L'ANALISI

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PUBBLICAZIONE QUADRIMESTRALE

*I contributi di questa pubblicazione sono stati sottoposti
alla valutazione di due* Peer Reviewers *in forma rigorosamente anonima*

Indice

Poetry and Metonymy: Percy Bysshe Shelley's Poetical Revolution

Lilla Maria Crisafulli
Università di Bologna

In this essay I would like to argue that, while in Italy, Percy Bysshe Shelley not only reached his poetic maturity, but also expanded his aesthetic theory in such a way that it might constitute a sort of bridge system, able to reconcile Shelley's empiricism with his idealism, together with his political and poetic goals. I believe that the aim of this theory, which can be described as holistic, was to fill the gap between art and society in an era of mercantilist ruthlessness and philosophical pessimism.

Il presente saggio intende argomentare in che modo Percy Bysshe Shelley, nel corso del suo soggiorno in Italia, non solo raggiunse la maturità poetica, ma ampliò altresì la propria teoria estetica costruendo una sorta di 'sistema ponte' in grado di conciliare empirismo e idealismo, obiettivi politici ed estetici. Fine di questa teoria, che può essere descritta come olistica, era quello di colmare il divario tra arte e società in un'epoca di forte mercantilismo e di pessimismo filosofico.

Keywords: Percy Bysshe Shelley, metonymy, aesthetics, poetic language

In this essay I would like to argue that Shelley, while in Italy, not only reached his poetic maturity[1], but also expanded his aesthetic theory in such a way that it might constitute a sort of bridge system, able to reconcile Shelley's empiricism with his idealism, together with his political and poetic goals. I believe that the aim of this theory, which can be described as holistic, was to fill the gap between art and society in an era of mercantilist ruthlessness, and philosophical pessimism. After all, the Britain of Shelley's years owed its prosperity to mechanical production, the exploitation of labour, the slave trade, and paper money. The latter had deprived salaried workers of the 'face value' of traditional silver and gold coins, as Shelley himself lamented in his political essay *A Philosophical View of Reform* (written early in 1820 but published only in 1920)[2].

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[1] Stuart Curran refers to the year 1819 in Shelley's literary production as Shelley's *annus mirabilis*. However, this definition might be easily extended to the whole period of his stay in Italy. See S. Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision*, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA 1975.

[2] As Paul Cantor points out, "Shelley attacks only one target in *A Philosophical View of Reform*: the national debt of Great Britain. He holds the newly created system of deficit financing solely responsible for the economic woes of the English people. In particular, he condemns the British government's substitution of paper money for the precious metal currency that had prevailed in the country, a change that caused an inflation that

It is no surprise, then, that the era had also produced the most vicious satire on the social function of poetry, with the publication of Thomas Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry* (first published in Ollier's *Literary Miscellany* in 1820[3]). Peacock's attack obliged Shelley to reassess his own aesthetic principles: exiled as he was in Italy, he had to respond to the supposed irrelevance to which Peacock's essay had overtly condemned poetry, and, implicitly, the very role played by Shelley himself as a poet and humanist[4]. On 15 February 1821, Shelley wrote to Peacock: "your anathemas against poetry itself excited me to a sacred rage [...]. I had the greatest possible desire to break a lance with you [...] in honour of my mistress Urania"[5].

As a result, Shelley found himself having to defend poetry, and his own work, from the most damaging accusation, that of being useless or, worse still – from Peacock's point of view – of being a meaningless expression of the past, the legacy of a barbarous and primitive epoch. In *The Four Ages of Poetry* Peacock outlines the development of poetry in parallel with the evolution of society and civilization, but tracing two opposing trajectories. Where the one, poetry, sets out from an initial valuable social role, but with the passing of the ages becomes increasingly superfluous and even ludicrous, the other, civilization, is instead characterized by a constant and enlightened advancement. Peacock becomes particularly fierce in his dismissal of the role of poetry in society when he comes to deal with contemporary poetry. He parodies the poetry of the two Romantic generations, but seems to forget Shelley, whose name he omits altogether. To Peacock, the poetry of his age is judged – if not an outright obstacle to the evolution of society – at best useless, being made up of the following:

> The rant of unregulated passion, the whining of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiments [...]. It can never make a philosopher, nor a statesman, nor in any class of life an useful or rational man. It cannot claim the slightest share in any one of the comforts and utilities of life of which we have witnessed so many and so rapid advances[6].

