

“Harmonies divine, yet ever new”: Shelleyan Music and the Poetry of Desire in *Prometheus Unbound*

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Abstract

Prometheus Unbound has long been recognized as inherently musical and influenced by opera, to which Shelley was introduced by Thomas Love Peacock and Leigh Hunt in 1817. This article addresses the appeal to Shelley of music as a method of escaping the limits of language that troubled the poet with a famous “passion for reforming the world” in the years following his residence in Marlow, during which music began to play a daily role. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley experiments with music as a way of performing the otherwise ineffable and enacting the poetics of desire that characterize his aesthetic and political agendas.

No, Music, thou art not the ‘food of Love,’
Unless Love feeds upon its own sweet self,
Till it becomes all Music murmurs of.
“Another Fragment To Music” (1817)¹

Percy Shelley is often called the most musical of the romantic poets both for his frequent use of musical metaphors and imagery and for the fact that his corpus has so often been set to music.² A perusal of the contents of any Shelley collection will reveal numerous “hymns,” “dirges,” “odes,” “songs,” “laments,” and a “serenade,” as well as lyrical passages in many of the longer poems that, as in Shakespeare’s plays, are often identified by critics and readers as imbedded songs. Such identifications are reasonable given the frequency with which Shelley’s texts either use music as a central trope or identify themselves *as* music, either in their titles or with identifications within the text itself. So within a corpus already redolent with musical influences, *Prometheus Unbound*’s (1820)

frequent citation as Shelley's most musical work is a significant claim.³ Newman Ivey White and, more recently, Ronald Tetreault have claimed that this self-proclaimed "lyrical drama," with its thirty-six different verse forms, owes its structure to opera (which at the time of the poem's composition Shelley had begun to attend regularly), and many critics have identified and often criticized this supposed drama's liberal musicality.⁴ While the fact that *Prometheus Unbound* is like an opera seems to be a firmly entrenched critical stance, an investigation into *why* it is like an opera – that is, into the ideological drive behind Shelley's use of the theme and forms of music – has been less scrutinized. This paper will attempt to place the musical qualities of *Prometheus Unbound* within the context of Shelley's most central philosophical and literary belief: that Eros, the desire for union and completion, is a force not just of individual fulfillment but of profoundly universal, political importance. An association between music and love, as illustrated in the epigraphic fragment quoted above, is a consistent theme throughout Shelley's late poetry and prose, suggesting that Shelley's frequent use of musical imagery serves an ideological purpose similar to his investigations into the nature of desire and attraction, all ideas woven into the fabric of Shelley's poetics of desire in *Prometheus Unbound*.

Music itself was undergoing seismic shifts during Shelley's lifetime: shifts in reception, in popularity, and in accessibility. In antiquity, music was seen as the worldly expression of universal harmony, the basis for all qualitative and quantitative analyses and the Pythagorean order that kept the planets in orbit, mathematical equations in balance, cathedrals in proportion, and lyres in tune. With the scientific revolution and the muting of the music of the spheres by a reordered heliocentric universe, however, music found itself demoted to a less transcendent and more personal role. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "*Essai sur l'origine des langues*" (published in 1781) signals the modern shift from music as cosmological blueprint towards music as a mode of individual expression allied with language, and by 1813 E.T.A Hoffman was calling music "the most romantic of all the arts [...] for its sole subject is the infinite" (Strunk 35). Just as music began its descent from the heavens to the human psyche, the Horatian tradition of *ut pictura poesis* that had been the aesthetic truism of Neoclassicism in the early eighteenth century was replaced with a widespread identification of poetry and music, an example of the general trend towards the "expressive theory of aesthetics" detailed in M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp*.⁵ By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, music was no longer seen from the top down, as an earthly metaphor for a celestial song, but from the inside outward, as a figurative performance of an individual's own consciousness.

Music was also undergoing a surge in popularity in the romantic era, fed in part by the establishment, in the 1780s, of several music publishers competing to fill the demand for cheaply printed sheet music inspired by the increasing availability of music to the English public in the forms of public concerts, festivals, and pleasure gardens. Advances in print techniques, including the development of lithography, made sheet music more available and affordable, and an entire industry of musical reviews and journals, spurred by major music histories by Charles Burney (*General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period*, 1776-1789), Sir John Hawkins (*General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, 1776), and Leigh Hunt's and Vincent Novello's *Musical Evenings* (1820-1921) evolved to feed the rising musical literacy of the English public.⁶

This concomitant shift towards a recognition of the expressive qualities of music and its widespread popularity and accessibility is one aspect of the renewed influence of lyric that has long characterized the romantic period of English literature. In the last decades of the eighteenth century, popular ballads gained a new importance; the success of James Macpherson's Ossian poems (1761-1765), Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) and, later, the works of Robert Burns and Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* (1807-1835) brought Britain's bardic heritage into the mainstream, inspiring perhaps the most recognizable romantic nod to the contemporary marriage of poetry and music, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Through their use of lyric and ballad, English poets sought to reclaim the musical origins of the lyric – originally, of course, meant to accompany the music of the lyre – from the confines of Neoclassical verse which had distanced the poetic from the musical.

