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Shelley's Communism of Writing

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Shelley's Communism of Writing  
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These essays are contributions towards a communism of writing. They are attempts to understand revolution and what binds revolutionaries when they choose, in concert, to put their bodies on the line to challenge a force that seems greater than they are.... For Shelley, the hegemonic enemy consists of kings, priests and the deities that they worship. In this thesis the relation of a communism of writing to these entities is explored in readings of *Laon and Cythna* and *Prometheus Unbound*.

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## Shelley's Communism of Writing

### Introduction

These essays are contributions towards a communism of writing. They are attempts to understand revolution and what binds revolutionaries when they choose, in concert, to put their bodies on the line to challenge a force that seems greater than they are. The titular phrase of this thesis is a formulation of Derrida's, albeit one he does not ultimately endorse. A communism of writing is a communism of language, whose participants are united by an alliance to wage war against hegemonic language in public space. The notion of hegemony, of which this thesis makes extensive use, designates a discourse that circulates so persistently that it minimizes the chance for an alternative discourse to reproduce itself.<sup>1</sup> The thesis is Shelleyan because the concerns of a communism of writing seem to have weighed heavily on Shelley. For Shelley, the hegemonic enemy consists of kings, priests and the deities that they worship. In this thesis the relation of a communism of writing to these entities is explored in readings of *Laon and Cythna* and *Prometheus Unbound*.

These readings come to the deeply Shelleyan conclusion that love can defeat any evil, no matter how seemingly omnipotent. The contagious quality of love, its shrouding or blurring presence in the air, is that which Chapter 1 calls 'joyance,' taking the word from *Laon and Cythna*. Through a reading of *Laon and Cythna* the thesis attempts to show that Shelley was far from an idealist of revolution, and that in fact he was acutely aware of the double valence of revolutionary contagion; that is, of joyance, and that this

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<sup>1</sup> The language of hegemony necessarily relates this thesis to the Marxist code of a 'dominant discourse.' Such a designation cannot but be tautological; a discourse can only be dominant because one says it is. Yet the language of hegemony remains necessary to

double valence meant that joyance can always end in genocidal violence. *Laon and Cythna* figures the disastrous side of contagion. As the poem draws to a close, immense numbers of Atheists and Republicans are burned in a furnace as a result of the same contagious dynamics that animated Laon and Cythna's revolution against the king and the priesthood. The traditional neglect of *Laon and Cythna* (an early work, often dismissed as the work of a novice Shelley) in the scholarship perhaps partially explains the persistent view of Shelley as a naïve dilettante of politics, even in discourses that acknowledge his poetic acumen.<sup>2</sup> In *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley is more than anywhere else attentive to the possibility that the contagious enthusiasm, which he explores everywhere and which may even be the essence of his political thought, can end in horrifying violence. Indeed, a cursory consultation of the historical record shows that revolutionary contagion has ended in horrific violence more often than not. Chapter 1 argues that the mad character of contagion is responsible for this double valence. The madness of contagion foils any attempt to teleologically delimit what possibilities to which a given instance of contagion could give rise; i.e. perhaps to stipulate its nonviolence. Contagion, rather than being produced by an alternative party or manifesto, is produced in *Laon and Cythna* as an effect of an *interruption* of the predominant teleology, and any teleological discourse, which leaves the valence of Reason or of horizon unquestioned, will be unable to account for the dynamics of contagion. I argue that Shelley's communism of writing is anti-rationalist. Not to say that this thesis endorses an incoherent affirmation of madness. On the contrary, what is at stake here is another (il)logic with which to understand revolution and contagion. The (il)logic that we

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<sup>2</sup> One can find an excellent review and refutation of such views of Shelley in Cameron's "The Social Philosophy of Shelley" in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*.



are interested in here would be attentive *both* to its possibilities, the possibilities of reason and ratiocination, *and* to their limits, in particular to their inability to account for revolutionary contagion. Another logic, rather than a simple illogic, must be attempted, if only for the simple reason that one cannot be against Reason without, by giving reasons to be against Reason, thereby being on the side of Reason. One cannot protest Reason without, through the act of protesting, legitimating it.

Whereas Chapter 1 attempts to clarify the dynamics of contagion that a communism of writing could set in motion, Chapter 2 focuses on how a communism of writing might justify its struggle. Why attempt to defeat a greater force, against which success seems impossible and struggle interminable? In order to clarify this question, Chapter 2 interrogates the rationality of Prometheus' opposition to the hegemony of Jupiter in *Prometheus Unbound*. In a conversation between Mercury and Prometheus, Mercury seems to stand in for a rationalist and historicist view of challenges to hegemonic forces, which denounce any political struggle that cannot rationally account for how it shall acquire the greater force. According to Mercury, an omnipotent hegemon is, by all historical knowledge and 'common sense,' unassailable. Prometheus' response to Mercury seems to foreground an essential paradox of mastery, in which mastery can only act on that which is non-coincident with itself (otherwise, why would it need to master it?), and that which thereby, by virtue of its otherness to the mastering entity, can always potentially signal the end of mastery, the reversal of force and the revolutionary destruction of a hegemon. Prometheus claims that even if Jupiter is presently the greatest force, the mere passing of time in the alternation between day and night signals to Prometheus that Jupiter's rule will eventually end. *Any* passage of time, *any* coming of

the future testifies to a future to come that is potentially not masterable by the hegemon. Even if, as Jupiter attempts, a hegemon attempts to *speculate* on the future and thereby control its interpretation, such speculation only demonstrates that the alterity of the future, as the object of mastery, is irreducible and always exceeds the discourse of the hegemon that attempts to master it. If a hegemon's rule was indefinite, it would not need to speculate on the future. Alterity is irreducible for mastery most simply because otherwise mastery would have nothing to master; it would be *saturating* and coincident with the universe.

This paradox of mastery shows a glimmer of the possibility of success for a communism of writing, but it still does not explain why one would oppose a hegemon (i.e. how a particular hegemon would be designated as bad) nor what keeps one from becoming miserable through the seemingly endless work to which a revolutionary must submit. Chapter 2 responds to both halves of this question, addressing the question of misery through the argument that Prometheus' struggle could not be maintained without his love of Asia. Prometheus must endure infinite torture in order to defy Jupiter, and why he would submit himself to such suffering is mysterious to Mercury. Love makes Prometheus' struggle possible. For Shelley, love has an exceptional status, and he returns again and again to its relative immunity to the withering effect of repetition. According to Shelley, love never gets old, and maintains its positive affectivity even if it is repeated for eternity. The necessity of love for a communism of writing comes from its relative immunity to the death effect of repetition. The example of Prometheus demonstrates that the attempt to challenge a hegemon must be repeated over and over again without any

immediate guarantee of success, and only love, for Shelley at least, can persist *eternally* throughout repetitions of the hegemonic challenge.

What about concern of ethically justifying the overturning of a hegemon? Why would a hegemon be bad? Chapter 2 shows how Shelley seems to denounce his hegemons primarily by highlighting their inability to receive a gift. Both the tyrant Othman and Jupiter (the hegemons of *Laon and Cythna* and *Prometheus Unbound*, respectively) seem to reduce everything to exchange value. Chapter 2 shows how the question of protecting the specificity of the gift weighed heavily on Shelley, and might even constitute his most fundamental ethical concern. The chapter puts some pressure on Shelley's denunciations, which, as denunciations, seem to resemble the logic of revenge and recompense that he quite explicitly is trying to exceed through the question of the gift. Laon gives a speech in *Laon and Cythna* against, precisely, justice conceived as revenge, and Prometheus in his own way attempts to exceed it.

Love is what makes a revolutionary possible, and occultation of the gift is what they struggle against. How to relate these two terms, love and the gift? Chapter 2 argues that *Prometheus Unbound* seems to indicate that love *gives eternity* for Shelley, and the *giving* of this incalculable or uncountable duration turns the gift into one of the thesis' most fundamental motifs. The motif of the gift runs throughout the thesis partially because the gift is all that exceeds exchange value and thereby capital, the counting of time, whose only limit is itself, and only comes itself to be exceeded by the gift beyond all value, whether exchange or use value. A communism of writing is, of course, anti-capitalist, always in opposition to capital and the rule of property and the proper. Moreover, the gift is a crucial motif because Chapter 2 shows how Shelley constantly

returns to the bartering of human flesh as a sort of limit case disaster, the worst thing that could happen, and this figure is interpreted here as the occultation of the gift, which submits everything to the logic of exchange. The gift constitutes *both* the logic that binds Shelley's protagonists *and* that which in their hegemony they oppose.

Chapter 3, coming too late, attempts to clarify what Derrida meant by 'communism of writing,' a phrase that emerged through a reading of Nietzsche's understanding of love. In Derrida's reading, Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* denounces the majority's discourse on love as overly appropriative, as conceived by those who lack and who wish to master a love object in order to gain fulfillment. Chapter 3 of the thesis explores how Derrida derives the phrase 'communism of writing' from his reading of Nietzsche's idea of love, and attempts to show how Shelley's understanding of love seems to exceed or at least mitigate Derrida's primary criticism of his own formulation, which is that it is anti-democratic and misogynist. Any communism, like any community, is according to Derrida inevitably risking the misogyny of fraternity. Shelley's feminism, to be sure, is not unproblematic, but despite any wider concerns, Chapter 3 attempts to show how Shelley's figuring of the sister as an *exemplar* of that which composes a community introduces some complexity into criticisms of community. Perhaps, if Shelley is read closely, a communism of writing can be more than a secret boy's club.

Derrida rejects his own formulation of 'communism of writing' because it seems anti-democratic by virtue of its opposition to the greatest number and misogynistic through its valorization of communion. In Chapter 3 the notion of a communism of writing is contrasted with Derrida's experience of democracy to come, and it is argued that the relatively universal consensus in favor of the question of democracy signals the

left to find new words like ‘communism of writing’ with which to demarcate its advocacy.

The hesitancy to endorse democracy to come does not quite consist of the argument that the language of democracy has been ‘appropriated’ by reactionaries because this thesis does not believe that appropriation as such ever takes place, if appropriation is understood as a mastery or saturating instrumentalization of an object. Each act of mastery changes the master, and this change happens specifically in terms of what is to be mastered. The object of mastery supplements and thereby changes what is supposedly mastering it, and thus is never simply ‘appropriated.’ It is not without consequence to induce a conservative political actor to always speak in terms of ‘democracy.’ That said, the language of democracy’s effect on those who attempt to master it, from Maoists to Neo-Nazis to Google, all of whom designate themselves as democrats, seems to be relatively limited. More potential, and indeed more *democratic* potential, is argued to consist in the language of the common and communism.

Chapter 3 demonstrates, through a reading of Google’s ‘company philosophy’ that capitalism is at present attempting to appropriate the language of communism as it confronts the question of open source and intellectual property. In this language the value of instantaneous common acquisition of information is valorized above all else. Such a logic, whether it realizes it or not, militates against the value of property itself and thus the rule of capital, an observation that is not lost on Hardt and Negri, most especially in their text *Commonwealth*. Perhaps, so the argument of Chapter 3 goes, if a communism of writing can sufficiently parry the concern of misogyny, it can be invited in by

capitalism as a guest, and in fact as a guest that the host cannot master without changing itself in a fundamental fashion.

The introduction to this thesis will conclude with ‘methodological’ questions. The thesis is patently Derridean in the readings it pursues of Shelley, and this juxtaposition of Shelley and Derrida must be justified.

## Why Derrida and Shelley?

Derrida never did a close reading of Shelley. *Living On*, Derrida's article on Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, does not engage in a close reading of Shelley but attempts to speak of *Triumph of Life* through a reading of Blanchot. Despite many remarkable similarities, this thesis finds its *raison d'être* most decisively within the chasm separating Derrida and Shelley on the question of community or communion, of participation, of the share taken or given up, and ultimately of appurtenance in general. The dialogue between Derrida and Shelley is a privileged place, though by no means the only place, to think a communism of writing, because despite many similarities in their thinking of politics, they are opposed in their thinking of community. Shelley and Derrida are productive foils for each other on the question of community. As Chapter 3 argues, Derrida is adamant about separating love rigorously from anything that could be described as sharing or communion. Derrida goes so far as to say love has nothing to do with any of the terms in the series sharing, community, communion, participation, and appurtenance. Deconstruction is the literary discourse most suspicious of community, even, as we shall see, a community of the void or a community without community, and thus deconstruction provides the best grinding stone on which to sharpen a communist reading of Shelley.

Derrida's hesitation stems from his suspicion of the fraternal risk of communion, which, he argues, always risks presuming a co-presence, a contemporaneity of entities, which are essentially related in some fashion, as if they were brothers. Derrida argues the example of the brother has been the predominant model for thinking community, and Derrida sees the consistent re-emergence of misogyny in even the most universalist

democratic discourses as attesting to the rule of the brother in the thinking of friendship and community.

Shelley, for his part, privileges sisters in a manner that places him in a unique position within the western canon, and for this reason he may be just the writer to provide the resources necessary for grappling with the fraternal dangers that deconstruction finds irreducible in any thinking of community. Derrida continually laments in *Politics of Friendship* that the western tradition has never placed the sister in a position of exemplarity, instead always treating her as an imperfect example of the brother, but Shelley does not seem to do so. As I argue in Chapter 3, the moments of communion seem to owe quite a bit to a thinking of the figure of the sister on its own terms, without viewing it as an instance of brotherly love. Yet the challenge for a communism of writing is even greater, since Derrida does not merely argue that community risks bringing a brother back, but also that it is unable to account for friendship or love. If love does not have *any* relation to sharing, has nothing to do with sharing, then a communism of writing does not work because it cannot protect or understand love, which is both its animating engine and its task to defend.

Whether a communism of writing can justify the ‘communion’ of communism or not, the foregrounding of the gift provides a powerful justification for using deconstruction to read Shelley. No other discourse has taken as seriously the semantic resources contained in the word gift, and any thought which wishes to clarify that which exceeds exchange value must grapple with the conditions of possibility of the gift, outlined from Derrida’s *Given Time* in Chapter 2 of this thesis.



Why is the thesis invested in the word communism? What is being named with this word, if it no longer refers to sharing as co-presence, of being with another in a manner that negates the alterity of the other by conjugating them with the self in contemporaneity? The word communism is not simply good because it contains this risk. The semantics of the word communism contain a movement against difference, a coming together as the shedding of differences in a merging, and Jean-Luc Nancy shows how the first known instances of the word testify to this heritage in his essay “Communism: The Word.” And yet the word communism also contains hostility to property and the proper, which short-circuits the ownership of any quality by an identity. Communism contains an injunction to protect the specificity of the gift, to protect it from being occulted by the circulation of exchange value.

Why do communion, sharing, and the common come up over and over in Shelley’s descriptions of love? What is the aspect of this series of words, which perhaps bears an irreducible relation to love? As Chapter 2 argues, the specific dimension of love Shelley reveals is that it is atmospheric. Love is the atmosphere of the gift. Atmosphere is common, it is *shared*, specifically among finite beings who breathe, while also requiring a spacing between its participants. The space between two lovers instantiated by atmosphere is accessible to neither of them, but affects both of them. It is common to them. The power of love to reverse forces, to defeat a hegemon, comes from its atmospheric character (“Like the wide Heaven, the all-sustaining air, / It makes the reptile equal to the God”). The atmosphere, as the milieu of air which by being consumed makes life possible (the eating of otherness of which breathing is a figure), makes all beings equal insofar as they enter into a relation to an alterity, which they consume in

order to exist. The reading of *Prometheus Unbound* will attempt to show, no hegemony can tolerate indefinitely the alterity that it must attempt to master in order to be hegemony.

The word communism, read through Shelley's understanding of sharing and communion, allows us to think how certain atmospheres animate certain political injunctions, and to imagine political struggles on this basis. The present context might even demand a communism of writing. Insofar as public space becomes more and more dispersed through the advancement of tele-technology, a communism of writing will have even wider limits within which to think the atmosphere of a war against hegemonic discourse. Shelley's thinking of atmosphere, of the common as the space for love, could be necessary now more than ever.

## Chapter 1: Thinking Revolutionary Contagion: Laon and Cythna's Mad 'Joyance'

### I – Contagion

For Shelley, revolution is contagious. It would be easy to show how, both in his explicitly political works such as *Prometheus Unbound* or *Queen Mab* and his less obviously political poems such as *Adonais* or *Ode to the West Wind*, that a substantial part of what Shelley is trying to think is a certain contamination or dissemination. I would like to clarify the nature of this contagion in *Laon and Cythna*.<sup>3</sup> I want to use the word 'joyance' to name the revolutionary contagion of *Laon and Cythna*. The word joyance, based on its placement in *Laon and Cythna*, allows us to think the complex nature of Shelley's revolutionary contagion. This chapter focuses on *Laon and Cythna* in particular because here, more than in any of Shelley's other poems, Shelley explores the double valence of contagion as both liberating and terrifying. Nowhere else in the Shelleyan *oeuvre* is the bloody underside of revolutionary enthusiasm so comprehensively dealt with.<sup>4</sup> 'Joyance,' alongside a rigorous reading of the poem, can help us to think this

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<sup>3</sup> *Laon and Cythna* is the early version of *Revolt of Islam* Shelley intended for publication, but ultimately had to censor into the *Revolt* in order to publish.