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impoverished its citizenry" (P. Cantor, *The Poet as Economist: Shelley's Critique of Paper Money and the British National Debt*, "The Journal of Libertarian Studies", 13, 1997, pp. 21-44 (p. 23)).

[3] T.L. Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*, "Ollier's Literary Miscellany in Prose and Verse by Several Hands", 1, 1820, pp. 183-200.

[4] The ironic vein of Peacock had already struck Shelley, but also amused him, in 1818 when he had made of the poet the protagonist of his satirical novella *Nightmare Abbey*. He had painted Shelley's poetical and political inclinations under the guise of the crazed philosopher and dreaming reformer Scythrop. In one of his most parodic passages, Peacock writes: "'You are a philosopher', said the lady, 'and a lover of liberty. You are the author of a treatise called 'Philosophical Gas; or, a Project for a General Illumination of the Human Mind'. 'I am'. Said Scythrop, delighted at the first blossom of his renown" (T.L. Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey*, R. Wright ed., Penguin, London 1969, p. 92).

[5] P.B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, F.L. Jones ed., 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1964, Vol. 2, p. 261.

[6] T.L. Peacock, *Peacock's Four Ages of Poetry*, H.F.B. Brett-Smith ed., Blackwell, Oxford 1937, p. 17.

Shelley, who strongly believed in the progressive and social value of the humanities, and who, unlike Coleridge, Wordsworth or even Byron, could not resort to a divine plan and a transcendental order, had to draw on the only faith he had cultivated over time: his love for freedom and poetic language. Shelley had faith in what Étienne Bonnot de Condillac had stated, "the progress of the human mind depends entirely on the skill we bring to the use of language"[7].

Furthermore, he relied on the feeling of sympathy, which for Edmund Burke was the principle governing the 'sublime'. In his essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke praises figurative language, typical of literary discourse, and of poetry in particular, and underlines the unique and unrepeatable capacity of the verbal image to transform itself into pure energy, into a 'living' word able to create worlds out of sounds. Burke cites Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and precisely the scene describing the fall of Lucifer in hell, as paradigmatic for his thesis. Likewise, Shelley, who was also a great admirer of Milton's epic poem, believed that poetical language generates emotions and unforgettable intellectual experiences. In addition to Burke, Shelley had also read assiduously the works of Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, Rousseau, Condorcet, Price and Godwin, and was able to blend the utilitarian principle to the principle of sympathy. When he uses the example of Milton in the "Defence", as well as in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, he succeeds in articulating to a greater extent Burke's example of the cause-effect principle, i.e. the relationship between word and world, sound and image, emphasizing the extent to which the force of Milton's imagination resides in the intimate relationship between the pathos that flows from his figurative word and the ethos of the thought that lies behind it. In the fresco of the history of civilization that Shelley outlines in the "Defence", his response to Peacock's provocation, what emerges most clearly is precisely the analogy between thought and word. To Shelley, the ages that expressed freedom of thought saw the greatest and most ambitious literary achievements, while the ages that lived in the darkness of enslaved minds produced modest and artificial artworks. Thus, Shelley resorts to a mode of linguistic relativism, according to which language – or, more precisely, literary language – always reflects the world of its speakers.