Regency science was also beginning to explain the effects of music in relation to the concept of sensibility, arguably the most influential example of applied popular science in the period. When in 1813 an article in *The Monthly Magazine* claimed that sound was the “effect of rapid *mechanical vibrations*, radiating in and upon the universal medium [...] and modified by contact with the atmosphere, and by reflections from all surrounding bodies,” it was immediately attacked as a “quackery in musical science” for attempting to contain the fine art of music within the bounds of the crudely mechanical (Ogawa 50; italics in original). Nevertheless, investigations into the physical qualities of music did begin to focus on vibration, which naturally led to a recognition of music's relationship to the human nervous system and its ideological apparatus, sensibility. The idea that music might resonate with the very nerves and organs of its listeners suggested a direct connection more palpable than any other form of expression: that even as a musician plays his instrument, the vibrations issuing from that instrument would play upon the fibers of its listeners and travel directly into their

brains.⁷ The implications of this scientific speculation made the practical and didactic implications of music powerful indeed, for if the mere written accounts of suffering, grandeur, or sensation contained in novels, for example, were thought to strum the nerves of sensible readers into frenzies of second-hand emotion, what then of the more direct effects of musical vibration on fragile English sensibilities? Or, as Shelley might have asked himself, might the modern idea of music as an expression of the player's innermost self plugged directly into the neurological composition of his listeners serve the agenda of a poet with a "passion for reforming the world?"

By 1817, Shelley had firsthand knowledge of this physical and psychological power of music, and he was then conversant enough in the classics to realize the close correlation between music and lyric, both referred to in Greek as *mousikê*, "the art of the muse." Therefore it is not surprising to find many of his lyrics full of rhapsodies about the speaker's intoxication by sound. "To Constantia" (1817-1818) is perhaps the most obvious example of Shelley's association between music and physical sensuality. As the singer's "blood and life" is transmuted into the "instrumental strings," the speaker's "brain is wild" and his "blood is listening in [his] frame" (3-4; 5-6), drawing an implicit connection between the blood that, by extension, plucks the strings and the speaker's blood that receives the sensory input. With a favorite Shelleyan image, the speaker is "dissolved in these consuming extacies" (11) and then, appropriately, claims to "have no life" (12) but in the player whose notes have consumed him and continue, through the next two stanzas, to encompass the entire physical world ("Whilst, like the world-surrounding air, thy song / Flows on, and fills all things with melody"). The speaker is finally pulled from the brink of the abyss of self-annihilation – the "wild lessons madmen learn" – in the final stanza, when the power of Constantia's eyes turning to the speaker counteracts the effects of her concluding song and brings him back to the awareness of himself that the music had erased. However, the final line suggests that the effects of Constantia's song – the "things the heart can feel and learn, but not forget" – remain with the listener after the song itself has ended. Whatever aesthetic or, as the penultimate line suggests, emotional lessons Constantia's song has imparted have continued to operate even after their expression has ceased; the song as a mode of expression forges ties between singer or player and listener that transcend the song's temporality.

It is no coincidence that "To Constantia" and its related lyrics were written during the period in Shelley's life when music began to play a daily role.⁸ Though earlier poems such as *Queen Mab* (1813) and *Alastor* (1816) certainly contain numerous references to music and its effects, it is not until after his residence in Marlow from March 1817 to March 1818 that Shelley begins to experiment with the

marriage of music and poetry and employ musical imagery not merely as set-pieces or metaphors for engagement but as actual methods of engagement (as in *Prometheus Unbound*, begun the following year). Almost immediately after the Shelleys (with Claire Clairmont and newborn Allegra soon to follow) settled into Albion House, Marlow, on March 18, 1817, Leigh Hunt commissioned his friend, musician and music publisher Vincent Novello, to purchase a cabinet grand piano for the Shelleys' home; it arrived on April 28 (*MWSJ* 168). Claire, the presumed the model for Constantia, often entertained family and friends with her famous voice like a string of pearls, and Mary Shelley's journal and letters are full like never before with references to musical evenings spent with Novello and the rest of the Hunt circle, attending concerts, operas, and plays. Shelley was introduced to opera by Thomas Peacock in 1817 and began to attend it in earnest: Mary's journal notes that in 1818 alone he saw *Don Giovanni* three times, *The Marriage of Figaro* at least twice, and attended the London première of *Barber of Seville* on March 19, 1818, the eve before his departure for Italy. Once in Milan, he attended five performances at La Scala as well as other venues throughout his various stops in Italy.⁹ Perhaps even more so than opera, Shelley was enchanted by the ballet; he wrote to Peacock that Salvatore Viganò's *Otello, ossia Il Moro di Venezia* (which he, Mary, and Claire attended on their second night in Milan, April 5, 1818) was "the most splendid spectacle I ever saw" (*PBSL* II.592). Before the Marlow period of 1817-1818, we have few indications that Shelley particularly enjoyed, understood, or cultivated an interest in anything musical; Mary Shelley's 1816 journals from the family's residences in Switzerland, Bath, and London do not contain a single mention of music, and an acquaintance from 1813 recalls inviting Shelley over for a musical evening only to have him ignore the performing hostess and instead delight her children with ghost stories (De Palacio 345). The overwhelmingly musical environment in which he became submerged in 1817, however, seems to have left a lasting impression on his poetic process, like the song of Constantia whose effects linger after its sound has ceased¹⁰.