<sup>4</sup> Writing on *Laon and Cythna* tends to begin with a discussion of how there is relatively little writing on *Laon and Cythna*. Most of Shelley's critics, if they mention it at all, believe the poem to be a failure, or at least one of Shelley's weaker poems with a convoluted plot and inferior artistry, less admirable than the rest of Shelley's *oeuvre*. Preferring Shelley's later works, they in effect answer Shelley in the affirmative when he asks in the dedication of *Laon and Cythna*: "Is it, that now my inexperienced fingers / But strike the prelude of a loftier strain?" (82-3). For example, Harold Bloom wrote almost nothing on it, repeatedly calling it an 'abortive effort'. Still *today Laon and Cythna* remains largely ignored or lambasted. Relegating *Laon and Cythna* to a very marginal place in the Shelleyan *oeuvre*, "[m]ost treatments of *The Revolt of Islam* in studies of Shelley use it mainly as a guide to interpreting *Prometheus Unbound*, 'Ode to the West Wind,' 'The Witch of Atlas,' and other later pieces" (Gutscherra 111).

double valence. As a preliminary definition, I define joyance as the spread of the madness of hope, of a hope that appears as madness because it exceeds any determinable political or historical context, and thus all logic, philosophy and ‘common sense.’

What is contagion? I said joyance is the ‘spreading’ of a madness of hope, and contagion is a ‘spreading’, certainly, but the word ‘spreading’ seems to imply an origin point from which the spreading spreads. Deconstruction teaches us to be suspicious of such origin points. The basis for this suspicion is that the original/derivative structure has trouble explaining how the derivative derived from the original if it was not already somehow ‘there’ prior to the derivation, even merely as a possibility held in abeyance. If the derivative contaminates the original, then the original is not an origin at all, but is itself informed by the possibility of derivation, and thus the vocabulary of original/derivative loses its pertinence.

*Mutatis Mutandis* a thinking of contagion must not presume an origin of contagion that broadcasts a revolutionary sensibility insofar as such an origin point would require, in order to be a stable origin, immunity from the revolutionary alteration that it engenders wherever it ‘spreads.’ If a thinking of contagion relied on an original/derivative structure, it would need to explain how the revolutionary modality of the origin point (manifesto, blueprint, revolutionary messiah etc.) is insulated from its revolutionary effects despite containing them. If these revolutionary effects could be so domesticated and instrumentalized by this origin, they would not seem worthy of the name ‘revolutionary.’ Such a thinking of contagion would be non-revolutionary through its identification of a point that has the stable vocation of distributing ‘revolutionariness.’

If an intuitive understanding of the word ‘spreading’ seems insufficient, what figure or analogy can assist us in thinking contagion? Canto X of *Laon and Cythna*, which describes a deadly pestilence, might be of some help. Shelley describes both a literal pestilence and the contagion of anxiety regarding the consequences of that pestilence. The contagion of anxiety will concern us here. It begins people when start to die of the pestilence in *Laon and Cythna*, in the process “[s]tartling the concourse of mankind,” because “[t]oo well / [t]hese signs the coming mischief did foretell” (3930-1).

What is “too well” foretold? That is, what is the “coming mischief,” which startles the “concourse of mankind”? The easiest answer might be the famine and general desperation that the plague announces. That is, the death of the vultures simply tells people things are going to go badly, and thus they panic. Yet the reason I call this *anxiety* is that I think Shelley’s text indicates that the plague points to something much more terrifying than a negative meaning. The plague opens onto a nihilistic abyss of meaning, a meaning that is not negative or positive but simply the lack of any meaning at all.

The nihilistic edge of *Laon and Cythna’s* pestilence is quite simple: if God was benevolent and merciful, and the worship of him that the monarchy and priesthood of *Laon and Cythna* advise was efficacious in gaining his favor, there would be no plague. The plague causes the population’s faith in God and their rulers to tremble. While the rulers are immune to famine due to their generous food stores, they are not immune to the anxiety of the plague, nor its literal manifestation. As the plague begins to penetrate the tyrant Othman’s retinue, the “Princes and the Priests” become “pale with terror” because “[t]hat monstrous faith wherewith they ruled mankind, / [f]ell, like a shaft loosed by the bowman’s error... ‘twas the blind who led the blind!” (4018-2).

How does this anxiety or nihilistic edge ‘spread’? Shelley seems to have been aware of the insufficiency of the word ‘spread’ for describing contagion because he often supplements ‘spread’ with the rhyming series dread-shed. For example:

Strange panic first, a deep and sickening dread  
 Within each heart, like ice, did sink and dwell,  
 A voiceless thought of evil, which did spread  
 With the quick glance of eyes, like withering lightnings shed. (3933-6)

The words do not all always occur together, but a selection of the series dread-spread-shed seems to arise whenever contagion is described.<sup>5</sup> Such a consistent pattern invites us to think the relation between these words and contagion.

First of all, the co-occurrence of “dread” with “spread” seems to line up well with a foregrounding of the anxious dimension of contagion. Contagion requires the dread that ‘something’ is coming, and that something is monstrous because one does not know what it ‘is.’ In the line that describes the beginning of the spread of anxiety that was quoted above, Shelley explains that the ‘coming mischief’ is ‘too well foretold.’ The participle of ‘to come’ here indicates that the mischief’s ‘coming’ or apparition is foretold rather than

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<sup>5</sup> For example, note these five instances of the rhyming series dread-spread-shed in *Laon and Cythna*: 1. “Suddenly starting forth, ‘that ye should shed / The blood of Othman — if your hearts are tried / In the true love of freedom, cease to dread / This one poor lonely man — beneath Heaven spread” (2009-2). 2. “These shrieking victims; some, ere life was spent, / Sought, with a horrid sympathy, to shed / Contagion on the sound; and others rent / Their matted hair, and cried aloud, ‘We tread / On fire! Almighty God his hell on earth has spread!’” (3987-0). 3. “We talked, a sound of sweeping conflict spread, / As from the earth did suddenly arise; / From every tent roused by that clamour dread” (1776-8). 4. “Quivered like burning emerald: calm was spread / On all below ; but far on high, between / Earth and the upper air, the vast clouds fled, / Countless and swift as leaves on autumn's tempest shed” (159-2). 5. “The twilight deep; — the mariners in dread / Cast anchor when they saw new rocks around them spread” (3188-9).

the ‘mischief’ itself. The mischief itself cannot be foretold because it is a nihilistic abyss, the unforeseeable consequence of a trembling of the teleological visions of the good that the Tyrant Othman and religious elites circulate.

This abyss is the engine of revolutionary contagion. In *Laon and Cythna*, the ruling powers are not threatened by the success of an alternative religion, political party or manifesto. On the contrary, the reason the plague’s anxiety ‘spreads’ so well is that the literal plague demonstrates the hollowness of the ruling religion’s prevailing teleological claims to salvation. The relation between teleology and contagion is not something I am imposing on the text. The figure of the “shaft loosed by the bowman’s error,” which I quoted above, makes this relation explicit. To miss with a bow and arrow is to have one’s *telos* or aim perverted, to have one’s purpose interrupted. The plague interrupts teleology insofar as the plague hollows out the ruling faith’s assertion that it knows the righteous path, its claim that it is more than just ‘the blind leading the blind.’

Secondly, the word “shed” can shed light on the process of contagion’s relation to visibility. Shelley says that contagion sheds light(ning), that it “spreads like withering lightnings shed.” The “quick glance of eyes” sheds lightning. How is this so? A ‘quick’ glance of eyes implies a blur or failure of visibility.<sup>6</sup> One’s eyes don’t dart around rapidly if one successfully sees what one is searching for. The darting of eyes, the struggle for identification, is necessarily anxious. In the process of contagion, there is an abyss, something that the ‘first’ person cannot see (“coming mischief”), and the shedding consists in the ‘second’ person seeing this first person not seeing. The ‘first’ person’s

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<sup>6</sup> On this point, this thesis is indebted to Geoffrey Bennington’s reading of Lyotard. In Bennington’s reading, Lyotard’s work seems as a whole to focus on the blur, on that which disappears the moment one tries to focus upon it. See in particular *Writing the Event* and *Late Lyotard*.

rapid glance, the demonstration of the failure of visibility, ‘sheds’ its blindness by engendering a blur in the ‘second’ person. This process is not the contagion of anything substantial, anything with substance, but the transference of an abyss, and the movement of a blur.

Why is the spreading of a blur the shedding of ‘lightning’ specifically? The bolt of lightning is a figure of invisible visibility. This is so because the apparition of lightning is composed of nothing other than visibility itself: lightning is nothing other than light. Yet at the moment of apparition, during the -ing of light-ning, which can stand in for the event of each and every instance of light, lightning blinds.<sup>7</sup> It provides so much visibility that it allows one to see nothing; it prevents one from seeing anything. Shedding is an emission (thus it would seem to have an origin point, a place from whence it emits), but shedding *lightning* in particular cancels the origin by masking the source of shedding at the moment of emission. One can never see where lightning comes from at the moment that it strikes, and thus one can never posit a stable origin from which the shedding of contagion sheds.

Shelley’s wielding of the word “shed” points us to the fact that contagion is the transfer of a blur that is nothing other than the masking of its origin, and thus it may not have an origin at all. To posit an origin of contagion is to miss it, in an analogous fashion to the act of trying to focus on a blur. When one attempts to focus on blur, through the very process of bringing the blur into focus one loses what was to be the object of vision. One is authorized to say that contagion is ‘nothing other’ than a blur because if it had any

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<sup>7</sup> On the question of visibility in Shelley, I refer of course to Paul de Man’s “Shelley Disfigured.” C.f. in particular the arguments surrounding the following passage (p.57): “Shelley’s imagery, often assumed to be incoherent and erratic, is instead extraordinarily systematic whenever light is being thematized.”



substance beyond a blur that very substance would cancel its blurriness by making it perceptible. Contagion would not be the shedding of lightning.

Shelley seems to put contagion squarely on the side of a hollowing out, rather than a substance. He describes the movement of lightning as “withering.” What is “withering” about contagion? The emptying out of teleological determination is something like a desertification.<sup>8</sup> When Cythna is alone and imprisoned by the tyrant Othman, she fantasizes about “Religion’s pomp made *desolate* (my emphasis) by the scorn / [o]f Wisdom’s faintest smile,” (3139-0).<sup>9</sup> Contagion withers one, dries one out or empties one, in a process of desertification. In *Laon and Cythna*, this process is a demonstration of the failure of the ruling faith. During the revolution, desertification happens through Laon and Cythna’s eloquent revolutionary speeches against the ruling powers. During the plague, desertification works through the spreading of dread that falsifies religious claims of faith. The same process is at work, that of the interruption of teleology, but with vastly different means and results.

The interruption of teleology can create vastly different results because it is never far from madness. Laon and Cythna both undergo long bouts of madness in the poem because anxiety regarding the process of desertification weighs heavily on the hearts of revolutionaries and tends to make them mad. Contagion is madness inducing, and

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<sup>8</sup> It would be a fascinating task to cross a reading of Shelley’s deserts and desertifications with the desert-like weak messianism Derrida articulates in *Specters of Marx*. In a passage that bears a striking resemblance to what we are doing here, Derrida invokes anonymous messiahs, desertification, and the chaos of the gaping mouth: “desert-like messianism (without content and without identifiable messiah), of this also *abyssal* desert, “desert in the desert,” that we will talk about later (p. 209), one desert signaling toward the other, abyssal and *chatoic* desert, if chaos describes first of all the immensity, excessiveness, disproportion in the gaping hole of the open mouth” (33).

Shelley's description of the literal plague quickly turns into a description of madness. After describing the plague's effects as mass starvation, Shelley adds, "[i]t was not hunger now, but thirst," and soon after that claims, "[i]t was not thirst but madness!" (3973, 3982).

The almost uninterrupted coincidence of madness and contagion in *Laon and Cythna* suggests that contagion cannot do without madness. The following phrases are exemplary of this persistent coincidence. They both occur in the context of describing contagion:

So from that cry over the boundless hills,  
 Sudden was caught one universal sound,  
 Like a volcano's voice, whose thunder fills  
 Remotest skies, — such *glorious madness* found  
 A path thro' human hearts with stream which drowned  
 Its struggling fears and cares, dark custom's brood,  
 They knew not whence it came, but felt around  
 A wide contagion poured — they called aloud  
 On Liberty — that name lived on the sunny flood. (3497-5)

The transport of a fierce and *monstrous gladness*  
 Spread thro' the multitudinous streets, fast flying  
 Upon the winds of fear ; from his dull madness  
 The starveling waked, and died in joy ; the dying,  
 Among the corpses in stark agony lying,

Just heard the happy tidings, and in hope  
 Closed their faint eyes ; from house to house replying  
 With loud acclaim, the living shook Heaven's cope,  
 And filled the startled Earth with echoes (4451-8)

These phrases (“glorious madness” and “monstrous gladness”) form a chiasmus, as well as a troubling consonance. The linguistic similarity of these two phrases is troubling because the first describes *Laon and Cythna*'s revolution and the second the genocidal counter-revolution of the tyrant Othman's forces. Madness-monstrous and glorious-gladness are crossed, and the chiasmus points to the double valence (good madness/bad madness, salvation/apocalypse, contagious enthusiasm/dreadful plague) of any contagion. This double valence is what deconstruction calls ‘undecidable.’ The results of the first phrase are revolutionary, describing the initial success of Laon and Cythna against the ruling powers. The results of the second are genocidal, describing the enthusiasm that accompanies King Othmann's orders to throw Atheists and Republicans into a furnace.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Hughes is profoundly attentive to the question of fire and burning in Shelley. In an article to which I am indebted, Hughes forwards a brilliant reading of the word ‘kindle’ as it operates in the Shelleyan *oeuvre*. Hughes contends that the word ‘kindle’ is a nexus of Shelleyan erotics, Shelley's poetic process, and the revolutionary promises of Shelley's protagonists. Here, I would only wish to add consideration of both a dimension of burning (its mad violence) and a poem (*Laon and Cythna*) that Hughes, in my view, does not give sufficient consideration.

Hughes explicitly denies the necessity of an examination of ‘kindling’ in *Laon and Cythna* because in “[t]he Revolt of Islam . . . the word is used to indicate a diffused excitement more than anything else” (Hughes 16). If my understanding of contagion's double valence is correct, the ‘kindling’ of *Laon and Cythna* is not only a ‘diffused excitement.’ The contagion, which Cythna tells Laon that he “hast *kindled* [my emphasis] in [her] heart,” leads to the aforementioned genocidal furnace in which Atheists and Republicans are thrown so that they may burn to death and culminates in Laon and Cythna's execution as they are tied to a pyre and incinerated (1056). The vibration of *Laon and Cythna*'s contagion between positive and negative, and thus a reading of ‘kindling’ in light of this double valence, seems indispensable to understanding the

The co-implication of contagion with madness makes talking about contagion very difficult. Speech must make sense, but contagion does not. What, specifically, is the difficulty? Contagion and madness find themselves in a relation of co-implication rather than rigorous distinction because the anxiety of the plague is both cause and effect of madness. On the one hand, the ‘spreading’ of anxiety has madness as its necessary condition because the emptying out of teleological determination is what enables it to ‘spread’. If the ruling faith were never falsified by the madness of the plague, there would be no contagious anxiety. On this side of the paradox, madness comes first, and enables contagion. On the other hand, the plague engenders or ‘causes’ madness because the thing that is ‘spreading’ *is* madness. On this other side of the paradox, contagion comes first, and enables madness. There is no logic that permits this sort of co-implication or mutual causality. Madness and contagion are each other’s cause and effect, and thus the language of cause/effect loses pertinence. Where does contagious anxiety start? We must proceed knowing that there is no answer to this question, and certainly none that would satisfy a rigorous logician. Contagion, in order to be contagion, is without origin. It is basically meaningless, a “voiceless thought of evil” says Shelley (3935).

It follows that if my reading of Shelley holds, there can be no theory of contagion. A theory, in order to maintain a logically consistent relation with its object, would need to disregard one side of the anxiety paradox, and would thus be unable to account for the contagion in *Laon and Cythna*. By shoehorning an actual revolutionary event into a

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movements of the plot in *Laon and Cythna*. While Hughes is so attentive to the negative valence of ‘kindling’ in terms of poetics, that of the poetic faculty’s necessary dwindling of its condition of possibility like fading coal, he is completely silent on the double *political* valence of kindling, and no doubt because he fails to consider the mad dimension of *Laon and Cythna*’s contagion.

theory, one would precisely cancel any revolutionary dimensions of that event. In fact, Shelley warns precisely against this rationalizing gesture at the conclusion of Canto X:

The madness which these rites had lulled, awoke  
 Again at sunset – Who shall dare to say  
 The deeds which night and fear brought forth, or weigh  
 In balance just the good and evil there?  
 He might man’s deep and searchless heart display,  
 And cast a light on those dim labyrinths, where  
 Hope, near imagined chasms, is struggling with despair, (4200-7)

Shelley is cautioning against the rational judgment of acts committed in the haze of contagion. Shelley’s caution is not a blanket valorization of what goes on during revolutions, a *carte blanche* for heinous acts insofar as one commits them ‘madly’ or in the name of revolution. Instead, but *inevitably by the same token*, it is an attempt to give revolution its chance, to preserve its necessary condition, a “Hope” that is “struggling with despair,” in a “dim labyrinth,” in a blurred space whose revolutionary potential is occulted if it is submitted to the searing light of rational judgment.

