



Unapprehended Relations

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Unapprehended Relations

Tom Phillips

In one of his most celebrated lyrics, Percy Shelley likens the skylark to a poet ‘singing hymns unbidden | Till the world is wrought | To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not’.¹ The subject of this article is a parallel between the poet’s capacity to generate new forms of ‘sympathy’ and the effects Shelley creates in his responses to ancient Greek poetry. I shall argue that both translation and allusion disclose morally and intellectually significant aspects of ancient texts that are only subject to recognition by being situated as the antecedents of the particular futurity that Shelley’s own poetry realizes. Such dialogues respond to the anachronistically unstable nature of translation and literary history by linking his own age to antiquity, and by allowing the ancient world to be understood as harbouring potentialities that render it untimely in relation to itself.² The result is an temporally idiomatic construal of antiquity that I trace through the ‘Hymn to Mercury’ (Shelley’s translation of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*), allusions to Pindar in the ‘Ode to Liberty’, and his prose works.

Poetics and Translation

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¹ ‘To a Skylark’ 38–40. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Shelley’s works are taken from *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Selected Poems and Prose* ed. J. Donovan and C. Duffy, UK, 2016.

² Aspects of Shelley’s engagement with ancient culture have received much scholarly attention, of which Harding (2013) gives a useful overview; important studies of his translation and Hellenism include Webb (1976) and Wallace (1997). Bowers (2018: 519–31) discusses Mary Shelley’s studies in ancient Greek and the linguistic and bibliographical background to Shelley’s translations.

In a letter to Maria Gisborne, Shelley calls the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* ‘infinitely comical’,³ and his translation is everywhere alive to the humour of Hermes’ doubleness. As god and infant, Hermes simultaneously inhabits two apparently incompatible temporalities and sets of capacities.⁴ Shelley’s version often amplifies the effects the *Hymn to Hermes* generates from this duality, and in so doing he makes salient questions about what kind of juncture between worlds his translation seeks to enact. Conspicuous in this respect is Shelley’s rendering of Mercury’s first inset song, which he sings immediately after his invention of the lyre. As a miniature hymn, the song sketches something of the character, aims, and content of the hymn of which it forms part (*HHerm.* 57–62):⁵

ἀμφὶ Δία Κρονίδην καὶ Μαιάδα καλλιπέδιλον
ὥς πάρος ὠρίζεσκον ἑταιρείῃ φιλότῃτι,
ἦν τ’ αὐτοῦ γενεὴν ὀνομακλυτὸν ἔξονομάζων·
ἀμφιπόλους τε γέραιρε καὶ ἀγλαὰ δώματα νύμφης, 60
καὶ τρίποδας κατὰ οἶκον ἐπηετανούς τε λέβητας.
καὶ τὰ μὲν οὔν ἦειδε, τὰ δὲ φρεσὶν ἄλλα μενοίνα.

[He sang] of Zeus son of Cronos and Maia of the lovely sandal, how they chattered in companionable intimacy, and he declared his own renowned lineage. He celebrated the servants and the splendid home of the nymph, the

³ For the letter’s context and the composition of the ‘Hymn to Mercury’ see *LAEP* III pp. 508–9; on his time in Italy see Weinberg (1991: 4–20); see further Stabler (2013), esp. 98–9, 157–8, 225–6.

⁴ Readings of the ‘Hymn to Mercury’ have often focused on the significance of Mercury as a figure for Shelley’s own self-conception, often with emphasis on his inspired connection to the supernatural: see e.g. Webb (1976: 72), who draws a comparison between Mercury the ‘wayward, irresponsible child’ and Shelley himself, Kahan (1992); Wallace (1997: 107–9) puts more emphasis on the translation’s use of irony and the distance between the translator and his text.

⁵ Albeit with considerable obliqueness: for the metapoetic elements of the passage see Vergados (2013: 271–2), Thomas (2018: 178–80).

tripods in the house and the unending cauldrons. These things he sang, but designed other things in his mind.

Shelley's version expands considerably on the Greek ('Hymn to Mercury' 72–8):

He sung how Jove and May of the bright sandal
Dallied in love not quite legitimate;
And his own birth, still scoffing at the scandal
And naming his own name, did celebrate;
His mother's cave and servant maids he planned all
In plastic verse, her household stuff and state,
Perennial pot, trippet and brazen pan –
But singing he conceived another plan.

His alterations and additions likewise condense salient characteristics of his translation as whole, as when the terse γέραίρε (60) brightens into 'he planned all | In plastic verse'. As an adjective, 'plastic' can refer to something which moulds, something which is capable of being moulded, and to a medium or person that generates ideas.⁶ Shelley's 'plastic verse' evokes all three senses in an implicit characterization of his own project, which both reconfigures and is moulded by the Greek, and which revels in its capacity to produce new ways of understanding the original poem.⁷ No sooner has 'plastic verse' mobilized these implications than 'her

⁶ As an instance of the last *OED* B13 cites J. Wharton, 'Essay on Pope' (1756) I iii 111: 'The genuine poet, of a lively plastic imagination'. Cf. the spirit's 'plastic stress' at *Adonais* 381–5 with the discussion of Wasserman (1971: 207–8, 477).