"A Defence of Poetry" was not only Shelley's answer to Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry*, but it also became his poetical manifesto, obliging the man and the poet to merge into one. "A Defence", then, revolves around the most awesome gift of human genetic and cultural heritage, namely language – which Shelley saw as being produced by the freest faculty of the human mind, imagination, and related to its highest prerogative, thought. However, in order to defend poetry from the marginalization to which the prevailing industrialization and contemporary scientism had allotted it (of which Peacock, a witty writer and able administrator at the service of the East India Company, was in many ways a representative), Shelley articulated a poetics that worked by extension, and could encompass its range of action, well beyond literature. It included not only the canonical territory of versification and figurative images, but also a dense weave of additional inclusions that would allow po-

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[7] É. Bonnot de Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, H. Aarsleff ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 69.

etry itself to encompass in its domain other trans-generic and trans-artistic forms, together with the highest moments in cultural and social history.

According to Kelvin Everest, it was the distinctive intelligence of Shelley to represent the great crisis of his era in a way that both universalizes and relativizes[8]. Hence, in the Shelleyan manifesto, poetry is presented not only as the genre that attracts to itself all other genres, but also as a sign and manifestation of an emancipated humankind, inspiration of the legislator, and foundation of collective living. Poetry becomes a hyper-genre to which all other genres, and, we might add, all other arts, can be subsumed. Shelley writes in "A Defence":

> Language, colour, form, and religious and civil habits of action are all the instru-
> ments and materials of poetry; they may be called poetry by that figure of speech
> which considers the effect as a synonime of the cause. But poetry in a more restrict-
> ed sense expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language
> which are created by that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the in-
> visible nature of man. And this springs from the nature itself of language, which is a
> more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is
> susceptible of more various and delicate combinations, [...] and is more plastic and
> obedient to the controul of that faculty of which it is the creation. For language is
> arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone; but all
> other materials, instruments and conditions of art have relations among each other,
> which limit and interpose between conception and expression. [...] Hence the fame
> of sculptors, painters and musicians [...] has never equalled that of poets in the re-
> stricted sense of the term[9].

Shelley, therefore, explicitly claims that what supersedes all the arts and literary genres pro-
duced by different realms of human endeavour is poetry, and that this supremacy somehow
"springs from the nature itself of language, which is a more direct representation of the ac-
tions and passions of our internal being". Or, to put it in another way, language can express
the deeper reality and activities of the human mind that generate poetry. Consequently
poetry, far from being closed in itself, is necessarily conditioned by contingency and conti-
guity, and gives a creative shape and an emotional frame to the way we perceive the world.

It is at this point that we are beginning to discern a less canonical aspect of Shelley's aes-
thetic theory, and the topic of this paper: i.e., the relationship between poetry and the rhe-
torical figure *par excellence* of contingency and contiguity, specifically metonymy. I would
argue that the role of metonymy in the "Defence" has a revolutionary effect on the tradition
of aesthetic reflection. In his essay, the Romantic poet explains how metonymy gives equal
dignity to literary works, artistic creation and knowledge: "they may be called poetry by
that figure of speech which considers the effect as a synonime of the cause". Metonymy is a figure
of semantic transfer based on the relation of some kind of contiguity (logical or material)
between the literal term and the translated term. However, such a contiguity between the

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[8] K. Everest, *"Mechanism of a kind yet Unattempted": The Dramatic Action of* Prometheus Unbound, "Durham University Journal", 85, 1993, pp. 237-245.
[9] P.B. Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, D.H. Reiman – N. Fraistat ed., Norton, New York 2002, p. 513.

literal and the translated term is due to the inferential function of metonymy and is strictly related to the way language functions. As Radden and Kövecses argue, "we have no other means of expressing and communicating our concepts than by using forms, language as well as other communication systems are of necessity metonymic"[10]. Interestingly, later in the "Defence", Shelley sums up his views by saying:

> The functions of the poetical faculty are two-fold; by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good[11].

And he concludes as follows:

> The first part of these remarks has related to Poetry in its elements and principles; and it has been shewn, as well as the narrow limits assigned them would permit, that what is called Poetry, in a restricted sense, has a common source with all other forms of order and of beauty according to which the materials of human life are susceptible of being arranged, and which is Poetry in an universal sense[12].

