

# “Rending the veil of space and time asunder”: Percy Shelley’s Poetics of Event(s) in Ode to Liberty

Pauline Hortolland

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Article abstract

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## *Romanticism on the Net*

### **“Rending the veil of space and time asunder”: Percy Shelley’s Poetics of Event(s) in *Ode to Liberty***

Pauline Hortolland  
Université de Paris

#### **Abstract**

This paper explores Shelley’s complex response to the tradition of the progress poem in *Ode to Liberty*, a poem published in August 1820 with *Prometheus Unbound* which celebrates the fall of absolute monarchy in Spain in January 1820. My contention is that Shelley destabilizes the conception of gradual progress which generally underpins the progress poem, ultimately suggesting that the origin of Liberty is not to be found in chronological time, but in human potentiality. I also argue that the poem tends to blur the difference between representing historical events and presenting itself as an event. This makes explicit the ambition of the progress poem to become itself an event in its own right, that is, a revelation of a secret world order that enables us to form a legible history out of the apparent chaos of events. Yet, the order unveiled in Shelley’s poem proves a decidedly personal and poetic one which does not fit the traditional narratives of progress and empire usually associated with this period. In the last part of the article, I rely on Agamben’s reflection on the act of creation in *The Fire and the Tale* (2017) to give a new reading of the poem’s ending, which has often been interpreted as an example of the unresolved struggle between political idealism and skepticism in Shelley’s poetry.<sup>i</sup>

#### **Biographical Note**

Pauline Hortolland is a PhD candidate at the Department of English and American Studies of Université de Paris (France), where she teaches translation. Her current research focuses on the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, with a particular emphasis on the notions of event, becoming and potentiality.

### ***Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)***

1. If there is anything we have been led to wonder about in 2020, it is what makes an event. The George Floyd Protests against police brutality and racism in the United States which started in May 2020 were seen as an unprecedented phenomenon that ushered in a new era, but they were also reminiscent of other events from the past when Liberty and civil rights were claimed and the “sound of the radical sublime, the swelling crescendo of popular protest and agitation” reverberated as a volcanic voice (Haywood, “The Sounds of Peterloo” 58). Both the impression that history constantly repeats itself and a sense that our era is that of an unparalleled disruption characterize our age. Yet is the undecidability between repetition and radical newness truly adequate to define an event? Is an event a change in nature or a change in intensity? Can poetry give us a better metaphysical framework to apprehend the course of events or at least to cope with their unpredictability?
  
2. What is paradoxical about historical events is that they can simultaneously appear as radically new, but also, to a certain extent, as the repetition of something that happened before. This paradox is used by Percy Shelley in his reflection on the history of Liberty in *Ode to Liberty*, published in August 1820 in the *Prometheus Unbound* volume.<sup>ii</sup> Using the expression “Rending the veil of space and time asunder,” Shelley underscores that each appearance of Liberty is an event that calls into question the very frame of reality (86). His ode is, at one level, an enthusiastic response to the replacement of absolute by constitutional monarchy in Spain, as a military uprising led by Rafael del Riego in Cadiz in January 1820 forced Ferdinand VII to restore the Spanish constitution of 1812. But the poem also transcends its own moment: the poem unfolds as the record of “a voice of out of the deep” which retraces the history of Liberty and its manifestations from the origins of the universe to the contemporary age (15). The voice fades away soon after tentatively predicting the

return of Liberty in stanza XVIII. According to Ian Haywood, the celebration of Spanish liberty and revolution by radical newspapers, notably *The Examiner*, was “the context for Shelley’s exhortation in the *Ode to Liberty*”: Spain’s “phoenix-like renaissance” thereafter more widely “inspired a new wave of Romantic poetic activity” in the early 1820s (“The Spanish ‘Revolution’” 235-237). In *Ode to Liberty*, Shelley sees in the “glorious events” of the Spanish insurrection a potential awakening power which could stir up rebellion, in England and elsewhere in the world, against oppression and in the name of “Liberty.”<sup>iii</sup> Shelley could have seen the Spanish revolution as an exemplary resistance against the conservative post-Waterloo order.<sup>iv</sup> He was also still writing in the aftermath of the Peterloo massacre of August 16, 1819, that is, under “the pressure exerted by the historical moment of 1819-20 when England’s popular protest movements were the most active, perhaps approaching a level that could be considered revolutionary” (Scrivener 275). For Michael Scrivener, “this pressure acted as a stimulus for Shelley to think through with rigour and inventiveness the nature of revolution” (276). In *Ode to Liberty*, a progress poem, Shelley finds historical precedents to the Spanish uprising and tries to reach back to the uncertain origins of Liberty in Ancient Greece. He traces a sequence of events which are manifestations of the same unpredictable power—that of Liberty—which is endowed with the energy of poetry itself.

3. For Nancy Moore Goslee, the dramatization of the history of Liberty in the poem is meant to awaken the reader’s own aspirations to freedom and to “encourage a practical hope for reform” (“Pursuing” 179). Yet, I want to show that, through his montage of the manifestations of Liberty throughout history and his emphasis on the unpredictability, the contingency, and the uncertain origins of such a power, Shelley destabilizes the conception

of gradual progress and linear temporality that traditionally underpins the progress poem, redefining what we call an event. However, contrary to some readings, I do not think that such undermining of the notion of gradual progress necessarily leads him in this poem to a “Politics of Despair,” even if the poem ends with the fall of the Pindaric eagle and the image of a drowning man.<sup>v</sup> On the contrary, I think that a clarified and enriched notion of event can help us better understand Shelley’s ode at several levels, not only as a demonstration of the eventual quality of both Liberty and poetry, but also as a reflection on the act of poetic creation, which not only changes our perception of the world but also upholds the poet’s intellectual independence. This reading challenges previous readings of the poem as an example of “poetic counterstatement”—a concept which relies on the traditional dichotomy between Shelley’s so-called hopeful poetry and his later, darker strain (Sachs, *Romantic Antiquity* 163)—or as a progressive model of historical “contrariety” (Kucich 19), that is, “a sustained pattern of historical progress and decline arranged around competing strategies of linear and cyclical narrative” (Sachs, *Romantic Antiquity* 153).<sup>vi</sup>

4. My aim in this article is to use the notion of event to highlight a change in Shelley’s way of considering causality and necessity in history, notably in contrast to *Prometheus Unbound*. I take issue with Earl Wasserman’s Hegelian reading of *Ode to Liberty* as tracing “the history of the self-realization of Spirit,” which I contend does not account for the unpredictability of Liberty in the poem as no ruse of reason is hinted at in it (402). Yet, I am very much interested in the way Wasserman’s conception of Shelley’s myth-making processes, as shown in his reading of *Prometheus Unbound* in *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, can be transposed to *Ode to Liberty*, albeit with a few adjustments.<sup>vii</sup> The metaphysical triadic structure of *Prometheus Unbound* (the universe as the realm of mutability, the One