⁷ Particularly salient is the use of rhyme to connect ideas and inflect access to the world that the text imagines. Particularly apposite here is the brilliant observation of Clarkson and Hodgson (2017: 118) that 'rhyme becomes something like a mode of intuition, a means through which a poem listens to the

household stuff and state' embodies them. The straightforwardly laudatory ἀγλαὰ δῶματα νύμφης is turned into a phrase that sounds a faintly derogatory note ('stuff') in bathetic juxtaposition with grander undertones ('state').⁸

In these lines as often elsewhere in the 'Hymn to Mercury', humour and temporal incongruity are closely related, in respect of both Mercury's song and Shelley's authorial practice. 'Scoffing at the scandal' makes Mercury celebrate pleasure at the expense of convention in a way that the Greek does not make explicit, and ramps up the humour of Mercury's precociousness: there is of course no realistic way that Mercury could know about this 'scandal', given that he has only just been born, and 'still' takes this incongruity further by suggesting, in a way the Greek does not, that his song continues an attitude that he has adopted previously.⁹ Focalization imputes to the god a preternatural moral judgement, implicitly attributing to him both a recognition that the relationship was understood by others as a 'scandal', and mastery of an ironizing detachment that raises a 'scoffing' eyebrow at the reports. Similarly precocious is the fine distinction of 'Dallied in love not quite legitimate', which wryly pokes fun not just at the censoriousness of those who see the liaison as a 'scandal', but at its own hair-splitting.

The phrase 'dallied in love not quite legitimate' advertises Shelley's philological deftness. With ἑταίρειη φιλότητι (the noun extant here for the first time), the hymnist suggests the kind of 'companionable' conversation that a symposiast might have with an *hetaira*, and hence hints at an impish piece of aetiology, making the relationship between Zeus and Maia into the model for later sympotic practice.

world and even overhears itself doing so.' On the 'Hymn's' *ottava rima* see *LAEP* III pp. 509–10, and the comments of Richardson (2016: 341–2).

⁸ This is the only occurrence of 'stuff' in the sense of 'goods', 'furniture' in Shelley's works.

⁹ Play on temporal incongruities recurs frequently in the 'Hymn'. A particularly telling example occurs at 259, where Shelley translates Apollo's address to the old man he meets at Onchestus (γεραῖε παλαιγενές, 199) with the adynaton 'man born ere the world began'. The paradoxical temporality that Mercury inhabits is made to colour the world that he and Apollo encounter.

‘Dallied’ can mean ‘converse’, ‘have a conversation’ as well as ‘spend time with’, and so neatly captures the sense of ὠρίζεσκον. ‘Not quite legitimate’ sets up the impishness of ‘scoffing at the scandal’, but it also catches something of the frisson that the mock-aetiology of ἑταιρείη φιλότητι might have created for an ancient listener. Equally, it might be read as a nod to contemporary critical debates, a side-swipe at the kind of censorious criticism of Homer Shelley deprecates elsewhere.¹⁰ By opening up these varying interpretative possibilities, the passage foregrounds the temporal uncertainties of translation as another source of the poem’s ‘plastic’, idea-projecting qualities. Do Shelley’s expansions attempt to close the temporal gap between antiquity and the present by approximating the effects of the Greek, ‘try[ing] how it will look in an English Habit’, in Abraham Cowley’s terms,¹¹ or does translation rather emphasise the processes of linguistic, cultural, and historical change that separate Shelley and his readers from the world of the original hymn?¹² The translation licenses both approaches, but reading the ‘Hymn to Mercury’ alongside Shelley’s reflections on poetry reveals a more specific sense in which his renderings encourage readers to find meaning in the original text.

Shelley held that poetic form was in part dictated by the historical circumstances of poems’ composition,¹³ and he was keenly conscious of the agency of historical change in affecting how a poem might be received. This attitude is manifest in two passages in ‘A Defence of Poetry’. In the first, Shelley holds that a poem is:

¹⁰ See especially ‘A Defence’, pp. 658–9.

¹¹ ‘Preface to the Pindarique Odes’ (1656) (quoted from *Poems* ed. A. Waller, 1905, p. 156).

¹² For Shelley’s remarks on the dangers of inadequate translation see *Letters* II 616, spring 1821.

¹³ In discussing Homer, Shelley remarks that ‘a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty’ (‘A Defence of Poetry’, p. 658).

universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. Time ... augments [the beauty] of Poetry; and for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains.¹⁴

The train of thought is continued later, more lyrically:

All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence their peculiar relations enable them to share; another and another yet succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and unconceived delight.

Far from being a menace to poetry's imaginative efficacy, the sundering of a poem from the time in which it was composed enables, on Shelley's account, its 'eternal truth' to be apprehended in new and freshly meaningful ways, as 'Time ... for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains'. The poem's force also springs from its indirect relation to the experiences which occasioned it, or to which it relates. The poem 'records' interior states, but in such a way that what is preserved is a means of recourse to an 'evanescent visitation'.¹⁵ What a translation enables us to encounter, in Shelley's understanding, is not the absence of a now-unrecoverable experiential plenitude, but a moment of meaning and

¹⁴ 'A Defence', p. 657; see further Wasserman (1971: 209–11).

¹⁵ 'A Defence', p. 674.

experience that might not have been fully realized even in its own time,¹⁶ the ‘traces’ left by ‘the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own’.¹⁷

Shelley’s expansions in the ‘Hymn to Mercury’ can be understood as instantiating a poetics akin to that sketched out in his famous claim that ‘[Poets’] language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension’.¹⁸ His practice of translation shows him drawing out and multiplying implications more or less nascent in the original text, adding to the new ‘relations’ between things generated by the *Hymn to Hermes* ‘relations’ that went ‘unapprehended’ in the original composition. Phrases such as ‘Dallied in love not quite legitimate’ approximate what Jacques Rancière terms anachrony, ‘a word, an event, or a signifying sequence that has left “its” time, and in this way is given the capacity to define completely original points of orientation’.¹⁹ Here, ‘in love not quite legitimate’ draws out the ‘before unapprehended relations’ configured by ἐταιρείη φιλότητι, but also imagines into a existence a new ‘relation’ that is contingent upon Shelley’s own linguistic and cultural environment, a poetic crystallization of capacities for imaginative and ethical life which are adumbrated but not fully expressed in the Greek.