William Keach calls this process "intelligible analogy"[13], whereas, according to Stuart Peterfreund, Shelley in time steers away from figures that are mostly 'metonymic' to ones that are primarily 'metaphoric': "Metaphor and metonymy are inextricably linked in the dyadic dynamic of language. Metaphor is forward-looking, whereas metonymy is backward-looking. Metaphor is the figure of love expressed; metonymy, the figure of desire repressed. Metaphor projects while metonymy reifies. [...] Shelley himself hints at this dyadic dynamic repeatedly with the trope of looking forward and backward"[14]. What seems to me, instead, is that Shelley, while allowing a continuous interplay of various figures of speech (metaphors, symbols and allegories), upheld to the end a predominantly 'metonymic' approach or even system within his visionary world, by virtue of the regenerative and transformative power that he attributes to poetry – manifestation, as he saw it, of an "inspired and ideal kind"[15] – the effect of a creative cause. It was this "ideal kind" that the poet was able finally to envisage in particular during his stay in Italy. He saw it embodied in Italian

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[10] G. Radden – Z. Kövecses, *Towards a Theory of Metonymy*, in *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, K.-U. Panther – G. Radden ed., Benjamins, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 17-59 (p. 24).

[11] P.B. Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 531.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 535.

[13] W. Keach, *The Political Poet*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, T. Morton ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, pp. 123-142 (p. 129). See also Id., *Shelley's Style*, New York/London, Methuen 1984 (in particular Chapter 1, "The Mirror and the Veil: Language in Shelley's *Defence*").

[14] S. Peterfreund, *Shelley among Others: The Play of the Intertext and the Idea of Language*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London 2002, p. 30. See also J.E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works*, Oxford University Press, New York 1988, p. 152.

[15] P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 51.

art, history, and natural landscapes; therefore, sensually and almost physically operating in transference, that is, becoming a concrete display of the abstract ideal of beauty.

Within this frame of interpretation one can also place Shelley's use of the poetic and literary genres. In *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, Stuart Curran emphasized how the work of Shelley welcomes and includes a great variety of genres, prose, poetry and theatre, and how, within these main genres, there converges an equally dense variety of genres and subgenres, from the gothic novel to the non-fiction, from the long poem to the ode, from the satirical poem to the elegy, from the pastoral poem to the lyric drama. A multiplicity of genres, concludes Curran, which corresponds to a variety of different strategies for forming the reader's response[16]. Curran successfully highlights Shelley's creative richness, but I believe that this convergence is also the sign of a quest that the English Romantic poet was carrying out in the attempt to create words that were not only arbitrary linguistic signs but motivated expressions of the will and that, as such, were transformed into powerful symbolic speech acts. In other words, the use of a particular genre, or the grafting of one genre onto another, allows the poet to give substance and a form to the object of his poetry. It shapes its meaning and gives rise to a lively and dynamic language able to manifest metonymically the poet's rational mind and poetic intention. Examples of such a dense use of poetic or dramatic genres, or of multi-layered poetry, in Shelley's work are numerous: notably the lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound* – to which we will come back later on in this paper – that beautifully weaves together language, music, song and ballet in order to create the utopia of a regenerated world where signifier, signified and referent intersect in a harmonious and organic whole. Similarly, his political manifesto *The Mask of Anarchy*, where masque and anti-masque stage a class struggle, while the ballad form turns the poem into a revolutionary song uttered by and for the oppressed. Not to mention the satirical play, or burlesque, *Oedipus Tyrannus, or Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820) – inspired by King George IV's attempt to divorce from his wife Caroline of Brunswick, in which royal pigs serve as chorus. The play, using Aristophanes's comedy and social critique as a classical model, creates, very much like the procession of the notables in *The Mask of Anarchy,* a counter-space of the contemporary political debate, and a contestation or 'heterotopia', defined by Foucault as a site which constitutes a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live"[17]. To Foucault, heterotopian spaces include the theatre, the library, the museum, the ship and the mirror, but also spaces that simultaneously reflect and contest their surroundings, 'counter-spaces' that are in different ways outside

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[16] S. Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990.