Mind as true Existence, and Power or Demogorgon as the reason why everything exists) is simplified into a dual one in *Ode to Liberty*: the realm of history and mutability, and the hidden power of Liberty. In *Prometheus Unbound*, according to Wasserman, within the realm of true Existence (the One Mind), “the principle governing the processes of events is Demogorgon’s inviolable law of Necessity—quite independent of Prometheus’s will—according to which what is called a cause must be followed by what is called a determined effect” (326): Necessity is what connects Power to true Existence. Conversely, I argue that in *Ode to Liberty*, what connects the power of Liberty to its various manifestations in the universe of mutability is not Necessity anymore but potentiality. In this poem the event is defined as the actualization of the virtual, participating in a shift from Necessity to Power as potentiality in the development of Shelley’s poetic thought. I think that the reason for this change is that *Ode to Liberty* is not taking place in the One Mind, as *Prometheus Unbound* is (according to Wasserman), but in the realm of mutability and human history. I contend that, although “caves” are regularly mentioned in the ode, the two layers of the metaphysical structure of *Ode to Liberty* are neither geologically nor spatially superposed as in *Prometheus Unbound* (because Demogorgon’s cave is subterranean), nor even neatly separated. Instead, their interweaving forms the fabric of reality, and the event as an actualization of the virtual is a node between them. The idea of “exhalation” in *Prometheus Unbound* somewhat prefigures this more permeable relation between Power and the realm of mutability but is still spatial (the word “exhalation” is used in the ode in a comparison line 159).<sup>viii</sup> Potentiality and prophecy in *Ode to Liberty* are associated with caves, but also symbolized by “Time’s fleeting river” (76). My main reference in this part is Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the virtual. For Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, “the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The process it undergoes is that

of actualization” (211). Deleuze argues that the virtual “is the characteristic state of Ideas: it is on the basis of its reality that existence is produced, in accordance with a time and a space immanent in the Idea” (*Difference* 211). The virtual encourages us to think of eternity not as exterior to time but as linked to an actualization (an event) in time. Consequently, there is no event without a spatio-temporal realisation, but an event is not reducible to that. Shelley’s poem is a subtle reflection on this paradox.

5. Moreover, there are many unresolved tensions in this poem which have largely been ignored although they constitute the generative force behind it. My contention is that the tension between the narrative dimension of the poem and its lyric form as an ode—which is typical of the progress poem as a genre—intensifies an even more profound tension between two impulses in the progress poem: the attempt to represent events and the desire to perform one. The poem tends to blur the difference between representing historical events and presenting itself as an event. The poem itself is an event which happens as a prophetic echo of all the other events that it describes—it both registers them in their unpredictability and suggests that other similar events are yet to come, albeit likewise unpredictable. This makes explicit the ambition of the progress poem to become itself an event in its own right, that is, a revelation of a secret order of things and of the hidden connections between events that enables us to form from them a legible history out of the apparent chaos. Yet, the order revealed in Shelley’s poem proves a decidedly personal and poetic one which does not fit the traditional narratives of progress and empire usually associated with this period. The poet rather seeks to renew our perception of reality by using the form of the poem—a structure of echoes—as a model to make his reader understand the history of Liberty’s temporal and spatial spreading in a way that destabilizes the conception

of gradual and teleological progress which generally underpins the progress poem. Relying on the arbitrariness of language and historical circumstances, the poet as an arbiter of rhyme and formal patterning produces new semantic links among arbitrary linguistic signs so as to change the way we see the world.<sup>ix</sup> In this poem, Shelley poetically charts a global network which opposes the imperialistic mapping of the world traditionally associated with the post-Waterloo era.<sup>x</sup> As Madeleine Callaghan puts it, the task of the poet is to “reshape the universe through the perception of his readers” (129). By doing so, the poem claims a new form of historical agency that has to do with its evental nature as a lyric that seeks to perform what it represents, investing the poetic form with unbounded vatic powers. I argue that the framing of the poem should also be understood from this perspective rather than as a disavowal of Liberty as an uncontrollable pharmakon.

6. In this investigation, Reinhart Koselleck’s arguments regarding the experience of history and modernity provide a helpful touchstone. Koselleck highlights that the predominant narrative of progress that is today deemed typical of the late eighteenth-century was actually frequently counterbalanced by a conception of the future as a source of potentially disruptive and contingent events. In *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Koselleck characterizes modernity (approximately arising after 1750) by the paradoxical impression that a “future not inferable from experience released all the same the certainty of an expectation that scientific inventions and discoveries would bring about a new world” (282-3). The French Revolution, which was perceived as extraordinary, novel, and unprecedented, destabilized former modes of experiencing history and envisaging futurity, which were generally founded on repetition.<sup>xi</sup> The former cognitive pattern used to apprehend futurity as bound to the past (“natural cycles”) was then brutally replaced by that



of the “irreversible direction” (18), which meant that “all past examples lost their force” (33). As Koselleck puts it, “the idea that the future would not only change society at an increasing rate, but also improve it, was characteristic of the horizon of expectation outlined in the later Enlightenment” (282). Philosophers like Kant and Hegel assigned a goal to history, endowing it with a teleological shape. Nonetheless, as shown by Koselleck, a growing gap between experience and expectations led people to regard the future as deeply ambivalent, that is, not only as a source of gradual progress, but also as something unknown and potentially disruptive. Such conflicted expectations are evinced in Kant’s chapter entitled “An old question raised again: Is the human race constantly progressing?” in *The Conflict of Faculties* where he asserts simultaneously that “the human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be henceforth” and that “so far as time is concerned, it can promise this only indefinitely and as a contingent occurrence” (304). In *Modernity’s Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation*, Emily Rohrbach emphasizes this latter way of envisaging futurity during the Romantic period. Relying on Jürgen Habermas’s criticism of Koselleck, she underlines the Romantic poets’ awareness of the paralyzing dimension of the ideology of progress as a conception of the future which can be used to close it off as a source of disruption and to “eliminate the possibility of paradigm-shifting historical surprise” (13). On the contrary, according to her, Romantic writers “appear remarkably sensitive to that possibility of surprise,” which destabilizes the teleological dimension of progress and creates the possibility of an unexpected bifurcation (13). In this context, Shelley’s ode can be seen as an urgent attempt to bridge the “gap between experience and expectation” in order to “enable one to live and act” (Koselleck 284), but also to preserve the possibility of the unexpected manifestation of the power of Liberty in the difficult context of a conservative, post-Waterloo Europe.

7. Up to now, I have set out the theoretical background of my approach to the notions of history and event in this poem. I will now give a definition of the genre of the progress poem and show to what extent Shelley's poem unsettles its conventions by underscoring the contingent and volcanic quality of the power of Liberty, fundamentally undermining the fantasy of retreating to the uncertain origins of Liberty and poetry. This will lead me to underline how rhyme, echoes, and formal patterning work in the poem as an organizing principle for the sequence of events that constitutes the history of Liberty and transform our perception of the world order. Finally, I will show to what extent the poem strives to define itself as an event—this will enable me to give a new reading of its ending, which has often been interpreted as the symbolic shattering of the poet's ideals, and as an example of the unresolved struggle between political idealism and skepticism in Shelley's poetry.
8. Shelley's poem is a complex response to the tradition of the progress poem, which usually "offer[s] models for tracing the spirit of liberty (and poetry) in a progressive manner, from its origins in Greece through Rome and medieval Italy to Britain" (*The Poems of Shelley*, 3 382). The Longman editors consider that the progress poems which influenced Shelley are James Thompson's *Liberty, A Poem* (1735-6), William Collins's *Ode to Liberty* (1747) and Thomas Gray's *The Progress of Poesy. A Pindaric Ode* (1757) (*The Poems of Shelley*, 3 382). Yet I will also include in my reflection Gray's *The Bard. A Pindaric Ode* (1757) (for its similar framing device) and, as a foil to Shelley's *Ode to Liberty*, Felicia Hemans's early piece *England and Spain* (1808).<sup>xii</sup> I also want to argue that *A Defence of Poetry* can be considered a progress poem in prose. Indeed, its depiction of Poetry and its historical manifestations is very similar to that of Liberty in Shelley's ode. For William Levine, the