In giving rise to such interactions, the passage illustrates a parallel between translation and the activity of writing poetry as Shelley famously defines it at the end of ‘A Defence of Poetry’:²⁰

¹⁶ Discussing the early stages of literary history, Shelley comments that ‘In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellency of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness: and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of their union’ (‘A Defence’, p. 657).

¹⁷ See the passage quoted in n. 3 for a fuller elaboration of this idea, and for discussion Wasserman (1971: 205–6), Keach (1984: 31–2).

¹⁸ ‘A Defence’, p. 653.

¹⁹ Rancière (2015) 47.

²⁰ ‘A Defence’, p. 678.

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

In Shelley's handling, a phrase such as *ἑταιρείη φιλότητι* becomes a 'mirror of [a] gigantic shadow' which the 'futurity' of his responsiveness retrojects. As the next section shows, some of Shelley's most subtle enactments of his 'futurity' as a reader of Homer occur in relation to the *Hymn's* more conceptually complex passages, but such responsiveness is just as evident when attuned to the *Hymn's* presentation of quotidian details. At 140–1, for instance, Shelley has Mercury invent a series of decidedly non-antique instruments ('Mercury first found out for human weal | Tinder-box, matches, fire–irons, flint, and steel') in response to the 'fire-sticks and fire' of the Greek (*Ἑρμῆς τοι πρόωιστα πυρήϊα πῦρ τ' ἀνέδωκε*, 'Hermes first delivered up fire-sticks and fire', *HHerm* 111).

Beyond humorously and anachronistically conflating ancient and modern technologies, Shelley's expansions here invite attention to the translation's construal of the domain projected by the ancient text as an antecedent for its own practices. 'Tinder-box, matches, fire–irons, flint, and steel' are implicit in Hermes' bestowal of *πυρήϊα πῦρ τ'*, in that the god's initial invention makes the later developments possible. Shelley's rendering suggests latent possibilities in the Greek, inducing readers to recognise the event recorded by the ancient text (*Ἑρμῆς ... ἀνέδωκε*) as the beginning of an ongoing process of innovation. Seizing on Hermes' *πυρήϊα*, Shelley shows how even poetry's records of such incidental objects can become 'the source of

an unforeseen and unconceived delight' when subsequent responses enable readers to glimpse in them the 'giant shadows' they portend. In his version of Mercury's second song, his reconfigurations bear instead on the psychology of love.

Mercury's Music

The episode takes place after Apollo has found out about Mercury's theft of the cattle, and attempted unsuccessfully to bind his hands. Seemingly about to try to flee, Mercury changes his mind, and begins to play his lyre and sing. Enchanted, Apollo then inquires about Mercury's music and song, and plays the lyre himself, beginning the reconciliation between the two gods with which the poem draws to a close (*HHerm* 417–35):

ῥεῖα μάλ' ἐπρήυνεν ἐκηβόλον, ὡς ἔθελ' αὐτός,
καὶ κρατερόν περ ἐόντα· λαβῶν δ' ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ χειρὸς
πλήκτρῳ ἐπειρήτιζε κατὰ μέλος· ἢ δ' ὑπὸ χειρὸς
σμερδαλέον κονάβησε, γέλασσε δὲ Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων 420
γηθήσας, ἐρατὴ δὲ διὰ φρένας ἤλυθ' ἰωὴ
θεσπεσίης ἐνοπῆς, καί μιν γλυκὺς ἴμερος ἦρει
θυμῷ ἀκούζοντα· λύρη δ' ἐρατὸν κιθαρίζων
στῆ ῥ' ὅ γε θαρσήσας ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ Μαιάδος υἱὸς
Φοίβου Ἀπόλλωνος, τάχα δὲ λιγέως κιθαρίζων 425
γηρύετ' ἀμβολάδην, ἐρατὴ δὲ οἱ ἔσπετο φωνή,
κραίνων ἀθανάτους τε θεοὺς καὶ γαῖαν ἐρεμνήν
ὡς τὰ πρῶτα γένοντο καὶ ὡς λάχε μοῖραν ἕκαστος.
Μνημοσύνην μὲν πρῶτα θεῶν ἐγέραιρεν ἀοιδῆ

μητέρα Μουσάων, ἢ γὰρ λάχε Μαιάδος υἷον· 430

τοὺς δὲ κατὰ πρέσβιν τε καὶ ὡς γεγάασιν ἕκαστος

ἀθανάτους ἐγέραιρε θεοὺς Διὸς ἀγλαὸς υἱὸς

πάντ' ἐνέπων κατὰ κόσμον, ἐπωλένιον κιθαρίζων.

τὸν δ' ἔρος ἐν στήθεσσι ἀμήχανος αἴνυτο θυμόν

καί μιν φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα ...

[Hermes] easily pacified the Far-shooter for all his toughness, as he himself desired. Taking it on his left arm, he tried it out with a plectrum in a tuned scale, and it rang out impressively under his hand; and Phoebus Apollo laughed for pleasure, the lovely sound of its wondrous voice invaded his senses, and sweet longing captivated his heart as he listened. Playing delightfully on the lyre, the son of Maia stationed himself unafraid on Phoebus Apollo's left, and soon, with the lyre's clear accompaniment, he was striking up his song, and his voice came lovely: he spoke authoritatively of the immortal gods and of dark Earth, how they were born originally and how each received his portion. Remembrance first of the gods he honoured in his song, the mother of the Muses, for she had Maia's son in her province, and then the rest of the immortal gods Zeus' splendid son honored according to seniority and affiliation, relating everything in due order, and playing the lyre that hung from his arm. As for Apollo, helpless longing seized the spirit in his breast, and he addressed him in winged words ...

