"Is Not the Past All Shadow?": History and Vision in Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats

Timothy Ruppert

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“IS NOT THE PAST ALL SHADOW?”:
HISTORY AND VISION IN BYRON, THE SHELLEYS, AND KEATS

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School
of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Timothy Ruppert

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“IS NOT THE PAST ALL SHADOW?”:

HISTORY AND VISION IN BYRON, THE SHELLEYS, AND KEATS

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Throughout the British Romantic period, poets and prose writers shared a keen interest in the imaginative possibilities conferred by the national legacy of literary prophecy. The subversive and transformative elements of the vatic tradition in England, particularly as established by John Milton’s aesthetically and politically radical work, appealed to both older and younger Romantic writers who sought not simply to describe their times but to remake them. To such minds, prophecy offered a historically authoritative genre equipped with unique aesthetic principles and a seemingly timely interventionist ethic, whether turned to the renovation of individual men and women or of whole communities.

After the Battle of Waterloo decisively concluded the Napoleonic Wars, however, Romantic literary prophecy in England underwent a significant transformation. This study addresses how four major British postwar authors—namely, Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats—engage and challenge the ideas and ideals of visionary poetics and so
assert new perspectives on literary prophecy in contradistinction to the first wave
Romantics’ aesthetic values and tenets. Over the course of this discussion, I look closely
at Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound, Byron’s The Vision of Judgment, Mary Shelley’s The
Last Man, and select lyrical pieces from Keats. Although Shelley in part carries forward
the visionary spirit of Blake and the Lake Poets, Byron, Mary Shelley, and Keats actively
question that spirit and its expression in literary art. Consequently, these second wave
Romantics facilitate the discontinuation of what the twentieth-century scholar Joseph
Anthony Wittreich, Jr., calls the English line of vision, that is, an artistic genealogy
stretching from the Romantics to Milton, Spenser, Sidney, and Chaucer (and, ultimately,
to the prophets of Judeo-Christian scripture). This study, then, presents an evaluation of
why the younger Romantics countervail the British visionary poetics tradition and how
this important change in the general artistic imagination reflects both the hopes and the
disenchantments of the British post-Napoleonic moment.
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Introduction

“The case is, that the word *prophet*, to which later times have affixed a new idea, was the Bible word for poet, and the word *prophesying* meant the art of making poetry. It also meant the art of playing poetry to a tune upon any instrument of music.”

—Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, First Part (1794)

This study examines British Romantic literary prophecy in the later Regency period, that is, in the years after the Seventh Coalition—an international alliance that included the United Kingdom—decisively defeated Napoleon Bonaparte and the First French Empire at Waterloo, Belgium, on 18 June 1815. The English Regency period encompassed the nine years between 1811, when the Prince Regent became acting sovereign in place of his father, King George III, and 1820, when the Prince Regent acceded to the throne following his father’s death. The period of hostilities with France, however, began in 1793 and continued almost without interruption until 1815. The British victory at Waterloo thus concluded nearly twenty-two years of war with France, at first a Revolutionary and finally an imperial state. My focus, then, is on the changes in Romantic visionary literature during England’s postwar years, a period that includes and extends somewhat beyond the English Regency timeframe.

Throughout the British Romantic period (very roughly, 1789 to 1832), poets and prose writers shared a keen interest in the imaginative possibilities conferred by the national legacy of literary prophecy. The subversive and transformative elements of the vatic
tradition in England, particularly as established by John Milton’s aesthetically and politically radical work, appealed to both older and younger Romantic writers who sought not simply to describe their times but to remake them. To such minds, prophecy offered a historically authoritative genre equipped with unique aesthetic principles and a seemingly timely interventionist ethic, whether turned to the renovation of individual men and women or of whole communities. Literary prophecy, as epitomized by Milton’s highly influential oeuvre, represented a way for art to come to terms with both personal and public conflicts in an age of serious historical crisis.

In a general sense, this shared interest in Milton’s art and prophetic persona unites the British Romantic writers of both the wartime and postwar generations. The Miltonic legacy provides a helpful framework for the scholar who seeks to interpret the Romantic period as a whole or wishes to consider the relationships between first generation Romantics, such as William Blake, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and William Wordsworth, and their postwar heirs. The principal theorist of this legacy is Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. In a remarkable succession of publications appearing throughout the 1970s, Wittreich breaks significant theoretical ground in both the study of visionary literature as a historical phenomenon and in the critical understanding of prophecy as an English literary genre. With respect to the former, he posits the idea of a trans-generational line of vision, that is, a literary tradition stretching from the Middle Ages to the present that takes scripture as its beginning and Milton as its apex. With respect to the latter, he asserts that prophecy establishes aesthetic values, a recognizable methodology for literary production, and a measure for an artist’s self-identification. His work on visionary
poetics thus presents an explicative model for a certain authorial temperament and provides a continuity theory that helps to clarify how poetic influence functions, as in the cases of Chaucer’s influence on Spenser, Spenser’s influence on Milton, or Milton’s influence on Blake, the Lake Poets, and the younger Romantics.\(^3\)

Wittreich offers both a critical narrative of English literary relations and a cogent description of an aesthetic especially popular with first-generation British Romantic poets. At the same time, he tends not to distinguish between the older and younger Romantics; consequently, he overlooks the distinctiveness of the two Romantic generations and their respective historical moments. Although neither cavalier nor self-defeating, this homogenization of the Romantic poets creates interpretative problems in light of certain critical assertions. William Kerrigan, for example, contends that “after the English Revolution,” the poet-prophet role changes because “the political and religious division of the nation inevitably meant a divided national literature” (81). As this remark suggests, the stability of the Miltonic inheritance is undermined from the outset by the lasting cultural effects of the mid-seventeenth century English Civil Wars that replaced Stuart monarchy with the Commonwealth. And although the early Romantics faced revolution abroad and Pittite repression at home, as well as many years of bloody war, we may note, with Christina M. Root, that “the post-Napoleonic period raised new questions about how lasting change could come about and demanded a more skeptical and self-conscious approach to both poetry and politics” (164). By blending the older and younger Romantics into a single class of poets, Wittreich simplifies a complex era and marginalizes cultural in favor of purely literary history.
With Wittreich’s theoretical work in mind, I seek in this study to show that the postwar Romantics significantly and lastingly transform the English visionary tradition. Over the course of this essay, I discuss the unique responses of four important late-Regency writers—namely, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, and John Keats—to the art of poetic prophecy. Although I treat each separately, in largely self-contained chapters, these individual authors bear collective relevance to the assertion that the Romantic visionary line falls apart within eleven years after the Battle of Waterloo. While it is true that Shelley carries forward much of the spirit of the Lake Poets in his lyrical drama, Prometheus Unbound (1820), his contemporaries, for varying reasons and to differing extents, challenge and with time undermine the visionary poetics promulgated by the first wave Romantics. Shelley’s belief in the transformative power of prophecy, although provisionally validated by Byron in The Vision of Judgment (1822), inspires Mary Shelley’s sophisticated repudiation of English visionary poetics in her 1826 novel, The Last Man. And although appearing late in the Romantic period, the book in fact shares a great deal with John Keats’s skeptical, materialist critique of Romantic prophecy, a critique that Keats first offers at a much earlier moment in the English Regency.

