

The Influence of Shelley on 20th- and 21st-century Poetry
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...every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification. . . .

P.B. Shelley, from *A Defence of Poetry*¹

It is only form
that can flower
Thomas A. Clark²

The reputation of Percy Bysshe Shelley and his influence upon later poets illuminates dramatically the fact that poetry can produce irreconcilable differences in understanding among poets and readers. At the Shelleyan poles stand on the one hand the Arnoldian Shelley, the ineffectual angel who becomes Palgrave's prime instance of a "poésie pure," a singer far above the world of social life; on the other hand is the radical political poet inspiring Chartists, Frankfurt School theorists, and the revolutionaries in Tiananmen Square. These two positions invite a third one that re-conceives a Shelleyan poetry in a way that takes account of both "lyric" and political radicalism.

In this essay I will show how some politically and poetically radical twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century poets found in Shelley a model for formal experimentation and playfulness in poetry that together with an understanding of him as a figure of an unpredictable personal and radical political life and who was

¹ In *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Freistat. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002, p. 514.

² Thomas A. Clark, [published as a postcard] Moschatel Press, 2007.

sensational in his death helped to form their own radical poetry and poetics. I will begin with brief discussions of three major precursors to this radical understanding, Yeats and Eliot, who acknowledged some of what the radical poets called on but came to very different conclusions, and in a somewhat similar vein a poet of the next generation W. H. Auden; then I will turn for the rest of the essay to some work of eight avant-garde poets.

By looking at how these poets engage with Shelley, I hope to indicate that there can be more than one line and model of influence. The paradigm of influence à la Harold Bloom as it affects twentieth-century poets' responses to the canonical Romantic poets has been beautifully articulated in the primarily British line of poets by Michael O'Neill in *The All-Sustaining Air*.³ Shelley's presence figures in many of the poets discussed by O'Neill, particularly notable being Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Spender, Stevens, Heaney, Mahon, Muldoon, Hill, and Fisher. These poets, and O'Neill's reading of them, represent one major way of registering and understanding Shelley's (and the Romantics') influence. O'Neill argues that the later poets participate in a "strenuous tussle" (p. 1) with their Romantic precursors and are consequently interested in a "dialectic" within the moderns themselves, courting and drawn to Shelley's (and more generally the Romantics') visionary and utopian excess but then correcting those tendencies as a function of modern social realities through a sense of a more imaginatively temperate function for poetry itself.

Some twentieth-century poets, however, have seen Shelley's influence as that which invites a recasting of his poems and his poetics (the principles upon which his

³ Michael O'Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

poems are made) not in the mode of skepticism but in the mode of greater or more current realization of their visionary utopian possibilities.⁴ For these poets Shelley is a poet of transformations, and, as the poet Michael Palmer has said, of “radical alterity.”⁵ The poets represented here—George Oppen, Robert Duncan, Robert Kelly, Gregory Corso, Barbara Guest, Susan Howe, Andrew Mossin, and Alan Halsey-- bring to light, realize, and at times “liberate” the thematic and formally radical elements of Shelley underlying the poetry, the poetics, and the man in his life and in his death. Indeed, in all cases, visionary transformation seems to demand an accompanying formal experiment. All of these poets, moreover, would assent to Barbara Guest’s confession about Shelley as poetic guide for imaginations narrowed and stymied by dark times but wishing to break out of them: “I assume his stewardship through the cold and mist.”⁶

The first modern poet strongly influenced by Shelley, and strongly influenced by Victorian views of him, was William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). Yeats as a young poet worshipped the Shelley of visionary utopias (*Laon and Cythna*, *Prometheus Unbound*) and the romantic alienated adventurer (*Alastor*).⁷ He went so far as to pronounce *Prometheus Unbound* one of the “sacred books” of

⁴ See Jerome McGann. *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, for an articulation of such distinctions in the interpretation of Romantic and Modern poetry and poetics.

⁵ Michael Palmer, “Some Notes on Shelley, Poetics and the Present,” in *Active Boundaries*. New York: New Directions Books, 2008, p. 204.

⁶ From “Shelley in the Navy-colored Chair,” reproduced in “The Barbara Guest Memory Bank,” http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/bg_memorybank/bg_memory.html#berssen

⁷ *Essays and Introductions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1961, pp. 65-95. See also, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*. Macmillan Company, 1965, p. 42.

the world. Further into his career, however, he saw Shelley as a poet weakened by his radical politics: "Shelley the political revolutionary expected a miracle, the Kingdom of God in the twinkling of an eye, like some Christian of the first century. . . ."8

Wanting not to deny the power of Shelley as a figure of visionary Romanticism, Yeats, in some of the poems of his middle and late periods, developed a more complex response to the Romantic poet, constructing a poetry of "dialogue," in which the positions within the poem itself, as Michael O'Neill argues, swing from a visionary idealism to a skepticism about the validity of such idealism. "Ego Dominus Tuus" and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," moreover, may find their origins in a roughly similar poem of Shelley's: "Julian and Maddalo." Yeats, in other words, picks up on the Shelley that is skeptical of himself, not the utopian, feminist, transgressive, intensely lyrical, and formally experimental poet. Similarly, in the essay on *Prometheus Unbound*, Yeats accounts for a way to continue his admiration of that poem in terms of what he sees as Shelley's self-critique of that radicalism; Yeats calls it a "nightmare-ridden work," one that "forced him to balance the object of desire conceived as miraculous and superhuman, with nightmare. . . ."9

In reading Shelley this way, Yeats confirmed or perhaps helped to create his view of the strengths and weaknesses of the poetry of Romanticism as a whole.

⁸ *Essays and Introductions*, p. 419.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

In this he both reinforces the late-nineteenth-century view of Shelley, as Richard Cronin has admirably sketched in his essay for this volume,¹⁰ and sets the stage for what might be called the establishment High Modernist reading of both Shelley and Romanticism.