This chiasmus is on display when Laon and Cythna meet their end at the hands of a counter-revolution that makes use of the same dynamics of contagion that animated their revolution. To be sure, Othman and the Christian Priest (the ruling powers) engender the counter-revolution in a top-down manner, but they benefit as much from contagion as the revolution itself. At the conclusion of the poem, the image of the revolutionary pyramid from which Cythna gave the revolution’s victory speech in Canto V reverses tragically into a funeral pyre for Laon and Cythna as they are publicly

executed.<sup>11</sup> Revolutionary acts can end in such horror; indeed, they have been horrifying more often than not, but if revolutionary acts are filtered in advance by the norms of Reason, the good, and thus utility, if madness is from the outset banned because of its potential for disaster, then there is no revolutionary contagion at all.

The fact that a theory of revolutionary contagion is impossible must not lead one to stop speaking about revolutions in favor of some incoherent affirmation of revolutionary meaninglessness. Such an affirmation would not only be ethically disastrous, it would also fail in its goal of meaninglessness the moment it was articulated. One cannot articulate a position ‘against’ Reason without being on the side of Reason merely by the act of giving reasons in the course of speaking. Perhaps the question is instead: how do we speak about contagion in a way that as much as possible preserves its revolutionary chance? There is always a chance of contagion, even in speech. Speech certainly occludes contagion, but it cannot quarantine it because the opposition between reason and madness is not an opposition at all. Madness contaminates reason, and thus haunts all speech, “[f]or sheer madness is a priori inscribed in the very sense of sense. The fool is *already* on the premises as a guest who would have preceded his host. He haunts him in advance, his shadow is watching in the darkness of all hospitality” (Derrida, PF 51). The reason that madness haunts all reason is that unless there was a base of non-sense that preceded sense, sense would have nothing to act on, like a potter without clay.

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<sup>11</sup> Deborah Elise White, in her Yale dissertation, pointed out long ago that PBS surely would have known that pyre and pyramid are etymologically linked, and thus that he was conscious of the reversibility of his revolutionary proclamations. Her argument is further strengthened by the fact that during the construction of the pyre it is even referred to as a “pyramid,” (4168).

One way of giving the madness that haunts speech its chance is to find speech that continually reminds us of the inadequacy of our speech to contagion and that interrupts our attempt to speak contagion. By constantly foregrounding, from moment to moment and context to context, the irreducible complexities of contagion, such a speech would train us not to misrecognize it. The word 'joyance' in *Laon and Cythna* seems to have some potential for such a project, and it is to this word that I now turn.

## II – Joyance

The word joyance appears three times in the poem, and is elsewhere absent from Shelley's *oeuvre*.<sup>12</sup> The three instances correspond to three crucial points in the poem:

1) Laon and Cythna's initial kidnapping by Othman's forces in Canto II:

I started to behold her, for delight  
 And exultation, and a joyance free,  
 Solemn, serene, and lofty, filled the light  
 Of the calm smile with which she looked on me: (1171-4)

2) The arrival of Laon and Cythna at the Golden City on the eve of revolutionary victory.

The scene is the successful siege of the Golden City by the revolutionaries:

As we approached, a shout of joyance sprung  
 At once from all the crowd, (1850-1)

3) Finally, joyance affects what Michael J. Neth calls a "temporary reversal," in favor of the revolutionaries in the battle between the revolution and the counter-revolution (Neth, in TCPPBS 775):

a shout of joyance sent,  
 Even from our hearts the wide air pierced and rent (2447-8)

Joyance, especially as it traverses shouts and speeches, seems to blur existing relations of force. Wherever it operates it momentarily creates a space where anything is possible. In order to counter the limitations of possibility that constitute by essence any repression or enslavement, we must understand joyance. To think the fog of war for any revolutionary

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<sup>12</sup> The word originates in Spenser, to whom *Laon and Cythna* is of course very indebted. For an extended discussion of Shelley's inheritance of Spenser, see Kucich.



struggle means to think the blurring of joyance that contaminates the speeches, tones, and silences of a revolution, whether its battles are literal or figurative. If the strength of any hegemon, of any dominant force or ruling power must ultimately make recourse to the ‘facts on the ground’ to legitimate its strength, joyance challenges this certainty by blurring such ‘facts.’<sup>13</sup>

How does the word joyance respond to the demands that a deconstructive suspicion of origins places on a thinking of contagion, which we glossed in the first half of this thesis? First of all, the origin of joyance is always blurred (and thus not an origin) because the word itself is undecidable between active and passive by virtue of its –ance suffix. One can never know where joyance is coming from. Just like ‘resonance’, ‘differánce,’ or ‘lovence,’ the word has built-in protection from attribution to either an author or an object, to either an active or passive grammatical operator.<sup>14</sup> As Derrida

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<sup>13</sup> Not to say that Shelley was ever inattentive to the ‘facts’ of a given historical situation. Cf. the following passage in Cameron (p. 514): “Nor did Shelley himself fail to ‘accommodate his theories to immediate practice.’ In regard to the continent of Europe he felt that the existing despotic governments could be overthrown only by revolution, and his letters and work show a constant attention to the development of such movements – in Spain, in Naples, in Paris, in Greece, as well as in Mexico, South America and Ireland.”

<sup>14</sup> In *Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida explores a deconstruction of the Greek notions of love and friendship and advocates for the value of the word ‘lovence’ for challenging the Greek predilection towards valorization of the active, loving side of love. It is worth noting here that I think all of the advantages Derrida finds in the word ‘lovence’ are shared by ‘joyance,’ and that moreover there exists a potential advantage in favor of ‘joyance’ relative to ‘lovence’ to name what we are thinking here. Derrida himself opines, between parentheses, “(is this still the right word?)” (PF 66). One might well wonder whether, if part of the (deconstructive) point is to open our language onto an outside of Greek, (despite never escaping it), the Latin root of ‘joy’, connected to the French ‘jouissance’, would not be better suited. This would be supported by Derrida’s argument in “Differánce” that Latin is “less philosophical, less originarily philosophical,” than Greek (MP 7). Even prior to undergoing such a study, it is easy to see that to connect revolution to jouissance, play, and orgasm, is to open a whole different set of problems. A Shelleyan would perhaps have to read the seven stanza long orgasm in L&C, among many other passages in *Prometheus Unbound* in order to open revolutionary thought onto

explains in “Differánce,”:

the ending –ance remains undecided between the active and the passive... announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving towards any of these terms. For the middle voice, a certain nontransitivity, may be what philosophy, at its outset, distributed into an active and passive voice, thereby constituting itself by means of this repression. (MP 9)

The –ance suffix does a lot of work, but more important is joyance’s position in the poem. The three moments in which joyance appears are Laon & Cythna’s separation, their revolutionary victory and their defeat. Joyance comes in at moments of shedding (separation), spreading (victory), and dreading (defeat). Thus, the word joyance allows us to think all of these moments of revolutionary contagion together, under the same word.

Joyance first appears at the moment Cythna accepts her revolutionary task to challenge the tyrant Othman, when Laon and Cythna are separated:

I started to behold her, for delight  
And exultation, and a joyance free,  
Solemn, serene and lofty, filled the light  
Of the calm smile with which she looked on me:

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the question of the orgasms of ‘joyance’. Such a study is interesting and necessary, but is outside of the bounds of what I can do here.

So that I feared some brainless ecstasy,  
 Wrought from that bitter woe, had wildered her –  
 “Farewell! farewell! she said, as I drew nigh.  
 “At first my peace was marred by this strange stir,  
 Now I am calm as truth – its chosen minister. (1171-9)

Joyance “filled the light” and thereby visibility is interrupted and we are in the zone of the blur. Laon is in awe of Cythna, he “started to behold[s]” her because her hope is inexplicable given her tragic context. The context of being kidnapped is hopeless (“that bitter woe”), but Cythna is hopeful. For Laon, this hope is mad. Joyance makes Cythna appear mad to him, as if she were ‘wilderer’ by ‘brainless ecstasy.’

Yet Cythna does not stay mad. She explains two moments: madness (“at first my peace was marred by this strange stir”) and then calmness, as truth’s “chosen minister.” There is a mad moment that interrupts a tragic interpretation of her context and then a second moment that consists of a serene state of hopefulness. Is the serenity and rationality (“Truth’s chosen minister”) of this second moment simply contradictory with a ‘mad’ thinking of contagion? Shelley is undoubtedly a rationalist through and through, and one should not minimize the fact that *Laon and Cythna* is a poem in which people are often persuaded through rationalist rhetoric to take part in revolution. Despite these wider observations, one must still insist on the anti-rationalist and anti-teleological status of Cythna’s task. Much later on, Cythna clarifies her rhetorical task, the one to which Truth positioned her as a minister, as a desertification and a blurring. Cythna claims, speaking of herself, that “[h]er lips shall rob thee of the grace thou wearest, / [t]o hide thy heart, and clothe the shapes which rove / [w]ithin the homeless future’s wintry grove,” (4641-

4). Cythna's task attempts to hide the future from rationality. It is something like a clearing. Whenever rationality attempts to know the future, joyance conserves possibility by blurring the teleological determinations that underlie rationality's claim to know, showing rationality as 'the blind leading the blind.'

The anti-rationalist defense of the future is the task that joyance engenders. Cythna explicitly couches this hope of the future in terms of the double valence of contagion we have been developing. Laon wishes to save Cythna, but Cythna does not wish to be saved, and her argument for why Laon should accept their separation is that "in Victory or in Death / our hopes with fear must blend," (1187). Why this blending? Joyance grants both hope and fear their necessary condition, which is the unanticipatable future, and so joyance must vibrate between the two or it is not truly blank or blurry. If joyance merely engendered hope, it would be determined in advance like simple positive expectation. By the same token, if joyance was purely rational or purely irrational, assuming either of those things was possible, joyance would be present or at least presentable. Joyance must exceed these oppositions to avoid being causally or logically determined. Through such determination, joyance's capacity to blur relations of force, and thus its revolutionary capacity, would be occulted.

That joyance first appears at the moment of Laon and Cythna's separation distinguishes a thinking of the contagion of joyance from any idealistic merging of revolutionaries. Joyance emerges when Cythna accepts her separation from Laon with serenity, and this co-occurrence of joyance with Laon and Cythna's separation invites us to think the relation of separation to joyance. During the kidnapping, Cythna correctly points out to Laon that they had planned to separate anyway: "Look not so, Laon – say

farewell in hope... it was my scope / The slavery where they drag me now... the rest thou knowest" (1182-3). Yet a perplexing question survives this explanation for separation: why did Laon and Cythna decide that they have to separate in the first place? While Laon and Cythna both seem to be convinced of the necessity of their separation, the poem does not breathe a word explaining why it is so necessary.

To account for this peculiarity, I venture the claim that Laon and Cythna are satisfying the conditions of a revolutionary modality, which cannot conserve itself if it is to be genuinely revolutionary. Their relationship is the 'source' of the revolution in *Laon and Cythna*, in the sense that they are basically revolutionary messiahs, but this source constantly erases itself. This first instance is not the only time that Laon and Cythna come up with excuses to part with one another. Even their idealistic lovemaking is described not in terms of union but precisely the opposite, as "[t]wo disunited spirits when they leap / In union from this earth's obscure and fading sleep" (2639-2640).

Occurring in the thick of revolutionary conflict, the other instances of joyance in *Laon and Cythna* are two 'shouts of joyance,' marking revolutionary victory and then defeat:

Afar, the city-walls were thronged on high,  
 And myriads on each giddy turret clung,  
 And to each spire far lessening in the sky  
 Bright pennons on the idle winds were hung;  
 As we approached, a shout of joyance sprung  
 At once from all the crowd, as if the vast  
 And peopled Earth its boundless skies among

The sudden clamour of delight had cast,  
 When from before its face some general wreck had passed. (1846-4)

Within a cave upon the hill were found  
 A bundle of rude pikes, the instrument  
 Of those who war but on their native ground  
 For natural rights: a shout of joyance sent  
 Even from our hearts the wide air pierced and rent,  
 As those few arms the bravest and the best  
 Seized, and each sixth, thus armed, did now present  
 A line which covered and sustained the rest,  
 A confident phalanx, which the foes on every side invest. (2443-1)

In order to analyze these shouts of joyance, we should make a few preliminary observations regarding the question of the shout. A shout interrupts tone. It is a tonal rupture, a tonal force that is not admitted as legitimate by the prevailing tone, and thus appears as a mad shout, an atonal and terrifying scream. The blur of a tone, mood, or *Stimmung* enacted by the shout of joyance is one way of thinking of Shelley's 'voiceless' contagion: "the shadow of a mood / Which only clothes the heart in solitude, / A thought of voiceless depth," (4228-0). When someone shouts, one thinks that they know something that you don't, and this non-knowledge has immediate implications, here and now: 'why are you shouting?' Thus, a shout blurs the *here* and *now* by making one feel as if one does not quite understand it. The senses contaminate each other because sight is blurred by sound; in our second example just quoted the 'wide air' and thus visibility is

‘pierced and rent’ by the shout. Yet the shouter does not really know why they are shouting either, at least not at the moment of the shout, otherwise the shout would simply be expressed speech. There is no such thing as a sane shout. One cannot decide *to shout* as a matter of strategy without negating the mad ‘shoutiness’ of the shout. A shout always emanates from the bottomless abyss of a gaping mouth.

In *Laon and Cythna* the revolutionaries benefit from the tonal rupture of the shout. The second shout of joyance quoted above takes place during the revolutionary war between the counter-revolution (the tyrant Othman’s forces) and the revolution (the side of Laon and Cythna). The war between the revolution and the counter-revolution is radically asymmetrical. The tyrant Othman has an overwhelming advantage; his quantitative advantage in troops is supplemented by naval bombardment that is so ruthless it does not seem to mind whether it kills friends or enemies. Yet the shout of joyance momentarily disrupts Othman’s counter-revolutionaries by blurring these strategic inequalities: “[t]hat onset turned the foes to flight almost / But soon they saw their present strength,” (2452-3). The shout of joyance’s utility in battle demonstrates that the blurring of joyance does not prevent militancy, the ‘present’ of a ‘confident phalanx.’ On the contrary, joyance grants militancy its necessary condition. Without joyance, militancy is hopeless because its potential force can never stack up to a hegemon like the tyrant Othman. Shelley suggests one could not beat the hegemon with sane strategy because if one could, he would not be the hegemon. Only by blurring the ‘facts on the ground’ can one justify a struggle that is quantitatively outnumbered and strategically outflanked, ‘which foes on every side invest.’

If the shout of joyance is such a weapon (albeit a weapon that one cannot consciously decide to use), what purpose does a shout of joyances emergence during *victory* serve, as in the first example quoted above? The context is the crowd's belief that they have recognized the arrival of Laon and Cythna, the revolutionary messiahs: "at once from all the crowd, / [a]s we approached a shout of joyance sprung." The 'approach' or coming of the messiahs engenders a shout of joyance, and following this shout there is a recurrence of the shed-spread rhyme: "[a] thousand flower-inwoven crowns were shed... Those angels of love's heaven, that overall was spread" (1860-4).

There is shedding and spreading but no dreading here. This shout is bereft of anxiety. The lack of anxiety is not without consequence, and provides us with a series of concluding questions. Is not Shelley's valorization of the shout part and parcel with the language of presence? Even beyond this example, is not the reason a shout is so inexpressible the fact that it is so immediate, so absolutely *present*, that nothing can be said about it? If the answer to these two questions is 'yes,' as I believe it is, is revolutionary Shelley a partisan of the shout, and thus a thinker of presence? Probably not. *Laon and Cythna* deals with this question explicitly during its description of the plague:

Silent Arcturus shines – ha! hear'st thou not the tread  
 Of rushing feet? laughter? the shout, the scream,  
 Of triumph not to be contained? see! hark!  
 They come, they come, give way! alas, ye deem  
 Falsely – 'tis but a crowd of maniacs stark  
 Driven, like a troop of spectres, thro' the dark,



From the choked well, whence a bright death-fire sprung,  
 A lurid-earth star, which dropped many a spark  
 From its blue train, and spreading widely, clung  
 To their wild hair, like mist the topmost pines among. (4323-2)

Shelley does not universally affirm the shout. He preserves the possibility of misrecognizing (“alas, ye deem / Falsely”) revolutionary contagion, which often truly consists of “a crowd of maniacs.” The possibility of this misrecognition authorizes us to counter a reading of Shelley as a thinker of the presence of the shout because the misrecognition is located at the precise moment that the prior example’s shout of joyance arose in a fashion that seemed too idealizing: the messianic apparition to which one should surrender (“They come, they come, give way!”).

Even if one still harbors suspicions regarding Shelley’s commitment to a language of presence, what is hopefully clear at our conclusion is that Shelley’s *Laon and Cythna* provides immense and nuanced resources for a deconstructive thinking of revolutionary contagion. Recent events like the Arab Spring as well as rapid advances in the dispersion of de-localized tele-technology call us to sharpen our understanding of contagion, and thus Shelley’s complexity and sophistication in this regard demand that we re-read him rigorously. I have attempted to mark the contours of such a reading through an understanding of the word ‘joyance,’ and contagion’s irreducible relation to madness and the blurring of anxiety, but much remains to be thought.