This study, then, presents a critical narrative of the second wave Romantics in relation to the English tradition of poetic prophecy as Wittreich describes it. To facilitate this presentation, my first chapter sketches out Wittreich’s theories in detail, thereby providing a context for the study as a whole. This initial chapter comprises four interrelated sections. The first section describes Wittreich’s line of vision and visionary
poetics theories, both of which arise out of an original idea of Milton’s poetic influence. The second section traces Wittreich’s own influence on a generation of scholars, including Jackie DiSalvo, Leslie Tannenbaum, Terence Allan Hoagwood, and George Anthony Rosso, who, during the 1980s, conducted new investigations of Romantic literary prophecy. After providing these two descriptive sections, I examine in greater depth two of my contentions with Wittreich: first, that he creates a Milton who is too decisive, who varies little from author to author and age to age; and second, that he renders the post-Waterloo moment too indistinctly, thereby fostering an inaccurate identification of the younger Romantics with their older counterparts. Accordingly, in section three I discuss Milton as an unsettled and markedly indecisive presence in British literary history, while in section four I offer a historical survey of the postwar Regency period in order to highlight its considerable distinctiveness.

My second chapter presents a reading of Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound as a vision of human perfectibility and social renovation that reflects the poet’s engagement with intellectuals such as William Godwin and the Marquis de Condorcet. I devote special attention in this reading to Shelley’s idea of Love as a vital principle through which all life is joined. To a certain type of mind, such a principle possesses a clear appeal, particularly at a time of intellectual disenchantment and political authoritarianism (the postwar years, of course, saw the restoration of monarchies throughout Europe and the reinforcement of the Hanoverian regime in England). Despite its verbal beauty, the piece is idiosyncratic and at times nebulous; consequently, I interpret the work through a close reading methodology that I believe best casts light on a crucial but often trying work.
Because I believe it appropriate to the analysis, I adopt this approach provisionally in chapter two and organize its six sections accordingly. Sections two through five present individual readings of acts one through four of Shelley’s lyrical drama; section five, however, focuses less on Shelley’s fourth act (which has almost no recognizable plot) than on an important question that it raises, specifically, whether the act presents a world reformed through Love as a decidedly utopian social vision. The concluding section addresses the relationship between Shelley and Byron, who, in The Vision of Judgment, responds at least in part to his contemporary’s visionary idealism.

In chapter three, I suggest an unusual interpretation of Byron’s 1822 poem, a work written to countervail Robert Southey’s sycophantic, manifestly royalist A Vision of Judgment (1821). Traditionally, Romanticists have viewed The Vision of Judgment as a merciless and mortal blow against the Lake Poet, whose disdain for Byron was both open and intense. The poem, however, provides adequate evidence for one to call this customary reading into question. In this chapter, I argue that Byron, partly influenced by Shelley’s visionary idealism, ridicules Southey—the former Jacobin radical who later became England’s Poet Laureate—without damning him. Rather, Byron shows clemency to his adversary (as well as to the late British monarch) by asserting a vision of compassion that develops subtly over the course of the piece. To demonstrate this atypical claim, I first recount the complex relationship between Byron and Southey; I then discuss how the intersection of vision and satire in the poem creates a unique textual opportunity for the young Romantic to explore the possibility of forgiveness; and, finally, I trace the pattern of tolerance and compassion established in the work by characters such
as the Archangel Michael, Sathan (Byron’s spelling), John Wilkes, and the enigmatic political critic, Junius. Through these three related analyses, I seek to establish that Byron, who was neither an idealist nor a disciple of the older Romantic seer-poets, engaged the visionary idiom seriously and resourcefully, as The Vision of Judgment shows.

In my fourth chapter, I consider Mary Shelley’s novel of biological apocalypse, The Last Man, and argue that the book offers a subversive critique of the poetical tenets that Percy Shelley and Byron espoused during the late Regency period. The novel indicts both poets by redrawing them as two politically powerful characters, namely the benevolent Adrian (Shelley) and the haughty Raymond (Byron). At first glance, such characterizations perhaps suggest that Shelley wishes to render a critique of Romantic radical ideology rather than of Romantic visionary aesthetics. A closer inspection of her experimental narrative, however, reveals that Shelley pointedly assails the latter by offering a sophisticated counterexample to the vatic works of her contemporaries. Although her protagonist, Lionel Verney, presents his plague-chronicle as a history rather than a vision, this record of what befalls humankind in the late twenty-first century assumes prophetic force by virtue of the fact that it is recovered by a Regency-era Englishwoman while visiting the Cave of the Sibyl in 1818 Italy. By privileging the sibylline prophetic tradition over the Judeo-Christian legacy in the frame narrative, Mary Shelley creates an expressly female visionary poetics that challenges many of the biases inherent in Shelley and Byron’s work. In chapter four, I expatiate on this assertion first by discussing her experiments with linear time and chronology and then by elaborating
how and why she replaces patriarchal scriptural and British referents with the matriarchal, pagan sibyl. I conclude by exploring the question of whether Shelley, by way of her daringly innovative novel, establishes the grounds for a specifically female line of vision.

My fifth and last chapter focuses on John Keats, who almost from the first brings a materialist, non-Christian perspective to bear on his engagements with visionary art. Because he distrusts the transcendent idealism implicit within the English vatic tradition, Keats offers a skeptical valuation of Romantic visionary poetics and its metaphysical undercurrents. This valuation amounts to a critique that takes shape over several poems and letters and reflects the maturation of Keats’s thinking with respect to both art and politics. Although he writes many of these pieces before the Shelleys and Byron publish their most important visionary works, Keats in fact anticipates the less than favorable Victorian response to the English visionary tradition. In this sense, Keats’s insistent realism and secularism bridge late Romantic poetry with the social reformist literature of the 1830s and 1840s. If the early Victorians write to renovate individuals and communities, they do so without directly invoking either the program for change or the aesthetic code standardized by the English prophetic tradition. To cast light on this contention, I discuss poems such as the well-known Ode to a Nightingale (1820) and the far less familiar “Before he went to live with owls and bats” (c. 1817) before presenting my analysis of Keats’s influence on the post-Romantic generation of British writers. My objective here is to show that Keats begins what Mary Shelley in essence finishes five years after Keats’s death, namely, the breaking of the Romantic visionary line.
The four younger British Romantics with whom I am concerned in this study differ significantly on several counts, as evinced by their divergent responses to the visionary mode established by the first generation Romantics. At the same time, what distinguishes these authors may be most advantageously understood in relation to what unites them. Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats share both a deep interest in history and an intellectual faith in the power of literature either to effect change or to articulate the need for change. Taken together, this interest and faith suggest why visionary poetics elicits so many profound if varied responses from the younger Romantics. These authors collectively intuit that literary prophecy—the legacy of Chaucer, Sidney, Spenser, and Milton—signifies much more than “ecstatic, mantic, oracular, [and] shamanic utterance and performance” (Leavitt 2). The poet-prophet’s art may involve elements of rhapsody or invoke the idea of divine afflatus; but poetic prophecy is primarily a way of writing about human beings in the here-and-now world. The poet thus offers to his times a reanalysis of the past, thereby facilitating change in the present and creating new possibilities for the future.