Here, as often elsewhere in the 'Hymn', Shelley's version is conspicuous for its expansions and divergences from the original ('Hymn to Mercury' 557–80):

Sudden he changed his plan, and with strange skill
Subdued the strong Latonian by the might
Of winning music, to his mightier will;
His left hand held the lyre, and in his right 560
The plectrum struck the chords—unconquerable
Up from beneath his hand in circling flight
The gathering music rose—and sweet as love
The penetrating notes did live and move

Within the heart of great Apollo—he 565
Listened with all his soul and laughed for pleasure;
Close to his side stood harping fearlessly
The unabashed boy, and to the measure
Of the sweet lyre, there followed loud and free
His joyous voice, for he unlocked the treasure 570
Of his deep song, illustrating the birth
Of the bright Gods and the dark desert Earth,

And how to the immortals every one
A portion was assigned of all that is;
But chief Mnemosyne did Maia's son 575
Clothe in the light of his loud melodies—
And as each God was born or had begun
He in their order due and fit degrees
Sung of his birth and being—and did move

Apollo to unutterable love.

The two versions differ strikingly in their framing of the music's effects. In phrases such as ἐρατὴ δὲ διὰ φρένας ἤλυθ' ἰωή / θεσπεσίας ἐνοπιῆς (421–2), sound is a physical entity striking Apollo. The main verb διὰ ... ἤλυθ' accentuates the process of sound 'passing through' his 'mind', whereas in 'The gathering music rose ... | The penetrating notes did live and move' (563–4), the impact upon Apollo is softened by being relegated to qualification ('penetrating'). The phrasing of ἐρατὴ ... ἰωή paradoxically combines loveliness with formless noise.²¹ Shelley's 'sweet as love' (563) responds to ἐρατὴ, but 'notes' tunes readers in to a more complex, internally disjunctive auditory experience, replacing the singular ἰωή with a plurality composed of distinguishable constituent parts.

Much like ἐρατὴ ... ἰωή, σμερδαλέον κονάβησε (420) and θεσπεσίας ἐνοπιῆς (422) echo with the disordered, asocial noise of battle and clashing metal, implicitly acknowledging the intense impressions music makes on the body.²² The tension between associations and reference captures the shock that strikes at Apollo. Shelley's equivalent verses are characterised by different form and emphasis. Unlike the more restrained Greek, lines 557–64 in the 'Hymn to Mercury' are replete with adjectives and descriptive participles. These qualifications, from the adversarial, aggressive language of 'winning', 'mighty', 'mightier', 'struck', 'unconquerable', to the gentler 'circling', 'gathering', and 'sweet as love', trace out a movement from agonistic confrontation to commonality, and create a descriptive undertow that acts as a synecdoche for the two gods' relationship. The occurrence of this drama in the

²¹ ἰωή is used of the wind (*Il.* 4.276, 11.308) and fire (*Il.* 16.127), as well as of the sound of a *phorminx* at *Od.* 17.261–2; see also the passages cited by Vergados (2013: 504) on ἐνοπιῆς.

²² At *Il.* 15.648, for instance, σμερδαλέον κονάβησε is used of the sound made by a helmet as its wearer falls dead in battle (ἀμφὶ δὲ πῆληξ | σμερδαλέον κονάβησε περὶ κροτάφοισι πεσόντος).

interstices of the syntax foreshadows Apollo's struggle to grasp and articulate the experience he undergoes.

Shelley puts more emphasis than the Greek on the sense that the erotic allure of the music precipitates an encounter which implicates and alters Apollo's whole being. This emphasis is implicit in the transformation of τὸν δ' ἔρος ἐν στήθεσσι ἀμήχανος αἴνυτο θυμόν (434) into 'and did move | Apollo to unutterable love'. Whereas ἔρος is an active force that brings about 'helplessness' (ἀμήχανος),²³ Shelley makes Mercury rather than love the subject of 'move', and with 'unutterable' renders 'love' a (notional) subject of speech and reflection. The suggestion that Mercury's performance occasions not just physical joy, but an incipient longing to describe its effects and the changes they have wrought in the listener, is picked up by Apollo's description at 593–4 of the music as 'such a strain of wondrous, strange, untired | And soul-awakening music sweet and strong' and at his later admission 'never did my inmost soul rejoice | ... as now' (609–11). 'Soul-awakening' expresses Apollo's feeling that the music has disclosed in him something hitherto undiscovered, wakening his 'soul' to a new sense of its capacities.

This emphasis chimes with elements of Shelley's short prose fragment 'On Love', written in July 1818. Especially pertinent to Apollo's experience is the definition of love as

... 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.²⁴

²³ Vergados (2013: 513) notes Sappho fr. 130.2 as an antecedent.

²⁴ 'On Love', p. 618. On the Platonic antecedents of these reflections see Chichester (2013: 144).

The emphasis on love as a form of ‘attraction’ occasioned by the discovery of an insufficiency within ourselves parallels Apollo’s acknowledgement in 593–4 that Mercury’s music outstrips his ability to be adequately responsive to it. In addition to the parallel between ‘unutterable love’ and the ‘insufficient void’ that accompanies ‘powerful attraction’, several other similarities between the two texts indicate a continuity in Shelley’s handling of love’s affective qualities. With his juxtaposition of ‘untired’ and ‘soul-awakening’, Apollo hints at a concinnity between the music’s properties and its effects that is articulated by the narrator in the line that immediately precedes Apollo’s speech: ‘These words were wingèd with his swift delight’. Shelley expands on the conventional Homeric line (καί μιν φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα, 435) with an emphasis on transience (‘swift delight’) which hints at the ‘evanescent visitation’ to which the Greek line might relate. Moreover, Apollo’s are words shaped specifically by ‘delight’. Together with ‘wingèd’ picking up on ‘circling flight’, this suggests that what follows will be an attempt to achieve a concinnity between words and feelings, as Apollo ‘awakens’, or strives to awaken, in his language ‘a community’ with his auditory experience.