## Chapter 2: Shelley's Hegemons

How can one emerge victorious against a superior power? The question no doubt weighed heavily on Shelley's mind. His revolutionary protagonists tend to be outmatched and outnumbered, and at the end of *Prometheus Unbound* Demogorgon enjoins his listeners, "[t]o defy Power which seems Omnipotent" (4.572). A power that seems omnipotent is a hegemon, and this thesis will develop a Shelleyan understanding of hegemony through a reading of *Prometheus Unbound* and *Laon and Cythna*. In *Prometheus Unbound* the God Jupiter occupies the position of hegemonic power, ruling over and enslaving the human race until his son, Demogorgon, successfully deposes him. I will argue that *Prometheus Unbound* foregrounds Demogorgon as the model of anti-hegemonic politics, and that this model is abyssal, without guarantee or foundation. Consequently, Demogorgon signals anti-hegemonic politics away from the insurance of any causal determination towards an abyssal future to come. Demogorgon shares these qualities with a deconstructive logic of the gift, and it will be further argued that Shelley's hegemon's are evil according to Shelley insofar as they are unable to receive a gift. Finally, Shelleyan love will be read as the atmosphere of the gift, which spreads contagiously the insecurity of his hegemons.

## I – Eternity

How long does deposing a hegemon take? How does one justify a struggle that could last for eternity? Prometheus seems willing to wait forever for Jupiter's reign to end. The price of defying Jupiter is to be restrained in torturous agony, and during this torture Prometheus is visited by Mercury and asked to justify his stance of defiance. The argument between Prometheus and Mercury in the first act of *Prometheus Unbound* provides valuable insights regarding the temporality of an anti-hegemonic force. Prometheus teaches us that such a force must learn how to wait, and to wait for something not anticipatable by history. Since such a waiting waits for what it does not know, it cannot but appear mad or irrational, and Prometheus' decision appears to Mercury as exactly that.

A close evaluation of Mercury's argumentation in his attempt to convince Prometheus to submit to Jupiter demonstrates that Mercury's opposition to Jupiter stems from a commitment to history itself. In Mercury's reading of history, to stand against the Omnipotent is futile. To support the argument, Mercury describes the operation of history, which he explains as reducing heterogeneous and disjointed time into a series of consecutive presents:

But vainly wouldst stand forth alone in strife  
 Against the Omnipotent; as yon clear lamps  
 That measure and divide the weary years  
 From which there is no refuge, long have taught  
 And long must teach. (1.1357-1)

History should teach Prometheus that resistance is futile. History teaches resistance is futile not because particular events in history have ‘empirically’ shown that defiance resembling that of Prometheus will fail, but because the rationalist light of history itself “divide[s] the weary years” into calculable, knowable presents “[f]rom which there is no refuge.” History, in the movement of historicization, turns time into something knowable and determinable, and thereby dissects the social and political forces under consideration.

Mercury is right to insist on the totalizing nature of historical narrative by claiming history admits ‘no refuge.’ Within history, there is indeed ‘no refuge’ from historical reason. An historical narrative includes no event that does not follow necessarily from a prior event; history can tolerate no other content. A history is totalizing in this manner or it is not a history. If historical narratives admitted the possibility of events inexplicable by historical facts, the history of history would not be that its lights ‘long have taught, ’ and ‘long must teach,’ because the lesson of such breaks, of events that defy historical necessity, would ‘teach’ the *limit* of historical knowledge, and render suspicious the historicist argument that Mercury articulates.

If Jupiter is omnipotent, then all good logic and common sense dictates that he cannot be beat. Within the domain of knowable force, the omnipotent always wins. “Thou art omnipotent.” Prometheus says to Jupiter in Act I (1.272). Any successful challenge to hegemony must be inexplicable by historical facts, and thus history itself (as Mercury observes) is rigged for hegemony. In the act of historicizing events, historical narrative must retroactively impart necessity to the result of every event. The past must make sense. Even if a lesser power ‘actually’ succeeds in history, history must, in order to narrate such a success, produce this event as determined, necessary and inevitable, and

thus not really the victory of a weaker power at all. It is from this necessity of history that Mercury derives his certainty that Prometheus' struggle is futile.<sup>15</sup>

By offering an argument against revolt that cites for its support the history of historicism, Mercury figures the hegemon's relation to history. Mercury does not cite a particular story about Jupiter; instead he describes the movement of historicization itself, which, no matter which side it takes or what story it tells, must necessarily cancel anything that did not lead to the present, and thus all events, including those that could potentially challenge a hegemon.

Not persuaded by Mercury's argumentation, Prometheus insists on waiting for Jupiter's downfall. What legitimates Prometheus' decision to wait? Prometheus believes his struggle will succeed eventually simply from the fact that time passes:

And yet to me welcome is day and night,  
 Whether one breaks the hoar frost of the morn,  
 Or starry, dim, and slow, the other climbs  
 The leaden-coloured east; for then they lead  
 The wingless, crawling hours, one among whom  
 — As some dark Priest hales the reluctant victim —  
 Shall drag thee, cruel King, to kiss the blood

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<sup>15</sup> The analysis undertaken here is fairly critical of necessity, and one might wonder how to reconcile this with Shelley himself and many other 18<sup>th</sup> Century radicals, given their valorization of necessity. The claim would be that there are at least two semantic dimensions of necessity: causal necessity on the one hand and necessity itself, defined as the irreducibility of the play between the one and the other, the necessity that the play between one and the other repeat. This latter necessity would be understood as what Demogorgon, as the movement of necessity, is figuring. For a helpful overview of necessity in *Prometheus Unbound*, see Sperry.

From these pale feet, which then might trample thee  
 If they disdained not such a prostrate slave. (1.44-2)

How can Prometheus be certain that Jupiter's empire will fall merely from the fact that time passes? Why couldn't Jupiter's hegemony last forever? Does time inevitably bring about something unanticipatable, and thus heterogeneous with the hegemon's present omnipotence, thereby threatening it? Or does the passing of time only bring more of the same? Time must be disjointed, with the future to come haunting the present in order for hegemony to be possible. Thus all hegemony is precarious. If the passage of time did not have the possibility of an unanticipatable event, the hegemon would be left with *total and saturating control* and thus nothing over which to rule. The hegemon would no longer be the hegemon in any meaningful sense because it would be perfectly coincident with the universe, containing no other within itself.

Jupiter's empire is haunted by its founding violence against Saturn, Jupiter's father, which could always potentially be repeated against it. Since Jupiter's hegemony's has not always existed, it will not always exist. When Demogorgon successfully confronts Jupiter, he specifically couches his victory as such a repetition: "I am thy child, as thou wert Saturn's child; / Mightier than thee:" (3.1.54). In *Laon and Cythna* Shelley also characterizes the moment of the hegemon's fall as the past returning: "Such wonder seized him, as if hour by hour /The past had come again" (1966-7).

Prometheus teaches us that the mere fact that time passes is enough to guarantee that chance, events and change threaten to disrupt hegemonic dominance. When Asia asks Demogorgon, "Who is the master of the slave?" (inquiring about Jupiter) Demogorgon does not reply with an answer of positive content because the "master" of

Jupiter is the abyssal future, the unpredictable to-come, which *both* produces the otherness that is the object of hegemony's impulse to mastery *and* the events that threaten hegemony (2.4.113). The double valence of the future to come is embodied in Demogorgon, whom Jupiter cites precisely as evidence of the growing extent of his rule, of the *future* of his power over humanity, but who ultimately deposes him. Jupiter thus figures the inability of a hegemon to master its own future. Jupiter's speech, in which he highlights Demogorgon as an example of his rule's future success, is a demonstration of hegemony's irrepressible drive to extend its dominance into the future. Jupiter attempts to find reasons his rule will last forever, but the mere fact he has to find reasons, that he has to *speculate* on the future, introduces the otherness of the to come, which the hegemon cannot contain.

The dissemination of the meaning of the word "it" in Jupiter's speech exemplifies the irrepressibility of otherness in every hegemon's discourse.<sup>16</sup> Throughout Jupiter's speech at the beginning of Act III, Jupiter uses the pronoun 'it' to refer to humanity's revolt against him, which he believes Demogorgon will suppress, but the word, considered in retrospect, seems to refer to his own rule, which Demogorgon ends:

It yet remains supreme o'er misery,  
Aspiring, unrepressed, yet soon to fall:  
Even now have I begotten a strange wonder,  
That fatal child, the terror of the earth, (3.1.16-9)

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<sup>16</sup> Donald Reiman pointed out the strange murmur of a failing hegemon in Jupiter's speech through the designation of it as "irony in the classical sense," (p. 180) in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*.

“That fatal child” Demogorgon is Shelley’s model of anti-hegemonic politics. He is abyssal and without form. Panthea describes Demogorgon as “[u]ngazed upon and shapeless; neither limb, / [n]or form, nor outline” (2.4.5-6). Demogorgon replies to Asia’s question as to who is Jupiter’s master by saying such an abyss cannot be described: “a voice / [i]s wanting, the deep truth is imageless;” because *what in particular is* to-come is impossible to envision or anticipate, yet the inevitability of the to-come itself, of time and the finitude of an Empire, renders any hegemony necessarily insecure.

An objection arises. Is the guaranteed *inevitability* of the future to come, which is what makes hegemony essentially insecure, counterproductive in its stated aim of preserving the possibility of radical futurity? That is to say: how can one provide *any* guarantee of futurity, even if that guarantee is merely the irreducibility of the interruptive to come which both enables and forecloses hegemony, if one wishes to preserve radical futurity? By positing the irreducibility of the to come, does not one impose a *form* in which futurity must operate in order to be futurity, thereby flattening history (in a manner different from but analogous to Mercury’s “clear lights”) and foreclosing radical futurity?

Demogorgon does not think so. As Panthea observes about Demogorgon himself (who has “[n]either limb, / nor form, nor outline”) the abyssal future to come is not a form or any *thing* at all, and so it actually guarantees nothing: “[f]or what would it avail to bid thee gaze / [o]n the revolving world? what to bid speak / Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change?” (2.4.117-9). Demogorgon is saying: what is the point of pointing to these things that are the “master” of Jupiter when doing so would explain nothing, would “avail” nothing to Asia and be meaningless to speak, be meaningless *in* speech because what these words describe is neither visible (“For what would it avail to bid thee



gaze”) nor speakable (“what to bid speak”)?<sup>17</sup> When it comes to the abyssal future, the only guarantee is that there are no guarantees, and thus the claims of hegemonic stability are belied without the need to posit a countervailing certainty.<sup>18</sup>

The claim that the omnipotent must pass is thus not a historical claim based on certainty or reality. On the contrary, Prometheus’ decision to wait interrupts history. While an interruption of history is commonly thought with the model of the rupturing instant, a moment that is not really a moment because it has no duration, Prometheus’ wait affirms an unknowable suffering that owes its unknowability to the opposite side of the infinite: the infinitely long moment rather than the infinitely short.<sup>19</sup> Mercury asks Prometheus to consider an infinitely long duration that is so long as to be uncountable. Mercury describes such a duration as “Eternity,” the very same name Demogorgon uses to describe himself when he defeats Jupiter: “Awful shape, what art thou? Speak! / Eternity – demand no direr name” (3.1.52-3). Mercury’s thought experiment asks Prometheus to affirm the madness of eternity:

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<sup>17</sup> It seems to me that Kelley's reading of Demogorgon's answers to Asia as (p.269) “strategically divided between dodginess and something akin to euphemistic speech” only holds if one expects Demogorgon to identify a hegemon. Kelley thinks he should have said 'Prometheus' because Prometheus gave Jupiter power in the first place. but Demogorgon's point is precisely that no one with substance or identity truly reigns because the one who reigns is himself subject to the law of the future to come. The decision not to speak this future to come is not 'euphemistic,' but simply an acknowledgement that it is impossible to gaze upon or speak the to come without occulting it and thereby defending the sovereign.

<sup>18</sup> In Derridean terms, hegemony would simply be inscribed and ruined by the perhaps. A reading of the perhaps in Shelley could begin here. In fact, Prometheus even says Jupiter’s reign will “[p]erchance” continue (1.424).

<sup>19</sup> Georges Bataille would be the exemplar of this position, in his discussion of the conditions of possibility of sovereignty. According to Bataille, a sovereign must tear time, must have relation to neither the past before it nor the future after it, and thus be an instant between abysses. The analysis regarding the eternal explored here is not mutually exclusive with this position; it merely approaches the same question from another side.

Yet pause, and plunge

Into Eternity, where recorded time,  
 Even all that we imagine, age on age,  
 Seems but a point, and the reluctant mind  
 Flags wearily in its unending flight,  
 Till it sink, dizzy, blind, lost, shelterless;  
 Perchance it has not numbered the slow years  
 Which thou must spend in torture, unreprieved? (1.416-3)

Mercury asks: is Prometheus willing to be tortured for an uncountable duration, until he is eventually driven to madness? What is an uncountable duration? What is “Eternity”? To count is to divide into repeatable unities; therefore, to be uncountable, “Eternity” must be absolutely heterogeneous to any unity encountered up to this point. Even the largest unities available stacked together, repeated over and over, “age on age,” seem “but a point,” and since all points have a size of zero, all of “recorded time” *does not even amount to a single unit*.

How does Prometheus respond to Mercury’s challenge? That is, how does Prometheus maintain an orientation to *wait* in the face of eternal suffering? Prometheus claims the uncountable is not all that threatening, because it still must necessarily pass eventually: “Perchance no thought can count them, yet they pass” (1.424). For Prometheus, Eternity names not the infinite prolongation of the present, but the infinite transformations of the present enabled by finitude, the always imminent future-to-come that ensures nothing that is not immortal can escape transformation. The aggregate of such infinite transformations might deserve the name “Eternity” because its capacity for

rupture foils in advance any attempt to divide them into units of historical time, as such a division would cancel their heterogeneity. Such an Eternity is infinite *because* it is finite.

Prometheus' understanding of Eternity demonstrates why his decision to wait could be successful, but why is Jupiter's rule something he desires to end? What, precisely, is the ethical justification for opposing it? Jupiter will be derided for not knowing how to receive a gift, and the next section turns to the question of the gift in Shelley.

## II – The Gift

Whence does Shelley derive an ethical justification for challenging the hegemon? Shelley's hegemons are evil, and demand to be challenged, because they are unable to receive a gift. In the case of both Prometheus and the tyrant Othman, the villain of *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley deplores the hegemon's inability to receive a gift, an incalculable donation without the possibility of reciprocation. The occultation of the gift also occupies a privileged place in Shelley's most disastrous speculations. At the lowest point in the progression of *Laon and Cythna's* deadly pestilence, Shelley laments the exchange of human flesh:

There was no corn – in the wide market-place

All loathliest things, even human flesh, was sold; (3955-6)

Shelley is lamenting the reduction of everything to exchange value. In Shelley's estimation human flesh should hold a status of dignity that makes it unsalable. It should be off limits to exchange. Shelley repeats the disaster scenario of selling flesh in *Prometheus Unbound*, where the Furies that torture Prometheus cite their origin as partially that of hegemonic (“[k]ingly”) “conclaves” that trade in human flesh, the Furies originating in “[k]ingly conclaves stern and cold, / [w]here blood with gold is bought and sold” (1.530-1).

In order to transcend the structure of exchange, as Shelley seems very much to want to do, one must think a logic of the gift beyond value itself; a gift that cannot be evaluated. In *Specters of Marx*, after arguing that exchange value cannot be delimited, Derrida foregrounds the fact that capital, and value itself, comes itself to be exceeded by a logic of the gift:

In a certain way, market equivalence arrests or mechanizes the dance that it seemed to initiate. Only beyond value itself, use-value and exchange-value, the value of technics and of the market, is grace promised, if not given, but never rendered or given back to the dance.

(201 SM)

Derrida is careful to emphasize that such a gift is “promised” but “never rendered.” In Derrida’s *Given Time: Counterfeit Money I*, Derrida works out in more detail what conditions would be necessary to fulfill a logic of the gift through a reading of Baudelaire’s prose poem *The Counterfeit Coin*. Derrida’s minimal conditions are as follows:

1. A gift cannot be bound or binding; it can neither service nor create a debt in order to be a gift. If a gift did either of these things, it would be enclosed by the circle of economic exchange, and thus would not be a gift.

2. In order to exceed determination a gift must happen by chance or fortune. In order to happen by chance, a gift must tear time. If a gift didn’t tear time, didn’t interrupt narrative and history, it would be determined according to ‘its’ time, predictable and domesticated like content within a date.

3. A gift must break with nature, with any originary or natural drive. To give out of a faculty of generosity, or any faculty at all, would be the unfolding of a pre-determined history.

4. A gift must surprise; it is a surprise that happens by fortune, but a gift cannot ever appear as surprise because an appearance requires a present that is entered into memory. Once the gift is entered into memory, it necessarily links into the symbolic

circle of memory, in economic relations of determination with other memories.

Specifically, once a gift ‘appears’ as surprise, as a happening within the category of surprise, it leaves the recipient helpless, violently taking them hostage because they do not know what to do on the threshold of the unanticipated. A pure gift must be such a surprise that networks of memory and recognition cannot integrate it. It must be forgotten immediately.

5. Finally, on the side of the giver, the semantics of the word ‘gift,’ imply that the giver freely and intentionally gives the gift. This final condition forms a profoundly difficult paradox in combination with the prior conditions. The gift must be unconscious, involuntary, exceeding memory yet still exerting effects upon it; and all the while it must co-exist with the intentional ‘freedom’ to give, which seems to foreclose all of these conditions. This does not imply intention ‘to’ give, but merely gift ‘with’ intention. Intention coexists with the gift in a ‘taking off’ in the gift of the act of giving that exceeds any intention. Intention ‘to’ give would be generosity, and giving out of generosity is patently teleological, submitting the gift to the socially determined program of alms giving.