British literary prophecy, accordingly, has little to do with sacred inspiration and bears even less relation to the simple foretelling of things to come. Rather, the art espouses an interventionist purpose that draws its authority from the nation’s poets and their works. For the second wave Romantics, the principal representative of this authority was Milton, a radical artist with whom they shared a love of intellectual liberty and a hatred of kings. These feelings join Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats, even if aesthetics often divide them. By reconsidering these authors in light of the unique conditions of the post-Napoleonic
moment, we may better appreciate how the younger Romantics carry forward Milton’s revolutionary spirit at a time when disaffection and bloodshed intensified the need for new visions of human freedom and community.
Building his argument partly on older studies such as Rupert Taylor’s *The Political Prophecy in England* (1911) and Raymond Dexter Havens’s *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (1922), Joseph Anthony Wittreich, in several works published in the 1970s, posited a theory of poetic tradition and continuity designed to counter the idea of literary relations that Harold Bloom presents in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). By way of his response to Bloom, Wittreich also engages, whether implicitly or explicitly, critics such as Marjorie Reeves, Walter Jackson Bate, Angus Fletcher, Murray Roston, Peter F. Fisher, Iain H. Murray, Northrop Frye, and, in later pieces, William Kerrigan.  

With these scholars as well as Bloom in mind, Wittreich offers a theory of poetic influence that yields a fresh understanding of British literary history and the aesthetic considerations which distinguish artists who write within one or the other of the two main currents constituting that history.

Wittreich asserts that English literary history comprises two principal intellectual genealogies, namely, the line of wit and the line of vision. Accordingly, most major British authors belong to one or the other tradition; a writer’s aesthetic concerns and practices determine whether he or she is a wit or a visionary (this second type of artist may also be called a poet-prophet, seer-poet, or vates). Unlike Bloom, who reads literary history as the sum of anxiety-driven conflicts across generations, Wittreich identifies two classes or communities of authors who share a sense of affinity with their historical
predecessors. Wittreich thus countervails Bloom by replacing Bloom’s picture of disaffected authors locked in Oedipal struggle with an image of the same artists joined in literary coalitions across time.

Wittreich’s critical interests lie principally in the visionary tradition and the class of writers engendered by that legacy. The line of vision, as Wittreich formulates it, has its provenance in Christian scriptural precedents and takes John Milton as its focal point. With Milton as its central figure, this tradition interconnects writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and the greater part of the major Romantics, especially William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley (*Milton and the Line of Vision* xiv). Additionally, this genealogy accommodates Modernists such as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, and Wallace Stevens. And, to take Wittreich’s theory a step further, we may count post-colonial authors such as Salman Rushdie and Doris Lessing among those whose work places them within the tradition of English vatic literature. Sharing aesthetic values, compositional techniques, and an idea of authorial identity, these writers, among others, constitute a trans-generational community that Wittreich positions against the competing line of wit tradition.

The line of wit, conversely, comprises writers such as Ben Jonson, John Donne, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, and Robert Browning, all of whom show less interest in biblical prophecy and Milton’s radical art than in classical sources and the aesthetic principles codified by those sources. Generally, the Elizabethan dramatists, the Metaphysical and neoclassical poets, and the Victorians belong to this historical countercurrent. John T. Shawcross, in *John Milton and Influence* (1991), clarifies the
distinctions between the two traditions in terms of their individual emphases on either classical or scriptural precedents:

While most attention has been paid to an “Aristotelian” principle of imitation that develops the line of wit, methodizing but praising variation as well, an unstinted undercurrent of “Platonic” “truth” persists to establish a line of vision. The “Platonic” poet becomes a copyist (a quite different concept from that of being an imitator) of the poet’s own vision. The employment of the Bible is a clear demarcation between these antithetic poets, the one reproducing, for example, event or character, the other interpreting the revelation in the event or character. Such revelation becomes archetypal and is fundamental to prophecy, an act of little interest to a Pope or a Johnson. (71)

Shawcross’s description encompasses a crucial point: while artists working in the wit tradition seek interrelatedness with classical authors, texts, and tenets, visionary writers look rather to align themselves and their art with the biblical seers of the Old and New Testaments. Of course, the two lines at times intersect, as in the case of Pope’s Windsor Forest (1713) (MLV xiv). For the most part, though, the traditions seldom coalesce or hybridize because the two lines have radically different provenances in the literature of the past.  

For writers composing in the vatic tradition, the Bible generally, and the Book of Revelation particularly, provide sophisticated and lastingly powerful models of influence. Wittreich contends that visionary poets, through a selective and purposeful program of study that mirrors scriptural precedents, strive for erudition in their respective literary
inheritances:

The interconnectedness of the tradition requires that the poet-prophet give to his precursors the same diligent study that Daniel gave to Jeremiah and that John of Patmos gave to Daniel. The involvement of these biblical prophets with one another is replicated by the relationship Spenser strikes with Chaucer, Milton with Spenser (and Sidney), Blake and the other Romantics with Milton, and Yeats or Stevens, as well as many other moderns, with both Milton and Blake. Moreover, the interrelationships, often noted, between the Book of Revelation and other prophecy (especially Daniel’s) are archetypal for those that exist between *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Faerie Queene*, between *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*, between Milton’s epics and those of Blake, and between Blake’s epics and the lyric-epic vision of Yeats or the epical novels of Joyce. (MLV xv)

