tree was planted, and why not for him?  
If not, why place him near it, where it grew,  
The fairest in the centre?  
(885)

Then Cain expresses the same doubt as Shelley in his *Necessity*: “They have but / One answer to all questions, ‘ ’twas *his* will, / And *he* is good.’ (886) The issue for all of them, be it Shelley, Byron, or their creations Ahasuerus and Cain, is that they struggle to comprehend what role they play in God's schemes. Michaels argues that to bring this dilemma to the reader, “Byron's play converts myth to the personal psychology of his hero, who, so to speak, needs the crime he commits in order to identify or account for himself.” (1) What both poets raise is a humanistic question concerning the relationship of God and his subjects. Should one obey the commands even when they make little sense, or when one cannot understand how they apply to him, solely because it is endlessly repeated that the Lord knows what he is doing? Cain's struggle to comprehend the reason for his punishment is for the Romantics but one of many instances where human reason clashes with God. In the beginning, Cain refuses to participate in a prayer of gratefulness, saying he has nothing to be thankful for and represents the conflict of revealed religion with a reasoning mind. “I judge but by the fruits—and they are bitter,” he

then exclaims. (886) Why should he be thankful for a castigation his parents inflicted, or a life which is more of a punishment than a gift, is beyond his human understanding. Similarly to Bakunin's notion of abolishing God, Byron and Shelley attempt to shed a light on how human reason judges the almighty. Reproaching his work is blasphemous because man has always been taught that there is no doubting divinity. Especially Shelley came to see it as a political measure. Ahasuerus cites The Bible's account of God's intention to beget a son who shall redeem mankind, to which Shelley adds a comment:

During many ages of misery and darkness this story gained implicit belief: but at length men arose who suspected that it was a fable and imposture, and that Jesus Christ, so far from being a God was only a man like themselves. But a numerous set of men, who derived and still derive immense emoluments from this opinion, in the shape of a popular belief, told the vulgar that if they did not believe in the Bible they would be damned to all eternity; and burned, imprisoned, and poisoned all the unbiassed and unconnected inquirers who occasionally arose. They still oppress them, so far as the people ... will allow. (Selected Poetry 89)

In an age of persisting persecution of such opinions, it seems that the only remaining option for the poet is to assume a battle stance. For Shelley, as has been already observed earlier with *The Masque of Anarchy*, this is a position he got to know well in 1819. In *Masque*, he called for resistance against the oppression of the state, but he had already been decided to expand the battlefield and include the tyranny of God—and thus *Prometheus Unbound* came to see the light of day.

### 4.3 Romantic Titanism

“We owe the great writers of the golden age of our literature to that fervid awakening of the public mind which shook to dust the oldest and most oppressive form of the Christian religion.” With this sentence in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley acknowledged the aim of his complex prophetic work. Along with that, he hoped, with optimism so characteristic of himself, that he will not remain alone.

The great writers of our own age are, we have reason to suppose, the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition, or the opinions which cement it. The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lightning, and the equilibrium between institutions and opinions is now restoring, or is about to be restored. (Selected Poetry 227)

Together with *The Masque of Anarchy*, the closet drama *Prometheus Unbound* may be viewed as two hypothetical peaks of revolution in Shelley’s poetry. Written in close proximity of time to each other, both works in a way summarise the major points of the poet’s opinion on oppression and liberty. What is not apparent in the *Masque*, given to the lesser power of the oppressor, is fully revealed in the dramatic piece: a resistance for freedom must never look neither at the tyrant’s power nor at the personal level of the conflict, but rather at its universal principle.

But what makes this drama perhaps the most characteristic piece of English Romantic literature? In a way, *Prometheus* is a play with an identical message to that of *The Masque*, which is not exactly an example of the aesthetics of Romantic poetry. It is perhaps the masterful synthesis of what generally constituted a dilemma for the Romantic poets which ensured the glory of *Prometheus*. The true challenge was to create a piece of some contribution to the betterment of mankind (be it moral or political) within at

least some of the essential boundaries of Romantic aesthetics. Perhaps *Prometheus* is the most successful of the English efforts in this sense; it clearly delineates the good and evil of the conflict, the imbalance of their power, and through the unfavourable odds of the imprisoned titan's resistance steers the reader's sympathies towards the moral side. All that is happening on a mythical background, with the raging elemental powers and omnipresent danger of the Indian Caucasus completing the atmosphere of the sublime.