progress poem is a piece that features “an imaginary westward and northward journey of an allegorical entity such as Liberty” (554). Levine adds that “a typical ‘progress’ of power or knowledge (*translation imperii* or *translation studii*) traces the birth and historical manifestations of its subject from classical times to the present, conveniently ending in contemporary Britain” (554). Most progress poems, such as those by Hemans, unfold as patriotic pieces and glorify British commerce and empire. Thomson’s long poem in blank verse is a canonical example of this “straightforward, sequential ‘Whig progress’ of history” (560), relying on a “scheme of meliorism” which he frequently endows with “jingoism” (564). Gray’s *Progress of Poesy* also starts in an original chaos, then quickly moves to Greece and Rome, and finally to Albion, which is defined as the apex of this progress. As Diego Saglia notes in *Poetic Castles in Spain*, “the progress structure is above all an aggregative mode, tending to streamline history and culture into an ideally neat evolutionary narrative,” which risks flattening historical discontinuities (125). Shelley’s ode is indebted to Collins’s poem, which already critiqued and modified the inherited ideology of Thomson’s progress poem according to Levine, the shortness of his 144-line Pindaric ode rather emphasizing discontinuities and reversals (567). For instance, while preserving the spatial westward movement of the progress poem, Collins reverses its chronological temporality by ending it with a vision of an idealized lost Druid temple in Albion which precedes Ancient Greece as the true origin of Liberty: “Tho’ now with hopeless Toil we trace / Time’s backward Rolls, to find its place” (95-6). For Levine discontinuity is not incompatible with the form of the progress poem, as the “conventional materials of progress” are particularly “problematized” in Collins’ ode—which breaks away from Thomson’s “panoramic historical scene” (556-7). Yet Shelley’s ode seems to take the poetic form to its limits by questioning the very idea of such progress.

9. Shelley's senses of event and progress are more complicated in *Ode to Liberty* than they are in *Queen Mab* and in *The Revolt of Islam*, as in the later poem he emphasizes the randomness of the power of Liberty. For instance, in spite of the use of the adverb "then" so as to underline a form of temporal progression (31, 91, 122, 273), progress in the poem is not linear but at least discontinuous, as Liberty keeps appearing and disappearing, then resurfacing in a ghost-like manner ("the shadow of thy coming" [122]) or like "dividuous waves" (47)—the singularity of each "wave" being emphasized by the adjective "dividuous." Violent verbs such as "fell" (122), or "pierce" (139) underline the randomness of its manifestations and the effect of surprise it produces. These appearances are often rhythmically emphasized, for instance with the use of an initial trochaic substitution in the first iambic pentameter of stanza V, which draws the reader's attention to the sudden emergence of Athens as a brilliant embodiment of Liberty. This is further reinforced with the enjambment and the colon, which visually singularize the phrase "Athens arose." Reading the idealized description of Athens as a New Jerusalem in stanza V, one can even wonder if Shelley's history of Liberty is not that of a decline, as its later manifestations seem messier and less successful. Shelley depicts many periods of gloom or dark ages, underlining the irregularity of Liberty's resurgences: "A thousand years the Earth cried, where art thou?" (121), or "a thousand years / Bred from the slime of deep oppression's den" (167-68). Although Liberty is sometimes personified, for instance as a mourner in stanza VIII ("From what Hyrcanian glen [...] Didst thou lament the ruin of thy reign" [106-9]), the reader can never access Liberty's overall historical design and can only witness its unpredictable manifestations, as shown by the uncertainty conveyed by modal auxiliary "may" in stanza X:

thou bearer of the quiver,  
Whose sunlike shaft pierce tempest-winged Error,  
As light may pierce the clouds when they dissever  
In the calm regions of the orient day! (137-40)

10. Even more problematic is the way Shelley depicts the origins of Liberty. In the poem, instead of insisting on the newness and the disruptive dimension of the birth of Liberty, Shelley blurs the temporal frame of the poem to simultaneously praise Athens as the cradle of philosophy and question the idea of a unique chronological origin that should be idolized. In *Ode to Liberty*, Shelley subverts two traditional manners of narrating the birth or the origin of the world—namely the Ancient Greek *theogony* and the Christian doctrine of the *ex-nihilo* creation of the universe. On the one hand, instead of focusing on the birth of the universe as the origin of our civilization, Shelley draws attention to the birth of something that is much more meaningful to him to define humanity—Liberty. Even when the universe takes on a recognizable shape, it is still described as “chaos,” which suggests that the creation of the cosmic and social harmony that is characteristic of such narratives is only possible with the advent of Liberty (22). In “Ode to Liberty,” Shelley shifts from a Greek-inspired *theogony* to a more radical *eleutherogony* (*eleutheria* meaning “liberty” in Ancient Greek).<sup>xiii</sup> On the other hand, many elements in the poem complicate the idea that Liberty has a certain origin or a foundational event. It seems that humanity is only truly born when it becomes free from tyranny. Yet, as one reads the poem, one can wonder if this event has ever happened, as Liberty is always described as brief and temporary. Liberty seems to be this immanent yet unattainable “Heaven of earth” (166). Moreover, what could be described as the birth of Liberty in stanza V is anticipated in stanza IV by the phrase “Prophetic

echoes” (50). Yet it is unclear what and whose voice is echoed—in one sense this phrase is oxymoronic, as it suggests that one can hear again the sound of something that has not yet happened. The phrase “unapprehensive wild” further implies that the echoes may have always been there (even during the stages depicted in stanzas II and III) but that the wild was simply not able to understand them (51). This points ahead to the *Defence of Poetry*, where Shelley declares 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” (516): similarly, human beings were not aware of their potentiality to be free, which was concealed to them by the tyranny of the ruling class. This is also reminiscent of Gray’s *Progress of Poesy* where Poesy spreads in remote areas (“climes beyond the solar road” [54]) before reaching Delphi. “Tuneful echoes” are also mentioned as the first manifestation of Poesy in Ancient Greece in Gray’s poem (71). Yet, Shelley’s “prophetic echoes” destabilize the linear conception of time that is implied by the form of the progress poem because, unlike Gray’s, they appear before the first explicit manifestation of Liberty in the poem (that is, when “Athens arose” [61]). The early presence of these echoes calls into question the traditional definition of an event as something entirely new and unprecedented. Liberty seems to be born as “Athens arose,” yet these “prophetic echoes” suggest that Liberty had already been there, in a conflation of future and past.