By adopting the interpretative and compositional methods of the Hebrew prophets (and, for the Romantics, doing so according to Milton’s example), the visionary engages the literary and cultural pasts dynamically, revivifying and revising older prophecies as a way to facilitate new possibilities for the human future. Through this depiction of the British visionary author, Wittreich both counterstrikes Bloom and answers M. H. Abrams, who, in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), chastises Romanticists who neglect to acknowledge that “Wordsworth and his English contemporaries reflect not only the language and rhythms but also the design, the imagery, and many of the central moral values of the Bible, as well as Milton, the great poet of Biblical history and prophecy” (32).
In his theory of an English line of vision, Wittreich crystallizes an especially cogent set of ideas regarding literary continuity in counterpoint to Bloom’s notion of the anxiety of poetic influence. Furthermore, his assertion that the visionary tradition has scriptural origins correlativelly establishes prophecy as a literary genre. Like tragedy, comedy, satire, or epic—the hallmark genres of the wit tradition—prophecy employs conventional devices and techniques. Consequently, this “composite medium,” as George Anthony Rosso writes, “develops a set of generic signals and expectations, including a visionary idiom, intertextual or allusive contexts, narrative disjunctions, multiple perspectives, a typological code, and a liberatory social ethic,” all of which features serve to create “a living drama of contending voices” (Blake’s Prophetic Workshop 12). Because prophecy is an assimilative genre, visionary artists often integrate elements of other major genres into their work. Thus the Bible’s importance to the English visionary is at least twofold: first, the scriptural prophets provide a model (one that in Christian England would be culturally sanctioned) for the writer’s public identity and historical relevance; second, scripture establishes a type and a set of conventions for a style of literary production that in most instances is distinctly radical in terms of both artistic technique and political perspective.

Clearly, the Bible bears special paradigmatic significance for the English visionary line. At the same time, visionary authors engage scripture principally through other visionaries; that is to say, the English poet-prophet is less interested in the literature of divine revelation than in the imaginative writing that seeks to interpret, reframe, and humanize what we may provisionally refer to as the revealed truth of sacred texts. For
example, Spenser, through his reading of the literary past, places foremost emphasis on the ways in which Chaucer, a fellow countryman and poet-prophet, adopts scriptural content and the vatic stance. Chaucer both mediates the Bible and acts as a positive influence through whom Spenser learns to transform the structures, themes, and language of biblical prophecy into original English art.⁶

For the British Romantic poets with whom I am concerned in this study, the great mediator of the vatic tradition is Milton, and his body of work epitomizes the revolutionary potential of vision as a method of literary production. In theorizing the relationship of Milton to the Romantics, Wittreich posits a guiding image rather than a sinister presence (thereby recasting Bloom’s idea of Milton as a historical force whom the poet must overcome). Although individual responses vary, often considerably so, Milton and his provocative oeuvre influence all the major English Romantics. With respect to his contentions in favor of Milton as a benevolent and crucial influence, Wittreich is not alone; Robert M. Ryan, for one, claims that the Romantics’ interest in Milton defines British Romantic literature in toto, particularly after the French Reign of Terror unfolded in 1794: “In Britain after 1795 prophetic reformation became a more practicable agenda, and for poets a more appropriate one, than political agitation. Here, as in so much else, John Milton provided a model, his achievement offering consolation for the thwarted liberal aspirations of a post-revolutionary era” (5). For Ryan, English Romantic literature fundamentally reflects Milton’s life and work as these establish an archetype of the inspired national artist who creates in times of profound historical crises.⁷ Thus one finds in Wittreich, as well as in more recent Romanticist studies, an
archetypal image of Milton that contrasts sharply with Bloom’s sketch of a Great Inhibitor who must be slain in the struggle between tradition and the individual talent.

Importantly, Wittreich presents Milton as a beneficent rather than a menacing influence. At the same time, Wittreich’s portrayal of Milton is much more than a pointed counterexample to Bloom’s depiction of the Puritan poet. Wittreich sees Milton as a guide to the British writers who come after him; but he also counts Milton a radical, an iconoclast, and a revolutionary in both art and politics. To this point, Wittreich asserts:

Like Spenser, Milton joined epic to prophecy; but what was important [. . .] was that Milton took a radical stance against all traditions—poetical and intellectual. Poets like Spenser, Herbert, and Milton transmuted the forms they inherited, but what distinguished Milton from other poets was the fact that he used his newly created forms to undermine rather than to uphold the reigning orthodoxies. Spenser and Herbert took their values from the audiences they addressed, but Milton [. . .] rejected the prevailing values in order to create new ones. (“Seals” 26)

By virtue of these qualifying statements, we see that Wittreich’s theorization of Milton and his artistic legacy relies on a foregrounding of the poet’s anti-authoritarian views regarding culture, governance, and literature. This picture of Milton as “an architect of new forms, a generator of values nobler than those his culture already possessed, a maker of new myths rather than a recorder of old ones” (“Seals” 26) allows Wittreich to advance two significant claims: first, that prophecy is a transformative genre designed “to alter [. . .] the collective ideology of the culture producing it” (Visionary Poetics 50);
and second, that the poet-prophet is not only an innovator but also an interventionist, an agent for change in his or her own time as well as for the future. These two contentions, founded upon a specific conceptualization of Milton as the arch-radical British poet, structure Wittreich’s analysis of the major Romantics and their visionary works.

Milton’s life and art thus clarify both the role of the English literary vates and the function of written prophecy, particularly as these become manifest in the Romantic era. The Miltonic visionary poet, as a student of literary and cultural history, learns through knowledge of the past to discern historical patterns as these develop in the present. Based on his or her insights into the historical dynamics of the moment, the visionary strives through literary art to disrupt those patterns mainly by subverting the cultural and intellectual institutions that perpetuate them. For Stephen C. Behrendt, the visionary plays this double role of historian and activist “in an effort to let historical phenomena speak their own counsel within works intended to expand and significantly shape the social, political, and moral conscience” (16). Behrendt’s claim accords with Wittreich’s view that “vision, unless it inspires action, is nothing” (VP 34). The poet-prophets who follow Milton’s example base their ameliorative programs on deep understandings of how the past recurs in the present: “Like the epic poet, the prophet may recount history; but his purpose is less to record it then to bring it to an apotheosis. Historical patterns are drawn not for their own sake but to find a release from them” (Wittreich, VP 34). Accordingly, such artists recognize “the renovation of history” as their principal aim (Wittreich, VP 36).

In this light, we see that the visionary poet is not a clairvoyant and that literary
prophecy is not intended to be predictive. The visionary, “often thought to foretell the future, more exactly attempts to fashion it” (Wittreich VP 34). Poet-seers are not soothsayers, such as the one who cautions Shakespeare’s Caesar to “beware the Ides of March”; correlativey, prophecy is not supernaturally prescient, as is the Weird Sisters’ “prophetic greeting” (1.3.78) to Macbeth and Banquo on the heath outside Forres. Nor is the visionary a contemporary version of the Anglo-Saxon scop: music and history are crucial to the public performances of both artists, but the visionary is a reformer rather than a court-bard. The scene in Milton most representative of prophetic reformation takes place within the two closing books of Paradise Lost, in which the angel Michael reveals postlapsarian history to Adam after healing Adam’s bodily eyes on Eden’s most prominent height. As Barbara Kiefer Lewalski notes in Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms (1985), Michael delivers his prophecy with two principal goals in mind: first, the angel seeks “the cure of Adam’s moral blindness” (256); second, he strives “to develop and exercise Adam’s faith, leading him to comprehend the typological pattern of history” (257). Michael’s prophetic intervention, willed by God and enacted according to these two objectives, facilitates the renewal of Adam and Eve, a spiritual and intellectual renovation brought about by Michael’s presentation of history in visionary form. On the whole, this episode establishes that the visionary generally—and the Miltonic visionary especially—intercedes in the present, unsettling it in order to liberate humankind and generate new possibilities for the future.