Yeats's view of this reading acknowledges the falling off from the visionary past and imagines the loss of the guiding presence of reason ("the worst are full of passionate intensity"). In "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" Yeats declares his youthful Romantic identifications and the subsequent changes to modern life that for any alert poet must put an end to Romanticism:

We were the last romantics – chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme; . . .

. . . But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.

(ll. 41-48)

¹⁰ Richard Cronin, "Shelley and the Nineteenth Century." See also Cronin's excellent study of post-"High Romantic" literature, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.

In Yeats's assertion that the modern horse of poetry is riderless, all energy and passion but no consciousness, "Romanticism," as appealing as it may be, becomes the word for that failure to acknowledge in art the "cold" reality of the present; it is a failure of mind and of ideas.

T. S. Eliot[, to whom I now briefly turn,] agreed with Yeats that Shelley's ideas were immature, but Eliot makes clear what is really at stake: he, and presumably Yeats, do not approve of the merging of poetry with ideas as part of a radical political program, particularly when "poetry" means, as is true of Shelley, intense lyricism. In an enormously influential pronouncement [from *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*], Eliot criticized Shelley precisely because the "adolescent" poet insisted upon his "ideas" and, more important, upon their merging with his poetry: "Shelley both had views about poetry and made use of poetry for expressing views. . . . I find his ideas repellent; and the difficulty of separating Shelley from his ideas and beliefs is still greater than with Wordsworth."¹¹

But why should visionary and lyric art, except in the mode of skepticism and irony, have to exclude consciousness? Or, as the above-mentioned Michael Palmer asks, in a brilliant essay on Shelley that finds the position of Eliot a major roadblock to the former's proper estimation in the contemporary world: "And why must a poet be separable from his ideas? . . . Dante and Milton cleansed of

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, from *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1933; quoted in Michael Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

ideas? . . .What is most striking. . .is [Eliot's] rage against Shelley's ideas. Which, one cannot but wonder, seemed to Eliot the worst: Shelley's feminism, his progressive egalitarianism, his ecotopic perspective, his idealism joined with an active interventionism. . . ?"¹² Eliot's demand that poetry remain separate from ideas only applies because of the radical, transformative nature of Shelley's ideas and the (correct) assumption that the intense emotional response elicited from Shelley's poetry would spill over into the enactment of the ideas in social life.

This perspective on Shelley and more generally the Romantics provided by Yeats and Eliot has appealed enormously to the subsequent "mainstream" tradition of poetry, from Auden and Spender in the 1930s, to the so-called "confessional" poets such as Lowell, Sexton, and Plath in the 1950s and 1960s, to more recent British poets such as Larkin and Hughes. W. H. Auden, for example, was one of the first and most articulate poets to pick up on this tradition and propel it forward to the present. Auden who will have to stand for, however unfairly, the mainstream poets.

He once wrote that the Romantic poets and their nineteenth-century followers "turned away from the life of their time to the contemplation of their own emotions and the creation of imaginary worlds, Wordsworth to Nature, Keats and Mallarmé to a world of pure poetry, Shelley to a future Golden Age. . . ." (*Early Auden*, p. 366, quoted in O'Neill, op. cit., p. 93). "Shelley," often a stand-in for Romantic sins, is one who characteristically puts the visionary at the center of the work, staking all on it, as if a poem were equivalent to its vision. To the High Moderns this

¹² Palmer, op. cit., p. 203.

often appeared as an act of naïve exclusion of the "real" world, with all of its materiality and, at times, its tragedy and needed "correction." Thus Auden can tout in "Musee des Beaux Arts" (1940) Pieter Breughel's paintings of the Nativity and of the Fall of Icarus as properly representing those moments of vast cultural and social significance by placing them along side quotidian moments (the daily work of the ploughman, for example).

Poets like Auden and his followers attend to form not so much with experiment as with the placing of a kind of pressure on, or resistance to, the (Romantic) "flow" of the line itself, an increase in its "density" (over a perceived vagueness and airiness in "the" nineteenth-century line), a packing together of consonant and stressed syllables. At other times these poets "correct" perceived Romantic escapism into excessive "poetic" diction by means of a more quotidian, "prosaic" one. The language of "Musee" resists figuration and "the poetic" yet, in straight-forward declarative sentences, speaks with assured praise for Breughel's vision:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well they understood
Its human position; . . .

Continuing the prosaic account of the painting, Auden then lengthens the line from these pentameters (the Wordsworthian or "Romantic" line of subjective meditation) to a longer, freer one that actually includes the expanded world of daily, repetitive life:

. . .how it takes place

While someone is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along; . . .

There is a significant difference, however, between Auden's formal attentiveness and that of the avant garde: in "Musée des Beaux Arts" the transformation of vision does not really occur. By contrast to Breughel's painting in which the viewer is forced to see a ploughman and a falling Icarus simultaneously, to feel the stunning juxtaposition and thus revisit the entire cataclysmic mythological event in the presence of the quotidian, Auden's poem simply diminishes the significance of one part of the juxtaposition. "For [the ploughman] it was not an important failure." The reader is not asked to take in both events at once, as an act of imagination that alters the reality. Thus the form of the poem does not therefore encourage a similar act of transformative imagination, for example, a rethinking of the Nativity, in terms of the quotidian.