11. The word “echoes” is omnipresent in the poem (50, 104, 112, 282). The “echoes” and the “shadow” or “ghost” are the most frequent modes of manifestation of Liberty in the poem, which has often been read as a way for Shelley to present Athens as the origin or the “fountainhead” of Liberty.<sup>xiv</sup> Indeed, Athens is depicted as “[a] divine work,” that is, as a

remarkable example of the free and democratic city and as a beacon of Liberty (69). Conversely, Rome is described as a disappointing copy of it. Such reading could be reinforced by noting the second use of the word “echoes” in the poem (“Palatinus sighed / Faint echoes of Ionian song” [103-4]). Yet, such an understanding of the word “echoes” is problematic as it would make the history of Liberty that of a decline, which contradicts the enthusiasm of stanzas I and VI for instance. Moreover, it is worth noting that under special conditions, for instance if a concave reflecting surface focuses the sound energy to the listener's position, as in a cave, an echo can seem louder than the original sound—albeit only because the sound is more concentrated—qualifying the idea of the echo as a “weaker” or “faint” repetition of the original sound. My hypothesis is therefore that, instead of using the word “echoes” to underscore a qualitative difference between a form of perfection embodied by the city of Athens and its subsequent manifestations in a hierarchical manner, Shelley rather uses it in a more poetic sense so as to create a network of events, enhancing their connection by relying on the model of the poem itself as a structure of echoes (using rhyme, rhythm and formal patterning), which emphasizes similarity rather than hierarchy. This would provide an alternative to the declining pattern that an idolization of Athens would inevitably entail. Hence the necessity to find another metaphysical framework to explain the use of the phrase “prophetic echoes” in the context of the poet’s attempt to retrace the history of Liberty.

12. The phrase “prophetic echoes” in Shelley’s poem destabilizes the linear and gradual temporal progression of the progress poem, suggesting that no clear chronological origin can be assigned to Liberty and that it may have always potentially been there, although concealed by tyranny. In this poem, Shelley does not depict human beings who are born

free, but with the potential to be free, which complicates any attempt to define Liberty and to narrate its history. Similarly, the epigraph of the poem “Yet, Freedom, yet thy banner torn but flying,” which is taken from Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, does not focus on the origin of Liberty but underlines its resilience and the fact that it must always be recovered from the dark forces of tyranny. This is further emphasized by the word “again” in the first line of the poem to underscore that the Spanish had earlier revolted against Napoleonic rule in 1808. Shelley also problematizes the origin of Liberty in stanza IV, in a series of comparisons:

And, like unfolded flowers beneath the sea,  
Like the man’s thought dark in the infant’s brain,  
Like aught that is which wraps what is to be,  
Art’s deathless dreams lay veiled by many a vein  
Of Parian stone; and, yet a speechless child,  
Verse murmured, and Philosophy did strain  
Her lidless eyes for thee[.] (54-60)

In this stanza the actualization of the work of art is compared to that of Liberty. Art and Liberty are both always already there, waiting to be actualized like a block of “Parian stone” “waits” to be sculpted. An event is here defined as the actualization of a latent power. Poetry (“Verse”) and “Philosophy” here appear as the two forces that can provoke the actualization of Liberty and of “Art’s deathless dreams,” by making us aware of our potential to be free from tyranny. Moreover, Shelley underlines that what one could see as the major event of the poem—the advent of Liberty embodied in the city of Athens in stanza V—is the actualization of a power that was already there. He also highlights this idea in stanza XIV (“His dead spirit lives in thee / Why do we fear or hope? Thou art already free!” [203-4]),



implying that the German unrest of the early 1820s actualized the same power of Liberty which animated the rebellion of the Germanic tribal leader Arminius against Roman tyranny centuries ago.

13. This definition of an event as the actualization of something that is already there raises the issue of the distinction “between the event, which is ideal by nature, and its spatio-temporal realization in a state of affairs” (Deleuze, *Logic* 53). According to Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense*, events are different from mere accidents because they “are ideational singularities which communicate in one and the same Event” (53). This way of conceiving the link between different events or manifestations is different from the Platonic doctrine as, while identifying a “major Event” in which other events participate, it does not create a hierarchy between an Idea and its copies, therefore avoiding, in the context of Shelley’s poem, the temptation of idolizing the Ancient Greek model and of reading the history of Liberty as a decline.<sup>xv</sup> It also challenges the concept of a gradual progress, depicting the history of Liberty as something more complicated than a linear movement. Liberty in the poem is rather a force or a power that unpredictably actualizes itself throughout history as “one spirit vast / With life and love makes chaos ever new” (88-89), with no necessary teleological goal. Similarly, in *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley refutes Peacock’s cyclical model of the history of poetry: instead, the pattern he describes is neither a systematic nor a teleological one but it can lead to unexpected resurgences.<sup>xvi</sup> Kenneth Neil Cameron underscores that Shelley “was convinced that beneath the surface, revolutionary forces were stirring,” as if a hidden power were unpredictably resurfacing in the guise of various events like a dormant volcano (volcanic eruptions can only be predicted a few days ahead) (364). Athens brilliantly embodies this power at one point of history, but Liberty also manifests itself in

all the other events that are described in the poem. The pronouns that refer to these two entities are clearly differentiated, as the ode is dedicated to “Liberty” (using the pronoun “thee”), not to Athens (“it”). This might be seen as a symptom of what Jonathan Sachs describes as Shelley’s growing criticism of the Athenian model, which he came to see more skeptically as an imperfect model.<sup>xvii</sup>

14. Rather than to idolize Athens nostalgically, the aim of the poem is to prepare England for a new resurgence of Liberty. The history of Liberty is conceived as a sequence of events, each one evincing a similar “power” (or Event) but tracing no systematic pattern. Those events are not mere copies of a mythologized and idolized origin. Such a structure is akin to the Deleuzian conception of the connection of events throughout history: “If the singularities are veritable events, they communicate in one and the same Event which endlessly redistributes them, while their transformations form a history” (*Logic* 53). I think that this conception of the event is helpful to understand the elusive nature of the power of Liberty in this poem. It is very similar to Wasserman’s reading of the metaphysical structure of *Prometheus Unbound*, yet it precludes any separation between mutability and eternity.<sup>xviii</sup> For Deleuze “each combination and each distribution is an event. But the paradoxical instance is the Event in which all events communicate and are distributed. It is the Unique event, and all other events are its bits and pieces” (*Logic* 56). Each event is therefore not something entirely new but participates in a network of events that constitute the Event that is brought to the world, which for Shelley is the advent of Liberty against tyranny throughout history.

15. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze formalizes the multitude of events that constitute the Event as a line, forming a special type of temporality called the Aion. The Aion is opposed to “the physical and cyclical Chronos of the variable living present,” which is our ordinary perception of time (*Logic* 62). The Aion also endows events with an eternal truth:

The Aion is the straight line traced by the aleatory points. The singular points of each event are distributed over this line, always in relation to the aleatory point which subdivides them *ad infinitum*, and it causes them to communicate with each other, as it extends and stretches them out over the entire line. Each event is adequate to the entire Aion; each event communicates with all others, and they all form one and the same Event, an event of the Aion where they have an eternal truth. ... But being an empty and unfolded form of time, the Aion subdivides *ad infinitum* that which haunts it without ever inhabiting it—the Event for all events. (Deleuze, *Logic* 64)

16. This formalization of the events as a line is useful to shed light on the image of the “river” at the beginning of stanza VI. I would like to argue that Shelley avoids idolizing the Athenian model and rather suggests that it is part of a line of events—here, of a “river.”

Within the surface of Time's fleeting river

Its wrinkled image lies, as then it lay

Immovably unquiet, and for ever

It trembles, but it cannot pass away!