We may say, in sum, that Wittreich’s theoretical work provides an incisive reading of English literary history and a cogent interpretation of poetic influence that bears special
relevance to the study of British Romanticism. The line of vision theory presents an attractively flexible explanation of literary affinity that, despite Lucy Newlyn’s claim to the contrary in Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader (1993), offers critics a model of influence adaptable to reconfigurations of the Romantic canon. As a way of framing the Romantics’ relationship with the literary past, the theory accommodates both canonical authors, like Blake or the Lake Poets, and non-canonical writers such as Lucy Aikin, whose Epistles on Women (1810) sets forth her claim that she is “a daughter of Milton,” as Jane Spencer has recently argued (4). Furthermore, Wittreich’s description of visionary aesthetics casts light on what the English Romantics share in terms of style, technique, and purpose; in this sense, Wittreich’s ideas possess both the liveliness and the scope to elucidate not only familiar Romantic authors but less well-known poets such as Anne Bannerman and Louisa Costello as well.

Whether the generative potential of Wittreich’s theories has been fully realized in Romanticism studies to date is a principal concern of the present discussion. Indeed, Wittreich’s work broke ground for several important studies of Romanticism published in the 1980s and early 1990s, including pieces by Jackie DiSalvo, Leslie Tannenbaum, Terence Allan Hoagwood, and Rosso. All four of these authors have contributed significantly to the scholarly conversation regarding Romanticism’s vatic aspects. At the same time, these critics focus their analyses of the visionary tradition almost exclusively on Blake, his aesthetics, and his relationship with Milton (save in part Hoagwood, who writes on Shelley as well as Blake). Although providing helpful access to Blake and his prophetic art, this body of work tends to restrict rather than amplify Wittreich’s theories.
Before asserting my own contention with Wittreich’s ideas on Romantic vision, I want in
the forthcoming section to survey the work of DiSalvo and her colleagues, thereby
clarifying the exact terms of this contention.¹⁶

* * *

That Wittreich’s theoretical approach provides a unique and persuasive critical
framework through which to interpret British Romantic literature is evinced by the work
of DiSalvo, Tannenbaum, Hoagwood, and Rosso, all former Wittreich students who build
on their teacher’s ideas in their respective studies of Blake’s verse-prophecies. These
scholars (hereafter referred to collectively as the DiSalvo generation) participate in a
vivacious dialogue with Wittreich; to note this fact, however, is not to insinuate that they
simply parrot their instructor’s insights in a shallow criticism by rote. Quite the contrary:
just as Blake—Milton’s finest student—revises his teacher in order to renew his
 teachings, so these critics rethink their instructor’s arguments in novel and generative
ways.

DiSalvo, for example, recasts Wittreich’s theory of poetic influence in a historical
materialist context and thus portrays the Blake-Milton relationship as a trans-generational
class struggle:

Milton becomes the key to all human history and human consciousness because it
was the seventeenth-century English bourgeoisie that first wrapped history in a
ball and rolled it toward the overwhelming questions of human development.
There is no society in the world today that is not defined by its relation to the
values and institutions of Milton’s England. As a spokesman of the Puritan
revolution, Milton articulated the values that enabled mankind to liberate itself from the shackles of feudalism, creating at the same time new fetters in their stead. Blake turns to Milton for his espousal of freedom but also for his expression of its bourgeois limitations. (“Blake Encountering Milton” 144-45)

With the British historian Christopher Hill in mind, DiSalvo redraws Wittreich’s theories from an expressly Marxist perspective. DiSalvo’s use of Hill is understandable, given that Hill, in sketching the picture of seventeenth-century England, devotes considerable attention to the subject of prophecy and the figure of Milton.17 With respect to the former, Hill writes that “the Reformation [. . .] stimulated the spirit of prophecy” by removing illegitimate intermediaries between the Lord and the individual, “and God,” Hill notes, “was no respecter of persons: he spoke to John Knox rather than to Mary Queen of Scots” (The World Turned Upside Down 91). And so “the common man,” Hill maintains, “could remake history if kings and princes did not” (World 91).18 Hill’s argument in favor of the egalitarianism of seventeenth-century English prophecy has an obvious appeal for DiSalvo, who reads the Blake-Milton relationship through a Marxist lens: “Blake’s struggle to transform society,” she asserts, “take[s] the form of a struggle to transform Milton’s myth” as it is constituted in works such as Paradise Lost (“Blake” 145).

What DiSalvo traces out in her essay, “Blake Encountering Milton: Politics and the Family in Paradise Lost and The Four Zoas” (1975), she develops at length in her War of Titans: Blake’s Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion (1983), a book in which she further explores the seventeenth-century social historical referents for Blake’s vision-
ary poetics. DiSalvo argues that, “during the revolutionary decades” in England, the
Book of Revelation was “studied not only by scholars like [David] Pareus, [Joseph]
Mede, and Milton, but also by artisans and vagrants who, suddenly propelled into public
life, turned to the Bible as the only tool they had” (War of Titans 37). Scripture helped
England’s alienated classes to create a countervailing voice against the privileged and
“saintly elite of a reforming middle class”—Milton’s class, to be precise (War 37).
DiSalvo has in mind Hill’s suggestion that “ordinary Bible-readers in the sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries wanted to democratize” scriptural mysteries and exegesis: such
readers “believed, on good protestant authority, that anyone could understand God’s
Word if he studied it carefully enough, and if the grace of God was in him. And then the
Bible could be made to reveal the key to events of his own time” (World 93). Radicals
such as the Fifth Monarchists, the Ranters, and the Society of Friends (that is, the
Quakers) found that “the Bible, if properly understood, really would liberate men from
destiny, from pre-destination. By understanding and cooperating with God’s purposes
men believed they could escape from the blind forces which seemed to rule their world,
from time itself; they could become free” (Hill, World 92). For DiSalvo and Hill alike,
scriptural prophecy, immensely popular with all of England’s social classes during the
revolutionary period, offered a reliable source of authority for new perspectives and
ideas.19

In War of Titans, DiSalvo adopts elements of both Hill and Wittreich in order to craft
her analysis of the Blake-Milton relationship. DiSalvo contends that Blake knew enough
of London’s radical climate in the late eighteenth century—including the Muggletonians,
the London Corresponding Society, and Joseph Johnson’s circle—to see the value in asserting parallels between 1790s England and the age of Milton (War 35). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Blake discerned that Milton’s poetic achievements, if freed from their class-specific doctrines, could improve life for England’s marginalized laborers—her prostitutes, her chimney sweepers, her factory workers. Taking his ideological cue from “such lower-class radicals as the Levellers and Diggers,” groups who were his “real antecedents” (War 42), Blake forged a prophetic art unwaveringly hostile to the bourgeois non sequiturs and class-based hypocrisies given form and force, even if inadvertently, by Milton’s work. Accordingly, Blake—who finds in Milton a help for the present and a pledge for the future—strives to liberate “the principles of Miltonic liberty” (War 42) from Milton’s own bourgeois world view, thus recovering Milton as a type of the English radical and his writing as a support for social and political reform in the years following the onset of the French Revolution.