The metaphor of ‘circling flight’ also attributes to Mercury’s ‘notes’ a bird-like autonomy that extends the conventional association of poetry and birdsong. The image is developed in the semi-personification of ‘The penetrating notes did live and move’, which shows music taking on the features of a form of life internal to Apollo’s consciousness. This exchange, in which music acts as the vehicle for the conveyance of intense sensation, is akin to the fantasised identity of persons in erotic encounter described in ‘On Love’ (‘we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our

own'),²⁵ but the song's narrative twins this affective power with cosmogony. Mercury recounts the process by which the cosmos is harmoniously allocated among the gods ('to the immortals every one | A portion was assigned of all that is') and by which orienting ontological divisions are established ('the birth | Of the bright Gods and the dark desert Earth'). In its prototypicality and articulation of an order in which the gods' brightness becomes aesthetically paradigmatic, the song's narrative approximates the internal mental landscape which Shelley envisages as developing when an individual's self-reflexive faculties are realized, and there emerges in the mind 'a miniature of our entire self ... the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man'.²⁶ Music and cosmogony combine to create in Apollo an 'ideal' interiority which stimulates an 'utterable love', an ineffable longing for 'community' between Apollo's thoughts and the cosmos they reach towards.

Here too, however, as with 'swift delight', Shelley has language shadow experiential evanescence. For ἐγέραμεν ἀοιδῆν (429), he gives 'Clothe in the light of his loud melodies', a line transparently recognisable as a product of his own imagistic repertoire, especially in its condensation of several strands of metaphor and its catachrestic application of 'light'. Picking up on the light imagery of 'bright gods', 'Clothe in the light' implies both that Mercury's 'melodies' take on the valence of the gods' appearance, and that they impart their own distinctive brightness to concepts. Music's referent and effect, however, are complicated by the testingly paradoxical collocation of texture, light, and sound the line engineers: as often elsewhere in Shelley's corpus, an 'ideal prototype' is experienced only in proportion to an

²⁵ 'On Love', p. 619.

²⁶ 'On Love', p. 618.

awareness of the inability of our faculties to fully realise such possibilities.²⁷ Employing a metaphorical register alien to the Greek, Shelley encourages readers to find in his translation the discovery of an ‘unapprehended relation’, as his line projects or discovers behind ἐγέραιρεν ἀοιδῆν a moment in which a mode of intelligibility opens up that neither Apollo nor (more importantly) the poet responsible for the *Hymn to Hermes* can adequately capture. On this account, Shelley’s retrojections are not only a virtuosic parading of his own poetic identity and concerns, but a means of writing moral and imaginative possibilities back into the imaginative domain of which the original text is a ‘trace’.

The Politics of Possibility

Shelley’s imaginative reconfiguring of his models has been paramount in my readings so far, but it is also important to see these dialogues in the context of the deeply political nature of his thinking about antiquity. His engagement with ancient poetry and art is matched by extensive consideration of historiography and political history, and by a sensitivity to what he saw as the intellectually deleterious effects of institutions that shaped the social life of the ancient world, most prominently organized religion and monarchy, but also slavery and the customs that constricted women’s intellectual and emotional development.²⁸ As well as being ill in themselves, these led to a diminution of the intellectual and moral faculties of the whole society. As a result, the shortcomings as well as the splendours of ancient

²⁷ For the idea, compare ‘Julian and Maddalo’ 14–19: ‘I love all waste | And solitary places; where we taste | The pleasure of believing what we see | Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be’, where ‘waste | And solitary places’ are a figure for the ‘boundless’ interiority ‘we’ wish our souls to constitute.

²⁸ For the latter see especially ‘A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancients Relative to the Subject of Love, A Fragment’, p. 220 (in D. Clark, *Shelley’s Prose*, London, 1988).

societies such as Athens should be viewed as a moral spur for action specific to our own historical circumstances:

What the Greeks were, was a reality, not a promise. And what we are and hope to be, is derived, as it were, from the influence and inspiration of these glorious generations ... When we discover how far the most admirable community ever framed, was removed from that perfection to which human society is impelled by some active power within each bosom, to aspire, how great ought to be our hopes, how resolute our struggles! For the Greeks of the Periclean age were widely different from us ...²⁹

I touch here on two instances of how Shelley's poetry bears out such concerns. What emerges in these moments is not a solution to the problems posed by historical and contemporary political developments, but the adumbration of a creative scrutiny of antiquity from which richer forms of political consciousness might spring.

Shelley's political sympathies often emerge in a poetry that enacts the need to transcend the exemplary limitations of antiquity, and that in doing so precipitates a mode of reading that might be informed by the latent possibilities of ancient texts in a manner parallel to Athens' 'influence and inspiration' being conditioned by its limitations. Although Shelley's vision of Athens in 'Ode to Liberty' is perhaps the most powerful instance of such poetry,³⁰ my particular focus here falls on the first and last stanzas of the poem:³¹

²⁹ 'A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancients', p. 219.

³⁰ 'Ode to Liberty' 61–90.

³¹ The poem was written in May and early June 1820 and was prompted by an uprising against the Spanish King, Ferdinand IV, earlier in the year: the circumstances of the composition are discussed at *LAEP* III pp. 379–80; important readings of the poem include Chernaik (1972: 87–108), Cameron (1974: 364–70), Hitt (2001), Keach (2004: 151–8).