It is precisely the merging of politically progressive ideas, experiments with form, and, as Robert Kaufman has called it, "song,"¹³ that drive the poetry and the poetics of the poets whom I will consider in the rest of this essay. All the poets we are about to discuss would agree with Palmer about the necessary unity of Shelley's poetry with his politically progressive "ideas." But a poetry that is simply a conduit for ideas does not raise people's hackles; only when ideas are wedded to the *form* of the poem, when it is "song" and thus pleasurable aesthetically and apparently innocent of thought, does a poem stimulate an Eliot

¹³ Robert Kaufman, "Legislators of the Post-Everything World: Shelley's *Defence* of Adorno," *ELH* 63 (1996) 707-733.

to find its ideas repellant. It follows that poets who practice in the wake of a Shelley demonstrate again and again a commitment to the transformation, or deformation, of poetic form as the way to activate those ideas through the destabilization of the very medium in which they are presented.

Leaving Yeats, Eliot, and Auden behind, I can now ask: what, then, in Shelley's life, poetry and poetics might have appealed to and guided the radical poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries whom I shall be discussing? They perceived that Shelley was a poet who, in his work and in his life, rejected the prevalent (and still prevalent) notion that an ideal poem existed in order to unfold the inner life, the drama, of the speaking subject. In Shelley's own time William Wordsworth was the leading exponent of this understanding of poetic purpose. But Shelley argues (in *A Defence of Poetry*) that love is, and poetry should be, a "going out of our own nature" (*Norton 2, 517*). While a poet like Wordsworth might not have quarreled with this statement as such, he would not have embraced it in the way that Shelley's later, radical interpreters in poetry have done.

They saw his life on the periphery of society, his exile, and his early death by drowning as standing for a life, a self, sacrificed to poetry and the political ideas embedded in it. This view of the poet seems to have had the emotional correlate for Shelley himself in a figure constantly pursued, at times violently, like the Actaeon described in *Adonais*, a self devoured or dismembered yet

occasioning beautiful myth, an exiled person become a breathless "form."

Lovely.

These twentieth and twenty-first century poets consequently might have noted at least two characteristics in Shelley's work that follow from the extremism of a life sacrificed to poetry. 1) Shelley's poems are replete with imagery and literary figures, the "poetry," so to speak, of poetry. Examples include the lyric songs embedded in *Prometheus Unbound*, many of which are imbued with a utopian orientation; or the paratactic figuration, the metaphor and metonymy, in poems like "To a Skylark" and *Epipsychidion*. This language often overwhelms the (classical) sense of figure as ornament to the narrative line or (Romantic) sense of personal monologue as the center of the work.

2) Later poets, therefore, would see in Shelley not a poet as a figure of stability but rather one performing and participating in transgressions and transformations. He was fascinated with mythic or fabulous personages who take distinct pleasure in unsettling the known borders and the constitution of the familiar. In his long poem *The Witch of Atlas* he created a figure who causes grotesque changes to occur in people, the effect of which is not to destroy but to realign in a positive way their thinking about themselves, their goals, and their world. In this she is like Mercury (Hermes) the god of transformations, of playfully wicked transgressions, the crosser of thresholds. Shelley translated the great Homeric 'Hymn to Mercury' at roughly the same time that he wrote *The Witch of Atlas*. Part of the drama of the Homeric Hymn involves a kind of

conversion of the god Apollo to the ways of the thieving genius of Mercury:

“poetry,” Shelley argues, insists upon such transgressions and indiscretions.¹⁴

Indeed, what these twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets see in Shelley may be what I have argued elsewhere is essential to the most vital faculty of Romantic poetics, the “Fancy.” To have figures like the Witch of Atlas and the god Mercury as presiding geniuses over one’s poetry may indicate a preference in Shelley for that poetic habit of mind – playful, dispersive, image-making, destabilizing, and often improvisational. In contrast to the Imagination where the focus is reflective and synthetic (in Coleridge’s famous phrase, concerned with the “reconciliation of opposites”), the Fancy is perfectly content with the accumulation or juxtaposition of images from different domains of experience. The playfulness of the Fancy in Romantic poetry, and in particular in Shelley’s, belongs to the radical side of the poetic spectrum, in part because it indicates a mind attuned to “reality” but liberated from its strictures.¹⁵

This in turn encouraged a poetry less committed to convention in form, syntax, and language itself – a more experimental poetry became possible, one in which the radicalizing of form, as well as a writing in the present, became essential for a poet trying to alter conventional modes and structures of thought.

¹⁴ In an unpublished dissertation on the importance of the figure of Hermes or Mercury in Shelley’s work and thought, Lisa Fishman has argued that (like the Witch of Atlas) Shelley as Mercury juxtaposes the contradictory and apparently unrelated. Lisa Fishman, *Shelley’s ‘secret alchemy’: Mercury Unbound*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Utah.

¹⁵ Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry: The Fancy in British Romanticism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Interestingly, Shelley's own poetry doesn't immediately call attention to itself as formally radical (although a poem like the aforementioned *Epipsychidion* could be said to reverse the formal ratio of the account of the speaker and the density of figure). But later poets unquestionably associate Shelley merging of "song" (form) and radical politics, which may turn out to be his greatest contribution to modern experimental poetry.

In the American Objectivist poet George Oppen's (1908-1984) re-working of Shelley's "Ozymandias," called in fact "Ozymandias," one can immediately discern that, generated by Shelley's poem, experiment with form goes hand in hand with critical analysis of the modern person in a world blanketed by the market economy:

The five

Senses gone

To the one sense,

The sense of prominence

Produce an art

De luxe.