Before the changes wrought by the Marlow year, we see numerous images of music and harmony in Shelley's pre-1818 work, from "strains of thrilling melody" in *Queen Mab* (II.48) to the "forgotten lyres" of "Mutability." I argue, however, that the ways in which Shelley employs music changed after the experiences of that period. Whereas Shelley's post-1818 productions deal with the very idea of music as a mode of discourse in new and innovative ways, the earlier poems are much more likely to feature music not as a method of conceptualizing the experience of love but in its more

ordinary role as a trope or figurative description of love. In *Alastor*, for example, the musical voice of the veiled maid is described as:

...like the voice of [the poet's] own soul
Heard in the calm of thought, its music long,
Like woven sounds of streams and breezes. (153-155)

This autoerotic vision of the poet's own mirror image – a woman, “Herself a poet,” who speaks to the isolated poet with his own voice of “thoughts the most dear to him” – is described in musical terms that accentuate her wildness, itself a reflection of the poet's increasing wildness:

...wild numbers then
She raised, with voice stifled in tremulous sobs
Subdued by its own pathos: her fair hands
Were bare alone, sweeping from some strange harp
Strange symphony, and in their branching veins
The eloquent blood told an ineffable tale. (163-8)

It might be tempting to read some similarity between this image of a bewitching woman with “eloquent blood” playing her harp and the image, only months later, of Constantia's “blood and life” teaching “witchcraft to the instrumental strings” of her instrument. There are, however, fundamental differences in the ways musical imagery is working in each of these poems. In “To Constantia,” it is the singer's voice and fingers that cause her listener's “breath” to come quick, his blood to listen, and his heart to quiver “like a flame” – the emphasis is placed on the relationship the music forges between singer and listener, self and other. The above passage from *Alastor*, however, is the ultimate image of self-involvement not only because it describes a non-existent woman who is merely the product of “the Poet's self-centered seclusion” (Preface) to begin with, but also for the inherent solipsism of her song. It is the maid's heart and breath that keep the tempo of her music:

The beating of her heart was heard to fill
The pauses of her music, and her breath

Tumultuously accorded with those fits
Of intermitted song. (169-172)

Just as the maid is herself merely a part or projection of the Poet's self, she is her music's own audience, thus clearly the opposite of Constantia. It is only when the veiled maid *stops* playing (as suggested by her rising in the end of line 172 and moving with "outspread arms now bare" in line 177) that the Poet is able to approach her and the erotic oblivion represented by her "bending eyes, her parted lips," and her "dissolving arms" (179;187). Thus the vision's status as an ephemeral projection of the Poet's psyche is actually reemphasized by the very action characteristic of two separate people striving to become one. The orgasmic moment that occurs at the end of the stanza, with the Poet's "vacant brain" being "rolled" into submission by sleep, marks the beginning of his end; having fallen prey to the idealistic folly detailed in the Preface, he wastes away in search of a communion that was never there. The veiled maid's song is not real, certainly not in the sense that Constantia's song is real, because it fails to form a connection with its listener who is himself too far removed from humanity to hear another's music. His blood beats "in mystic sympathy / With nature's ebb and flow" (652-3), but never with another person's; the Poet's inability to form human relationships is highlighted by the veiled maid's strange and self-involved symphony, so unlike the embracing music of Constantia.

A different approach is apparent in "On Love," first published in 1828. The critical disagreement over this piece's date of composition presents some problems for its consideration within the framework of Shelley's changing use of music, but I would argue that "On Love" contains a prose deliberation on some of the same ideas worked out more extensively in both *Alastor* and later works like *Prometheus Unbound* and *Epipsychidion* and will function here as useful tool for the examination of both early and late poems.¹¹ Regardless of when it was written, the fragment's use of vibration and music to describe and explain the human impulse to love and the frustrating inability of language to achieve love's goals offers both a refutation of the experience of *Alastor*'s Poet and either the development or continuation (depending on which chronology one accepts) of a new Shelleyan use of music. In "On Love," love is, simply, completion, the "powerful attraction" toward that which fills the part of ourselves in which we recognize an "insufficient void." The images that Shelley uses to exemplify this "powerful attraction" form a synesthetic amalgam that utilizes musical imagery:

If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would the airy children of our brain were born anew within another's; if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood. (473)

This description of love as the act of nerves in synchronized vibration is continued later in the same paragraph, where the ultimate ambition of love is defined. The discovery of one's epipsychidion-like soul mate, the antitype of one's mirror-image "prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving," is to find "a frame whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own." This union is, however, "the *unattainable* point to which Love tends" (474; my emphasis). Whereas the (possibly) contemporary fragment "On Life" suggests the prospect that poetry can free mankind from the dualistic shackles of structured language, the "*I, you, they*" that keep us from becoming "we," "On Love" remains skeptical about the ability of language to either describe or affect any lasting union. Even music is, after all, temporal – once the strings of the exquisite lyres stop vibrating, the harmony of their song is merely "memory of music fled," and the ties that bound the two separate instruments into "one delightful voice" dissolve into nothingness.

The insufficiency of language is an idea to which Shelley turns again and again, but it is in a footnote to this fragmentary, seemingly minor prose work that he provides his most concise and candid treatment: "These words are inefficient and metaphorical – Most words so – No help –" (474). This frustration with the metaphorical nature of words recalls the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1816) and its exploration, through similes, of the glorious inability of human will to force language into its service, an idea that will reappear in "To a Skylark" (1820), where the bird's "profuse strains of unpremeditated art" are favorably compared to the labored sequence of similes with which the poet attempts to describe the bird's effortless song. As both a poet and a would-be reformer of mankind, the idea that words are "inefficient and metaphorical" is an enormous and seemingly incontrovertible problem, for how can the many goals of poetry as described in "A Defence of Poetry" (1821) be implemented with a flawed, post-lapsarian language in which word and object are no longer one? If "the great secret of morals is Love, or a going out of our own nature" but, as in "On Love," words can neither affect nor fully describe the undifferentiated oneness with another that is the expression of love, then how can a poet aspire to any lasting efficacy?¹² Mary Shelley's notes to the poems of 1817 claim

that in that year Shelley “had lost the eager spirit which believed it could achieve what it projected for the benefit of mankind,” and perhaps this fundamental problem of the insufficiency of language contributed to his disillusionment regarding his own efficacy.¹³