Among some of the recurring topics to be found in Shelley's political poetry is the French Revolution. "The fundamental problem in reform" is, Rader traces Shelley's opinion, "to change men's hearts. The revolution must be inward; when all men are re-born, the outer renovation may quickly be consummated." (109) This is the main argument the poet employs against the criticism of the French Revolution. Unlike the Lake Poets, he refused to change his mind about the historical event when the information about the post-revolutionary terror had spread. In the preface to *Laon and Cythna*, (later known as *The Revolt of Islam*) Shelley attempts to excuse the result: "Can he who the day before was a trampled slave suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing, and independent? (Selected Poetry 134) The claim bears some resemblance to Byron's idea of a 'free spirit' necessary to break chains of tyranny, the lack of which makes the oppressed partly responsible for their condition. What Rader termed as "a change in men's hearts" is what both poets operate with. Shelley's idea here is that of Byron's in reverse—the "trampled slaves" of France could not be expected to attain the free spirit, as the entirety of their lives was marked by tyranny. In other words, Shelley "excuses the 'excesses' of the Revolution as being caused by the ingrained effects of a tyrannical so-

ciety on those leading the movement for social change.” (Selected Poetry xxi) Prometheus is shown this vision by the Furies:

Names are there, Nature's sacred watchwords, they  
Were borne aloft in bright emblazonry;  
The nations thronged around, and cried aloud,  
As with one voice, Truth, Liberty, and Love!  
Suddenly fierce confusion fell from heaven  
Among them; there was strife, deceit, and fear;  
Tyrants rushed in, and did divide the spoil.  
This was the shadow of the truth I saw.  
(Selected Poetry 248)

They desire to break Prometheus’ spirit with the vision of the failure of liberty—a notion he may have subtly aimed at the Lake Poets and other contemporary intellectuals of his whom it had discouraged. “The Furies ... are those forces by means of which the governing aristocracy ... kept itself in power; its vast armies ... its crooked judges, lawyers, and moneylenders—with all of whom Shelley had had bitter personal experiences...” (Cameron 5) Prometheus refuses Jupiter’s offer of reconciliation brought by Mercury in exchange for the knowledge of the god’s fate only the titan knows. The secret being the eventual birth of a man more powerful than Jupiter and therefore his downfall, Prometheus is determined not to comply. That is not solely because he would thus save his arch-enemy, but also because it would have broader consequences for all the world’s freedom and its principle: “Submission, thou dost know I cannot try: / For what submission but that fatal word, / The death-seal of mankind’s captivity”. (Selected Poetry 241)

But the steadfastness of Prometheus and his resistance overshadows another different aspect of the titan’s psychology. Contrary to the popular belief, Shelley’s Prometheus does not despise Jupiter. That does not, naturally, mean theirs would be any cordial relationship. Both have been sworn enemies for thousands of years—Prome-

theus, however, managed to overcome the personal level of their conflict during his long solitude.

PROMETHEUS. Were these my words, O Parent?

THE EARTH. They were thine.

PROMETHEUS. 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. (Selected Poetry 238)

Thus he repents after hearing the curse he pronounced at Jupiter millennia ago which he already forgot. Freeing himself from blind hatred, Prometheus embodies the ideal beacon of revolution of the Shelleyan dream: unwavering, fierce and principled, but at the same time selfless, moral, forgiving and willing to sacrifice himself for the good of the many. It was also the absence of such beacons, the shortage of public intellectuals of the Promethean type which brought the French Revolution to its violent end. “Such a disaster could have been prevented only—he had decided as early as 1812—if there had been more French intellectuals to lead the masses and keep them from going to extremes,” Cameron observes in Shelley’s essay *Proposals for an Association*.

“Had there been more of these men France would not now be a beacon to warn us of the hazard and horror of Revolutions, but a pattern of society, rapidly advancing to a state of perfection, and holding out an example for the gradual and peaceful regeneration of the world.” (Prose Works)