[17] M. Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* [*Des espaces autres*, "Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité", 5, 1984, pp. 46-49], J. Miskowiec trans., http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf (last accessed February 25, 2019), p. 4. The notion of 'heterotopia' was introduced by Michel Foucault and put to use in literary, sociological and anthropological as well as political studies. Foucault's first reference to the concept of heterotopias appeared in 1966 within his preface to *Les Mots et les Choses*, translated into English as *The Order of Things* (1970). In March 1967 Foucault was invited in Paris to give a lecture to a group of prominent architects. He gave the lecture and it is in the transcript of this lecture that the concept of heterotopia found its widest audience. The text appeared just before his death in 1984 as *Des espaces autres*, and in translation two years later as *Of Other Spaces*.

the ordinary, including cemeteries, brothels, prisons, asylums, and holiday villages. Thus, heterotopian space can be seen as a magical, albeit metonymic place due to its contiguity to the 'real' world, outside the practices of everyday life. "The heterotopia", Foucault adds, "is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible"[18]. If we now turn back to "A Defence of Poetry", we realize that to Shelley poetry is at the same time in and outside the *real* world, since it includes everything but is nonetheless different from everything else. Poetry becomes a virtual site that somehow exists separately from all other places, but that gives rise to similarly imaginary notions of space:

> Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language in itself music and persuasion out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms. He was [...] the Lucifer of that starry flock which in the thirteenth century shone forth from republican Italy [...] into the darkness of the benighted world. His very words are instinct with spirit; [...] a burning atom of inextinguishable thought [...]. All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially[19].

Then Shelley completes his reflections:

> 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 [...], another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight[20].

In his poetic manifesto, Shelley creates an organic theory of knowledge, decidedly secular and, indeed, progressive. Poetry becomes a palimpsest in which different epochs, arts, languages and cultures are stratified. Poetry, as it has been suggested earlier, is turned into a kind of hyper-genre that presides over all other arts and genres, capable of harmonizing different fields of knowledge and the various succeeding ages. From this perspective the history of art is one with literary history, and the latter with the history of philosophy, architecture and science. Given this interpretative hypothesis, the problem of the hybridization of genres lends itself, as far as Shelley's work and thought are concerned, to a broader debate involving the very means of expression, i.e. language itself, that produces and supports not only hybridization but also the overall epistemological system.

We might refer to Pavel Medvedev and Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom the literary genre should not be understood only as a set of techniques or a specific assembly of linguistic elements, but rather as a specific way of visualizing and conceptualizing reality on a degree more or less rich in genres depending on the human consciousness that produces them

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[18] *Ibidem*.

[19] P.B. Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 528.

[20] *Ibidem*.

and its ideological environment[21]. It follows that genre becomes a cognitive resource and is based on a dialogic principle that somehow also shapes the author's view of the world[22]. It would therefore be a matter of arranging words and phrases according to different ways of seeing, so that each genre would imply a new seeing or expansion of the vision and, in this sense, seeing and representing would merge. Medvedev's and Bakhtin's positions, for whom genres are really forms of thinking, suggest how it can be unsuccessful for an artist to use a genre for purposes alien to the ethos of that particular genre. Bakhtin also believes that the literary genres, and their revitalization, reflect the changes that take place in life and society, and even anticipate those changes by leading to new ways of seeing human experience. Finally, a literary genre becomes a precious reservoir of memories, because it accumulates past forms and modes while it itself is founded on stratifications of history and ideas. In the same way, according to Bakhtin, through genres great artists create potentials for the future by exploiting the resources of the past. This resonates with Shelley's assumptions in the "Defence", although it must be said that the English poet had begun to develop his aesthetic research well before the writing of the "Defence" (1821). In the first year of his arrival in Italy, in 1818, concerning the Italian painting and sculpture that he saw and admired, he admitted:

> The material part indeed of these works must perish, but they survive in the mind
> of man, & the remembrances connected with them are transmitted from generation
> to generation. The poet embodies them in his creation, the systems of philosophers

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[21] See P.N. Medvedev – M.M. Bakhtin, *The Object, Tasks, and Methods of Literary History* in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, A.J. Wehrle trans., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1985, pp. 131-134. See also M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, C. Emerson – M. Holquist ed., V.W. McGee trans., Texas University Press, Austin 1986.