Such questions and concerns must have plagued Shelley as he began to write *Prometheus Unbound*, arguably his most ambitious attempt not only to press language into the service of an extra-textual goal but also to use language to describe the effects of the attainment of those goals. It might have been in the parlor of Albion House or in the audience of *Don Giovanni* that he arrived at a solution to this conundrum: music, for all its temporality, cannot only metaphorically *describe* love; it can also *enact* the unity of love in ways unavailable even to poetry. Instead of using music as a metaphor for love (as in the “two exquisite lyres” image), music functions in *Prometheus Unbound* as an entirely new mode of discourse and as a way of embodying and performing the otherwise ineffable. At the same time, since what Shelley attempts to depict in his lyrical drama is nothing less than the process and end result of a world reformed by love, what better method to present such a transformed world than through music, which, as the above epigraph has already demonstrated, Shelley closely associated with love? Thus *Prometheus Unbound*'s generic hybridity – part lyric, part drama, part opera, and part verbal ballet – is an experiment in creating a new sort of readerly experience, a musical duet with the reader in which the text, like music, is less reliant on interpretation than on impression and reaction. It is through this expressive, non-hierarchical form of communication that Shelley hopes to reform the human spirit and regain the poetic efficacy that language intrinsically lacks.

The opening of *Prometheus Unbound* immediately presents its reader with a dualistic deadlock: a Hegelian master/slave dialectic embodied in the tyrant Jupiter and his self-proclaimed “foe,” Prometheus. This relationship is upset only when Prometheus inverts its roles by recalling – in the simultaneous senses of remembering, restating, and repealing – his curse on Jupiter and calls on Jupiter's Phantasm to repeat the curse, thus destabilizing the foe/tyrant relationship. This rejection of a normative power structure sets into motion a chain of reformation that leads to the transformed world portrayed in acts III.iii and IV, where man is now:

Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed...
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree – the King
Over himself. (III.iv.194-197)

It is significant that the impetus for these world-shaking changes happens on the level of language. Prometheus takes no action against Jupiter but merely stops referring to him as a “foe” and thereafter refuses to participate in the tyrant’s power dynamic. As a result of his nonviolent, linguistic protest, Prometheus’s loving alter-ego, Asia, is released from her exile and free to reunite with Prometheus in their idyllic cave, where they will retire to “talk of time and change, / As the world ebbs and flows, ourselves unchanged” and will

...like lutes

Touched by the skill of the enamoured wind,
Weave harmonies divine, yet ever new,
From difference sweet where discord cannot be. (III.iii.24; 36-39)

The final act is an illustration of what such a non-hierarchical, transformed world would look like. But the awakened world celebrated in Acts III.iii and IV is possible only because of Prometheus’s anti-action in the beginning of Act I; by refusing to submit to the Jupiterian power structure, he is not only able to live outside of it but instigates its universal downfall. Words and the way Prometheus formulates them have truly brought about the end of language as a tool of differentiation.

In the same way that Prometheus rejects the title “foe,” *Prometheus Unbound* refuses to submit to any one form, voice, or dramatic convention; the preface even states that the poem’s imagery taken from “the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed” is “unusual in modern Poetry,” even as Shelley then goes on to admit imitating his contemporaries (133-5). It was frequently the poem’s reluctance to conform to the conventions of drama – such as having its “hero” completely absent from the final act and its dénouement in the first – that roused so much ire in contemporary critics (Zillman passim). The fact that it revisits classical drama and, as the preface emphasizes, reverses its trajectory suggests yet another subversion of tradition. Shelley’s use of music throughout this lyrical drama serves as an embedded rebellion against both literary tradition and the structure of language itself. The understanding of music as expression that had developed during the eighteenth century posited music as a discourse divorced from the rationality and reason that characterizes speech. Much as Prometheus refuses to submit to the language and mindset of oppression,

Shelley presents his reader with an alternative experience: not quite poem, nor drama, nor opera, and beholden to none of those forms' traditions or expectations.

The musicality of *Prometheus Unbound*'s form reaches its apogee in the second act, with the highly musical fourth act providing both a final glimpse of this new, Edenic world and a hint of its impermanence; Ronald Tetreault compares the music- and dance-filled Act IV to the ballet that would traditionally follow an opera, in that both ballets and Act IV celebrate "the triumph of order over chaos, the restoration of harmony, and the union of the sexes" (190). Act I, for example, opens with a long speech by Prometheus – by far his longest in the poem – in which he begins to realize the folly of his submission to the Jupiterian order (I. 56-9). Almost immediately after Prometheus's decision to recall his curse, the collection of elemental voices appears and like a Greek chorus sings a hymn of exultation over Prometheus's decision. The appearance of The Earth in line 107, the introduction of Ione and Panthea in lines 222 and 231, respectively, the appearance of the Phantasm of Jupiter in line 240, and the recalling of the curse and subsequent appearance of Mercury and the Furies are all rendered in rather traditional dramatic form, and there are no noteworthy musical images until the middle of the act, when the previously disparate Furies form a Chorus and break into song and refrain:

From the ends of the Earth, from the ends of the Earth,
Where the night has its grave and the morning its birth,
Come, come, come! (I.485-7)

The impetus for their reversion to song appears to be Prometheus's claims in the preceding lines that despite Mercury's and the Furies' attempts to reestablish the master/slave relationship between Prometheus and Jupiter, Prometheus considers himself "king over myself" (I.492). The transformation of the Furies from a pack of "Jove's tempest-walking hounds" to a "Chorus" by the middle of the first act and the introduction of various "Semichoruses" and a "Chorus of Spirits" towards the act's end provide a transition into the second act, where the use of music becomes even more implicated with the message of forgiveness, submission, and love that the first act has introduced.