A glorious people vibrated again
The lightning of the nations: Liberty
From heart to heart, from tower to tower, o'er Spain,
Scattering contagious fire into the sky,
Gleamed. My soul spurned the chains of its dismay,
And, in the rapid plumes of song
Clothed itself, sublime and strong;
As a young eagle soars the morning clouds among,
Hovering in verse o'er its accustomed prey;
Till from its station in the heaven of fame
The Spirit's whirlwind rapt it, and the ray
Of the remotest sphere of living flame
Which paves the void was from behind it flung,
As foam from a ship's swiftness ...

As scholars have noted, 'As a young eagle soars the morning clouds among, |
Hovering in verse o'er its accustomed prey' draws on the closing lines of Pindar's
Nemean 3 (76–82):³²

χαῖρε, φίλος· ἐγὼ τόδε τοι
πέμπω μεμιγμένον μέλι λευκῶ
σὺν γάλακτι, κίρναμένα δ' ἔερσ' ἀμφέπει,
πόμ' ἀοίδιμον Αἰολίσσιν ἐν πνοαῖσιν αὐλῶν,

³² The connection is pointed out by e.g. Webb (1977: 42–3), *LAEP* III p. 388. *LAEP* III p. 380 also notes that Shelley transcribed *Pyth.* 8.95–7 in a notebook and wrote around them drafts of 'Ode to Liberty' 4 and 8–13.

ὄψέ περ. ἔστι δ' αἰετὸς ὠκύς ἐν ποτανοῖς,
ὃς ἔλαβεν αἶψα, τηλόθε μεταμαιόμενος,
δαφρινὸν ἄγρην ποσίν·
κραγέται δὲ κολοιοὶ ταπεινὰ νέμονται.

80

Farewell, friend. I send you this honey mingled with white milk, which the stirred foam crowns, a drink of song accompanied by the Aeolian breaths of pipes, late though it be. Swift is the eagle among birds, which suddenly seizes, as it searches from afar, the bloodied prey in its talons: the cawing jackdaws range down below.

Differences of phrasing and context, however, indicate that Pindar, whose oligarchic political conservatism sits uneasily alongside Shelley's radical egalitarianism, is as much a foil as a straightforward model.³³

Readers are alerted to such differences by the touch of irony in 'accustomed prey'. Shelley's 'prey' is different from Pindar's; it is the image, rather than the poem's subject and purpose, to which readers are 'accustomed'.³⁴ Pindar's more context-focused poetics, in which self-referential language ostensibly replicates, and binds the poem to, the violence of its subject-matter (most obviously αἰετὸς ὠκύς ἐν ποτανοῖς ... δαφρινὸν ἄγρην), is displaced by a poetry in which superhuman forces ('whirlwind', 'living flame') are vehicles for the soul's elevation, and which takes

³³ Hitt (2001: 72) claims that the eagle 'taints the scene with another reminder of the violence of nature', but this reading does not account for Shelley's diminishing the violence of the Pindaric image.

³⁴ 'My soul spurned the chains of its dismay' foreshadows this differentiation: Shelley's poem grounds itself in a moral response to suffering that takes as its object a whole society, whereas Pindar's attention is directed towards a smaller group, that of the victor, his family, and his immediate associates (caught in the concluding emphasis on the victor, 83–4).

flight towards a domain posited solely by the imagination.³⁵ The most violent element of Pindar's phrasing (δαφαινὸν ἄγραν, 81) is excised, and the purposive, destructive down-thrust of τηλόθε μεταμαιόμενος (81) becomes a symbolic, self-actualizing 'soar[ing]'.

Structure functions similarly. The 'Pindaric' comparison is positioned between lines that nod to (among others) Plato ('in rapid plumes of song | Clothed itself ...'), and the Dantean (and Platonic) imagery of 'Till from its station in the heaven of fame ...', so that the eagle is transformed from a climatic figure into a stage in imaginative progression, culminating in the encounter with 'The Spirit's whirlwind', that mimics the trajectory of the Platonic soul in the *Phaedrus*.³⁶ When read against the Pindaric model, this framing gains purchase from the respective, and strongly contrastive, substitutions for Pindar's material focus on local conditions of performance (suggested in the reference to music in πόμ' αἰοίδιμον Αἰολίσσιν ἐν πνοαῖσιν ἀύλων) and competitive engagement with rivals.

Yet Pindar's programmatic salience indicates that intertextuality brings about a selective reading of his lines rather than simple displacement. Phrasing and structure position the Pindaric model, like Mercury's 'fire sticks' and Apollo's reaction to music, as potentializing, rather than a subject of imitation that is autonomous and complete in itself. Pindar's eagle becomes in Shelley's appropriation a figure for imaginative interpellation rather than local political efficacy or rhetorical function. Crucially, Shelley's rewriting shows him interpellated as much by the possibilities Pindar opens up as by the image itself. Read as antecedents, Pindar's lines become 'the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire'.³⁷ Shelley's selective framing accentuates a feature implicit in Pindar, the eagle's figuring of an imaginative

³⁵ On the conceit see Curran (1986: 80–1), O'Neill (2013: 337).

³⁶ See *LAEP* III p. 389.

³⁷ See p. ***.

self-assertion that pulls away from and transfigures the world it imagines, and suggests that it is from this aspect that the exemplary, transhistorical value of Pindar's poetry emerges, or ought to emerge, for contemporary readers.