[22] P.N. Medvedev – M.M. Bakhtin, *The Object, Tasks, and Methods of Literary History*, pp. 131-134. On Medvedev's view of literary genres we can refer to M. Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique. M.M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology*, Routledge, London 1992, p. 22: "Of particular interest is Medvedev's suggestion that the apprehension of social or natural reality through any given semiotic medium – and here the literary occupies a privileged place – is organized in terms of specific generic forms, each of which 'possesses definite principles of selection, definite forms for seeing and conceptualizing reality, and a definite scope and depth of penetration'. Hence, they constitute a kind of ideological framework or cultural grid through which the 'substantial, objective, [and] thematic' features of the text coalesce into particular forms. Such literary genres also enrich our inner speech with new 'devices' which transform our awareness and conceptualization of external reality. He speculates that the emergence of new literary forms (and corresponding systems of representation) enable individuals to perceive and visualize aspects of reality in unexpected and novel ways (the dual meaning of the word 'novel' being perfectly appropriate in this case). Through the mediation of literary forms, both artists and readers can understand 'the unity and inner logic of an entire epoch' and 'master new aspects of reality'". As for Bakhtin's way of dealing with literary genres see also M. Holquist, *Dialogism. Bakhtin and His World*, Palgrave, London 1990, p. 160: "Bakhtin treats genres as a sub-topic of the larger problem of point of view; a genre is a particular way of looking at the world. For instance, the emergence of the novel is for him an event in not only the history of literature, but the history of perception: for those who have experienced novelness, the world will not look the same. But how can we talk about many different texts as having a single point of view? By conceiving, as Bakhtin does, the history of a genre as the history of a species, much as evolutionary theory has come to perceive the life and death of a species as the history of forms adapting to – or failing to adapt to – changing environments".

are modelled to gentleness by their contemplation, opinion that legislator is infected with their influence; men become better & wiser, and the unseen seeds are perhaps thus sown which shall produce a plant more excellent even than that from which they fell[23].

As Timothy Webb pointed out in his seminal *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*, art exercises a fundamental influence on the observer. Quoting from *Prometheus Unbound*, in which the joy for the deliverance of Prometheus and the freedom of men is celebrated, "the mind becomes that which it contemplates", Webb adds: "these statues were significant influences on human behaviour [...], therefore, in the exultant hymn in which the Earth celebrates the powers of regenerated man, language, sculpture and painting are all acknowledged as important factors in the maintenance of man's new-found status"[24].

Shelley constructed his organicist aesthetic methodically and, I would suggest, metonymically, as he confesses in a letter to Mrs. Gisborne:

one of my chief aims in Italy being the observing in statuary & painting the degree in which, & the rules according to which, that ideal beauty of which we have so intense yet so obscure an apprehension is realized in external forms[25].

Shelley recorded his deep emotions and reactions in *Notes on Sculptures in Rome and Florence* (1819). In the letter to Mrs Gisborne, Shelley refers to the "ideal beauty", i.e. a poetic figure but also the manifestation of an intellectually emancipated humanity. And it is precisely this "ideal beauty" which Shelley captured in the Greek marbles of Niobe and Laocoön, as much as in the poems by Dante or Milton or in the prose of Spinoza and Plato, as he affirms in "A Defence of Poetry", or, even, in the paintings of Guido Reni and Raphael, all works that belong to an "inspired and ideal kind". Of Raphael's Santa Cecilia, in a letter to Peacock from Bologna (November 1818) he writes:

You forget that it is a picture as you look at it, and yet it is most unlike any of those things which we call reality. It is of the inspired and ideal kind, and seems to have been conceived & executed in a similar state of feeling to that which produced among the antients those perfect specimens of poetry & sculpture which are the baffling models of succeeding generations. There is an unity & perfection in it of an incommunicable kind[26].