While music plays a key role throughout all of *Prometheus Unbound* (and the musicality of the fourth act is worthy of its own meticulous analysis elsewhere), it is Act II, the literal and ideological core of the lyrical drama, that contains Shelley's most impassioned and experimental uses of music in the service of both love and revolution. Like the first act, the second opens with a long soliloquy, this

time by Asia. But unlike the first act's mostly conventional dramatic form, wherein characters enter, leave, converse, interact, and generally behave the way that characters in a drama are expected to behave, Act II, after the arrival of Panthea, veers off into a wholly different direction. Panthea's description of the "delight of a remembered dream" inspires Asia to attempt to "read" the dream through her sister's eyes in one of Shelley's most developed explorations of the idea of Eros and of the inherent problem of self and other. Panthea begins by trying to explain the first of her two dreams: a transformed Prometheus looks into her upturned eyes, and with an "overpowering light" love is poured into them, as if Panthea were an empty vessel. As in the speaker's claim in "To Constantia" that "I am dissolved in these consuming extacies," we see once again the Shelleyan water table at work with the description of dream-Prometheus's and Panthea's intermingling selves in terms of heat, evaporation, and condensation (italicized below):

...love...which, from his soft and *flowing* limbs
And passion-parted lips, and keen faint eyes
Steam'd forth like *vaporous fire*; an *atmosphere*
Which wrapt me in its all-*dissolving* power
As the *warm ether* of the morning *sun*
Wraps ere it *drinks* some *cloud* of wandering *dew*.
I saw not – heard not – moved not – only felt
His presence *flow* and mingle through my blood
Till it became his life and his grew mine
And I was thus *absorbed*.... (II.i.74-82)

This total dissolution of the self into the other and the erasure of the boundaries that keep people apart is, however, like the chords of two exquisite lyres, or like the water cycle, in which the heat of the sun continually turns water into vapor and then into rain: ideal, but impermanent. In the lines immediately following those above, Panthea returns to an awareness of her self:

– until it past
And like the *vapours* when the *sun* sinks down,
Gathering again in *drops* upon the pines

And tremulous as they, in the deep night
My being was *condensed*, and as the *rays*
Of thought were slowly gathered, I could hear
His voice, whose accents lingered ere they died
Like footsteps of far melody. (II.i.82-89; italics added)

Panthea's condensation into her individual self after her moment of undifferentiated oneness with Prometheus is like "memory of music fled" – vital and moving, but necessarily transient. It would seem that the usual problem of temporality and language has reappeared; "I" must always be different from "you," rain must return to the earth, and lovers whose hearts unite for a moment must "disunite in horror" at their separate selves (*Julian and Maddalo*, 428).

However, despite Panthea's lengthy description of her dream, Asia is unsatisfied:

Thou speakest, but thy words
Are as the air. I feel them not...oh, lift
Thine eyes that I might read his written soul! (108-110)

Much has been made of this passage's use of reading as the "correct" means of communication and of Asia as the idealized reader. Yet what such arguments fail to consider is its clear rejection of *words* as the vehicles for meaning. This passage is the pivot on which the act, and indeed the entire drama, rotate; its rejection of insubstantial, unfelt words introduces a new means of engagement – composed of words yet not entirely reliant upon them for meaning – that lies at *Prometheus Unbound*'s literal as well as ideological center. After Prometheus's realization, language is unmasked as insufficient; despite the beauty of her sister's description, Asia must find another route to the answers she seeks.

Reverting to her original plan of reading the dream in Panthea's eyes, Asia is surprised to see not only the radiant Prometheus of the first dream, but a second, shadowy figure – identified by Panthea as "mine other dream" – that seemingly leaps from Panthea's eyes into the substantial world with the command "Follow, follow!" (II.i.132). So begins Asia's and Panthea's descent into Demogorgon's realm, a descent characterized from its start by the Oceanides' lack of agency. It is, after all, a dream that sets the journey in motion, and dreams eliminate will or intention by their very nature. Just as Prometheus was unable to take action against Jupiter, for action against a tyrant merely