The voices of thy bards and sages thunder

With an earth-awakening blast

Through the caverns of the past:

(Religion veils her eyes; Oppression shrinks aghast:)

***Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)***

A winged sound of joy, and love, and wonder,  
Which soars where Expectation never flew,  
Rending the veil of space and time asunder!  
One ocean feeds the clouds, and streams, and dew;  
One Sun illumines Heaven; one Spirit vast  
With life and love makes chaos ever new,  
As Athens doth the world with thy delight renew. (76-90)

In this stanza, the pronoun “It” refers to Athens. The poetic voice describes the persistence of the ideal embodied by the city of Athens through time as a beacon of Liberty. Shelley uses a traditional comparison between time and a river.<sup>xix</sup> He paradoxically describes Athens’s image as still (“lies” [77], “immovably” [78]), which introduces an idea of resistance, as the image of Athens is “wrinkled” (77) and “trembles” (79) but “cannot pass away” (79). This duality is that of the event as both a caesura and an eternal truth, which can communicate with all the other events distributed on the line of Aion. In this stanza, Shelley describes how Athens has crystallized—on the surface—into the Ancient Greek ideal, showing how it came to exemplify Liberty. Yet, the reader can expect other actualizations of Liberty to join the river, including those very events that the poem is about to describe.

17. Similarly, in the following lines, the present tense underlines the radical immediacy of the power of Liberty as both a sudden outbreak, which frees man from “Religion” and “Oppression,” and a lasting truth, which enables Liberty’s constant resurgence throughout history (83). Shelley uses here simultaneously two functions of the present tense: first to make a scene vivid, that is, to create a *hypotyposis*, but also to underline the iterability of

these actions, which are the necessary effects of each outburst of Liberty. “Time’s fleeting river” becomes the metaphorical line where all the manifestations of the power of Liberty are to be recorded, which enables Shelley to underline the dual quality of Liberty as both an unpredictable energy and an enduring truth (76).

18. Looking for the mythological origin of Liberty in chronological time is a false lead, firstly because it would paralyze future action by preventing us from properly welcoming (and sparking off) the next manifestation of the power of Liberty, and secondly because a true Event (if we follow Deleuze) is always made of more than one singularity, both in time and in space. For Shelley in this poem, the origin of Liberty is not to be found in a chronology, but in the virtual, in humanity’s universal potential to free itself from tyranny. Shelley in the poem suggests that Liberty springs from the caves of the human mind: in stanza IV Liberty’s “prophetic echoes” were flung from “enchanted caves” (49-50), and in stanza XVIII the poet asks Liberty to “lead [wisdom] out of the inmost cave / Of man’s deep spirit” (256-7). However, Liberty is also depicted in the poem as a “contagious fire,” suggesting that each spark participates in the global fire of Liberty (4): the advent of Liberty is not only the actualization of a personal potentiality but also a collective event. Shelley therefore repurposes a conservative topos—the comparison between the struggle for liberty and the struggle with an illness or a virus. A fire—just like an epidemic—is something that expands both in time and in space, which is crucial for Shelley as he hopes that the power of Liberty that triggered the Spanish rebellion will spread to Germany, Italy, and England. The traditional “westering” of Liberty that is typical of the progress poem—usually from Greece to Rome and then to England—is therefore twisted and made more complex and global, pointing ahead to what could become a world revolution. In this poem Shelley thwarts the

praise of British commerce and empire that is generally expected from a progress poem. For instance, his ode stands in sharp contrast to Hemans's youthful *England and Spain* (1808) (yet it is worth remembering that as Hemans grew older, she fought against the very imperialism she seems to acclaim in this early poem), where Britain's economic imperialism is praised ("fearless Commerce, pillar of thy throne, / Makes all the wealth of foreign climes thy own" [93-4]).<sup>xx</sup> Although the poem presents itself as a celebration of two nations (England and Spain), the patriotic depiction of England soon gains preeminence.<sup>xxi</sup> The bond between the two nations seems quite superficial and essentially negative as it builds upon a shared anti-French sentiment. Conversely, Shelley's global network is not imperialistic, and Albion is not depicted as a superior entity guiding Iberia on the path towards freedom—quite the contrary, it is Spain which shows England the way to Liberty. Shelley incorporates in his poem a major scientific discovery made in 1760—scientists then realized that the volcanic regions of the globe were interconnected and could communicate at enormous distances. In the poem, Spain "calls" (182) England like a sister-volcano, and the poet describes them as "Twins of a single destiny" (192), which confirms Evan Gottlieb's observation that "the Romantics were beginning to experience a 'linked' world order" (15) which was not necessarily "an elaboration or an anticipation of imperialism" (10), although this is the case in Hemans's poem. Moreover, the subterranean connection between the manifestations of Liberty in Shelley's ode emphasizes the way events spread spatially and geographically, just like rhyme or formal patterning in a poem.

19. So far, my contention has been that Shelley describes in his poem a network connecting different events which, like echoes of the same source, all evince the same major Event, that is, the advent of Liberty. However, it is also worth noting that, through its rhyme

scheme and its use of assonances, alliterations and repetitions, a poem *is* made of echoes. A poem is a structure one can read focusing on the connections made through rhyme and formal patterning. I argue that Shelley uses rhyme to shape anew the history of Liberty in a way that challenges the assumption that Europe and Britain have reached their zenith with the post-Waterloo settlement. Here I also want to suggest that there is a conflict in the progress poem between the desire to relate events and the urge to perform one. For instance, Levine argues that Collins's *Ode to Liberty* strives to become the lost temple it unveils in the last stanzas of the poem.<sup>xxiii</sup> Similarly, as an actualization of a hidden potency (the "voice out of the deep" [15]), Shelley's poem is on the same level as the manifestations of Liberty it describes. This stems from the tension between narration and lyric which is at the heart of the genre of the progress poem and of many other lyrics.<sup>xxiii</sup> I suspect that Shelley is also conscious that the ambition of the progress poem to perform theodicy (for instance, Gray's speaker in *The Progress of Poesy*, who asserts his wish to "justify the laws of Jove" [47]) has been contaminated in many cases by an imperialistic and jingoistic ideology. This is patent in his fantasy to see "words" in their "nakedness of false and true" in stanza XVI. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley states that the poet's task is to "behold intensely the present as it is, and [to] discover those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered" (513). Shelley's aim is to free the progress poem from the imperial ideology with which it has sometimes been invested and to endow it again with its capacity to "create anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration" (*A Defence* 533). Although the poem is defined as the dress of inspiration ("My soul spurned the chains of its dismay, / And in the rapid plumes of song / Clothed itself, sublime and strong" [5-7]), it has a certain power to remodel the arbitrariness of language. My approach is indebted to William Keach's discussion of arbitrariness in

*Shelley's Style and Arbitrary Power*, notably to his idea that, through “calculated stylistic risks,” Shelley attempts to “appropriate and shape the arbitrariness of language into a medium both reflective of and resistant to a power that defies the mind’s desire for meaning” (*Shelley's Style* 187, also see note ix).