Here Shelley underlines how, in the encounter with the greatest art works or literary texts, the reader-recipient leaves the isolated and self-referential subjective dimension, dominated by habit and custom, to move in a virtuous circle, that is a dynamic and vital intellectual space where the individual merges with collective wisdom. In this interpretive complex-

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[23] P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 53.

[24] T. Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1977, p. 209.

[25] P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 126.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

ity the different arts and literary genres are compared and equalized within the theoretical frame of an 'aesthetic ideal' that can be approached only by similarities and approximation, but that alone is able to restitute the essence of the referent, each referent being part of 'an ideal whole'. Similarities and approximations are used by Shelley everywhere in his "A Defence of Poetry" as in his poetry of nature. "The Cloud", "To a Sky-Lark" or "Ode to the West Wind" convey the beauty and the freedom of the natural elements to the reader, not through the explication of their substance but through paraphrases and continuous transferences that, eventually, allow a more intimate approach and even, a sensual perception of the natural element. With regard to "Ode to the West Wind", E.R. Wasserman observed in his canonical volume that the ode refers to the most powerful and universal force that exists in Nature, while also embodying, similarly to the "imageless Intellectual Beauty", an invisible presence that permeates the world. However, Wasserman then completes his arguments arguing that all the attempts to reach and, ultimately define the natural element are vain. The poet's thought tries to reach something that lies beyond the limits of his sensory experience, he tries to grasp the infinite fullness of that power, of that total being of which the natural object is a part but inevitably runs into its inaccessibility[27]. My own understanding is that Shelley's intention is not to 'possess' the essence of the object of his poetry nor 'access' its substance. Shelley's method is rather to play with and round it, thereby opening different perspectives from which to admire the beauty of the natural objects. He provides us with a 'sense' of the object in order to open the poem up to a wider range of interpretations and responses, so as to free all its potentialities. Freedom in poetic speech (although dressed in different generic guises) like freedom in political institutions (although referring to different ages and places) ultimately means to contest the mercantile society that Peacock epitomized, thus creating a language "favourable to liberty"[28], that might convey a need for change and transformation. In his ground-breaking volume dedicated to Shelley's poetic style, William Keach argues that the quick and winged images of Shelley's poetry, the vertiginous flight and the frenetic movement that almost take the reader's breath away, would re-propose the same aerial flight of the human mind. Hence, it is a form that conveys a content, as if to show, it should be added, that the poet places poetry at the very origin of thought, in an inseparable and indispensable process of equivalence and simultaneity[29]. Shelley himself, in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, further clarifies this creative process:

> The imagery which I have employed will be found in many instances to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed. This is unusual in modern Poetry[30].

In the essay "The Political Poet", William Keach explains this quotation as follows: "Here is the founding principle of Shelley's radically idealist poetics: instead of offering sensuous

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[27] E.R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 1971, pp. 222-234.
[28] J.E. Hogle, *Language and Form*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, pp. 145-165 (p. 148).
[29] W. Keach, *Shelley's Style*.
[30] P.B. Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 207.

or material figures for mental states and processes, the writing of *Prometheus Unbound* will draw its figures or 'imagery' from mental process itself"[31]. And the poet's mind moves and pivots around that "inspired and ideal beauty", which sustains his poetic vision and intention. Not by chance, the "inspired and ideal beauty" that Shelley refers to also invests political and social institutions. For example, in "A Defence of Poetry", the political institutions of Rome and Athens, and of the medieval and Renaissance republican municipalities, are considered ideally poetic, which means that they stand for the highest political ideal: liberty. Of the democratic institutions of republican Rome he affirms:

> [t]he true Poetry of Rome lived in its institutions; for whatever of beautiful, true and majestic they contained could have sprung only from the faculty which creates the order in which they consist[32].