For all its subtlety, however, the understanding of Pindar enabled in these lines might seem glancingly trivial when set against the sweep of history that the 'Ode to Liberty' traces, and the pessimism, or at least impassioned uncertainty, the poem stages about the prospects for Liberty's success in an age that has seen the terrible events set in train by the French Revolution, and the oppressive atmosphere of post-Waterloo Britain.³⁸ The poet's apparent weakness in the face of history is suggested in the image of the dying swan in the final stanza (273–7), which evokes Horace's use of the swan to figure Pindar as the paradigmatic sublime poet,³⁹ and which transforms the bold, hopeful Pindaric 'eagle' of the opening into a creature defined by its pathetic vulnerability.⁴⁰

But as the poem moves towards its conclusion, the echoes of the 'great voice' that 'sustain[ed]' Shelley's performance becoming 'waves which ... | Hiss round a drowner's head in their tempestuous play' (282–5),⁴¹ apparent hopelessness is offset by more hopeful intimations. The dying swan immediately gives way to further images (278–82):

As summer clouds dissolve, unburdened of their rain;

³⁸ For the importance of these events to Shelley's thought see e.g. *Letters* I 504, O'Neill (1989: 123), Duff (1994), Sachs (2006: 121–2).

³⁹ The 'sublimely winging' of 273 recalls Horace *Odes* 4.2.25–7: *multa Dircaeam leuat aura cycnum, | tendit, Antoni, quotiens in altos | nubium tractus* ('a mighty breeze raises aloft the Dircaean swan, Antonius, whenever he soars into the high paths of the clouds').

⁴⁰ As *LAEP* III p. 417–18 points out, 'When the bolt has pierced his brain' recalls *Ov. Fast.* 2.109–10, where Arion's song, as he plays to the pirates who are about to throw him overboard, is compared to that of a dying swan. For different assessments of the poem's view of Liberty as either hopeful, despairing, or a combination of the two, see especially Roberts (1997: 436–9), Hitt (2001: 80–5), Keach (2004: 156, 158), O'Neill (2013: 338).

⁴¹ An image perhaps not devoid of ironic humour: see *LAEP* III p. 418 ad loc.

As a far taper fades with fading night,
As a brief insect dies with dying day,
My song, its pinions disarrayed of might,
Drooped ...

Multiplicity enacts and gives shape to poetic fecundity even as it declares its diminishment. As ‘unburdened’ implies relief at a gruelling task discharged, a refusal of simple closure is voiced by ‘As summer clouds dissolve, unburdened of their rain’ (278), which balances evanescence with a foreshadowing of harvest. The mannered polyptotons of ‘fades with fading’ and ‘dies with dying’ seem to express a defeated resignation, as attention to differences is displaced by apparently bland repetition, but in the movement from ‘night’ to ‘day’, the song’s ‘fading’ is extended and carried into the future, and an impression created of a limited but insistent perpetuation overflowing the conceit that cordons it. This movement picks up the prolepsis of ‘summer clouds’, and underscores the potential for recovery implicit in the metaphors it frames. The abundant inventiveness with which Shelley envisions his song’s failure asserts the transfigurative power of his creativity, and its prolepses limn the hope that it, like the poems on which it is modelled, will bear fruit unpredictably in the future. Although he disavows simple identity with the ‘sublimely winging’ Pindaric swan,⁴² his resourceful creation of a poetic form the generative power of which transcends the immediate political context to which it is ostensibly answerable makes good on the handling of Pindar in the poem’s first stanza.

Beyond accentuating its author’s imaginative power, the poem’s ending foregrounds the challenges of responding to its particular version of the past. Within

⁴² The turn away from the Pindaric sublime is driven home by an allusion in ‘its pinions disarrayed of might | Drooped’ (281–2) to Gray’s dissociation of himself from Pindar: ‘nor the pride nor ample pinion | That the Theban eagle bare’ (‘The Progress of Poesy’, 114–15).

the fiction that frames the ‘Ode’, ‘the echoes far away | Of the great voice which did its flight sustain’ (282–3) proceed from a supernatural source, but as part of the poem’s texture they recall the ‘Prophetic echoes’ that ‘flung dim melody | On the unapprehensive wild’ in early Greece (50–1). The failing of Shelley’s song is thus coupled with a reminder of the understanding of history, art, and literature with which its transfigurations have equipped readers, the infancy of Greece’s artistic development rendered significant as premonitions of Liberty (46–60) and integrated into a story that spans the present age. More obliquely, the ‘echoes ... of the great voice’ also suggest the ‘echoes’ of the poets that ‘did sustain’ the poem by providing its models, and which have been subject to allusive reshaping throughout. As a counterweight to the image of drowning, we are reminded that poets such as Pindar are folded into this ‘great voice’ by being lent additional resonance in Shelley’s reimagination of them.⁴³ The imaginative work of positing antiquity and its literature as a particular past from which a particular future might emerge, and of holding open a ‘futuraity’ into which readers can enter in order to ‘sustain’ these relations for themselves, is offered as a resource that might work against, and even help to affect, the processes of history.⁴⁴

Untimely Antiquities

Shelley frequently reflected on the fragmentariness that conditioned contemporary response to antiquity. The imperfect remainders of the ancient world could be a cause

⁴³ In this sense, the ‘great voice’ parallels the ‘great poem’ of ‘A Defence’, for which see p. ***.