20. In the poem, Shelley suggests that Liberty was the one who taught, Pan-like:

the woods and waves, and desert rocks,

And every Naiad’s ice-cold urn,

To talk in echoes sad and stern,

Of that sublimest lore which man had dared unlearn[.] (110-3)

Shelley here implies that nature and poetry are sanctuaries which preserve Liberty, and he directly connects the eventual quality of the power of Liberty to that of poetry through the word “echoes.” The poem is filled with apostrophes (to abstract entities such as Liberty or the tomb of Arminius), imperatives (to Liberty) and optative wishes (notably in stanzas XV and XVI) which underline that the poem is not only a narrative of the history of Liberty but also a call for action. According to Jonathan Culler, to apostrophize is both to “give us a ritualistic, hortatory act, a special sort of linguistic event in the lyric present” and “to will a state of affairs, to attempt to bring into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire” (213, 215-6). In *Ode to Liberty*, this latter goal is further reinforced by Shelley’s use of formal patterning. For instance, Liberty is not paired with another word in the rhyme scheme of the first stanza, which draws attention to the concept. Yet the numerous alliterations of /t/ in the first sentence of the poem prove a sonorous scattering of the word “Liberty” which phonetically enacts what it semantically describes, in a sort of contagious alliteration.



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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. (1-5)

Those alliterations of /t/, as both prophetic echoes and resonances of the word “Liberty,” announce the regime of echoes underpinning the poem. They enact the poem itself as event. Michael O'Neill remarks that the triple rhyme of “dismay” (5), “prey” (9), and “ray” (11) in the first stanza “records the emergence from ‘dismay’ into an inspired state,” while “the same rhyme, used four times at the end, announces the subsidence of creativity, a creativity whose very guarantee is its own provisional instability” (338). This symmetrical unfolding of rhyme suggests that the poem itself enacts an eruption. The final phrase “o'er it closed the echoes far way” (282) reads both diegetically, as the “great voice” that sustained the poem fades away, and metapoetically, as the poem comes to an end.

21. Images, stylistic devices, and formal patterning add a new layer of meaning that distorts the linear temporality traditionally underpinning the progress poem. The use of short enjambments in the poem evinces this play on temporality. For instance, in the first stanza the word “Liberty” (2) poetically enacts the disruptive dimension of the power of Liberty, while in the last stanza of the poem the verb “Paused” (271) postpones the last change of stanza and unsettles the stanzaic form of the poem. This subtle destabilization of linear temporality in the poem is further reinforced by images that conflate past and future. The Acropolis, for instance, is described as Liberty's “earliest throne and latest oracle” (75), that is, simultaneously the oldest trace of Liberty and a prophecy of its return, functioning

as a sort of “prophetic echo.” It later reappears in stanza XV (“Ye the oracle have heard” [216]) as a distant echo of this echo. Moreover, Shelley announces at the outset the unsettling of the progress poem’s linear temporal frame with the phrase “Hovering in verse” (9), both implying that the poet goes back in time (“inverse”) and asserting the primacy of the temporal frame of the poem itself (“in verse”), which is built on a network of sounds and echoes and can be read nonlinearly.<sup>xxiv</sup>

22. Yet, this assertion of the power of poetry to reshape our perception of the world is not meant to revive a so-called ancient and more genuine type of poetry, but rather to underscore the evental and performative quality of *Liberty*, which is typically poetic.<sup>xxv</sup> Indeed, the poem *Ode to Liberty* is also an event unto itself. *Ode to Liberty* unfolds as a vision, that is, “a sustained revelation that leads to the submission of the poetic self to a visionary power both within and beyond itself” (O’Neill 337). The voice emerging “out of the deep” is a poetic device that underlines the evental quality of the poem as the product of an encounter between a source of inspiration and the poet it inspires. My aim in this last part is to nuance influential readings of the ending of the poem that see it as an expression of despair, notably Christopher Hitt’s interpretation of the poet as “bedeviled, overwhelmed, and finally defeated by fears and anxiety” and of the poem as Shelley’s “most profound expression of the despair that encumbered his political idealism and haunted his personal life” (68). I also want to qualify Keach’s notion that “the language of poetry succeeds when it articulates by ‘careful observation’ its own idealized failure. Poetry as it actually exists records the failure of an ideal expressive completeness” (*Shelley’s Style* 30). What I take issue with in particular is Keach’s use of the word “failure,” as well as the idea that the ending of *Ode to Liberty* testifies to an unresolved struggle between political idealism and skepticism. An

important reference for my argument is Giorgio Agamben's reworking of Deleuze's thesis that all creation implies a form of resistance.<sup>xxvi</sup> Agamben in *The Fire and the Tale* argues that:

We need to look at the act of creation as a field of forces stretched between potentiality and impotentiality, being capable to act and to resist and being capable not to act and not to resist. Man is capable of mastering his potentiality and accessing it only through his impotentiality; but precisely, for this reason, there is in the end no mastery over potentiality, and being a poet means being at the mercy of one's impotentiality. (41)

What I criticize in previous readings of Shelley's poem is the idea that its ending is the acknowledgement of some sort of failure. I rather see it as an instantiation of the ambiguity of Power as the potentiality to be, which implies the potentiality not to be. In *The Fire and the Tale*, Agamben describes this ambiguity as "the specific ambivalence of every human potentiality, which, in its original structure, always maintains a relation with its own privation and is always—and with reference to the same thing—the potentiality to be and not to be, to do and not to do" (39). This ambivalence is noted by Shelley himself in *A Defence of Poetry*: "in the intervals of inspiration, and they may be frequent without being durable, a poet becomes a man, and is abandoned to the sudden reflux of the influences under which others habitually live" (534). Instead of a failure, I argue that the final defusing effect of the poem participates in a reflection on the act of creation and should be seen as a way to enhance the power of Liberty and confirm its evental nature and its unpredictability, which makes it akin to poetic inspiration.

23. According to Hitt, the collapse of the song is the "inevitable outcome and surest sign of the loss of this political ideal," making the ode an "elegy" and a demystification of Liberty

(84-5). This psychological analysis of the final “defusing” effect is a way for Hitt to diminish the analogy I wish to emphasize between literature and politics in the poem (Hitt 69-70). My reading departs from psychological analysis as I consider that this final deflation is the logical ending of the poem as an event, that is, as the actualization of a power. The ending does not entail the loss of the poet’s political ideal, but rather enhances the evental quality of poetry, which is reactivated by our very reading of the poem.<sup>xxvii</sup> Just as art is “veiled” in Parian stone, waiting to be actualized, the poem is an event whose actualization is momentary but produces a lasting truth. The expression “rapid plumes of song” highlights the necessity for the poet to react quickly to the voice’s call to record it, but most of all underlines the evental nature of the poem, as the dress of inspiration and Liberty (*Ode to Liberty* [6]). The evental quality of the poem is also underlined by the use of the verb “burst” and the semantic field of the thunderstorm—“lightning,” “sun-like shafts pierce” (*Ode to Liberty* [2, 138])—pointing ahead to the semantic field of lightning in *A Defence of Poetry*: “Poetry is a sword of lightning”; Dante’s words are like “sparks” and are “pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor” (*A Defence* 520, 528). Shelley’s reflection on the evental quality of Liberty is also a reflection on that of Poetry, and on the act of creation itself.