Deconstruction teaches us these minimal conditions for respecting the specificity of the gift, and the unanticipatable to come shares these conditions. In order to facilitate the event and thus the possible destruction of the hegemon, one cannot simply wait in a straightforwardly passive sense. One must ‘actively’ learn not to misrecognize the event, because misrecognition can mistake an event for historical determination. Just as historical narrative occludes the event by identifying it, so too does history occlude the gift by reducing every bestowal to a programmed historical determination. Like the gift,

the event is a bestowal to which reciprocation or attribution is impossible. If the event could be reciprocated, attributed to the willful action of a particular agent, or explained as inevitable by historical conditions, it would be programmable into historical narrative, necessary and determined, and thus neither gift nor event.

Mercury and Prometheus are indeed arguing about what to *give* to Jupiter. Prometheus condemns Jupiter for his ignorance of the gift and rejects Mercury's proposed exchange with Jupiter. Mercury suggested that Prometheus trade the secret of humanity's permanent enslavement to Jupiter:

Be it not so! there is a secret known  
 To thee, and to none else of living things,  
 Which may transfer the sceptre of wide Heaven,  
 The fear of which perplexes the Supreme:  
 Clothe it in words, and bid it clasp his throne  
 In intercession; bend thy soul in prayer,  
 And like a suppliant in some gorgeous fane,  
 Let the will kneel within thy haughty heart:  
 For benefits and meek submission tame  
 The fiercest and the mightiest. (1.371-0)

Mercury proposes a sacrifice. Mercury wishes for Prometheus to unconditionally sacrifice finitude. The secret of permanent human enslavement should, in Mercury's estimation, be offered as a trade. Prometheus is quick to pick up on the occultation of the gift in Mercury's proposal. When Prometheus responds, the question of the gift enters in full force:

## Evil minds

Change good to their own nature. I *gave* all  
 He has; and in *return* he chains me here  
 Years, ages, night and day: whether the Sun  
 Split my parched skin, or in the moony night  
 The crystal-wingèd snow cling round my hair:  
 Whilst my belovèd race is trampled down  
 By his thought-executing ministers.  
*Such is the tyrant's recompense: 'tis just:*  
*He who is evil can receive no good;*  
*And for a world bestowed, or a friend lost,*  
*He can feel hate, fear, shame; not gratitude:*  
*He but requites me for his own misdeed.*  
 Kindness to such is keen reproach, which breaks  
 With bitter stings the light sleep of Revenge.  
 Submission, thou dost know I cannot try:  
 For what submission but that fatal word,  
 The death-seal of mankind's captivity,  
 Like the Sicilian's hair-suspended sword,  
 Which trembles o'er his crown, would he accept,  
 Or could I yield? Which yet I will not yield.  
 Let others flatter Crime, where it sits throned  
 In brief Omnipotence: secure are they:



For Justice, when triumphant, will weep down  
 Pity, not punishment, on her own wrongs,  
 Too much avenged by those who err. I wait,  
 Enduring thus, the retributive hour  
 Which since we spake is even nearer now.  
 But hark, the hell-hounds clamour: fear delay:  
 Behold! Heaven lowers under thy Father's frown. (*italics mine 1.380-1.409*)

Prometheus criticizes Jupiter for his inability to recognize the gift. Jupiter's ignorance of the gift legitimates Prometheus' either-or: either no exchange will work because Prometheus is not willing to exchange anything that has any value to Jupiter (all that he has of value is the secret to permanently imprisoning humanity, which he is unwilling to offer); or any proposal that functions outside the domain of value is dead on arrival because Jupiter's "evil nature" does not know how to recognize a gift. Prometheus cites Jupiter's track record, his *credit*, in attesting to Jupiter's status as unable to receive a gift, and in so doing presumes Jupiter's identity will *repeat* itself. Prometheus explains that he "gave all [Jupiter] has; and in return [Jupiter] chain[ed]" Prometheus. Jupiter paid back ("such is the tyrant's *recompense*") the gift of wisdom by failing to repeat it, by entering wisdom into an economy of enslavement. Jupiter's crime is that he utilized a gift for mastery.

Yet there is an additional layer of complexity to Prometheus' accusation because according to Prometheus Jupiter's inability to receive a gift is *itself* "just" compensation for Jupiter's evil nature. Jupiter's evil nature justifies what he does not gain from receiving gifts, but his evil nature is the very same inability to receive gifts. Prometheus'

accusation against Jupiter sets in motion a vicious circle. Prometheus believes that Jupiter is evil for not recognizing the gift, which means he has an “evil nature”, which consists of his inability to recognize the gift, which is his “evil nature,” *ad infinitum*. Jupiter’s crime is not apprehending the gift (i.e. he mastered it, thus not apprehending it as something that he was not supposed to master), and his punishment is *also* not apprehending the gift.

Prometheus’ denunciation is a snake eating its own tail that leads Prometheus to moralistically conclude that Jupiter does not *deserve* a gift. Jupiter hates or suffers, yet these are his own fault because they are merely instances when he “but requites [Prometheus]” for his own misdeed of failing to apprehend gratitude. Prometheus’ use of the phrase “but requites,” is meant to point out that Jupiter merely requites, that is: Jupiter *only goes so far as to requite* rather than pushing all the way to the excessive character of the gift. Jupiter knows only the economic circle of mutual requital, and remains blind to anything that might exceed it. Shelley relies very heavily on the language of the gift in the above quoted denunciation. Jupiter cannot feel “gratitude”: the domain of the gift is closed to him; and so he cannot genuinely respond to “a world bestowed” or a “friend lost”.<sup>20</sup> Jupiter is “evil” and so can “*receive no good*’ (italics mine).

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<sup>20</sup> Shelley’s juxtaposition of these two examples is fascinating: according to Prometheus Jupiter can feel no gratitude for a “world bestowed” (the ‘es gibt’ or *it gives* of the world) or for a “friend lost.” In the first place, Jupiter lacks gratitude for what is given prior to the mastery of a subject, of what pre-exists every operation of mastery insofar as mastery needs an unmastered object to precede it in order to have something to master. The first example is in line with the reading of the other-to-come’s threat to hegemony pursued through this thesis: hegemony, in order to believe they are hegemony, must be certain of their power and thus unable to receive the gift of the other to come, which would inscribe their power in the speculative domain of the perhaps (as was shown in Jupiter’s irrepressible drive to speculate). Yet the second example, of a “friend lost,” concerns a friend, not a world, and seems to add to Prometheus’ denunciation the dimension of mourning that inflects the word “gratitude,” the master-word of Prometheus’ accusation, in a very strange way. Gratitude takes on the character of mourning; it consists of being

Those who are evil both *cannot* and *should not* experience a gift according to Prometheus. Yet the fact that only criterion for evil remains the inability to experience a gift makes Prometheus' denunciation very difficult to justify. Why does the question of the gift govern the denunciation rather than, for example, simply the fact that Jupiter is tyrannical, enslaving humankind and raping Thetis? Prometheus himself claims these results are secondary effects that follow directly from Jupiter's inability to receive the gift of power, which Prometheus himself gave him. Prometheus "gave all [Jupiter]" has, the hegemony, which he now wields, but Jupiter's inability to receive a gift caused him to wield this power incorrectly. Despite Prometheus' claim that he wishes to "break the

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thankful for one who is lost. Yet mourning was already there in the first example: "A world bestowed" could not be felt gratitude for unless it was gone, unless one was mourning it. Otherwise gratitude would be pointing from outside the world in order to point to the world in the operation of gratitude, which is impossible insofar as gratitude, like everything else, must be *in* the world to which it is referring. In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida explores the testamentary structure of friendship, in the course of which showing that, for Friedrich Nietzsche at least, the essential character of the friend was that they leave one (thus the dimension of mourning) but in this act of leaving, in their send-off, they promise to give you a world, a particular world, in the precise sense of a "world bestowed." In his reading, Derrida emphasizes that the Nietzschean friend but promises *a* world, only a *particular* world, only a *finite* world, and Shelley's construction "a world bestowed" rather than *the* world harmonizes with Nietzsche's understanding. Shelley's wording here does not suggest a promise of a world, but it still shares the absence to the world that a promise indicates (insofar as one can only promise what is not there). Shelley's juxtaposition of these two examples thus places him alongside Nietzsche in his thinking of the gift and friendship, a proximity, which given Nietzsche's aristocratic leanings, Shelley would have deplored. If Derrida is right that the question of friendship opens onto the question of politics and of political community, how would this harmony mutually inflect Shelley's radicalism and Nietzsche's aristocratic preference? Do the similarities end there? Would not it be significant, to answer this question, to consider how Laon of *Laon and Cythna*, in the passage quoted on the next page, chastises the crowd's desire for revenge as unvirtuous, and how, in the Nietzschean corpus, which reads morality as always a denunciation of vengeance or *ressentiment*, the value of virtue as such is *never, not once* put into question, despite so many Nietzsche transformations aimed at the concept of virtue? How close would these two writers be in their thinking of the Eternal, in particular of the *Eternal Return*, and its relation to the economic circle and thus the gift?

bitter stings of Revenge's sleep" with kindness, is there not some vengeance in Prometheus' belief that Jupiter should suffer a lack of the gift? Is not the claim tinged with vengeance that Jupiter does not *deserve* a gift because his lack of a gift is his own fault based on his past actions? Prometheus believes it is just that Jupiter not enjoy the reception of gifts ("tis just") because an inability to receive gifts accords with Jupiter's "nature." Yet can one have a "natural" receptiveness to gifts, or is the category of the "natural" completely foreign to the interruption of determination that characterizes any gift? If a gift is 'naturally' expected or 'naturally' foreclosed, aren't its properties occulted, in the same way an event can be occulted by or as historical determination?

Such questions cast doubt on Prometheus' repeated claims to be beyond revenge. A conception of justice without revenge was a persistent concern of Shelley, demonstrated in Laon's relation to the tyrant Othman in *Laon and Cythna*, a poem in which the namesake protagonists lead a revolution against economic and religious elites. In *Laon and Cythna*, at the moment when Othman falls and there are those who wish to execute him, Laon denounces those who would harm the tyrant in revenge, thereby saving Othman's life from the wrath of the crowd:

What call ye justice? is there one who ne'er  
 In secret thought has wished another's ill? —  
 Are ye all pure ? let those stand forth who hear,  
 And tremble not. Shall they insult and kill,  
 If such they be ? their mild eyes can they fill  
 With the false anger of the hypocrite ?  
 Alas, such were not pure — the chastened will

Of virtue sees that justice is the light  
 Of love, and not revenge, and terror and despite. (2017-5)

Laon not only states clearly that “justice is the light / [o]f love, and not revenge,” he also claims that those who fail to see this are “not pure” and lack “the chastened will of virtue.” It seems difficult to distinguish Prometheus’ denunciation of Jupiter or Laon’s denunciation of the revolutionaries from the structure of punishment from which Shelley wishes to distinguish his thought of justice. Prometheus even refers to the end of Jupiter’s rule as the “retributive hour.”<sup>21</sup> Prometheus is operating solidly within the space of malediction, and after Jupiter’s ghost recites Prometheus’ curse, at which time he claims to “hate no more,” Prometheus hardly seems believable (1.57).

Shelley’s denunciation of the inability to receive a gift extends to the tyrant Othman of *Laon and Cythna*. Unlike *Prometheus Unbound*, *Laon and Cythna* models a failed challenge to hegemony: in the conclusion the protagonists are burned at the stake. A further difference is that in *Laon and Cythna*, the proposed exchange with the hegemon is attempted. During the scene that interests us, near the end of the poem, Laon confronts the tyrant Othman, offering Othman a simple economic exchange rather than attempting a potentially transformative ethical injunction because Othman “cannot change, [he is] old and grey”:

It doth avail not that I weep for ye – Ye cannot change, since ye are old and grey,

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<sup>21</sup> My position thus stands against anyone who reads Prometheus as having successfully transcended revenge. See, for example Bronwich: "If the poet were unique in the way a revolutionary leader is unique, he would be the protagonist of a fable of revenge that needs likewise its antagonist. Our thoughts about change go along these lines because they tend to be thoughts about contest. But in his later poetry, and in *Prometheus Unbound* above all, Shelley was looking at revolution from the point of view of a creator no longer interested in contest, a creator who is not a light-bringer."

And ye have chosen your lot – your fame must be  
 A book of blood, whence in a milder day  
 Men shall learn truths, when ye are wrapt in clay:  
 Now ye shall triumph. I am Laon’s friend,  
 And him to your revenge will I betray,  
 So ye concede one easy boon. Attend!  
 For now I speak of things which ye can apprehend. (4405-3)

Laon’s claim to “speak of things which [Othman] can apprehend” makes explicit his belief that Othman is unable to apprehend that which exceeds exchange. Like Prometheus, Laon is making a determination of natural predilection (“Ye cannot change, since ye are old and grey”) at the precise point where we have every reason to believe nature has no relevance; that is, in the zone of the gift which precisely exceeds natural determinations. Just as Prometheus did not *credit* Jupiter, Laon denies Othman and his retinue *trust*: “I put no trust in ye, / Swear by your dreadful God.” – “We swear, we swear!” (4444-8).

If Laon puts “no trust,” in the ruling powers, how can he trust the fact that they swear, even if they swear “on” something else, specifically something not in this world (“God”)? To swear on something is to cite credit for the act of swearing: i.e. perhaps you do not trust me, but you trust that I care about that on which I am swearing, and thus you can trust my oath. Yet such an act, despite any effects of appearing genuine that it may have, must necessarily fail insofar as its necessary condition is also what it attempts to prove. If your credit is in doubt, it does not ameliorate the matter to swear on something else to legitimate it, because such a swearing is still the testimony of one without credit.

Perhaps futilely, Laon demands trust for an exchange, in which he offers to give himself up as long as Cythna's safe passage to America is guaranteed. In his words,

the boon I pray

Is this--that Cythna shall be convoyed there--

Nay, start not at the name--America!

And then to you this night Laon will I betray. (4437-0)

Laon's exchange is unsuccessful because the Christian Priest convinces the tyrant Othman to break the oath and execute Laon and Cythna. Could Laon and Cythna have done anything to improve their chances? It does not seem likely, but one must still insist that the text of *Laon and Cythna* directly refutes Laon's justification for why Othman cannot receive a gift, which Laon cites as the reason he must resort to exchange. Laon cites two reasons that he does not believe Othman can be taken beyond the logic of exchange, and neither seems to hold water. The two reasons, quoted again, are as follows: "Ye cannot change, since ye are old and grey, / [a]nd ye have chosen your lot" (4405-6).

First, Laon claims Othman is "old and grey" and thus cannot change. Refuting the conclusiveness of this accusation directly, later in the poem (though earlier chronologically), Cythna assured sailors engaged in sex trafficking, the trade in "human flesh" Shelley denounces all the time, that their age (a quality figuratively inclusive of their crimes) was not a barrier to their possibility to be affected by the gift of love: "thou art grown old, / [b]ut Hope will make thee young, for Hope and Youth / [a]re children of mine mother, even Love – behold!" (3433-5).

Laon's second accusation is that Othman has "chosen [his] lot" and thus can never be changed. Such an accusation is made suspicious by a thinking of the gift. How

interruptive would the gift be if it could not interrupt a willful determination, a “chosen lot”? At another moment in the poem, Othman’s “evil nature” is shown to be more insecure than Laon realizes. When Cythna is captured to be Othman’s concubine, she precipitates a crisis in his nature:

Even when he saw her wonderous loveliness,

One moment to great Nature's sacred power

He bent, and was no longer passionless; (2867-9)

Othman resists this moment and proceeds to rape Cythna, but the morning after he cannot withstand the sight of her:

and when the day

Shone on her awful frenzy, from the sight

Where like a Spirit in fleshly chains she lay

Struggling, aghast and pale the Tyrant fled away. (2879-3)

The “aghast and pale” tyrant Othman clearly has the possibility of being affected. Even if Laon deserves a break, considering he already showed Othman mercy once an act of mercy, which was a necessary condition of the counter-revolution that Othman led, Laon’s justification for speaking in terms of exchange demonstrates that Laon retains a commitment to revenge in spite of himself. For Laon, there is no future for Othman, but Othman’s fame, his public credit, might be readable for the future:

your fame must be

A book of blood, whence in a milder day

Men shall learn truth, when ye are wrapt in clay: (4506-8)



The difference between Laon and Cythna, *between a brother and a sister*, is that for Cythna there is still a future for Othman, whereas for Laon Othman's death is a condition of his future. The feminine in Shelley is the greater artist of love. For Cythna, even Othman and those like him have a future, and Othman's future was precisely opened onto by an act of love.