And down town

The absurd stone trimming of the building tops

Rectangular in dawn, the shopper's

Thin morning monument.¹⁶

Oppen sustains by updating Shelley's theme for the present: the fate of monomaniacal tyrannies is recast as the success of the world of high commercial capitalism, seen as the tyranny of "the sense of prominence" over the other five senses. Formally, and in keeping with the critique of the market economy, he revises the sonnet and the idea of the sonnet: with his spare, short lines[,] he visually projects the critique of tyranny as a critique of the "monumental" form of the sonnet. He further capitalizes on Shelley's emphasis on the pastness of Ozymandias ("I met a traveller from an antique land, / Who said. . .") and the failure of monuments and the tyranny associated with them to last. For the politically radical Shelley the spirit of Ozymandias comes forward into the life of the Regency decade moment. Oppen seems to begin right here in his own present – mid-twentieth-century New York City – where there has been no ruin, nothing "shattered." Thus both poets engage in an important "improvisational" feature available to poetry, that the focus is ultimately on the present: a poetry of

¹⁶ George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson. New York: New Directions Books, 2002, p. 59.

participation. The poet doesn't meditate on or reflect upon its subject as much as he observes it.

Where lies the tyranny of the King of Kings? – in today's "down town" world of shops, in which the only identifiable person is one whose attention to the world through "the five / Senses" has vanished, through Ozymandias as the specter of capitalism, to be replaced by identity as acquisition. The new "monument" (the sinister last "remaining" word in the poem) is not an empire as such but a department store. The only line to equal Shelley's in length is a ten-syllable line mocking the stony monumental one.

One could read Shelley's sonnet as a critique of "the monumental" associated with the misuse of power in poetry as well as in society. If the sonnet is a "monumental," abstract form, even visually chunky, in the spirit of the poem it deserves to be "shattered" by a later poet: the otherwise characteristically (for Oppen) shorter lines seem to indicate the vanishing of the monumental or the ephemeralizing of it. Conversely, these very short lines have, as they do in much of Oppen's work (or in the work of other poets also in the "objectivist" tradition such as Louis Zukofsky and Lorine Niedecker), the sense of new beginning, slight eruptions of the visionary imagination out of the oppressive Ozymandian silence. The vertical length of Oppen's poem, if you count spaces between lines, comes to fourteen, the length of a sonnet, all of which is to say that the poem's social critique has a correlate in formal revision.

Oppen's poem, then, is an example of a poetic *deformation*, in which an "essence" of the vision or life of a form is sought by a radical re-working of form: in this case, the sonnet's requisite number of lines are kept but its horizontal vector, the 10-syllable line, is deformed. Deformation at once recalls the original while it acts as a critique that simultaneously releases the energies of the original. In this case Oppen *is realizing*, or translating, or deforming, Shelley's vision of tyranny and critique of monumentality into the twentieth century

The principle of deformation works in the next example, by the North American poet Robert Duncan (1919-1988), although here the poet intends to liberate a Shelleyan lyric from what he perceives as an outworn metrics. Simultaneously he works to release the erotic energies of Shelley's elegiac version of Ovidian myth by recasting Shelley/Ovid as a comedy of the fulfillment of love. Duncan took Shelley's Ovidian lyric "Arethusa" and made it new: "Shelley's ARETHUSA set to new measures." Using much of Shelley's language, imagery, and narrative, Duncan, from his point of view, updates and revivifies the Romantic's poem. Luckily, the motive for the revision has been recorded in Duncan's letter to Denise Levertov in which he describes his experience of reading "Arethusa" out loud with his partner Jess:

Then we tried the Shelley aloud, but its onrushing regular stresses and rimes rang ludicrous in our ears, as if they did monkey imitations of

themselves, having lost some secret of conformity – yet something in the poem haunted and asked to be rendered [sic]. It was a bet too, over coffee, and I set myself to keep the current, the stream-form of the original, and wherever I could to keep the original intact: the basic thing was to get a shifting pace and pattern to it – to have pools, eddies, and fast and slow onrushes etc. . . .¹⁷

Duncan's "Shelley's ARETHUSA" "deforms" the original in the sense that actual words of Shelley and the exact movement vertically in the poem are maintained, but are loosened from their older syntax, from their quite strict anapestic foot and predictable two dimeters then closed by a trimeter, and from grammatical archaisms ("Alpheus bold" becoming "bold Alpheus"). Shelley's words then become "winged," floating, sliding. Duncan's version of Arethusa before Alpheus' chase catches, I think, the mobility in the words that Duncan wants to restore:

As if still asleep, she goes, glides or

Lingers in deep pools.

(ll. 11-12)

Duncan's initial seemingly skeptical response to the Romantic's "Arethusa" leads him not to a skepticism about Shelley's project but to an effort to realize the

¹⁷ *Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 288.

intention of the original and what “haunted” him about it. The letter goes on to recount beautifully the impulse to bring more life to the original than Shelley’s had, to refresh the rhythm and the images, to allow a “labor in love of form.” As Levertov’s reply indicates, Duncan’s version is like an “inspired translation. . . , one that didn’t try to copy the original slavishly but to give it new life by imitating the spirit of it.”¹⁸

Duncan realizes Shelley’s work in part by recasting the earlier poet’s account of Ovid’s mythic version of Alpheus, the River God, and the nymph Arethusa: Alpheus attempts to rape Arethusa, but the god of the Ocean saves her by transforming both into the river itself where they live eternally together. Here is the final section of Shelley’s poem:

And now from their fountains
In Enna’s mountains,
Down one vale where the morning basks,
Like friends once parted
Grown single-hearted,
They ply their watery tasks.
At sunrise they leap
From their cradles steep
In the cave of the shelving hill;
At noontide they flow

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 291.

Through the woods below
And the meadows of asphodel;
And at night they sleep
In the rocking deep
Beneath the Ortygian shore;--
Like spirits that lie
In the azure sky
When they love but live no more.

(1)

And here is Duncan's rewriting:

When now from Enna's mountains they spring,
 Afresh in her innocence
Arethusa to Alpheus gladly comes.
Into one morning two hearts awake,
at sunrise leap from sleep's caves to return
 to the vale where they meet,
drawn by yearning from night into day.