perpetuates the cycle of tyranny, Asia is unable to reach Demogorgon through an act of will. Immediately after the shaggy dream disappears, Panthea claims that “it passes now into my mind” (II.i.133), a passive image indicating her lack of agency. When she and Asia relate their visions of the phrase “O follow, follow” – itself a repetition of the dream’s statement – written on the leaves, in the mountains, in the trees, and even in Panthea’s eyes, an “Echo” stage direction repeats the words back to them: “Follow, follow!” (II.i.163). The direction “[*more distant*]” (174) indicates that the echo of the sisters’ voices – which is actually an echo of the sisters’ echo of Panthea’s dream – is receding, and therefore they must follow to keep up: “ASIA: Shall we pursue the sound? – It grows more faint / And distant?” (II.i.188-9). As a chorus of “ECHOES *unseen*” break into song, Asia and Panthea are compelled to follow: “As the song floats, thou pursue.../ While our music, wild and sweet, / Mocks thy gently-falling feet” (II.i.179-186). Asia and Panthea follow their echoes of the words of a dream, which are, by their nature, merely imitations of the sisters themselves; their footfalls, in turn, create more echoes, which are imitated by the music the sisters must follow in order to hear as it recedes. Shelley creates a situation in which individual agency is nullified; Asia’s and Panthea’s descent is a perfectly selfless act in the sense that they merely follow themselves. As the Semichorus I of scene ii proclaims, “soft emotion / Attracts, impels them” (50-1); neither verb involves agency or active pursuit, even though, as the Semichorus claims, “they / Believe their own swift wings and feet / The sweet desires within obey” (54-6). Prometheus could not have brought about the fall of Jupiter if he had known that to do so would have meant the tyrant’s downfall; likewise Asia would not have been able to access Demogorgon by an act of will.

Even though the phrase “follow, follow” appears to be the impetus for the Oceanides’ journey, since Asia’s refutation of words in lines 108-9, Act II.i there has been a subtle shift – words have been subordinated to sound. After Panthea describes the dream-vision that “passes” into her mind, Asia describes her sister’s words as “[filling] my own forgotten sleep / With shapes” (II.i.141-3). Panthea’s words are transformed into visions, which in turn inspire the chorus of Echoes. “What fine clear sounds! Oh list!” Asia exclaims, and it is the “liquid responses / Of their aerial tongues” in the form of song that entice the sisters. Every interjected comment made by Asia and Panthea for the remainder of the scene focuses not on what the echoes say (the content is never discussed) but on how they say it, on the musicality of the spirit voices. Even as it enables their journey without agency, the echoes engage Asia and Panthea in song by making them participants in it. Their music – originating in Asia’s own echo, then drawn out into verse – is what draws the sisters in, “Attracts, impels them.” In Act II, scene

i, Shelley presents us with a blueprint for the remainder of *Prometheus Unbound*; like the Oceanides, his readers are invited to reject the realm of the merely verbal and engage in a shared experience wherein mere words are insufficient to represent the universal changes to come. Just as Asia and Panthea follow the musical voices to the cave of Demogorgon, the reader must be drawn into the music of *Prometheus Unbound* in order to understand the transformed world the subsequent acts will represent. As Asia has already learned, reading is not enough; music, that direct conduit to the human brain and partner of love, will become the foundation for the rest of the poem, and the intoxicating song that leads the Oceanides is meant to work on the reader, as well.

Therefore it is fitting that the of Act II, scene ii and the beginning of scene iii invoke Bacchus, the Maenads, and the Delphic oracle, pagan entities that suggest the intoxicating ecstasy that leads to the dissolution of one's selfhood, Bacchus and the Maenads through music and wine, the Pythia through "oracular vapour" and divinity. As Asia approaches her interview with Demogorgon in scene iv, she becomes increasingly Pythian, repeatedly referencing the brain-dimming vapor and increasing uncanniness of their descent.¹⁴ Meanwhile the "SONG OF SPIRITS," taking over from the chorus of echoes, chants an invitation to continue her journey towards unconsciousness and the self-less power of Demogorgon (II.iii.90-98). Their repetitive song pulls both Asia and the reader into Demogorgon's cave, where Asia becomes her own Pythia, answering her questions and unconsciously (because she cannot do so intentionally) commencing the "destined hour" of Prometheus's release and Jupiter's downfall. Asia and Panthea are borne in the chariot of one Spirit of the Hour while Demogorgon leaves with the other for his appointment with Jupiter in Act III, scene i.

Act II, scene v, meanwhile, provides the reader with the first glimpses of the world perfected by the chain of Necessity set into motion by the passive actions of Prometheus and Asia. Asia's appearance is transformed to that of a Botticellian Venus, and Panthea notes that, with Asia's transcendence, she has become the personification of love and desire:

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!

[*Music.*] (35-37)

This stage direction "*Music*" is the poem's first explicit use of that word, and it is appropriate that it occurs directly after Asia has completed her evolution from agent to Pythia to symbol of love. Music and love, those two favorite Shelleyan powers, have united in this poem's center and become embodied in the same female figure. The remainder of the scene is pure song, a duet between Asia and the "VOICE (*in the air, singing*)."¹⁵ Asia's final song of the scene, beginning on line 72, is noteworthy not only for its crystallization of the poem's association between music and love but also for its recollection of the intoxicating and transcendent value of music depicted in "To Constantia" two years previously. Such similarities should be expected, given that Asia's song is a reworking of one of the 1817 "Constantia" manuscript fragments:

My spirit like a charmed bark doth swim
Upon the liquid waves of thy sweet singing,
Far far away into the regions dim

Of rapture – as a boat, with swift sails winging
Its way adown some many-winding river,
Speeds through dark forests o'er the waters swinging....¹⁵

Asia's depiction of herself as an "enchanted boat.../ Without a course – without a star" (II.v.72;89) dissolving "Into a Sea profound, of ever-spreading sound" (II.v.84) recalls the reverie of "To Constantia" and the speaker being "dissolved in these consuming extacies;" if anything, Asia's song is an even more extreme picture of a world perfectly in tune:

And we sail on, away, afar,
Without a course – without a star –
But by the instinct of sweet Music driven
Till, through Elysian garden islets
By thee, most beautiful of pilots,
Where never mortal pinnace glided,
The boat of my desire is guided –
Realms where the air we breathe is Love

Which in the winds and on the waves doth move,
Harmonizing this Earth with what we feel above. (II.v.88-97)

With Asia, the newly-minted symbol of love, on her way towards her reunion with Prometheus, the champion of mankind, Demogorgon about to inform Jupiter of his impotence, and the chain of earthly events later described in Act III.iii beginning to unfold, *Prometheus Unbound* melts into a pure, triumphant song that will not return until the balletic final act and its celebration of that “Which was late so dusk and obscene and blind” becoming “an Ocean / of clear emotion, / A Heaven of serene and mighty motion” (IV.95-98).