Conceived by a more mature Shelley, Prometheus' disruption of his own commitment to revenge is more sophisticated than Laon's. Prometheus attempts to *forget* his desire for revenge against Jupiter. At the poem's opening, Prometheus has forgotten the curse in which he senses revenge. Jupiter's ghost repeats the curse in Act I. While speaking about the curse, both prior to and after its repetition, Prometheus tries very hard to control the tone of his denunciation of Jupiter. He wishes to denounce out of *pity* rather than revenge:

Disdain! Ah no! I pity thee. What ruin  
 Will hunt thee undefended through wide Heaven!  
 How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,  
 Gape like a hell within! I speak in grief,  
 Not exultation, for I hate no more,  
 As then ere misery made me wise. The curse  
 Once breathed on thee I would recall. (1.53-9)

It is difficult to believe Prometheus when he claims to "speak in grief, [n]ot exultation," and that he does not "[d]isdain" Jupiter. A series of three exclamation points punctuates the above description of Jupiter's suffering after the speculated fall of his empire, and the exclamatory punctuation forms the giddy rhythm of Prometheus' imagined revenge. The

play's use of exclamation points to end sentences beginning with the question words "[w]hat" and "[h]ow" seems to indicate that Prometheus is not really asking questions. Instead, Prometheus is punctuating question words with his enthusiasm regarding the immensity of Jupiter's future suffering.

What does Prometheus' curse consist of? Prometheus' forgotten curse on Jupiter is a demand that Jupiter suffer eternal remorse:

I curse thee! let a sufferer's curse  
 Clasp thee, his torturer, like remorse,  
 Till thine Infinity shall be  
 A robe of envenomed agony;  
 And thine Omnipotence a crown of pain

To cling like burning gold round thy dissolving brain. [1.286-1].

In the curse's imagination, Prometheus' "Omnipotence" becomes a source of pain because it recalls the torture to which the omnipotence was put to use. The *action* of omnipotence on its object becomes what omnipotence regrets, and thus splits omnipotence within itself. Yet the torture Prometheus wishes on Jupiter is difficult to distinguish from the torture that justified it, which Jupiter carries out on Prometheus. Prometheus' torture is eternal pain, and Jupiter's suffering would be eternity made into pain ("thine Infinity shall be/ [a] robe of envenomed agony"). Both Jupiter and Prometheus would be destined to turn around their suffering for as long as one could imagine.

While Prometheus claims to have forgotten the hate, which animated this curse, recall that Prometheus' threshold for the claim that he has forgotten hate is *absolute*. He claims that he has "no memory" of hate:

If then my words had power,  
 Though I am changed so that aught evil wish  
 Is dead within; although no memory be  
 Of what is hate, let them not lose it now! (1.69-2)

To have "no memory" is easier said than done. Most simply, how could Prometheus determine that he lacks his past hate without an implicit notion and thus memory of this hate with recourse to which he determines its absence? I am not claiming nothing happened to Prometheus during the course of his "misery," and not even claiming that his forgetting simply fails or is any way bad. I am merely calling into question the strict purity of his forgetting.

Shelley's protagonists struggle against giftless hegemon, but their accusations of giftlessness come back at them like a boomerang. Their memory preserves a desire for revenge against the hegemon whom they wish to overthrow. The problematization of Laon and Prometheus' accusations against their respective hegemon does not serve to falsify their struggles, but it does show that the accusation of a giftless nature, the denunciation of a perversely un-pervertible nature, is always a decision that structurally belies its own certainty. No hegemon, no matter how calcified or seemingly omnipotent, is unable to receive a gift, if only because the to come with which the gift shares many of its necessary conditions is also a necessary condition of hegemony. The auto-immunity of hegemony consists in the need to master an otherness that is not masterable.

How to think waiting for eternity and the logic of the gift together? Shelleyan love provides an answer to these questions.

### III – Love as Giving Eternity

For Shelley, the promise of love is immune to both torturous circle of eternity risked by Prometheus and the finitude of the to come embodied by Demogorgon. Shelley's hyperbolic privileging of love is testified to by the fact that love has an exceptional status for both Prometheus and Demogorgon. While Prometheus waits in torture, he claims, "all hope [is] vain but love" (1.824). Demogorgon's claim that chance, change and the future govern everything is supplemented by the observation that love is exceptional, and not governed by these things: "[t]o these / [a]ll things are subject but eternal Love (2.4.120-1).

What is love? Asia, Prometheus' beloved, describes love as an aftereffect of the gift, an aftereffect of "sweetness," which never wearies from its own repetition:

Hearest thou not sounds i' the air which speak the love  
 Of all articulate beings? Feelest thou not  
 The inanimate winds enamoured of thee? – List!  
 Thy words are sweeter than aught else but his  
 Whose echoes they are: *yet all love is sweet,*  
*Given or returned. Common as light is love,*  
 And its familiar voice *wearies not ever.*  
 Like the wide heaven, the all-sustaining air,  
 It makes the reptile equal to the God:  
 They who inspire it most are fortunate,  
 As I am now; *but those who feel it most*  
 Are happier still, after long sufferings,

As I shall soon become. (italics mine 2.5.35-7)

Asia claims that love is indifferent to being “merely” an echo; its effects are not occulted by repetition. *The immunity of love to the death effect of repetition is why Demogorgon says it is “Eternal.”* Panthea’s words echo those of Prometheus (“[t]hy words are sweeter than aught else but his / [w]hose echoes they are”), but their status as repetition does not make them any less sweet because the “familiar voice” of love “wearies not ever.”

Lining up well with the above reading of the gift as that which is never rendered but only *announced*, Asia’s capacity to inspire love is only announced as Panthea does not actually bear witness to Asia, but only her effects:

How thou art changed! I dare not look on thee;

I feel, but see thee not. I scarce endure

The radiance of thy beauty. Some good change

Is working in the elements which suffer

Thy presence thus unveiled (2.4.16-0).

While Panthea seems eager to identify love as a quality that Asia uniquely inspires, Asia attempts to delineate love from any quality that could be made proper to an entity (“yet common as light is love/ Given or returned”). In Asia’s view, love is common, and thereby exceeds all ownership or property, even the ownership of the one ‘responsible’ for the love (here Asia). Love exceeds all property because love’s effect of sweetness is felt by both the lover and the beloved, by both the giver and the receiver of love. Love is the atmosphere of the gift, and is thus possessed by neither the giver nor the receiver. Moreover, Asia confirms that love, aligned with a logic of the gift, exceeds any natural determination. Those who inspire love do so as a result of *fortune*, of chance and not

nature, and thus their capacity for inspiration is not *proper* to them, does not follow from their predicates (“They who inspire it most are fortunate”).

Why is light “common,” and what does it mean to say Love’s common-ness is analogous to light? The placement of the “yet,” which precedes this analogy, shows that Asia stops herself from establishing a hierarchy of love, in which Panthea’s words would be less sweet than those of Prometheus. Panthea’s hesitation interrupts an attribution of love to a particular source to which it would be proper. Light is common because a viewer cannot own it: it is visibility itself, and if visibility were contained fully in a viewer, nothing would exist to be viewed, and thus it would not be visibility. Just as the act of seeing requires a share of alterity that could be taken up by another, love is common because it is unmasterable insofar as there must be love object that exceeds control of the loving entity. Yet, the analogy must have another dimension because according to Panthea light is not only visibility, but the cancellation of visibility. Asia is not visible to Panthea: her beauty is blinding through its “radiance”: “I feel, but see thee not.”

Asia maintains that love is not proper to her, the inspirer, and Panthea claims additionally that love is not proper to the one who is inspired: “nor is it I alone, / [t]he sister, thy companion, thine own chosen one, / [b]ut the whole world which seeks thy sympathy” (2.4.32-4). In Asia’s case, there are uncountable lovers (“the whole world”) but only one beloved. Those inspired by Asia love her without regard to their predicates, without regard even to their existence as living things, as even the “inanimate winds” seem “enamored” of Asia. Asia’s capacity to inspire love is universal. Yet the relation of love is not symmetrical, because Asia privileges the lover over the beloved, the inspired over the inspirer, in terms of the magnitude of the sweetness felt (“those who feel it most/

Are happier still”). She proceeds to forecast her own shift from inspirer to inspired, an event that will take place when she is finally reunited with Prometheus (“As I shall soon become”).

If Asia’s capacity to inspire love is not proper to her, where does Asia’s exceptional ability to distribute love effects come from? Panthea states clearly that the atmosphere of love, which Asia exudes, would be impossible without Prometheus:

The scene of her sad exile – rugged once  
 And desolate and frozen like this ravine,  
 But now invested with fair flowers and herbs  
 And haunted by sweet airs and sounds, which flow  
 Among the woods and waters, from the ether  
 Of her transforming presence – *which would fade*  
*If it were mingled not with thine.* – Farewell!” (italics mine 1.827)

Asia’s power does not exist in her physical beauty (which blinds those who view her anyway), but in the “transforming presence” she exudes in hoping for Prometheus. Asia’s power would fade without the memory of Prometheus (“which would fade / [i]f it were mingled not with thine”). Prometheus and Asia share a mutually dependent love.

According to his own words quoted above, Prometheus’ wait would have no hope without Asia’s love, and Asia would have no atmosphere of love without the memory of Prometheus.

Even if their challenge to Jupiter is successful, does Asia and Prometheus’ mutual dependence provide evidence that Shelley’s idea of love is communitarian? What is Shelley’s explicit definition of love? According to Shelley’s text *On Love*, love is the



drive to share the experience of the abyss. Love is the force one feels towards another to share an abyss with them, “that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves” (Shelley, SPP 473). Shelley does not claim love involves sharing any positive content, but instead involves the transference of the rhythm of a particular vibration, a force of alternating attraction and repulsion towards a void.

Shelleyan love is a communion, but a communion of desire for the void, for a particular chasm in one’s “own thoughts.” The apparently empathetic or communitarian character of such an idea of love (“a community with what we experience within ourselves”) might arouse a wariness of collectivism.<sup>22</sup> Yet this very “empathy” is responsible for Asia’s success in summoning the Spirit of the Hour, the “past coming again,” which is instrumental in bringing about the end of Jupiter’s reign. Asia demands that Demogorgon put himself in her place. When Asia demands to know when Prometheus will be rescued, she prefaces her question with a request that Demogorgon “answer [her] / [a]s [her] own soul would answer, did it know / [t]hat which [she] asks” (2.4.124-7).

Asia thus requests that Demogorgon answer her as if he loved her in the Shelleyan manner, as if Demogorgon experienced a “community with what [Asia] experience[s]” as the void of Prometheus. Asia’s soul is longing for Prometheus, and she wishes to share with Demogorgon the gap in which Prometheus vibrated. Demogorgon’s immediate response of “Behold!” along with the Spirit of the Hour’s arrival suggests that he

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<sup>22</sup> Derrida, at least, would not be able to tolerate the word community.

summoned the Spirit in response to communion with Asia, and thus that this communion was successful (2.4.128). Undoubtedly, Asia would want Prometheus saved immediately and without delay, and this desire was transferred to Demogorgon in the positing of her question.

Love is necessary to Asia's awakening of Demogorgon, but how precisely is it necessary to Prometheus? Love allows Prometheus to withstand an infinity of repetitions, an Eternity with so much repetition it is unrepeatable and impossible to conceive. Love gives Eternity. Since love never wearies through repetition, love is all that can withstand Mercury's thought experiment, and thus is Prometheus' only defense against an eternity of torture. I said that Prometheus stakes his decision to wait on time passing, and this is certainly the case, but the only fact that can legitimate such a decision is one that is immune to its object i.e. the passage of time and the infinity of repetitions, which can only be love.

Finally, the auto-immunity of every hegemon that this paper explored earlier is created by love, which Asia says "makes the reptile equal to the God." The gap between the present and the to come of a hegemon that allows Jupiter to speak on his future is opened by love. Quoted above, Asia states that love, "like the wide heaven, the all-sustaining air...makes the reptile equal to the God." Love "makes the reptile equal to the God" because like the atmosphere itself ("the wide heaven, the all-sustaining air"), love, as desire to share the void, introduces a gap between all entities and thereby equalizes them as spaced monads. Every hegemony needs an atmosphere in which to breathe, and this atmosphere is the space of its relation to otherness, which it tries to master. Shelley figures a love that has nothing to do with idealistic dissolution of the lovers into each

other. If love did not have the atmospheric gap of air, if it ever became naïve merging, it would cancel its own possibility. Some instances of love fall victim to this self-cancellation, but and thus it constitutes a weapon against all hegemony and any force of repression or enslavement.

## Chapter 3: Derrida, Nietzsche, Shelley: Paths for a Communism of Writing

This is the conclusion of 'The things people call love' and, like a certain Aristotle, an Aristotle whose oligarchial recommendations no one, not even Nietzsche or Blanchot, will ever have disavowed, this conclusion pronounces something of a sentence on number. One must think and write, in particular as regards friendship, against great numbers. Against the most numerous who make language and lay down the law of its usage. Against hegemonic language in what is called public space. If there were a community, even a communism, of writing, it would above all be on the condition that war be waged on those, the greatest number, the strongest and the weakest at the same time, who forge and appropriate for themselves the dominant usages of language – leaving open the question of knowing if the greatest force – in a word, hegemony or dynasty – is on the side of the greatest number; and if, as always according to Nietzsche, the greatest force be not on the side of the weakest – and vice versa. (PF 71)

How to think collective political engagement without denying the singularity of those within the collective? While many deconstructive thinkers, including Derrida himself, find immense value in the critique of political economy, the word 'communism' raises suspicion. The word communism, even more so than the word community, seems, for Derrida at least, to "always risk bringing a brother back," (PF 299). In *Politics of*

*Friendship*, Derrida argues that every political community has been heretofore thought on the basis of friendship, of a natural bond of commonality that has found the figure of the brother to be indispensable as an example of political community (those within a political community are ‘like a brother’ to each other, etc.). The Enlightenment slogan “Liberty, Fraternity, Equality,” present at the founding of 18th-Century republican constitutions testifies to political thought’s fraternal inheritance. Yet despite his suspicions, Derrida himself outlines the conditions of a communism of writing through a reading of Nietzsche in Chapter 3 of *Politics of Friendship*, “This Mad Truth: the Just Name of Friendship.” In this chapter, I will clarify Derrida’s communism of writing, and attempt to situate it in relation to Derrida’s own objections.

Finally, I will bring a Shelleyan understanding of communion into dialogue with Derrida. I contend that Shelley’s work is a case of communism of writing. As we saw in *Prometheus Unbound* and *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley concerns himself with struggles against great numbers and the hegemonic force that enslaves them. In particular, Shelley is interested in the bond between those who participate in these struggles, like the one between Laon and Cythna or Prometheus and Asia. Like Derrida, Shelley’s revolutionaries are interested not in matching strength with strength, but in exploring the power of non-power, the strength of weakness. Unlike Derrida, Shelley is very interested in thinking communion, and even finds the love, which he associates with communion, to be crucial to challenging a hegemon. While Derrida wishes to separate love absolutely and rigorously from sharing or communion, Shelley finds the communions of his revolutionary couples to be necessary for their love and thus necessary for successfully challenging a hegemon. As the reading of *Prometheus Unbound* showed, for Shelley only

love is immune to the death effect of repetition, of the possibly infinite procession of time it may take to depose a hegemon.

Shelley is particularly well suited to grapple with Derrida's primary objection to the word community, as he articulates it in *Politics of Friendship*, although I do not contend that Shelley totally eliminates this risk. Derrida sees the word community, (and thus communism, the common, communion, and all their derivatives) as always risking a brother coming back, even when the word is coupled with steadfast universalism.<sup>23</sup>

Shelley is ardently feminist, and concerns himself crucially with sisters. In order to explore feminist resources for thinking community, this chapter will also read a passage in *Prometheus Unbound*, in which Shelley places the sister in a very privileged place of exemplarity.

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<sup>23</sup> Derrida finds very incriminating quotations about women in many purportedly universalist Enlightenment discourses, and the way Derrida accounts for this is through the inheritance of the rule of the brother. Cf. Chapter 9 of *Politics of Friendship*.

## I – Nietzsche’s Communism of Writing

In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida reads Nietzsche as a particularly rebellious participant in the fraternal inheritance of the thought of friendship. In particular, Derrida is interested in Nietzsche’s understanding of love. Nietzsche laments that the majority of those who speak on love consider love as an acquisitive drive to possess a love object. For these people, love is the filling of a lack, coming from a desire for possession that Nietzsche compares to the Christian love of the neighbor, of which he is equally suspicious.

Nietzsche’s suspicion of property, of the lust for possessions that he sees in the majority’s love, makes him a good resource to think communism, insofar as communism declares war upon the rule of property. A communism of writing is a ‘communism’ because it acts to defend the specificity of a gift that exceeds all property. Yet Derrida attempts to do so as well, as the reading of *Given Time* mentioned earlier showed, and he certainly would not sign up for the word communism.

Thus a communism of writing has an additional specificity: it constitutes an alliance between a few, to wage war against the greatest number, against the hegemon. There is something like a ‘we’ or communion in a communism of writing, and it is here that deconstruction offers very compelling objections to any thinking of community.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lyotard is particularly attentive to this question of ‘we’ in *The Differend*, and for Lyotard what ‘we’ ultimately papers over is the gap between the addressor and the addressee of a given prescription, in effect forcing the acquiescence of those on which the prescription operates by conjugating them into the ‘we.’ There is always a gap between those making the statement of what the collective wants and the collective itself, for the simple reason that, according to Lyotard, all statements require a non-coincidence between the addressor and the addressee in order to exist. Lyotard’s analysis has the advantage of objecting to the ‘we’ without presuming the existence of individuals, (i.e. without perhaps by making a sort of libertarian argument about how every individual is

Nietzsche is far from a naive thinker of merging, and he has his own objections to friendship conceived as such:

When one realizes this, and realizes in addition that all the opinions of one's fellow men, of whatever kind they are and with whatever intensity they are held, are just as necessary and unaccountable (*unverantwortlich*) as their actions; if one comes to understand this inner necessity of opinions originating in the inextricable interweaving of character, occupation, talent, environment – perhaps one will then get free of that bitterness of feeling with which the sage cried: 'Friends, there are no friends! (*Freunde, es gibt keine Freunde!*).<sup>7</sup> One will, rather, avow to oneself (*Er wird sich vielmehr eingestehen*): yes, there are friends, but it is error and deception regarding yourself that led them to you; and they must have learned how to keep silent in order to remain your friend (*und Schweigen müssen sie gelernt haben um dir Freund zu bleiben*); for such human relationships almost always depend upon the fact that two or three things are never said or even so much as touched upon; if these little boulders do start to roll, however, friendship follows after them and shatters. Are there not people who would be mortally wounded if they discovered that their dearest friends actually know about them?