⁴⁴ O’Neill (2013: 338) argues that in these lines ‘philosophical and ethical wisdom surrender themselves ... to the element of a self-reflexive creativity ... whose very guarantee is its own provisional instability’. But this ‘creativity’ also has an outward-facing dimension, with consequences for the exemplary power readers accord to antiquity.

for wonder at what had been lost,⁴⁵ or could create situations in which a fragmentary sublimity outdid the complete originals.⁴⁶ Yet his thinking does not ascribe to antiquity an ideal domain of understanding against the loss of which the present cannot but measure its belatedness. Just as the social fabric of antiquity should not be taken as straightforwardly exemplary, neither should its receptive conditions. For Shelley, poets' heightened relation to the world results in creations which act 'beyond and above consciousness', and are rarely if ever fully appreciated in their own time.⁴⁷ Such shortcomings are sometimes occasioned not just by the poetry itself but by deficiencies in 'sensitivity' operative in a particular period. A powerful articulation of this view occurs in his critique of the Hellenistic 'sensitivity':

And let us not circumscribe the effects of [Hellenistic] bucolic and erotic poetry within the limits of the sensitivity of those to whom it was addressed. They may have perceived the beauty of these immortal compositions, simply as fragments or isolated portions: those who are more finely organized, or born in a happier age, may recognize them as episodes of that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.⁴⁸

Passages such as this frame in theoretical terms what the passages from the 'Hymn to Mercury' and 'Ode to Liberty' discussed above realize poetically, implying as they do

⁴⁵ See especially the discussion of ancient music at 'A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancients', p. 217.

⁴⁶ See e.g. *Letters* II 87 '[Rome] is a city of palaces & temples more glorious than those which any other city contains, & of ruins more glorious than they'; *Letters* II 488 (referring to the Coliseum): 'I can scarcely believe that when encrusted with Dorian marble & ornamented by columns of Egyptian granite its effect could have been so sublime & so impressive as in its present state': see further Sachs (2006: 110).

⁴⁷ See the passage quoted in n. 17.

⁴⁸ 'A Defence', p. 664. For discussion of the 'great poem' see Duff (2009: 195–6).

that engagement with antiquity should not aim primarily at the recreation of historical conditions that obtained in the past or pursue identity with the ancients' sensibilities and interpretative faculties.⁴⁹ By emphasising antiquity's moral and political failings, and asserting that even the great Greek authors, to say nothing of their audiences, were not 'fully aware of the excellency of [their] poetry',⁵⁰ Shelley challenges us to consider what becoming so ourselves might entail. By translating or echoing ancient texts in ways that accentuate the additional meanings they take on when read as 'episodes of th[e] great poem', he stages the means of such enhanced awareness.

Our conversations with antiquity, Shelley suggests, are doubly anachronistic. Processes of historical change render ancient texts out of joint. Reading them entails being given over to the intellectual possibilities which emerge in the unforeseeable junctures between poems' 'waters of wisdom and delight' and the 'peculiar relations' through which they are apprehended. Equally, however, such conversations entail encounters with texts which were out of joint in their own time, so that there is no secure exemplary receptiveness within antiquity itself in which to ground our engagements. We are close here to Joshua Billings' telling identification of 'engagement with the *untimeliness* of antiquity ... as the genuinely productive force in classical reception',⁵¹ although with the additional emphasis that for Shelley, such untimeliness is written into ancient poetry at its inception.

The version of 'the *untimeliness* of antiquity' Shelley promotes also has consequences for readers' moral agency and historical self-consciousness, which can be elucidated with reference to the power he accords poetry to expand readers' imaginative capacities:

⁴⁹ Even Athens' status as a model, for which see Webb (1977: 203), Duff (2009: 194) is premised more on its achievements than on the receptivity internal to it.

⁵⁰ See above n. ***.

⁵¹ Billings (2010: 21–2).

The great instrument of moral good is the imagination: and poetry administers to the effect by acting on the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts.⁵²

Ancient poetry's efficacy in 'enlarg[ing] the circumference of the imagination' depends in part on a readerly openness to moments in those texts in which futurity's giant shadows can be apprehended. The dialogues in which 'Hymn to Mercury' and 'Ode to Liberty' involve readers anticipate Alain Badiou's characterisation of an event as that which 'opens up a possibility ... [and] proposes something to us', and which entails a fidelity to what the event makes possible, such that an individual comes to 'participate in the new subject made possible by the event'.⁵³ Shelley's retrojections project a 'new subject' proportionate to the poet's inventions, and invite an expansion of readers' moral and interpretative sensibilities adequate to the demands of the 'great poem' in which they are called to participate.⁵⁴

The morally interpellative aspect of these dialogues with antiquity is matched by the suppleness with which they respond to historical change. Some historiographical thinkers, most famously Reinhart Koselleck, have found in 'the processual nature of modern history' (starting with the French Revolution) a 'peculiar' temporality which renders an historical exemplarity grounded in continuity defunct: 'it is not the past', argues Koselleck, 'but the future of historical time that

⁵² 'A Defence', p. 659. Wasserman (1971: 211) notes that, for Shelley, 'moral good ... is the *effect* of form'; see *ibid.* p. 220 for comment on this passage.

⁵³ Badiou (2013: 9–10).

⁵⁴ For the phrase, see the passage quoted in n. ***. Such projections enjoin a recognition that 'each mind is essentially an equivalent particle of the Absolute' (Wasserman (1971: 206)), but also of the specific contexts of self-realisation that shape the emergence of the transcendental aspect of the self.

renders similitude dissimilar'.⁵⁵ By contrast, Shelley presents a historicity in which the future is conceived not as a unmasterable sequence of radically unpredictable occurrences, but a domain for the emergence of alternative forms of continuity between temporal periods, based on a transcontextual capacity for imaginative and moral self-actualization. Sensitivity to the future enjoins an acknowledgement of self-limitation grounded in an awareness of the extent to which understanding of futurity was occluded from even great writers of the past. But we are also invited to measure our own dealings with antiquity against those 'new relations ... unforeseen and unconceived' that will succeed our own. Like 'The oracular thunder' of the 'Ode to Naples' or the city 'such as vision | Builds' in 'Ode to Liberty',⁵⁶ antiquity's occluded future is always before us, a protreptic and a promise.

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⁵⁵ Koselleck (1985: 38).

⁵⁶ 'Ode to Naples' 6, 'Ode to Liberty' 61–2.

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