Like DiSalvo, Leslie Tannenbaum argues that Blake understood Milton to be a continuingly relevant emblem of the English anti-authoritarian tradition. Tannenbaum, however, situates his discussion of Blake and Milton within the history of scriptural exegesis. In Biblical Traditions in Blake’s Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art (1982), he states that Blake, “like Milton [. . .] drew upon biblical tradition to assert in theory and practice the superiority of an aesthetic based upon the Bible, but then—true to the essentially revolutionary aesthetic that he and Milton shared—he transformed the traditions he inherited, including the Miltonic tradition” (24). By surveying the principal currents of pre-Blakean biblical hermeneutics, Tannenbaum notes that confluences be-
tween competing interpretations allowed Blake considerable freedom in reading both the Bible and Milton through multiple perspectives. Blake thus created a biblical art that registers and at times blends myriad interpretations of scripture; this eclecticism, in turn, frames Blake’s understanding and use of Milton.

Tannenbaum finds special significance in the late eighteenth-century’s “mingling of learned and popular culture” (11), particularly as such synthesis informs 1790s pamphlets and tracts—circulated, as Tannenbaum specifies, by groups such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (10-11)—“that searched the Scriptures for prophecies of the French Revolution” (11). Such pamphlet writing reflected popular religious thinking not attributable solely to radical chiliast sources. Rather, groups like the Evangelicals and Dissenters drew on scholars of prophecy, including Thomas Brightman, Sir Isaac Newton, David Hartley, Joseph Priestley, and of course Milton, in order to compose pamphlets on scripture’s applicability to the contemporary political and social milieus at home and abroad (Tannenbaum 11).

Blake thus learned to refine his biblical art partly through both his direct and implicit familiarity with the various takes on scriptural prophecy written into the tracts and pamphlets available to Londoners in the early 1790s. Yet Blake’s idea of an art founded upon the Bible is complexly assimilative, as Tannenbaum suggests: any one consideration, such as the pamphlets’ influence, cannot account wholly for Blake’s recourse to and revision of Christian scripture in his poetry, as in the case of the Lambeth prophecies.²¹ For Tannenbaum, the Lambeth books “constitute Blake’s initial attempt to write a Bible of Hell, an imaginative re-creation of Scripture” that aims to coalesce “a
number of disparate books into a coherent and unified vision of human life from the Creation to the Apocalypse” (7). Tannenbaum thus redraws Wittreich’s line of vision, dispossessing Milton and Paradise Lost in favor of the biblical authors and sacred literature; consequently, the question of Blake’s literary influences may be approached through a new context that significantly complicates Wittreich’s schema. For Blake, Milton’s influence is mediated by a body of scholarly and popular biblical commentary that Blake receives, studies, and reconfigures. Milton thus articulates a single perspective in the history of scriptural interpretation, a fact that requires Blake to reconsider, through others’ eyes, Milton’s reading of the Bible. As a result, Blake’s early prophecies are informed not only by Milton but also by radical antinomians (Tannenbaum 16), by Voltaire, Thomas Paine, and David Hume (Tannenbaum 13), and by philosophers, historians, and biblical exegetes such as Robert Lowth, Sir William Jones, Hugh Blair, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, and Johann Gottfried von Herder (Tannenbaum 21-22).

While DiSalvo modifies Wittreich’s theories to conduct a political analysis of the Blake-Milton relationship and Tannenbaum recasts that affinity in terms of what Blake knew of European scholarship on the Bible, Terence Allan Hoagwood addresses the question of Romantic prophecy in light of the philosophical traditions available at the time of the French Revolution. In Prophecy and the Philosophy of Mind: Traditions of Blake and Shelley (1985), Hoagwood looks at Romantic prophecy as an intersection between ways of understanding human history and ways of understanding human knowledge. By doing so, Hoagwood, like DiSalvo and Tannenbaum before him, offers
an original analysis of Romantic poetics anchored in Wittreich’s work on the English visionary tradition.

Hoagwood begins by surveying philosophers such as John Locke, Newton, George Berkeley, and Hume, all of whom respond to René Descartes (11); with these figures and this intellectual conflict in mind, Hoagwood argues that the English philosophical tradition establishes principles and a bank of metaphors on which both Blake and Shelley draw. Moreover, this tradition clarifies the subversive methods and aims of Romantic seer-poets like Blake and Shelley who wish “to penetrate to the process of vision itself, shaking the very foundations of thought” (56). With the Anglophone philosophical legacy as a principal context, Hoagwood assays Wittreich’s theory of influence by approaching Blake’s Jerusalem and Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound through Newton’s Opticks (1704) and Berkeley’s Principles of Human Knowledge (1710), as well as through Milton’s art.

In his study, Hoagwood frames prophecy as both intellectually and politically radical. Visionary poetics, he asserts, “is concerned with spirit, a synonym for mind; its final cause is intellectual revolution, and this revolution, like God, shall become manifest in history” (58). Prophecy thus facilitates “a revolution whose historical equivalent is the political liberation of mankind” (58). The revolutionary politics of prophecy, Hoagwood maintains, distinguishes the Romantics from Augustan wits such as Dryden and Pope, whose conservative art sustains the very order—in England, characterized by monarchy, primogeniture, patriarchy, and the like—that the visionary writes to undermine (46). British philosophy, in Hoagwood’s view, provides Romantic poets like Blake and Shelley
with a basic discourse through which to understand how visionary poetics may both speak to the human mind and realize its revolutionary goals in human history.