The French Revolution cannot be reverted, and thus the most important action to take, Shelley is convinced, is not to repeat the same mistake and make sure that in the upcoming revolutions intellectuals assume their leading positions. The final shape of the utopian state shows Shelley’s consistency in the question. His political works, be it *A Philosophical View on Reform*, *Queen Mab*, *The Masque of Anarchy*, *Prometheus Unbound* or others, always introduce, albeit lightly, the general goal. That is a state on the basis of a republic with many principles faithful to Godwin’s theses, human reason as



the main drive of progress, preservation of peace as the only acceptable option, but mostly a patient, wise society actively participating in governing. The latter is essential to finally disrupt the way of extremes he calls after the six-headed monster and the whirlpool from Greek mythology in *A Philosophical View*: "The rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and the Charybdis of anarchy and despotism." (Selected Poetry 654) Such was the case in the French Revolution. Anarchy could not mend the wounds of despotism and vice versa; the right path leads through the middle, guided by human reason and the most powerful cosmic power: "Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? To these / All things are subject but eternal Love." (Selected Poetry 269) Those are the words of the Demogorgon, the ultimate conqueror of Jupiter. Love is Shelley's most powerful deity, one worth seeking and worshipping as it fills the Universe and is, in his own words, coeternal with it.

## 5 Conclusion

In the previous chapters, some forms and shapes of Romantic politics were investigated. Contrary to the opinion of some critics, I believe, the field is not in danger of being overworked. While it is no challenging task to find sources speaking of the greatest Romantic works in their political contexts, a great amount of nearly forgotten poems still await their moment of revival. The present goal was to outline the main currents of political concern in the case of the most renowned poets of English Romanticism, yet even despite their poetic qualities, their voices hardly constitute the complete picture. I am well aware that a lot of work remains to be done for the topic to get anywhere near fully understood, let alone complete, and that it would deserve much more detailed scrutiny than possible in the present thesis.

The age of unprecedented social and political changes initiated by the revolutions in America and France presents a source so rich in stimuli for poetry that it would be worth dozens of books that are sure to come. With the increasing mechanisation of not only factories but life in itself, questions arose concerning the role of a poet. Shelley, Blake, Byron, Keats and others understood it as a prophetic role to guide the civilization through the change without forgetting the virtues of organic life and Beauty. The change encompasses the rise of science, a tremendous challenge for many hitherto dominant patterns of thinking. But “scientific advances have not rendered us incapable,” Woodring thinks, “of distinguishing between reason and wisdom, and this is roughly the distinction that the English romantics sought to illuminate and make prevail.” (29) Perhaps it is this distinction that represents the best the gap between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The reason is a virtue and the most substantial faculty of mind, the philosophers and thinkers of Enlightenment would propose. Yet what virtue it is without wis-

dom? is the Romantic answer. The era after the French Revolution shed a light on the question with the ends of Robespierre, Napoleon, or even George III. Those were all men of reason, yet greater wisdom might have secured them more favourable fates.

With the general emphasis on Romantic moods, subjectivity and emotion on the one hand and the revolutionary character of many of the poems on the other, Carl Woodring concludes his great study with a simple, yet crucial observation: “One important conclusion ... is that the romantics did not recoil from a world without order. They recoiled from philosophies that attributed superficial, geometric order to a living universe that is profoundly if impalpably ordered.” (328) The Romantic aesthetic revolution consists also of the rejection of domesticated nature, tamed wilderness and geometric beauty, and it is mostly so because a Romantic mind struggles with binary explanations. Complex matters demand deep devotion and patience but reward men with a sense of alignment with the universe. In the literature of the period, this is best shown in the shift of the heroic archetype. The ‘stock’ characters of clear moral views are a thing of the past, and the outcast, moody, internally suffering Byronic figures are frequently their main substitute. Wright claims that what makes Byron’s satire so powerful, particularly *The Vision of Judgement*, is “precisely this refusal to think in easy oppositions, as Southey does, and Pope refuses to do.” (Selected Poems 695) If Byron objects to siding either with revolutionaries or reactionaries, the same unwillingness to see solutions based on binary oppositions is characteristic for Shelley, who knew that the answer lied neither in tyranny nor in anarchy. It is thus safe to claim among the wonders of Romanticism, even though it was rather rediscovered than new, belongs the advancement of complex thinking in many fields: science, politics, philosophy, religion, and most importantly the way men think of themselves. The romantic man, growing to unpreceden-

ted size during the Enlightenment, shrinks. It ceases to be the conqueror of nature, the reasoning superior to animals, and the final shape of human progress. The titanic ideals of Keats' *Hyperion* or Shelley's *Prometheus*, the cured, spoiled youngsters Childe Harold and Don Juan, even the unnamed solitary narrators of Wordsworth's contemplative poetry are all connected with nature or learn the significance of living in accord with it. At the end of the day, political oppression is but a deviation from the natural order, and the Romantic soul will desire to confront it even against a foe wielding godlike powers.

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