Down into the noontide flow,
 into the full of life winding again, they find
their way thru the woods
 and the meadows of asphodel below.

Wedded, one deep current leading,
they follow to dream
in the rocking deep at the Ortygian shore.

Spirits drawn upward,
they are divided
into the azure from which the rain falls,
life from life,
seeking their way to love once more.¹⁹

Even though Duncan describes his complaint with Shelley on the level of prosody and idiom, his reworking starts with the revision of Shelley's account of the Ovidian myth itself, which operates in an economy of scarcity: if the human is absorbed into the natural, its human attributes – difference and identity, "life" itself – vanish. They lose their maturity and become "cradled" in the nature that receives them. There is an elegiac side to Ovid and the Romantic's version of him. But Duncan presents their transformation in an economy of abundance. Not only love but "life" comes "from life," and renewal of love, not its pastness, becomes the principle upon which the poems ends. One feels this in Duncan's rewriting of individual lines, both in the content and in the greater expansiveness

¹⁹ Robert Duncan, *Roots and Branches*. New York: New Directions Books, 1964, pp. 78-83.

of the lines themselves (compared to “Arethusa”’s shorter ones) including a new density of sound in alliteration and assonance: “Down into the noontide flow, / into the full of life winding again. . . .” (ll.75-76) Ezra Pound’s discussions of the need in modern poetry to increase vowel lengths that had been foreshortened by the domination of “meter” in the nineteenth century seems behind Duncan’s rewriting of the prosody of Shelley. By seeking to liberate the sounds of poetry to match the onrush of the violent energies of desire and escape along with the suddenness of transformation, Duncan catches something fundamental that is not only latent in Shelley but something that “haunted” both Duncan in his reading of “Arethusa” and Levertov in her return to the Romantic poem.

Strikingly, a number of twentieth-century poets writing with Shelley’s ideological and formal revisionism in view, seek to liberate in a contemporary idiom what I referred to above as the playful poetics of the Fancy. His late poems to Jane Williams have somewhat surprisingly spurred interest where one might not expect it, among some of the “Beat” poets, past and present, and also in Frank O’Hara (of the New York School of poets) who wrote a short group of lyrics to the artist and friend, Jane Freilicher: “A Terrestrial Cuckoo,” “Jane Awake,” “A Mexican Guitar,” and “Chez Jane,” all in *Meditations in an Emergency*.²⁰ In his version of “Jane poems” O’Hara recasts Shelley’s playfully

²⁰ Frank O’Hara, *Meditations in an Emergency*. New York: Grove Press, 1957, pp. 24-29.

imaginative but also utopian and deeply felt love poems into a post-surrealist playfulness; he picks up and extends the casualness of Shelley's exchange (unusual in Romantic poetry) with his interlocutor. Formally he carries Shelley's poetics of the fancy (e.g. short-lined rhymed couplets in long, unending streams, whimsical myth-making) into a poetry of comic juxtapositions of language and image.

At times Shelley's "**Jane poems**" seem like short-line riffs on his massive poem of passion-love *Epipsychidion*. Although Shelley referred to one of them as an "ariette,"ⁱ they contain much passion and intensity, much utopian idealizing and erotic longing; it is in this context that their playfulness must be considered: "A spirit interfused around / A thrilling silent life." O'Hara pushes the fancy-fulness further, in the way of a post-surrealist New York poet. In "With a Guitar: To Jane" Shelley gives her a gift of the guitar with a poem that ventriloquizes Shakespeare's Ariel and then creates a "myth" of the guitar's creation. O'Hara extends this kind of creativity to a playfully erotic juxtaposition of images, indeed an updating of that Shelleyan density of image, but also to dancing a fandango to the strains of a "Mexican Guitar":

Our shouting knocked over a couple of palm trees
and the gaping sky seemed to reel at our mistakes,
such purple flashing insteps and careers!
which bit with lavish envy the northern soldiers.

()

In each of the exhibits given to this point, a poet not simply responds to but intervenes formally and thematically in or with reference to a poem of Shelley. The North American poet Robert Kelly, in his recasting of Shelley's *Mont Blanc* in a thirty-eight-page blank version meditation with the same title, makes the formal part of the intervention apparent from his comment prefatory to the poem:²¹ "Inscribed in the spaces of Shelley's "Mont Blanc"." Not only asked to realize that Kelly's lines are massive intercalations between Shelley's, the reader also learns to think of the poem (both poems) spatially and comparatively: Shelley's poem appears at the back of the book for easy reference. This allows one to see easily how Kelly is "deforming" it, including what he might mean by "spaces." Moreover, both front and back end-pages have copies of a detailed early map of the Mont Blanc region of France, with the rivers Arve (Shelley)? and Drance (Kelly)? figuring centrally. Not on the map but right near the beginning of the poem reference is made to the Hudson River near where Kelly lives in the United States where he has been teaching at Bard College and has become an extremely prolific and heavily anthologized poet over the past half century. Kelly's poem encourages one to look at Shelley's spatially as well, as a geography of mind. The "spaces" in Shelley belong to that geography; thus it is Kelly's intention to fill them with his own language and thinking by following out Shelley's implications or to take them along new pathways. The

²¹ Robert Kelly, *Mont Blanc*. Ann Arbor: OtherWind Press, Inc., 1994.

inscriptions are the formal equivalent of his thematic, in this case philosophical, recasting of Shelley's meditation, in [his] *Mont Blanc*, on the sublime.

The speaker in Shelley's poem worries the connection between a power outside the self and the mind of persons, a version of the sublime in which access to that power may "repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe." (ll. 80-81) How, the poem continually asks amidst the speaker's overwhelming solitude in the presence of Mont Blanc, can one write about forces that fundamentally are other, the sources of which are far vaster than any human faculty can imagine and yet which could have enormous power for the human mind? The emphasis ultimately falls on a capacity of the "awful power," not to tyrannize but to free up that mind in its imaginings, a liberation that involves full acknowledgement of the mystery of the other.