24. In the final stanza, the idea that the poem is coming to an end is reinforced by the use of the semantic field of deflation (“paused” [271]; “withdrawn” [272]; “dissolve” [278]; “drooped” [282]) but also by the use of short, unsettling enjambments, notably in line 271 and in line 282, where the verbs “paused” and “drooped” mimic what they describe—respectively the postponement of a change of stanza and a fall from one line to another. Those two verbs are also particularly noticeable because they are both trochaic substitutions

in a predominantly iambic stanza. Paradoxically, time is also made to freeze in this last stanza with the anaphora “as,” which formally delays the brutal ending of the poem while semantically underlining it (“dissolve”, “fades”, “dies”), notably with the appearance of an iambic hexameter (278-280). Once more, a tension is established between the brutality of the event (“suddenly withdrawn” [272]) and its lasting effects (“echoes” [282]). Such a tension is rhythmically emphasized by the framing of the two trochaic tetrameters describing instantaneous death of the swan (276-7) by iambic pentameters (and one iambic hexameter), making the ending very turbulent.

25. The description of the sudden withdrawal of the spirit (272) underscores that for the poem to be given, for the potency to be actualized, the poetic voice must disappear. Shelley makes us imagine the very event of composing a poem, pointing ahead to the image of the fading coal in *A Defence of Poetry*:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, “I will compose poetry.” The greatest poet even cannot say: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: the power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results: but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet. (531)

26. What is recorded both in this passage and at the end of the ode is not the loss of Shelley's political ideal but the necessary fading away of inspiration, which is not tragic *per se*, because the poet's fall into impotency is part of the act of creation. Without impotency, there would be no actualization. By acknowledging this ambivalence, Shelley resists the political expediency that leads most progress poems into a triumphant final line such as "Thou, Lady, Thou shalt rule the West!" in Collins's *Ode to Liberty*.<sup>xxviii</sup> In this regard, I detect in the comparison with a drowning man at the end of Shelley's poem a reference to the bard's dive at the end of Gray's *The Bard. A Pindaric Ode*, that is, an allusion to an authoritative figure of the independent and fearless poet who does not submit to any political agenda but his own inspiration. By underlining his impotency, the poet enhances the power of his poem to make us imagine an alternative world order which disrupts the post-Waterloo conservative settlement and enlarges the realm of possibilities. Such a framing device makes the reader conscious of the eventual quality of the poem as a call for action, but also as a performance, since the poem is left for us to read, perpetually reactivating Shelley's political ideal to extend the line of Aion.<sup>xxix</sup>

27. Therefore, what Shelley seeks to formulate in *Ode to Liberty* is that gradual progress, newness and repetition are limited concepts to understand what an event is or to define history. Although one can be inspired by Athens, one should also resist the temptation to idolize it, so that one can remain open to future manifestations of the power of Liberty. Contrary to Christopher Hitt's contention that "the act of poetic composition proves a poor model for the implementation of lasting political reform," my reading aimed to show that the poem itself works as a network of echoes that charts anew the history of Liberty and a world order which challenges the triumphant post-Waterloo settlement (85). This

alternative order will last so long as the poem is read and re-performed. In this poem, Shelley contends that Liberty is a power that manifests itself in an unpredictable and sudden way, just like the “evanescent visitations” of poetry, “always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden” in *A Defence of Poetry* (532). Most progress poems use the argument of chronology to account for the superiority of British empire. The idea that Liberty is a universal human potentiality debunks that ideology and makes it harder to justify empire as a higher form of social organization. For Shelley in this poem, the actualization of Liberty is not a matter of chronology but of social and psychological renovation. “Kings” and “Priests” must be erased, as well as the slave’s temptation to perpetuate tyranny (hence the necessity of “wisdom” [259]). Poetry cannot prophesy the precise circumstances of such events, but it can “foreknow the spirit of events” (*A Defence* 513). One could argue that Shelley’s Liberty points ahead to the “ghost” of communism at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*.<sup>xxx</sup> Each event depicted in the poem creates a bifurcation, eventually replacing the linear temporality of the progress poem with a poetic network of echoes. Deleuze’s concept of event sheds light on the twofold effect of an event in Shelley’s poem: albeit transient and unpredictable, an event delivers a lasting truth. Knowing the history of Liberty but also the fact that Liberty fundamentally originates in human potentiality enables us to remain open to its power and to spark off its future manifestations. Moreover, Shelley’s poem is also an event in its own right: both evanescent and the bearer of an enduring truth, clad in a “temporary dress” and containing an “eternal truth,” it “marries [...] eternity and change” (*A Defence* 516, 515, 533). As he carefully retraces the unpredictable events that make the history of Liberty, Shelley’s poem ultimately proves an instantiation of this Event.

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<sup>ii</sup> All quotations from *Ode to Liberty* are taken from *The Poems of Shelley*. 3. (386-418).

<sup>iii</sup> See *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. 2, n°557 (180), to Leigh Hunt, Pisa, April 5, 1820: "We shall remain in Pisa until June, when we migrate to the Baths of Lucca; and after that our destination is uncertain. Much stress is laid upon a still more southern climate for my health, which has suffered dreadfully this winter, and if I could believe that Spain would be effectual, I might possibly be tempted to make a voyage thither, on account of the glorious events of which it is at the moment the theatre. You know my passion for a republic, or anything which approaches it."

<sup>iv</sup> Haywood underlines that "after six years of repression, the rebellion of 1820 was celebrated by British liberals and radicals as the fulfillment of the frustrated political ambitions of the earlier conflict, but with a key difference: the uprising was now against an internal despot, and it was part of Europe-wide resistance to the post-war settlement which had restored autocratic rule across the continent" (2018, 9).

<sup>v</sup> In his article "'A Sword of Lightning': Shelley's 'Ode to Liberty' and the Politics of Despair," Christopher Hitt argues that "growing along with the speaker's uncertainty about the attainability of lasting liberty is his awareness of human beings' propensity to abuse it—to succumb to the 'epidemic transport' of a revolutionary zeal that mutates into an uncontrollable thirst for blood... The song must end because its originary inspiration, true Liberty, has been recognised as a mirage. The poem's collapse is the inevitable outcome and surest sign of the loss of this political ideal" (79-94).

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<sup>vi</sup> In his book *Romantic Antiquity: Rome in the British Imagination, 1789-1832*, Jonathan Sachs applies to *Ode to Liberty* the concept of “poetic counterstatement” that was coined by Jerome McGann in his article “The Secrets of an Elder Day: Shelley after *Hellas*” (2009 26). According to McGann, most of Shelley’s major poems undermine their own stances through the use of collapsing or defusing effects, for instance at the end of *Epipsychidion*. Tellingly, McGann does not mention “Ode to Liberty” in his article, and I hope to show that this “poetic dualism” does not entirely account for what I call the eventual quality of this poem (127).

<sup>vii</sup> According to Wasserman, “*Prometheus Unbound* is cast in universal, not special terms, and is formed by Shelley’s vision of the entire history of man’s inevitable movement toward equality and freedom, from ancient Greece to the glorious future. His conception of history having been shaped by the recent sporadic eruption of revolutions for freedom throughout Europe and America, he conceived of the French Revolution as but an event in that progress, and he recognized the development that resulted in the Reign of Terror and the despotism of Napoleon as the type of all that prevents revolution from becoming freedom. [...] However much the reader may be tempted to specify Shelley’s references, the fact is that Shelley has consistently abstracted and syncretized archetypal patterns of religious and political history in the same manner that he has assimilated the forms or potential forms of various conventional myths by releasing them from their special particularities. Presented successively with archetypal visions of religious and political revolution, Prometheus has seen, by virtue of Shelley’s myth-making processes, the two major expressions of his own inclusive archetypal history as the One Mind” (305).