Given that it describes the cosmic and terrestrial workings of an apotheosized world, its overwhelmingly musical form of Act IV makes perfect sense: any attempt to describe such an existence using the same tired, hierarchical linguistic system that posed such problems for Prometheus would be impossible, since only music can reflect the harmony of the “world of perfect light” glimpsed in Act II.v and fully revealed in Act IV. It is for this same reason that Act II.v must end with lyrics (in the literal, classical sense); rather than merely portraying the transformations, music enacts them, with its commingling of disparate voices into one glorious universal harmony. The stage direction “[*Music*]” acts as an invitation to the reader to imagine what the rest of the act might sound like and thus draws the reader into the song, in the same way that the chorus of echoes attracted Asia and Panthea. While they invite readerly participation in the creative process, these songs – embedded as they are within a “lyrical drama” – subvert readers’ expectations and invite them to share in the interpretive experience. This extension of creative agency to the reader also undermines the authority of the author, which aligns with Shelley’s treatment of authority in the form of Jupiter. It also keeps this utopian poem from becoming didactic – which, as the preface famously states, is Shelley’s abhorrence – and from participating in the dominance (author) and submission (reader) of a didactic poem, from perpetuating linguistically the same Prometheus/Jupiter dynamic that interfered with human happiness for three thousand years. The songs of Act II.v act as harbingers of the final act, their “ever-spreading sound” an indication that the world of the poem has changed.

Shelley’s proclaimed antipathy for didactic poetry is perhaps coy coming from the author of “The Mask of Anarchy” and contained in the preface to, if not his most overtly political poem, possibly the one that most precisely delineates his attitudes toward tyranny, revolution, and human potential. Although he certainly wants his reader to finish *Prometheus Unbound* instructed by its “beautiful

idealisms of moral excellence,” he is loathe to assume the role of Jupiterian teacher. Music and its vibratory connection to the human brain provide a way of instilling the “things the heart can feel and learn” by stimulating emotion directly, without recourse to linguistic convention, its power structure, or its rationality. Like the music that vibrates the hearer’s nerves and inspires a physical reaction, *Prometheus Unbound*’s songs are filtered through the reader’s perceptions and thus become a method of engagement, a way of involving the reader in the interpretive experience. It is no coincidence that “The Mask of Anarchy,” a ballad, was composed at the same time that Shelley was finishing Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound* – he clearly recognized the power of song to unite, inspire, and remain in the memories of its listeners. The timing of the composition of “The Mask of Anarchy” is obviously also related to its inspiration, the Peterloo Massacre, but its balladic form, with its recurring, easily remembered chorus, speaks to Shelley’s belief in the efficacy of song as a tool for social change and as a means of working on the reader’s hearts, as well as their minds, and of enacting the universal harmony that he hoped mankind would be capable of achieving.

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Biographical notice

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¹ "Another Fragment To Music" (1817). Thomas Hutchinson, ed. *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1921. All subsequent Shelley quotations will be taken from Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 2002) unless otherwise noted.

² Burton R. Pollin's *Music for Shelley's Poetry* (1974) and its continuation, eight years later, in "More Music for Shelley's Poetry" trace the history of Shelley's poetry being set to music "for solo voices and mixed voices, in songs, choruses, cantatas, operas, and tone poems" in a dozen languages by more than one thousand composers (Pollin Music ii). Pollin argues that, although similarly exhaustive studies on other poets are lacking, Shelley may be the most popular English poet to be set to music besides Shakespeare: compared to the 1,309 compositions for Shelley identified in 1974 (swelling to 1,374 in 1982), Pollin notes approximate figures for other nineteenth-century poets: Edgar Allan Poe (450), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (600), Walt Whitman (500), Robert Browning (450), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (100) (Pollin Music i-ii).

³ Zillman compiles numerous examples of critics – both contemporary and modern – who acknowledged the poem's musical qualities, sometimes with admiration and often with scorn (37-53).

⁴ See Pollin *Music* iii. Similarly, Zillman notes that many other critics have found the poem to be “a dramatic ode, or a sequence of odes linked by dramatic poetry, thus making it much like an opera (Charles Garnier, “Metrical Study,” p. 155; George H. Clarke, Edition, p. 238; and George Cowling, *Shelley*, p. 63, with the latter noting that ‘its form owes something to Italian opera, to which Peacock introduced Shelley in 1817, and in which he afterwards found great pleasure’); a noble oratorio (Parke Godwin, ‘Shelley,’ p. 127); nearer to symphony than to drama in form (Arthur Clutton-Brock, *Man and Poet*, p. 209)...” (51).