Kelly recasts the drama of mind, in the sublime, in terms of the presence of the other as his beloved; indeed this is the biggest "space" in Shelley's text that Kelly fills: he turns the solitary meditation into an address to the beloved who is at once present and to be discovered. The poem moves back and forth from the Hudson River of home to the River Drance; the journey celebrates her presence and their fulfillment while it journeys far to discover the same thing, a *via negativa*. Charlotte, wife of the poet, moves back and forth between a figure of the quotidian, a comfort in the social scale, and a lover on the scale of, say, (at least in imagination) Emilia Viviani or perhaps Jane Williams. The world swings from present-day New York State to the world-in-exile of Shelley and Byron (the

cover of the book pictures the castle of Chillon). Similarly, he says of language that it is the “network of its pasts.” Kelly, in other words, works precisely among the different registers of being found in the great epics – social, historical, mythic – and like Shelley asks, how does one define “the human” in relation to outsized and mysterious embodiments of reality? In terms of the address to the beloved the poem becomes an intense and extensive exploration of love.

But why Shelley in the first place? In an amusing comment in the poem, Kelly declares: “there is nothing north of Boston,” presumably a reference to the title of an early book of Robert Frost and thus a swipe at one whom Kelly would deem (in Michael Palmer’s term) a “poet of accommodation.”²² The journey of discovery therefore must go farther afield than a quick car trip from New York State along the Massachusetts Turnpike to Frost’s northern New England countryside. Moreover, Frost’s poetics of containment will not suffice for the exploration of essential mysteries of love and power (“Visit the hidden”). This exploration includes in its purview the failures of modern societies to care for the inner as well as public lives of its members: he therefore must journey back to the radical Romantic Shelley.

The life and in some cases the death of the radical Romantic Shelley also fascinated twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets, sometimes as a biographical fact but always as a precise locus for what gives his poetry its authenticity as a

²² Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

visionary poet pushing for utopian solutions. This Shelley tragically but heroically “sails” from the life of the social person into poetry – a “world” of rhythm, song, and image. In the late nineteenth century the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, a great promoter of Shelley, wrote: “He alone was the perfect singing-god; his thoughts, words, deeds, all sang together. . . .Shelley was born a son and soldier of light, an archangel winged and weapon’ d for angel’s work.”²³

Presumably an account of a poet-as-person resonates to a way of thinking about his or her poetics. In the 1950s through the 1970s the so-called Beat Poets revered the figure of Shelley as a precursor of a politically and poetically radical enthusiast, a boy-man of poetic energies, for whom, like themselves, at least in principle that level of high-energy resistance was required to counter the perceived repressiveness of post-McCarthy North America. The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, founded by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman in 1975, and continuing to this day, championed this understanding of Shelley particularly in its first twenty-five years. And no one (other than perhaps Ginsburg himself and Diane di Prima) was more vociferous on the subject of Shelley than Gregory Corso, whose letters are full of praise of and identification with Shelley. “If I heed all my Catholic upbringing then surely Shelley is in Hell. I once asked a priest, ‘Do you really think beautiful Shelley is in hell? And he said, “He left his wife didn’t he? Married another didn’t he? Was an Atheist,

²³ In her late novel *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf, as Jane Goldman has told me, quotes from Shelley’s poems many times, often in the mode of what might be called visionary naturalness.

wasn't he? Then surely his soul rests in hell.' But I said, 'Look at his poems, he loved God!'"²⁴ Corso wrote a poem of sheer hero worship, "I held a Shelley manuscript (written in Houghton Library, Harvard)" that openly rejects the kind of self-conscious distancing and criticism seen in Yeats's later poems and in his accounts of Shelley in the *Autobiography* and the essay on *Prometheus Unbound*: "I would have taken the page / breathing in the crime!"²⁵ Corso's (and more generally the Beats') Shelley is authentic precisely because he is the *senex puer* who thrives at the peripheries of the consciousness of "middle age," or that of the social person. Corso describes himself, playfully, à la Shelley as "A poetman / become an olding messenger boy / O silver tongue of spiritus!" ("Sunrise")

Such poems are less self-deprecating than they are defining of a quality to be preserved or reconstituted in the present. "On Gregory Being Double the Age of Shelley" acts as a challenge to a poet who has long lived past the age at which "authentic" poets like Keats and Shelley himself died; as such we should contrast the idea of this poem with Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" in which the middle-age of the speaker requires, in relation to the *wunderkind* Chatterton and Burns, a new poetics: how do you write poetry and survive? The result has been the mainstream tradition of lyric which privileges the poem of the drama of the lyric subject. But for Corso it is different: "If Shelley gave me

²⁴ *An Accidental Autobiography: The Selected Letters of Gregory Corso*, ed. Bill Morgan. New York: New Directions Books, 2003. p. 117.

²⁵ "I held a Shelley manuscript," in *The Happy Birthday of Death*. New York: New Directions, 1960, p. 22.

anything, it was a kind of nobility, an effort at plagiarizing the Gods as it were. . . . He's a pure angel-man" (Jan. 2, 1961).²⁶ That is, how do I survive and still be "angel-man," still plagiarize the gods and not worry too much about craft, the curse of the non-visionary but resolute and independent ego?

Very similar to Shelley here, Corso's poet as "angel-man," with the anticipation of a destabilized identity, at times leads him to promote as ideal poet the god of transformations and thresholds, Hermes or Mercury, just as Shelley (and Keats) did. A favorite epithet (to be found in Shelley's *Defence*) is "herald"; a book of Corso's is called *Herald of the Autochthonic Spirit*. The herald, or "messenger," is Hermes, "the orphan god," alone in these late days but crucial, as he was for the poet of *Homer's Hymn to Mercury* and *The Witch of Atlas*, for an artist wishing emphatically to awaken the consciousness of citizens.