<sup>viii</sup> Wasserman establishes that in *Prometheus Unbound*, “although the manifestations of the cosmic Power have multiple forms, significances and values, they are all various modes of the single act of chthonian exhalation; and therefore this relationship exactly corresponds to the relation Shelley understood between power and the events it effects in the realm of existence” (339).

<sup>ix</sup> My contention is influenced by William Keach’s argument in *Shelley’s Style* that “rhyme would appear to be a mysterious consequence of linguistic arbitrariness as Shelley conceives it. For in rhyme the arbitrariness of language turns back on itself to produce—or to make it possible for the poet-as-arbitrer to produce—phonetic or graphemic as well as semantic links among arbitrary linguistic signs” (*Shelley’s Style* 185). Keach further endows this observation with a political dimension in *Arbitrary Power*: “A founding assumption throughout will be that rhyme—the usually accidental phonetic correspondence between or among different words—dramatizes the principle of linguistic arbitrariness as no other formal convention does, and that as an organizing feature of verse it projects its arbitrariness into very extensive and fundamental structures of meaning, including political meaning” (*Arbitrary Power* 46).

<sup>x</sup> I rely on Even Gottlieb’s assertion in *Romantic Globalism* that many Romantic-period writers shared “a commitment, implicit or explicit, to teach readers to think globally in ways that emphasize the horizontality, transversality, or mutually constitutive nature of the relations between peoples and nations” and that their “global thinking frequently took shape as an alternative to, rather than merely an elaboration or anticipation of, imperialism” (10).

<sup>xi</sup> For Koselleck, “this experience of history, founded as it was on repeatability, bound prospective futures to the past” (16).

<sup>xii</sup> According to Gary Kelly, Shelley wrote a letter to Felicia Hemans on reading *England and Spain* “with the pretext of dissuading her from support for war and belief in a god” (20).

<sup>xiii</sup> I thank Juliette Delalande and Louise Brouard for coining this word for me.

<sup>xiv</sup> For Wasserman, “when, in tracing the history of freedom in his *Ode to Liberty*, Shelley writes after vague foreshadowings “Athens arose,” he means to locate in Athens at the conclusion of the Persian Wars not merely an episode of liberation but the original birth of freedom among mankind, both the prototype and the fountainhead of all subsequent human freedom and expulsions of tyranny” (381).

<sup>xv</sup> For Nancy Moore Goslee, the problem of idolization is central to the poem (*Visual* 127-129 and 135-136). According to her, as he composed the poem, Shelley had in mind Wordsworth's line from "Resolution and Independence": "By our own spirits are we deified."

<sup>xvi</sup> For instance, "it was not until the eleventh century that the effects of the poetry of the Christian and Chivalric systems began to manifest themselves" (524). The reasons of such late and random actualization are quite obscure. The best three epic poets selected by Shelley are not hierarchized in terms of quality as the adjectives "first", "second", "third" are chronological. *A Defence of Poetry* does not describe a teleological progress nor a decline of poetry, nor even a cyclical pattern (as in "The Four Ages of Poetry") but unpredictable actualizations of an evanescent power whose origin is in a human's mind, which is highly reminiscent of the power of Liberty in Shelley's ode.

<sup>xvii</sup> In *Romantic Antiquity* Sachs considers that "Shelley's treatment of Greece shifts from an almost supernatural enthusiasm in which Greece is an enduring example of Promethean perfection to a still reverent, but more deeply skeptical and historically grounded veneration for Greece as a society in which liberty and the arts flourished first and more prevalently than in other places" (174).

<sup>xviii</sup> For Wasserman, "inasmuch as ultimate cause is infinitely remote from the first palpable event in the regular temporal succession called cause and effect, Demogorgon's realm is absolutely remote not only from the universe but also from the One Mind by which the universe is constituted; and it is notable that Prometheus and Demogorgon never meet, indeed could not" (318).

<sup>xix</sup> Jonathan Sachs reminds us of the popularity of the image of the river to conceptualize and represent time in his article "Scales of Time and the Anticipation of the Future: Gibbon, Smith, Playfair." He notes that "in 1769, for example, Joseph Priestley produced his *New Chart of History*. In his companion description of this chart Priestley argued that all time could be represented as a line. 'Time here,' Priestley insists, 'flows uniformly, from the beginning to the end of the tablet. It is also represented as flowing *laterally*, like a river'" ("Scales" 712). Playfair's subsequent invention of the pie chart underlines a notable evolution in the representation of change over time, from a purely horizontal representation to a more elaborate graphic design, which underlines the fact, according to Sachs, that "historical actors experienced increasingly complicated relations to temporal processes" ("Scales" 717).

<sup>xx</sup> Diego Saglia in *Poetic Castles in Spain* observes that "the poem rests on the well-rehearsed principle that the culminating stage of civilization is the commercial one, as theorized by the historical-anthropological research of the Scottish Enlightenment" (115).

<sup>xxi</sup> Saglia notices that "British nationhood gains pre-eminence over the Spanish one, and [that] the latter is relegated to the role of counter-text," while the poem is characterized by a "constant veering off nationalism towards the domain of imperial ideology" (16).

<sup>xxii</sup> Levine argues that "to introduce his partially revealed vision of a lost Druid temple, Collins collapses his account of its legendary construction with the work he will perform in the poem, to recreate it poetically" (558).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Jonathan Culler in *Theory of the Lyric* reflects on "lyric's attempt to be itself an event rather than the representation of an event" (35). He also argues that "the tension between the narrative and the apostrophic can be seen as the generative force behind a whole series of lyrics" (226-7). For him, "one major effect of lyric address is the replacement of a narrative temporality with the temporality of the poetic" (229): I think that it is exactly what is at stake in Shelley's poem, which is addressed to an abstract entity and is replete with apostrophes.

<sup>xxiv</sup> I thank Sophie Musitelli for suggesting these two possible readings of the word "inverse."

<sup>xxv</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Druids were thought to be the native inhabitants of Britain and the original source of oral British poetry. They were praised and hailed as poetic models by Gray and Collins in their odes. Yet notice that they are excluded from the poetic echoes of Liberty in stanza VIII of Shelley's poem.

<sup>xxvi</sup> See "Qu'est-ce que l'acte de création?", a talk given by Deleuze on May 17, 1987, at La Fémis.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Jonathan Culler argues that “the fundamental characteristic of lyric...is not the description and interpretation of a past event but the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special ‘now’ of lyric articulation” (226).

<sup>xxviii</sup> For Levine, “Collins ultimately surrenders to political expediency; whatever solution is soothing to the nation is acceptable to him” (569).

<sup>xxix</sup> I here use Culler’s distinction between the lyric performative (the illocutionary act, that is to say “the poem’s success in bringing about what it describes”) and lyric performance (the perlocutionary effects, meaning that “the lyric performance succeeds as it acts iterably through repeated readings, makes itself memorable”) (131). Although Culler mainly focuses on the latter, I think that both are articulated in Shelley’s poem.

<sup>xxx</sup> See Marx and Engels: “A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism” (31).