Although his consideration of the English philosophical tradition helps Hoagwood to frame the part which vatic art plays in human history, the relationship between vision and history is more thoroughly investigated by George Anthony Rosso in his book, *Blake’s Prophetic Workshop: A Study of The Four Zoas* (1993). Rosso writes not simply to place Blake’s work within the contexts of British and world history but to clarify Blake’s notion of history as a product of art and a basis of human community. Rosso argues that Blake, in *The Four Zoas* (and elsewhere), universalizes history; the poet “replays ancient ‘events’ in the contemporary moment to activate the present meaning of the past” (109). He elaborates that, “for Blake, historical events lie partly within the poet’s mind; but they must be put into a shared form and re-enacted within the present if readers are to convert to a prophetic view of history that transforms the world” (109).

If Blake indeed reasons through the question of history as Rosso describes, then any past incident or series of incidents—for example, the Civil Wars, the French Revolution, or an April morning in Felpham—may be recreated through art. Such recreation benefits both individuals and communities by putting the conflicts of history in imaginative terms, thereby allowing those conflicts to be resolved through intellection rather than through physical violence. In this way, Blake aspires to effect social transformation through a visionary poetry that preserves “the special bond between ethics and history,” between the sacred and the secular (108). Blake’s interventionist art, as Rosso describes it, relies for its social efficacy on the fact that he “does not seek to bind his readers to a specific
doctrinal or religious project, but rather attempts to inculcate the visionary habit of mind that can enable them to refigure their ways of seeing and being” (108). This prophetic technique—which in part recalls Blake’s antinomianism—allows human communities to remake the present by re-imagining the past, and battles in blood may be re-fought and finally resolved at the level of mental engagement.

Taken together, DiSalvo, Tannenbaum, Hoagwood, and Rosso find in Wittreich’s theoretical work a source of intellectual creativity and critical energy. The DiSalvo generation’s output encourages the reader who comes to Wittreich’s theories in the early twenty-first century to see those theories as especially generative critical resources. Furthermore, the DiSalvo generation demonstrates the interdisciplinary relevance of their teacher’s driving insights; the line of vision and visionary poetics theories, as we have seen, underlie important examinations of Romanticism that span several topics, including politics (DiSalvo), biblical exegesis (Tannenbaum), philosophy (Hoagwood), and history (Rosso). In this respect, the DiSalvo generation shows the adaptability of Wittreich’s 1970s work on the Milton, the Romantics, and the English visionary tradition.

At the same time, the body of work produced by these critics suggests certain limitations in the application of Wittreich’s critical framework. The most conspicuous of these limitations, as we encounter them in the DiSalvo generation’s work, involves the use of Blake as a subject of analysis. Although the DiSalvo generation’s investigations of Blake’s art, ideas, and relationship with Milton are illuminating, the general focus on a single Romantic poet (save in Hoagwood, who also studies Shelley) creates the impression that Wittreich’s theoretical models, even when rethought and reapplied, can-
not account for other Romantic writers who compose in the prophetic vein. Such an impression works against the claim for the elasticity of both the line of vision and visionary poetics theories. Certainly, we cannot indict critics for their scholarly interests. Nevertheless, Wittreich’s theories, which of course contribute to the DiSalvo generation’s work on Romantic prophecy, advance the idea that the vatic mode creates trans-generational literary communities. The DiSalvo generation’s collective focus on Blake, in effect, countervails that idea by marginalizing the Romantic literary community in favor of a single representative. Consequently, the line of vision idea seems to elucidate little beyond Blake’s interconnectedness with Milton, and visionary poetics—that is, the aesthetic code transmitted through Milton’s art—appears in reality to pertain almost solely to Blake’s stance, techniques, and aims.

The fact that the DiSalvo generation’s Blake studies foster such impressions owes, in part, to two problems inherent in Wittreich’s foundational work: first, Wittreich represents Milton flatly, thus imparting a sense that all the major Romantics see him as Blake appears to do; second, Wittreich relies on an exceptionally broad understanding of history, both in terms of what it is and how it functions in visionary literature. These two problems arise from Wittreich’s tendency in his 1970s work to privilege generalized continuity to critical nuance. If Wittreich’s theories are, as I contend, uniquely appropriate to the study of less familiar Romantic authors such as Aikin, Bannerman, and Costello, then we must reconsider those theories in light of the problems I have identified in order to test the accommodative quality of the visionary line and the accuracy of the visionary poetics theory of literary aesthetics.
In a recent essay on the Restoration-era poet Elizabeth Singer Rowe, whose “ambition to sing for the Protestant king” (65) William III reflected her belief in William’s “internationalist, militant Protestant vision” (66), Sharon Achinstein asserts that “the Miltonic ‘style’ bore contradictory political or ideological meanings, serviceable to a variety of occasions and interests, even as his political identity remained clearly antimonarchical” during Rowe’s lifetime (65). Achinstein argues that Milton’s writing, by virtue of its stylistic distinctiveness, proved especially attractive to authors like Rowe after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (in which year, as Achinstein notes, Jacob Tonson’s folio edition of Milton appeared) (68-9): “The reign of William III was a boon era for Milton rehabilitation, as the poet was transformed from republican to Whig and then became something of a splintered mirror in splintered Whig polemic, refracting different political and religious partisan views” in the wake of the so-called Bloodless Revolution (69). Although Milton’s poetic style was “instantly recognizable” (87) to poets such as Rowe, Milton himself, almost from the moment of his death in 1674, appeared protean:

John Dryden had long recognized his stature, but the process of avoiding Milton the defender of king-killing in favor of Milton the great poet was a complex one. His works were revive in both a Whig political agenda as well as in a Tory backlash. He was an inspiration both for those advocating a neo-classical aesthetics, as did Joseph Addison, as well as for those claiming a divine poetics, as did John Dennis, Isaac Watts and Elizabeth Singer Rowe. (87)
“For Rowe,” Achinstein claims, “Milton could serve as both sublimely inspired poet of affective description as well as the stern moralizer, not only a defender of political liberty, but a prophetic voice against religious persecution” (87).

Achinstein’s discussion of Rowe’s life, art, and admiration for Milton illustrates the flexibility of Milton as a literary and cultural influence. The ardor Rowe felt for Milton, as Achinstein points out, is reflected in both her public works and personal affairs. Rowe composed, for example, “A Pastoral on the Nativity of our Saviour” and “A Description of Hell. In Imitation of Milton” (Achinstein 66); moreover, “she cited [Milton] to greet the morning” and employed her alternate name, “Philomela” (a reference to *Il Penseroso*), “in John Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury* in the 1690s as well as in her romantic correspondence with her husband” (Achinstein 68). Yet Rowe—known as “William III’s laureate” (Achinstein 67)—shares little with Milton in terms of political feeling. To the Romanticist, Rowe suggests a closer resemblance to the Scottish poet Anne Grant (whose conservative poem *Eighteen Hundred and Thirteen* opens with an epigraph drawn from *Samson Agonistes*) than to Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Ann Yearsley, or Anna Letitia Barbauld.