If Shelley's life, that merges the person with the poet, commands Corso's attention, Shelley's haunting death by drowning helps other poets to characterize the essence of Shelley's contribution to poetry. In the accounts of his death begun by contemporaries including Mary Shelley, Leigh Hunt, and Edward Trelawney poetry is intimately entwined with death: Shelley, depending on the account, is washed ashore holding the latest book of Keats, the plays of Aeschylus, or the plays of Sophocles in hand or in his pocket, while remnants of water-soaked Shelley manuscripts also belong to the constellation. The poets with whom I will conclude this discussion associate the merging of life, death-

²⁶ Ibid., p. 273-74.

by-drowning, and work with a poetry that gains its hold over us as social beings because it locates itself beyond or outside the social, and goes deeper into origins than does typically a poetry of the drama of the lyric subject. Moreover, their preoccupation with drafts from Shelley points to an interest in Shelley as a poet of process or event rather than of finished artifact (writing a monumental poetry of recollection and pastness). These poets also associate the “draft” with an open-form poetry of their own.

A beautiful poem by Barbara Guest, alluded to previously, “Shelley in the Navy-colored Chair,” that begins “I sit so close to him [Shelley]” directly brings the drowned person into conjunction with a transformed, living language. She observes: “He breathes into the alphabet I found upon my chair” and continues

. . .he failed to ride the unswept sea, and like
a nautilus drowned in heavy seas, windswept
like the alphabet he enriched. . . .

To add more stanzas to this alphabet
is the view Shelley takes.²⁷

To be transformative with our language requires a poetry that comes from the sources of life, the sea of his drowning, implicitly a place where language has not distinguished itself from the person uttering or writing it. This is the implication of a moment in Susan Howe’s Preface to her book of (often lyric) essays *The Birth Mark*; writing about the use of manuscripts (Dickinson’s, Hoelderlin’s, and

²⁷ From “The Barbara Guest Memory Bank,” op. cit.

Shelley's) for the understanding of poets' engagement with them, she discusses one which "was pulled from the wreck of the *Don Juan*" – which the poet had hoped to christen *Ariel*." She focuses on the text at the moment of Shelley's death, the text dredged from the sea itself and "heavily damaged by water, mildew, and restoration," which is to say that the "product" cannot be separated from its physical history and the body of its author. Since they are drafts, the text cannot be separated from the process of its making. Moreover, Howe picks as specimens passages which themselves blur the boundary between the artifact and the person producing it: 1) "A Poet is as- nightin gale who sits < > darkness & sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds. . . ." (*Defence*) 2) "He is a portion of the loveliness which once he made more lovely" (*Adonais*).²⁸

Thus when Andrew Mossin in his fascinating long, open-form poem *Drafts for Shelley* says that it represents his effort to "find 'Shelley,'" ²⁹ he alludes to the feverish activity that occurred in 1822 to find or recover the body of the drowned poet. But here it stands for an extreme way of writing that at once recovers a "complete" and immediate version of the earlier poet through and for the sake of an expanded version of the later one: drafts from Shelley (reproduced

²⁸ Susan Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993. From the Introduction (no page numbers).

²⁹ Andrew Mossin, *Drafts for Shelley*. Cedar Ridge, CA: Fracture Books, 2001. The quotations here and subsequently come from an unpublished draft of an introduction to the book.

occasionally in Mossin's text) become drafts for him. In both cases drafts signify process, which in turn revives the person in the text. The "find"ing of the poet, his/her recovery, becomes itself a construction of a poetry very much his own but unabashedly "derivative," in which he, in the spirit of Howe's editing, "often ventriloquized the repetitions, cross-outs, and rewordings that score the pages of his notebook and contribute to their physical and graphemic beauty." "I sought to erase and fracture the language of Shelley's 'original,' thereby arriving at a poem whose language remained Shelley's yet whose form was my own." It is not difficult to see this as a poetic reclamation of the Actaeon-like dismemberments with which Shelley himself identifies and of the drowned body ravaged by water and the creatures feeding on him. The "Shelley" reclaimed by poetry is not by any means solely the biographical and social person, not simply the Shelleyan ego against which he and his Cockney companions protested, but attracts to himself like seaweed to the drowned body the "portion of that loveliness" that is his own poetry as well as all of the elements of the mythic and historical collective in which he has participated.

Mossin moves this process forward into his own life in a manner that recalls Kelly's shifting of Shelleyan solitude to the context of unalloyed love. Much of *Drafts for Shelley* was written during the two years marked by the births of his two daughters; in an effort to record that intense experience, what he describes as a trance, he would sit "with the blue Bodelian notebooks on my lap and transcribe myself into Shelley/Shelley into myself. . . ."

Finding Shelley means finding and collecting fragments of Shelley's poetry and presenting them as such: a constellation of fragments (Mossin writes in open-form fragments) that create a strangely new, unpremeditated and unanticipated, yet strangely familiar, Shelleyan, whole. Looked at in terms of the politics of literary history such a poetic project as Mossin's refuses a sentimentalized or idealized version of Shelley and his poetry. This, I believe, is the main point of the extraordinary book-length poem by the British poet Alan Halsey, *The Text of Shelley's Death*. Halsey exploits the fact that there are many accounts of Shelley's death, some eye-witness and some retrospective and second-hand; but no one account fully agrees with other accounts, and often the facts from one telling contradict those of another: "the text of Shelley's death is an embodiment of contradiction"³⁰ (p. 61). Memoirists and literary historians have attempted to resolve the differences or insist upon one authentic one, but Halsey takes a different approach: he presents all the variants, often in the spirit of a variorum edition. In other words, he wants the text of Shelley's death to honor, even celebrate, the contradictions. In contrast to almost all of the accounts of Shelley's death, which dwell in the spirit of pastness and the tone of elegiac loss, this one actually radiates the feeling of recovery.