⁵ “The use of painting to illuminate the essential character of poetry [...] so widespread in the eighteenth century, almost disappears in the major criticism of the romantic period; the comparisons between poetry and painting that survive are casual, or, as in the instance of the mirror, show the canvas reversed in order to image the inner substance of the poet. In place of painting, music becomes the art frequently pointed to as having a profound affinity with poetry. [...] Music, wrote [Wilhelm Heinrich] Wackenroder, ‘shows us all the movements of our spirit, disembodied’” (Abrams 50). Tetreault also traces the trajectory of the alignment of music and poetry into the later nineteenth century: “What painting had been for the eighteenth century music became for the nineteenth, the model art. When Pater advises us that all art aspires to the condition of music, he merely fulfills the promise of Romantic aesthetics” (171).

⁶ “From the 1760s, books about music came under review in the higher literary journals, at first in the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review* [...] From the 1780s new music itself, in printed editions, began to be surveyed in the *European Magazine* [...] and from the 1790s in the *Monthly Magazine*, later also in the *Gentleman’s*. [...] Daily papers such as *The Times* and the *Morning Chronicle* devoted greater and more regular space to performance-reviewing from the late 1810s” (Langley 615). In *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain*, Gillen D’Arcy Wood notes the sensational ubiquity of sheet music by the early nineteenth century: “music catalogues that in the 1760s contained a hundred items by 1790 had thousands, and by 1820 could offer selections from tens of thousands of available musical scores” (157).

⁷ Ogawa cites an entry in Abraham Rees’s *The Cyclopaedia; Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature* (1819) – a text which Shelley himself cited and was therefore familiar with – which defines “nerve” as “a solid chord” composed of “a soft white or medullary substance” and which “connected either immediately or remotely with the brain, spinal marrow, or certain small bodies called ganglia” and forms “the instrument by which eternal [sic?] objects act on the brain” (56). Similarly David Hartley’s *Observations on Man, His Frame and His Expectations* (1791), another text known to Shelley, describes the corporality of words: “the sound of the words causes vibration through the air to reach the so-called ‘membrana tympani’ of the auditory nerve. [...] For Hartley, it was the medullary particle that enabled the communication between the organs of the body, and, for previous physiologists, it was the ‘animal spirits’ that gave rise to the idea of the ‘sympathy’ of the body” (Ogawa 59).

⁸ In addition to “To Constantia” (sometimes referred to as “To Constantia, Singing”) there are four unfinished lyrics on similar subjects that date to this period: another “Constantia” poem, “Fragment: To One Singing” (later revised into Asia’s song from *Prometheus Unbound* II.v) and “A Fragment: To Music,” as well as the fragment given as an epigraph above.

⁹ Claire’s journal notes that, when she, Shelley, and Peacock visited the Hunts on January 29, they all saw Giovanni Paisiello’s *La Molinara* (82). According to Mary’s journals, Shelley and Claire also attended *Don Giovanni* (with Favier’s ballet *Acis and Galatea*) on February 14 (Mary had gone to the same on the 10th, but it is not clear that Shelley went with her). On February 21, they saw *Don*

Giovanni (again) and the ballet *Zephyr, ou le retour de printemps*, featuring the enchanting Mlle. Milanie whom Shelley will mention repeatedly thereafter (as in *PBSL II.4,9*; see also Peacock's *Memoirs* for Shelley's reaction to both *Don Giovanni* and Milanie, whose performance was rapturously reviewed by the *Examiner* on March 2, 1818). On February 24, Shelley and Mary see *Figaro* at the King's Theater; on February 28, also at the King's Theater, it is *Griselda; ossia la virtù al cimento* by Ferdinando Paër, once again with *Zephyr, ou le retour de printemps* as the ballet. On March 7 Mary notes that she saw *Don Giovanni* yet again, this time with Shelley and Peacock. On March 10, 1818 – the family's last night in England – they saw *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at the King's Theater. After the Shelleys move to Italy, they continue their opera-going habit: in their first fifteen days in Milan alone, they attend La Scala five times (*MWSJ* 205-207).

Opera influenced their reading habits, as well: Mary also notes that she – and possibly Shelley as well – spent a part of their day reading Italian operas on March 2, 1818; Claire's journal for this day records: "Read *Il Barbiere di Seviglia*. Spend the evening at Hunts. Peacock, Hogg & Keats. Music" (83). Claire also records that she finishes *Il Barbiere* on the 13th, moves on to *Le Mariage de Figaro* on the 5th, and reads *Così fan tutte* on February 26th (84). Though Claire does not specifically mention Shelley also reading these texts, the fact that they were clearly available in the house, coupled with the family's general habit of communal reading, suggests at least the possibility that he did.

¹⁰ For the Marlow circle's adoption of music as a key aspect of "Romantic sociability" see Jeffrey Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and Their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) and Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770-1840: Virtue and Virtuosity* (Cambridge UP, 2010).

¹¹ Reiman and Fraistat place it in the summer of 1818, "very likely between July 20 and 25, after Shelley finished his translation of Plato's *Symposium* and before he began 'Discourse of the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love'" (473). In *Shelleyan Eros: The Rhetoric of Romantic Love* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990)

William Ulmer agrees with this date (6). However, Richard Holmes (in *Shelley on Love: an Anthology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980; page 66), places it in 1814-1815, an opinion which seems to be a minority voice.

¹² C.f. Aristophanes' claim in Shelley's translation of the *Symposium* that love is "something of which there are no words to describe."

¹³ Thomas Hutchinson, ed. *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1921. 547.

¹⁴ "Look, sister, ere the vapour dim thy brain" (II.iii.18); "– my brain / Grows dizzy – I see thin shapes within the mist" (II.iii.49-50). See also line 97's reference to the Delphic python.

¹⁵ "Fragment: To One Singing." Thomas Hutchinson, ed. *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1921.