(Nietzsche quoted in PF 53)

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necessarily suffocated in any collective). The gap between addressor and addressee is enough to short-circuit the legitimation of a norm affirmed by a community.



Nietzsche claims there are no friends because all of one's qualities, which would be the basis of choosing a friend, are necessary and one is not responsible for them. Nietzsche's implication is that friendship is on the side of the proper, that a particular friend is a friend insofar as their proper qualities are the basis of the friendship. Since all of one's qualities are necessary results of "the inextricable interweaving of character, occupation, talent, [and] environment," none of one's qualities are proper to oneself, and thus there exists no stable basis for a genuine friendship. One believes oneself to have friends only when one mistakes one's own qualities as being proper to oneself, as essential qualities ("yes, there are friends, but it is error and deception regarding yourself that led them to you"). Friendship, in order to be friendship, must be based on something proper, but for Nietzsche there is no proper, insofar as the environment systematically determines every quality one could have; all of one's qualities are second-hand. Friendship happens only illusorily through a false act of attribution, of making someone responsible for their qualities.

Is Nietzsche's equation of the proper with friendship legitimate? Could friendship be based on something other than a quality? If friendship were based on singularity, on a difference not reducible to a quality, then one would be the friend of everyone, of just anyone, because all others have a radical singularity.<sup>25</sup> Yet friendship cannot just be based on qualities either, because every quality, in order to be a quality, must exist in

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<sup>25</sup> The placement of friendship on the side of radical singularity is advocated by Maurice Blanchot in *Friendship*. While such a conception has the advantage of disarming in advance any nationalism or pernicious identity politics, it seems to place friendship a bit too far on the side of otherness, and is thereby unable to explain why one is friends with a particular friend, rather than anyone and everyone.

others. Otherwise, it would offer no information on the friend in question because it would be coincident with them.

Friendship can be based neither on a quality nor on mere singularity. Could one be a friend with a *particular* singularity? If one is a friend with a particular singularity, a particular person's X factor, friendship's relation to speech becomes very complex. The moment a singularity is entered into speech it occults its own singularity in order to be consistent across repetitions in language. If friendship does not exist prior to some sort of language, prior to a relation to a proper name with which one is friend, then friendship continually erases its own possibility in enunciating itself. Anytime friendship is 'there,' it is not actually 'there,' because to hold it in perception or language is to erase what makes it possible, by covering over, with the consistency of speaking or perceiving, what amounts to a particular interruption of singularity.

Nietzsche is warning against speaking friendship, claiming that once the process of speaking what unites friends gets going, it ultimately shows the friendship to be mundane and hollow, because speeches' only resources for making a friendship coherent are qualities for which the friends are necessarily not responsible and which are not proper to them. The gap between the friends becomes more evident the more it is disavowed. Speaking of qualities can legitimate no bond because no quality can be proper if it is to be a quality. If one has something that is not reducible to one's predicates, to one's determination in an interlocking system of causality, culture, etc., then such a something would have to be an interruption of determination, an irruption of responsibility for which another could feel friendship. For Nietzsche, it would have to be a gift.

Nietzsche's reading of the Greek *philia* leads him to identify the gift as the *sine qua non* of friendship. Nietzsche "reveals an internal contradiction in the Greek concept of friendship," when he submits the reciprocity of Greek *philia* (according to which a good friend is one who treats you fairly and whom you treat fairly, in a relation of reciprocity) to a logic of the gift (according to which a friend must interrupt you, both the determinations which constitute you and the 'you-ness' of you, the self-presence of an independent subject) by retelling an Athenian tale:

The Athenian philosopher disdains the world, refusing as a result the king's gift (Geschenk) of a talent. 'What!' demanded the king. 'Has he no friend?' Nietzsche translates: the king meant that he certainly honoured the pride of a sage jealous of his independence and his own freedom of movement; but the sage would have honoured his humanity better had he been able to triumph over his proud self-determination, his own subjective freedom; had he been able to accept the gift and the dependency ... A logic of the gift thus withholds friendship from its philosophical interpretation... This logic calls friendship back to non-reciprocity, to dissymmetry or to disproportion, to the impossibility of a return to offered or received hospitality; in short, it calls friendship back to the irreducible precedence of the other. (PF 63)

In Nietzsche's reading (according to Derrida), this story demonstrates that Greek *philia* already values the gift above calculable philosophical knowledge. The tale chastises the philosopher for denying the gift of a talent, a form of currency, on the basis that he does

not need it, that he knows the world and what he wants to do with it. The king chastises the philosopher as friendless ('Has he no friend?') because he is confident in his solitary determinations and does not want it to be disrupted. The gift, considered as an interruption of intention or calculation, is thus linked to friendship by the tradition of friendship.

As we saw in Derrida's *Given Time*, a gift shares the quality of never being 'there' with friendship because its singularity would be occulted in an act of perception or speech. Nietzsche thus prescribes an art of silences to protect the gift of friendship, and in fact friendship is nothing but this art of silences insofar as any speaking of friendship occults it. Derrida translates Nietzsche: "[f]riendship is founded, in truth, so as to protect itself, from the bottom, or the abyssal bottomless depths... [t]he truth of truth is that the truth is there to protect a friendship that could not resist the truth of its illusion" (PF 53-4).

Silence is necessary to give friendship breathing space, to prevent itself from annihilating itself by speaking itself. Yet a simply negative gesture of never speaking friendship would assume that speech and silence are opposed, that where there is speech there is no silence and vice versa. Speech and silence are not opposed but co-implicated, and thus silence traverses and haunts all speech. One speaks to say something in particular, responding to a particular absence or silence, which precedes the act of speech, otherwise speech would have no reason to speak. The silence, which precedes an act of speech, leaves its mark on the act of speech for which it will have been the condition of possibility. If the opposition between speech and silence is not rigorous, a particular avowal could hide the abyss of friendship even better than a particular silence, and thus

Blanchot's *Unavowable Community* does not seem to be quite the right formulation for understanding what happens in a communion of friendship.

The question becomes, instead of whether one should avow friendship or not, if one wants to preserve friendship, how to speak about friends while giving the unspeakable abyss that sustains a friendship its chance:

For there would be two communities without community, two friendships of solitude, two ways of saying to oneself – keeping silent, keeping it hushed – that solitude is irremediable and friendship impossible; two ways for desire to share and to parcel out the impossible: one would be the compassionate and negative way, the other affirmative, which would attune and join two disjointed rejoicings [jouissances] conjugated at the heart of dissociation itself: heterogeneous allies, co-affirmed, perhaps affirmed in total darkness. An ecstatic rejoicing but one without plenitude, a communion of infinite wrenching (PF 54).

The affirmative community without community consists in co-affirming the modality of unbondedness. The participants do not affirm unbondedness itself, but the particular unbondedness between two or more. The friends are united only through the simultaneity of their leap away from the contemporaneous, including their co-presence to each other.

What binds them is their shared non-binding.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Derrida's phrasing here would line up well with Shelleyan love. In a passage quoted in this thesis' first chapter, Shelley's thinking of ecstatic rejoicing is compared to a mutual leaping away: the lovemaking between Laon and Cythna occurs like "[t]wo disunited spirits when they leap / In union from this earth's obscure and fading sleep" (L&C 2639-2640).

Why does not Derrida sign up for this? Derrida seems to be on board until the word “community” and its derivatives show up (as they do quite often in Shelley).<sup>27</sup> The risk of confirming the heritage of community thought on the basis of fraternity is too great for Derrida. For him, the word community is basically unsalvageable, a strong denunciation reserved for very few words in the Derridean corpus:

friendship or love – ...is (perhaps) no longer of the order of the common or the community, the share taken up or given, participation or sharing. *Whatever the sentence constructed with these words* (affirmative, negative, neutral or suspensive), it would never be related to what we persist in naming with these well-worn words: lovence, friendship, love, desire...lovence, it would no longer imply the motifs of community, appurtenance or sharing, whatever the sign assigned to them. Affirmed negated or neutralized, these 'communitarian' or 'communal' values always risk bringing a brother back. (My emphasis, PF 298-9)

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<sup>27</sup> A few examples from *Laon and Cythna*: Laon, describes his relations to his past intellectual inspirations, as well as his relation to Cythna in terms of communion. Laon's intellectual and political development is conducted “[w]ith deathless minds which leave where they have past / A path of light, [his] soul *communion* [my emphasis] knew;” (L&C 838-9). Laon decides “in commune with the hope / [t]hus deeply fed,” that he should “arise and waken / [t]he multitude” (L&C 793-4 and 784-5). From this communion, Laon gathers “[w]ords which were weapons;” constituting the force of eloquence that both Laon and Cythna utilize throughout the poem (L&C 842). Both Laon's revolutionary zeal and his intelligence are partially derived from his communal relation with Cythna, as Laon's “communion with this purest being [Cythna]/ Kindled intenser zeal, and made [him] wise,” (L&C 946-7).

A communism of writing must defend its use of the word “communism” against this objection of risking misogyny. No matter how empty or aligned with interruption communism is thought, the baggage of the word community risks occulting these dimensions by smuggling in the presumption of a co-presence, of a being-with. What all of the words in the series that Derrida lists (“common or the community, the share taken up or given, participation or sharing”) have in common is that they seem impossible to imagine in their specificity without some sort of co-presence. What would it mean, for example, to say that two ‘participate’ in a communism of writing, other than to say that they do so together, contemporaneously? Thus, the co-presence at the heart of the word community seems to occult the gift logic of friendship that his reading of Nietzsche has brought out. The word community for Derrida both does not describe friendship and risks bringing back the fraternal prejudices that the history of the thought of friendship has demonstrated. We will now parse Derrida’s argumentation relating this presumption to fraternity.

## II – Communism’s Misogyny Problem

Friendship’s relation to the name, which we mentioned above, constitutes its misogyny. All friendships are linked to a proper name (a particular friend), but the proper name, simply by virtue of being a linguistic entity, lives on beyond the finite existence of the friend it designates. Language must be able to function in the absence of its referent, or it could not function as communication. The moment the name is enunciated, the possibility of the repetition of the name in the absence of the friend who is designated is announced. It’s not only the possibility of the absence of the friend that is announced, as if their absence was merely some future event. The absence of the referent haunts each iteration of the name. If there was no gap, no distance between the name and the named, (and thus a certain absence of the named to every instance of naming) the operation of designation could not take place, even the first time. Nothing would *happen* in the act of designation if the named entity were identical to the name and present to the name: the friend would simply *be* the name, would be coincident with the name. Thus, the absence of the friend is present at every enunciation of their name. If absence is a figure of death, one mourns the friend at every moment of friendship, and this is the testamentary structure of friendship that explains the co-occurrence of mourning and friendship in philosophical discourse on the friend: “this testamentary structure that we have constantly seen at work in all the great discourses on friendship” (PF 297).

Friendship is tied to the name, and thus to mourning, but we still haven’t gotten to the sister. First, inheritance of the name traditionally passes through the male partner, and so the living on or *survivance* of the name, which is constitutive of the structure of friendship, has more chance of binding fathers, sons and brothers in friendship than



women, mothers and daughters. Second, since feminine names have less chance of acquiring social renown, they have less chance of percolating through what is called public space and announcing relations of friendship, which, as the mourning structure shows, do not require proximity to the friend (i.e. they can begin just by hearing about someone):

Under the two forms of this enframing (inheritance of the name and social renown) this history leaves less chance to the woman, to the daughter, to the sister. We are not saying no chance, but less chance. When one speaks of hegemony – that is, the relation of forces – the laws of structure are tendential; they are determined not (do not determine) in terms of yes or no, hence in terms of simple exclusion, but in those of differential force, more or less (PF 293).

How does Nietzsche's thinking of friendship demonstrate such a fraternal inheritance? Derrida, in his reading of an unpublished passage of *Beyond Good and Evil*, shows Nietzsche staging a scene of feminine seduction, in which the feminine is equated to the 'perhaps,' a perhaps whose seduction must be resisted, yet also forms the basis of Nietzsche's philosophers to come. The seduction that might have to be resisted is the 'dangerous perhaps' Nietzsche posits that will be the relation to truth of the 'new philosophers,' who, in Nietzsche's understanding, are to be friends of truth (it would be nihilism, pure madness, to not be a friend of truth), but an abyssal truth that is *perhaps* true, and is thus more true than truth, insofar as it respects the fact that a truth is only true if it is proper to one and is never common or universal. Any given truth, and any given friendship is thus not very stable: Nietzsche says the moment a neighbor begins to speak

a truth, it must be given up, because it has demonstrated its low value by virtue of being common. Thus all truths for the ‘new philosophers’ will be perhaps true rather than universally true. Universalism, says Nietzsche, has been the dogmatic (and thus false) form all thought of truth has taken up to now. A universal truth is not proper to one, because it is potentially any one’s truth, thus it has little value because it is common, whereas up to now (according to Nietzsche) philosophers have placed upon universality the highest value. After laying out this argument, which is certainly anti-democratic both by virtue of its judgment against the great number and against the universality of the democratic demand, Nietzsche says the following in a few unpublished passages cited by Derrida:

But who has the courage to look on these ‘truths’ without a veil?

Perhaps there exists a legitimate decency before these problems and possibilities, perhaps we are mistaken about their value, perhaps we all thereby obey this will.

A second draft contains two unerased conclusions:

1. But who is willing to concern himself with such ‘perhapses’! That violates good taste, especially virtue, when truth becomes scandalous to this point and renounces all decency: one must recommend prudence before that lady.

2. Perhaps! But who is willing to concern himself with these dangerous ‘perhapses’! That violates good taste, and also virtue.

When truth becomes scandalous to this point, when this unscrupulous

lady divests herself of her veils to this point and renounces all decency: away! Away with this seductress! May she henceforth go her own way! One can never be too prudent with a lady like that.

(quoted in Derrida, emphasis is his 57)

Derrida ends this section of his essay with the question of what chance such a staging of friendship gives the feminine friend: “How much of a chance would a feminine friend have on this stage? And a feminine friend of hers, among themselves?” (PF 57).

The feminine friend is given less chance because the friendship of the new philosophers will compose a fraternity that will demand, sooner or later, that the woman fraternize herself, that she veil the monstrosity of her femininity, be decent, and not scandalize the truths of the new philosophers with the event of the perhaps. Nietzsche’s concern in these passages is that this particular ‘perhaps,’ the feminine perhaps, violates good taste, which he equates with decency, with the gentlemanly air of his coming guild of philosophers.

In question is public space, and the relation of the feminine to it. Nietzsche’s new philosophers are against the baseness of the public: they wish to maintain ‘good’ taste. They are against the licentiousness that comes with the liberal freedom of democracy. What is scandalous about the feminine is not seduction itself, but its appeal to the base and inferior taste of the public. The new philosophers are not really at peace with the ‘dangerous perhaps’ that supposedly constitutes them because they are also committed to good taste, which is always taste of the very few and not the public; good taste is constituted by the fact that it does not allow itself to be common, and that’s why Nietzsche denies the value of any virtue that is second hand.

The scandal that Nietzsche does not want revealed by an undomesticated perhaps and a feminine friend is that the 'good taste' that constitutes the new philosophers is undermined by their only common bond: the dangerous perhaps itself. Nietzsche is, in my view, dogmatically resisting what is democratic in his own formulation. Once universalism has given way to the 'perhaps,' the new philosophers have no basis for the elitism of good taste: anyone's taste could be, could perhaps be, proper to them. Even if their taste is common, indecent, base? Perhaps yes, because their existence as a monad ('individual' if one prefers) means that they are always base *in their own way*. Perhaps not, as it is a-priori impossible for something common to be proper.

The perhaps is not the unveiling of seduction; the perhaps spreads a veil over public space, granting the condition of possibility of the secret as superficiality, and thus also of seduction and the concept of public space itself. The zone of the perhaps is a veil insofar as the object of its speculation *may not exist, perhaps does not exist*, and the perhaps thereby it shrouds everything in secrecy. Anyone who comes along, and thus in principle everyone, can contest something superficial that does not have a depth behind it without fear of being in error regarding the object of speculation. The secret of the secret is that there is no secret, there is nothing behind superficiality, and yet there are effects that are not reducible to that superficiality, effects that seem to be results of some sort of secret. These are the effects of seduction to which the veil and sexual difference are tied, effects which philosophy tries to occult by fraternizing the sister. A seductress is not more seductive without her veil, as Nietzsche seems to imply in his equation of the veil with decency; on the contrary, the veil of the perhaps is the only way seduction can be distinguished from knowledge, including the universalist knowledge of the philosopher

Nietzsche wants to resist. If one *knew* what drew one to a seductress, what is sought in the act of succumbing to seduction, the act would be an operation of knowledge, an anticipated future present that does not surprise or pervert the subject's intentions, and thus it would, according to Nietzsche's own reading of the gift, have nothing to do with perversion, seduction, the gift, love or friendship. *Even if* a seductress undresses completely, as Nietzsche fears would ruin the taste of his secret boy's club, attraction to the naked seductress is inexplicable without positing another veil analogous to the 'fourth wall' of a theater, an invisible veil without which there would be neither theater nor seduction.