Halsey makes it clear, by accepting the impossibility of knowing irrefutably "what happened," his construction works against an idealization of the poet that began with his death and that led directly to the Arnoldian Shelley

³⁰ Alan Halsey, *The Text of Shelley's Death*. Sheffield: West House Books, 2001.

of ineffectuality and to a certain chasteness under the guise of “maturity” that one still sometime encounters in versions of this poet. “The boat disappeared into thick haze” (p. 9). This line concludes a brief, three-quarter-page opening re-telling (“Everybody knows the text of Shelley’s death”). The book that follows lays out many details that produce a thick haze, not to be suffered but to be embraced as the way to finding Shelley. The book assumes the dis-figuring, the fragmentation, and the dismemberment of body and work as the starting point. Halsey’s characterization of Shelley picked from the shards of his language and the surrounding narratives belongs to a quotidian, erotic, often self-absorbed world but also one drenched in sounds, rhythms, and figuration.

The closing “Index” accumulates a lake or bay (the Bay of Spezia in which Shelley drowned) of poetic language. The alphabetical presentation of image phrases, replete with the ambiguous or multi-valent nature of images, leads to a metamorphic flowing of one image into another: reading it like a poem, one becomes aware of sound, of intense alliterative transmutations. The *topicality* that one usually associates with an index becomes all signifier and movement. There are no page numbers, nothing to look up; thus the language here isn’t referential. Each letter of the alphabet, separated by a vertical space from the preceding and succeeding ones, becomes a “poem,” the letter a rule for the poem to follow, giving it a shape, but also open for any number of specific entries. It reads like an open-form or aleatory version of a Shelley poem (a bit like

Duncan's "Shelley's ARETHUSA" and Kelly's "Mont Blanc"). Here, for example, is the beginning of "t":

Tempering the cold and radiant air
That band of sister-spirits
That planet-crested Shape
That strange boat like the moon's shade
That thinnest boat
The boat of my desire

(p. 78)

The text of Shelley's death absorbs and transforms the poet-as-ego into a much larger and more poetic version of self, linked to mythological figures of his own referencing (like Prometheus or Mercury) and to poetic language. In his last paragraph Halsey says: "At moments the text reads as a sailing into metaphor into the unavoidable image of Shelley's own sea of metonymy and symbol: if this is an illusion it is one borne out by the outsider-tellers' reliance on a Shelleyan vocabulary."³¹ Halsey has given us a twentieth- and twenty-first-century Shelley of radical transformations, a Shelley whose poetic calling sacrifices normal life for a total world of images. Perhaps she had Shelley in

³¹ Ibid., p. 81.

mind when Laura Riding wrote: "Appearances do not deceive if there are enough of them."³²

"The romantic kind of poetry is still becoming; indeed, its peculiar essence is that it is always becoming and that it can never be completed."³³ The poets considered in this essay seem to understand Friedrich Schlegel's aphorism instinctively, in a conclusively different response from that of Yeats described earlier, in which modernism and its sequellae are a falling off from Romanticism and even its predecessors. That Shelley, as quintessential Romantic poet, became a lightning rod for their continued acts of becoming and renewing tells us precisely how he "flowed in" to their own thinking and making. As we have seen, part of the becoming these poets have participated in assumes the truth of Ezra Pound's dictum: "All ages are contemporaneous in the mind."³⁴ That is, Shelley seems to have inspired an immediacy or presentness in their making of poems. To the degree that "Shelley" belongs to the past, he must not remain in the recollection of a modern poet but must be brought forward into "now": his

³² From *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, ed. Lisa Samuels. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 (originally published 1928), p. 19.

³³ Friedrich Schlegel, from "Athenaeum Fragment #116. Quoted in Jerome Rothenberg and Jeffrey C. Robinson, eds., *Poems for the Millennium, Volume Three: The University of California Book of Romantic and Postromantic Poetry*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2009. P. 901. This gathering of poetry from the mid-eighteenth-century until the early twentieth century confirms the view and the presence of Romantic influence put forward in this essay on Shelley. It documents Romanticism as a movement of continual renewal and a perpetual utopian and formally experimental project.

³⁴ Quoted, without reference, in *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, p. 41.

perceptions, his prosody and form, his politics, and finally the collective dimensions of his person must be “found” now. Clearly not many poets of the past have evoked such an urgency for renewal:

Scatter, as from an unextinguished heart

Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy!³⁵³⁶

³⁵ from Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”

³⁶ I wish to thank Elizabeth Robertson for her help with the construction of this essay.

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The 20th century English poetry emerged in the early years of the 20th century through various schools, styles, and influences: 1st Phase. The first phase of the movement, the school of imagism, the style of French symbolist poetry influence of Donne and the dominance of war poetry, these were all different manifestations of modernism in English poetry (1909-16) A.D. 2nd Phase. During the flowering of Modernist poetry between 1917 and 1929, the 2nd phase of the movement, all these initial manifestations of modernism combined to find a full nature expression in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell. These two writers are the giants of 20th Century English poetry. The second half of the century brought to prominence Dylan Thomas, Philip Larkin, and a few others. However, we are probably a little too close to that period to make final judgements on their lasting contribution.

RUDYARD KIPLING (1865-1936). Kipling was born to English parents in India, which was then ruled by the British. He began writing stories and poems about India, a place he loved for its ancient and sophisticated culture. Some of his poems were printed in "Barrack Room Ballads" (1892) and this sold extremely well, making