According to Jerrold E. Hogle, Shelley's interplay with poetic language combined political intention and poetical forms is especially evident "In this more mature view, Shelley regards language, along with the perception it helps to form, as inherently transformable. This is why revolutionary thinking and poetic language can be seen, like thoughts and words, as perpetually interacting with one another for their betterment of humankind". Hogle then summarizes his reading of Shelley's stylistic method in the following insightful way: "language is frequently reinvigorated and its tyrannies overturned, by continuous poetic transformation – and hence social revolution"[33].

In conclusion, I would like to pay homage to the Shelleys in Milan but, more in general, to Italy as a privileged metonymic referent of Shelley's poetry and poetics. If we take as a point in case Shelley's masterpiece, the lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*, Kevin Everest in his essay underlines how the Neapolitan experience had been essential for forming the images of the 'oracular' vapours in the poem[34]. However, some other experiences made up of images, if not words, had a striking effect on his imagination to the point of being reworked over time and finally reappear as triumphant literary tropes in his lyrical drama. I am referring here to the synesthetic encounter he had with the *ballet en action* or pantomime dance by Salvatore Viganò that the Shelleys saw and admired at the theatre La Scala during their stay in Milan. Between 4 and 29 April 1818, the Shelleys and Claire Clairmont went to La Scala several times, recording in their letters the pleasure they received by Viganò's ballet.

Elsewhere I have extensively discussed Viganò's artistic mastery in the extraordinary ability of his dancers to perform and convey passions, emotions with extreme lightness[35],

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[31] W. Keach, *The Political Poet*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley,* pp. 123-142 (p. 127).

[32] P.B. Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 523.

[33] J.E. Hogle, *Language and Form*, p. 151.

[34] K. Everest, *"Mechanism of a kind yet Unattempted"*, pp. 237-245.

[35] L.M. Crisafulli, *Il viaggio olistico di Shelley in Italia: Milano, la Scala e l'incontro con l'arte di Salvatore Viganò*, in *Traduzioni, echi, consonanze. Dal Rinascimento al Romanticismo – Translations, Echoes and Consonances. From the Renaissance to the Romantic Era*, R. Mullini – R. Zacchi ed., Clueb, Bologna 2002, pp. 165-183; Ead., *"The sublime emotions such spectacles create": P.B. Shelley e le arti figurative in Italia*, in *Marble Wilderness.*

but what I wish to emphasize here is the use that Shelley makes of this special inter-artistic experience. The final and universal rejoicing that we witness in the third and fourth acts of *Prometheus Unbound* would have been impossible to express in words unless the latter had 'formed forms'. It is no accident that *Prometheus Unbound*, whose subtitle is *A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts*, has been defined as a symphonic and operatic poem. The poem turns in fact into a choral drama in which an infinite succession of danced images fill the stage and evoke the kinetic and choreographic patterns of Viganò's *coreodramma*. In Shelley's poem, as in Viganò's ballet, the groups dancing express lightness and ethereal agility in their ascending movement into the air. In Shelley's lyrical drama it is the spirits who, through their movements and choreographies, give form to change, expressing the metamorphosis that humanity has undergone. *Prometheus Unbound* beautifully exemplifies Shelley's extraordinary metonymic way of using cross-references. It also stages the most daring and revolutionary art of the so-called second English Romanticism.

Motivi e relazioni di viaggio di Inglesi in Italia, M. Pala ed., Cuec, Cagliari 2002, pp. 41-67; Ead., *"A Language in Itself Music": Salvatore Viganò's* Ballet en Action *in Shelley's* Prometheus Unbound, in *The Romantic Stage: A Many-Sided Mirror*, L.M. Crisafulli – F. Liberto ed., Rodopi, Amsterdam 2014, pp. 135-159.