In his defense of the veil of decency against the veil of the perhaps, Nietzsche thus remains within the fraternal tradition of friendship, acting as a brother inheriting the name of truth, defending it from the perhaps, which assaults it from within. Derrida's argumentation regarding the word community seems to be borne out in the case of Nietzsche: Nietzsche tries to think a mad and dangerous perhaps, and a collective of philosophers aimed at defending this perhaps from appropriation by the base predilections of the greatest number, of the hegemonic conception of love, and the result, conceived explicitly as a protection of this community, is a viciously misogynistic imagery of the threatening and imprudent naked woman as well as a conceptual domestication of the feminine. A communism of writing will need other resources than Nietzsche if it is going to grapple with the accusation of misogyny.

Does Shelley have resources to grapple with the misogyny of community, of co-presence? What happens between sisters in *Prometheus Unbound*? One could say that there is something suspicious and perhaps misogynist about Prometheus having three

wives, and this thesis does not necessarily disagree. Yet despite broader concerns regarding Shelley's feminism, the last act of *Prometheus Unbound* contains a dialogue between Panthea and Ione that foregrounds the exemplarity of the sister, and precisely for a thinking of communion, the communion between the Earth and the Moon. In this passage, Panthea is describing the movement of the Earth and Moon, which is the focus of the final act of *Prometheus Unbound*, and the culmination of the play. The relation between the Earth and the Moon is the climax of the action of the play and Shelley compares their path to sisters:

But see, where through two openings in the forest  
 Which hanging branches overcanopy,  
 And where two runnels of a rivulet  
 Between the close moss violet-inwoven  
 Have made their path of melody, like sisters  
 Who part with sighs that they may meet in smiles,  
 Turning their dear disunion to an isle  
 Of lovely grief, a wood of sweet sad thoughts,  
 Two visions of strange radiance float upon  
 The Ocean-like enchantment of strong sound  
 Which flows intenser, keener, deeper yet  
 Under the ground and through the windless air. (4.194-205)

The Earth and the Moon, “[make] their path,” they tread or trace, “like sisters.” The sisters regret their separation, which is why they “part with sighs,” but they separate so “that they may meet in smiles.” On an initial reading, one might think that separation is

thereby instrumentalized by the union: that in other words, the separation only acquires a valence insofar as it is going to end in communion. Yet this reading cannot explain why the sisters need to separate if what is valorized is solely their being together. As we saw in the reading of *Laon and Cythna*, the poem does not breathe one word on the question of why Laon and Cythna must pursue their revolutionary mission separately, and continually separate throughout the poem. What are the effects of separation? The sisters create something by lamenting each other's absence, by mourning each other, an "isle / Of lovely grief." The sisters create a monad, a particular island, which is the trace of their separation from each other. This shared gap gives mourning and love united in this island of "lovely grief."

The testamentary structure that Derrida identified in all the brotherly discourses on friendship, and which constitutes the movement of the Earth and the Moon's love, is here thought on the basis of sisters. The shared island between them recalls them to each other, allows them to mourn each other. Derrida claims that the tradition never places the sister in such a position of exemplarity. Thus, the tradition has never tried to learn anything from the sister. Instead, says Derrida, the sister has always been consigned to being an example of the brother, as a species of the genus brother. Through this operation, the history of philosophy has narrated the sister to itself as not brotherly enough, as not ready to be a brother, and endeavored to fraternize the sister. For Derrida, philosophy is even indistinguishable from this history of fraternization. Yet, in Shelley, the sister is an example, of precisely a separating union, of a union that immediately begins to mourn itself; that is, a community.

Why does Shelley say “like sisters,” rather than, as the tradition always has, “like brothers”? What does the feminine have to offer a consideration of revolutionary communion that the masculine does not? Shelley is staging the very feminine perhaps, which Nietzsche wished to domesticate, and the community of a democratic republic to which it gives rise. That Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound* is in the zone of the perhaps is testified to by the fact that Ione and Panthea continually correct each other’s perceptions, denying the self-evidence of a communion between the Earth and Moon. Ione directs Panthea to the silences in the melody of the communion: “Listen too, / How every pause is filled with under-notes” (4.188-9). Ione, for her part, testifies to Panthea regarding the untestifiable; the “under-notes” and silences that form the rhythm of the Earth and Moon’s communion. Panthea, responds, as if in a democratic debate, with “But,” the signature of a contestation, as if Ione is not focusing on the right part of what is going on: “But see where through two openings in the forest /Which hanging branches overcanopy” (4.194-5). When Panthea valorizes the Spirit of the Earth’s unconscious gestures, Ione protests that the Spirit is only feigning co-presence, that Panthea is in fact not in on the secret of the Spirit of the Earth: “Tis only mocking the orb's harmony” (4.269).

Shelley’s revolutionary communion is not a presence, and the sharing of love in which his revolutionaries partake does not constitute a fraternal co-presence, but a pair of sisters contesting each other’s understanding of silences, gaps and traces the status of which is undecidable. Shelley, here, seems to more radically problematize the fraternal inheritance than Nietzsche. The conversation between Panthea and Ione is driven by the motor of speculation on a veil, which the feminine perhaps enables, and which is a necessary condition of any democratic republic. If there were no perhaps, no veil that



makes one's claims undecidable, there would truly be no objection to a universalist guild of philosophers because they would, at least in theory, eventually be able to master scientifically every object. The entire anti-democratic philosophical tradition would be legitimated in its distrust of the sister and of democracy.

At the very least, Shelley's understanding of communion seems more sophisticated than it should be if he is in any simple way trapped in the fraternal inheritance that accompanies the values of sharing or community. Shelley's communism of writing seems less prone to the risk of bringing a brother back than any other. How does democracy, which owes itself to both the side of the greatest number, i.e. the majority, as well as the minority's rights against the majority, square with a communism of writing that wages war against the greatest number, against the hegemon in public space? Shelley certainly has democratic impulses, but he also seems, as our readings of *Laon and Cythna* and *Prometheus Unbound* showed, to be intent on thinking small groups of lovers and their contestation of hegemon's structure of power in a manner that accords with Derrida's thinking of a communism of writing. Thus, we will now turn to sorting out the relation between democracy and a communism of writing, in particular the Derridean notion of a democracy to come.

### III – Communism of Writing vs. Democracy to Come

... I was wondering why the word ‘community’ (avowable or unavowable, inoperative or not) – why I have never been able to write it, on my own initiative and in my name, as it were. Why? Whence my reticence? And is it not fundamentally the essential part of the disquiet which inspires this book? (PF 305-6)

Does a communism of writing have any utility today? Does the anti-democratic bent of a communism of writing, which allies against the language of the greatest number, the base hegemonic language that appropriates difference for its own use, position a communism of writing, as oligarchical, inevitably at odds with democracy?

The place of democracy in deconstruction must first be clarified. As is generally understood, democracy to come does not name a present reality, but a future to come. Yet, if one stops here without further clarification, democracy to come simply becomes a Kantian Idea, mandating the asymptotic approach towards a more perfect democracy that is admitted to be unattainable yet remains the organizing reference point of politics. Such a conception would fall to an accusation of the metaphysics of presence: even if the future of democracy is admitted to be unreachable, in order to function as a guiding point to which present society must be adjusted it must be consistent with itself as a future present that does not interrupt the teleological approach towards it.

Democracy to come is indeed meant to function as a weapon against all those who obscenely proclaim presently existing democracy when, in absolute terms, never have so many in the world suffered from hunger, from regular humiliation, from been denied rights legally guaranteed to them or demanded in principle, from totalitarianisms old and

new, and most of all from the devastating speed of a global market that races to enclose everything within its yoke and “which seems likely to blot out, with its greyness, the faintest traces and last recesses of the planet's mysteries,” (Guattari 22).

Yet that observation only scratches the surface of the concept. Derrida's point is at least doubly more complex. First of all, democracy to come is not merely incidentally not present right now, but constitutively non-present in the definition of its concept. As Alain Badiou points out, repeating Plato, democracy is basically meaningless; no one knows what ‘democracy’ is and so, both Badiou and Plato conclude; it's not really worth talking about as a pursuit for the brotherhood of philosophy. The semantic void at the heart of the concept of democracy is what gives it its auto-immunity, exemplified by non-democrats winning democratic elections in order to end democracy. Democracy guarantees, in principle, the right to say *anything*, even the right to speak against this very right. The unconditional right to auto-immune critique, to critique that deconstructs itself, is not a problem, as Plato seems to think, but is necessary for deconstruction. There is no deconstruction without democracy, insofar as deconstruction draws the infinite resource of its readings from the non-coincidence of what a text says and what it does, from the auto-immune democratic forces within a text that rebel against the text. Conversely, there is no democracy without deconstruction, because only deconstruction, as one step beyond critique, is able to question the logic of the limit, to delimit the logic of the limit and thus make the legitimate exercise of democratic questioning limitless by making everything delimitable, putting everything up for debate, up to and including the form of questioning itself.

Even further, democracy to come is not merely non-present to itself in the definition of its concept; if it only were so, it would be indistinguishable from the impossible itself, and Derrida himself identifies such a conception as merely a repetition of Rousseau:

A second preliminary question has been torturing me. It may look like a kind of regret for having used and abused the expression “democracy to come.” And especially, through this use and abuse, for having repeated, while feigning innovation, a truism. As if all I had been saying were: “You know, the perfect democracy, a full and living democracy, does not exist; not only has it never existed, not only does it not presently exist, but, indefinitely deferred, it will always remain to come, it will never be present in the present, will never present itself, will never come, will remain always to come, like the impossible itself.” Had I said or meant only that, would not I have been simply reproducing, even plagiarizing, the classical discourses of political philosophy? (R 73)

The dimension of the phrase “democracy to come” that Derrida does not explain until *Rogues* is the gap between the constative and performative readings of phrase; this place is itself the proper place of democracy. Democracy to come is a verbless phrase, and as Derrida constantly repeats from J.L. Austin, only sentences and not words mean.<sup>28</sup> This particular gap of nonmeaning opens the play between a constative and a performative

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<sup>28</sup> The verblessness of the phrase “democracy to come” in particular being an important issue for Derrida: “For the democracy to come and thus for justice,’ as a verbless phrase puts it in *Specters of Marx*” (R 88).

reading of the phrase “democracy to come.” The gap is between on the one hand, purportedly neutral diagnosis: ‘you need to know what you are saying when you say the word democracy, democracy remains to come means it can never be present, is characterized by a semantic void, by a political universalism etc.’ Yet “democracy to come” could also be a performative statement, a weapon that attempts to win conviction, an imperative that proclaims that democracy *should* come. One could always feign, in use of the phrase, to be a philosopher or an activist, to be each by turns without the possibility of a decidable tone: ‘I may have sounded technical, but I was being explicitly political, when I said democracy *to* come I was saying I wanted it to come, that it was obligatory that it should come’ or ‘I didn’t describe my allegiance, as I was merely describing the concept, democracy as a word and its relation to infinite perfectibility.’

The phrase democracy to come thus figures the democratic play that opens the secret of irony, which through superficiality (as the lack of a deeper or ‘correct’ meaning) creates the publicity of public space, of a certain nonpublic within the public that is in on the secret but a secret that is superficial and thus can never be divulged decisively. Nietzsche’s hostility to the feminine seduction of the veiled perhaps was not an additional dogmatism, separable from his anti-democratic tendencies, but is in fact inseparable from them. The demand for good taste, of a lack of scandal, is a demand against irony and the vertiginous change in tone that accompanies it. Democracy is the only constitution that gives the right to irony in the public space: “democracy opens public space, the publicity of public space, by granting the right to a change of tone, to irony as well as to fiction, the simulacrum, the secret, literature, and so on” (R 92).

Despite all of these interesting qualities of the phrase democracy to come, is the name democracy, and by extension the phrase democracy to come, still *strategic*? Is it still efficacious to make recourse to democracy, does it still open the possibility of democracy to use the name democracy? Far from holding to the name democracy at all costs, Derrida claims that the decision to use the name democracy *must* be strategic because if it were not, if the name democracy was not delimited through the necessity of strategically applying it to particularity, the attachment to democracy would be transcendental and would be neither democratic nor deconstructive, since it would cancel the auto-immune character of the name democracy. Democracy must delimit itself in order to be democratic:

Saying that to keep this Greek name, democracy, is an affair of context, of rhetoric or of strategy, even of polemics, reaffirming that this name will last as long as it has to but not much longer, saying that things are speeding up remarkably in these fast times, is not necessarily giving in to the opportunism or cynicism of the antidemocrat who is not showing his cards. Completely to the contrary: one keeps this indefinite right to the question, to criticism, to deconstruction (guaranteed rights in principle, in any democracy, no deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction). One keeps this right strategically to mark what is no longer a strategic affair: the limit between the conditional (the edges of the context and of the concept enclosing the effective practice of democracy and nourishing it in land and blood) and the unconditional,

which, from the outset, will have inscribed a self-deconstructive force in the very motif of democracy, the possibility and the duty for democracy itself to de-limit itself. Democracy is the autos of deconstructive self-delimitation. Delimitation not only in the name of a regulative Idea and an indefinite perfectibility but every time in the singular urgency of a here and now. (PF105)

It is perhaps no longer strategic to use the name democracy because, first of all, everyone, from neo-Nazis to Maoists to Google, identifies themselves as a democrat. Democracy has become hegemonic, and thus the proclamation of democracy has become anti-democratic. In Google's company "philosophy," they specifically attribute their search engine's success to democracy:

Democracy on the web works.

Google search works because it relies on the millions of individuals posting links on websites to help determine which other sites offer content of value. We assess the importance of every web page using more than 200 signals and a variety of techniques, including our patented PageRank™ algorithm, which analyzes which sites have been "voted" to be the best sources of information by other pages across the web. As the web gets bigger, this approach actually improves, as each new site is another point of information and another vote to be counted. In the same vein, we are active in open source

software development, where innovation takes place through the collective effort of many programmers.<sup>29</sup>

It's hardly objectionable, in of itself, to consider what the greatest number of people on the web need and for a search engine and to lead them to it. Yet somehow, the language above, which privileges the greatest number above everything, can coexist with a company whose founders, as Julian Assange points out, in their manifesto *The New Digital Age* "dismiss the Egyptian youth witheringly, claiming that 'the mix of activism and arrogance in young people is universal.' Digitally inspired mobs mean revolutions will be 'easier to start' but 'harder to finish.' Because of the absence of strong leaders, the result, or so Mr. Kissinger tells the authors, will be coalition governments that descend into autocracies."<sup>30</sup>

A democrat can always say: of course those who claim to be democratic are not truly democratic; it is the role of the political critique of democrats to continually point that out. And in fact, many of the youth of the Arab Spring denounced by Google's founders did just that. It's not a matter of giving up, *forever and always*, on the word democracy, but of finding other words that in the present context do not have such a loud and nefarious consensus in their favor. The interruption of the declaration of democracy, the performative half of the phrase 'democracy to come,' is neutralized in the time when the world hegemon attempts to spread its influence through technological democracy, even if it is not completely saturated by this neutralization.

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<sup>29</sup> (<https://www.google.com/intl/en-US/about/company/philosophy/>)

<sup>30</sup> Julian Assange, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/opinion/sunday/the-banality-of-googles-dont-be-evil.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/opinion/sunday/the-banality-of-googles-dont-be-evil.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)>



Perhaps there is more potential in a communism of writing. The most interesting part of the above quotation is the phrase “by the same vein,” which Google uses to link their decision to honor democratic ‘votes’ regarding what is most important to their search to the question of *open source*, that is, information which belongs to no one and exists in a space without property. Google, though it is doubtful they understand the implications, is linking the common to democracy, claiming that they support the common in the name of democracy. This logic, left unchecked, quickly becomes: oppose capitalism in the name of democracy! The communist dimension of Internet democracy, of an economy based on information that no one can own, is intolerable to the discourse of capitalistic democracy, particularly that which circulates in the United States. Google itself sees open source, de-privatized development, as working hand-in-hand with their commitment to democracy, even though they do not see how such an equivocation challenges any democratic claim made by capital by equating open source with democracy.

Google’s exemplary gesture, echoed by many new-style corporations, invites a guest that the host cannot possibly domesticate. A communism of writing has a linguistic opening in the present context. By foregrounding the incompatibility of Internet imperialism with the rule of property, by showing how it draws on the productivity of communism, and thus the gift, the field of possibility is opened, allowing for the consideration of all sorts of organizational arrangements that capital has for so long successfully been able to designate as unproductive in the public space by citing the fact that they are not answerable to property. How to make these islands of anti-hegemonic struggle democratic and feminist; how to make them hospitable to revolutionary

contagion without bowing before the rule of the public, to act in the name of the public against the hegemony that polices public space? Perhaps Shelley's revolutionaries show the way.

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