If Milton, as a historical authority for art, political thought, and even ethics, proves more indecisive than Wittreich’s 1970s portrayal of him allows, that indecisiveness is partly attributable to Milton’s own varying representations of himself. Lewalski notes that the poet adopts an “unprecedented [. . .] number of cultural roles. In his poems and polemic tracts, he varies the mix of roles as genre and rhetorical purpose dictate: sacred priest, learned scholar, humanist critic, cosmopolitan man of letters,
rhetorician, engaged patriot, satirist, reformist poet, epic hero, teacher, prophet, and bard” (“Milton’s Idea of Authorship” 74). For Lewalski, Milton aligns himself selectively with secular and scriptural persons and legacies. Accordingly, the Milton we find in Of Reformation and Animadversions—“a bard celebrating and helping to perfect the reformed society that will herald Christ’s millennial kingdom” (“Idea” 74)—differs from Milton either as an Isaiah-like “prophet-teacher” in The Reason of Church-Government (“Idea” 74) or as “an English Jeremiah who combines fierce invective and tragic vision with a bitter, prophetic lament for the imminent Restoration” in The Readie and Easie Way (“Idea” 75).

In their respective analyses, Achinstein and Lewalski elucidate how Milton changes—partly through his own authorial initiative—from period to period, from reader to reader, and from text to text. These critics share a sense of Milton as an unsettled, flexible figure, both in terms of how he is received by other writers (such as Rowe) and how he creates and recreates his own authorial identity. This protean image of the poet clashes with Wittreich’s portrait of Milton as an arch-revolutionary and a prophet throughout his career. Wittreich casts Milton into these roles purposefully; to distinguish the liberationist visionary line from the conservative line of wit, Wittreich asserts both the decisiveness of Milton’s stance and the cohesiveness of his work: “The canon of the conservative poet is often a collection of disconnected poems—a series of unrelated imaginative moments; but the canon of the revolutionary artist is composed of an aggregate of poems inextricably involved with one another” (Angel of Apocalypse 161). For Wittreich, “the canon, not the poem,
represents the radical unity of revolutionary art” (Angel 161), and “Milton strove for this kind of unity” (Angel 161). Contrary to Achinstein and Lewalski, Wittreich supposes a lifelong coherence in Milton’s character and art, thereby arguing for a Milton who, to his Romantic readers, closed the revolutionary seer-poet he begun.

As early as in his book The Romantics on Milton: Formal Essays and Critical Asides (1970), Wittreich asserts that, during the Romantic period, Milton was preferred to Shakespeare as a poetic influence because the latter seemed “too much of a chameleon” (13), whereas the former “cut across and subsumed all areas of human experience; he was the quintessence of everything the Romantics most admired” (11). Wittreich recounts that Byron, for one, saw in Milton’s “constancy” (11) an important counterexample to the Lake Poets’ eventual renunciation of their early 1790s radicalism. The point in itself is not poorly taken: in the 1819 “Dedication” to Don Juan, Byron references Milton to provide a contrast to the directly addressed (and mercilessly mocked) Robert Southey:

Thinks’t thou, could he, the blind Old Man, arise

Like Samuel from the grave, to freeze once more

The blood of monarchs with his prophecies,

Or be alive again—again all hoar

With time and trials, and those helpless eyes

And heartless daughters, worn, and pale, and poor,

Would he adore a sultan? he obey

The intellectual eunuch Castlereagh? (11.81-88)\textsuperscript{24}
Byron here celebrates Milton as a long-suffering defender of human liberties, a prophet whose brave creativity equaled his hatred of kings. In this respect, Byron’s image of Milton appears to bear out Wittreich’s contention that the Romantics saw him not only as a great man and “ideal poet” (RM 12) but also as a lifelong radical and revolutionary who, “like Gerrard Winstanley, never weakened in his opposition to monarchy,” to borrow one of Hill’s assertions (Milton and the English Revolution 173). But in the “Dedication,” Byron lauds Milton to loathe Southey; that is, the young lord ridicules England’s Poet Laureate through contradistinction, setting Milton’s steadfast anti-monarchism and republican values against the royalist stance which Southey struck later in life. Byron thus purposefully constructs Milton as a visionary if unfortunate freethinker whose comparative integrity and perseverance trivialize Southey particularly and the Lake Poets generally. As Lewalski’s remarks help us to recognize, such an evocation of Milton, for all its rhetorical success, engages only one of his several authorial roles.

Byron’s “Dedication” provides an analogue for Wittreich’s representation of Milton as a stable, fixed influence in the visionary tradition. Wittreich, like Byron, gives us a fiery vates who fought illegitimate forms of power and strove to bring forth a New Jerusalem. Yet this image presents the Puritan poet incompletely; Lucy Newlyn, for one, argues that Wittreich offers an “inflexibly sublime Milton, a Milton for whom there is no such thing as ambiguity or indeterminacy, and who is therefore a model of univocal authority” (16). Newlyn deems this simplification of Milton’s complicated identity especially pernicious because it presents “a monochrome picture
of the prophetic tradition” (16) and renders “a passive model for the [Romantics’] reception of Milton’s ideas” (16). Newlyn, whose sympathies clearly are with Bloom, indicts Wittreich for his “historically inaccurate” (17) notions of poetic influence; the Milton-centered visionary line, for Newlyn, portrays the Romantic poet as “a vehicle for transcendent truth” (16) who articulates “a body of values which are communally shared” (16). Wittreich’s theory, “in some respects inviting” (Newlyn 16), nevertheless “seriously misrepresents the cultural climate which fostered Romanticism, and which made the ownership of ideas—‘originality’—a matter for concern” (Newlyn 16). In Newlyn’s view, Wittreich’s argument encourages the misperception that all the Romantics share a single, collective perspective on Milton. During the period, major and minor authors alike imitated, revised, and challenged Milton and his legacy, as A. D. Harvey has recently discussed; yet very few writers did so in the same way or for the same reasons. Wittreich blurs this fact by presenting Milton’s influence on the Romantics as monolithic; as Newlyn suggests, the great poet comes to embody values and aesthetics that function identically for all of the Romantics, whether those who came to prominence after the Napoleonic Wars or those who wrote in the years immediately following the French Revolution’s outbreak.

In light of these comments, we may ask if Wittreich’s portrait of the Romantics’ Milton is entirely precise. To be sure, the Romantics valued the seriousness and sincerity of the poet’s involvement in the mid-seventeenth century republican cause, as well as the relationship between Milton’s writings and the English Revolutionary
moment. Furthermore, Milton’s works and aesthetics, for many of the major Romantics, “encouraged the hope that poetry still had new, historically important work to do” in a similarly conflicted and violent age, as Ryan notes (37). Beyond these points, however, the Romantic consensus on Milton falls apart. If later Romantics such as Byron and Shelley could exalt Milton as an intellectual regicide, other Romantic authors, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, could invoke both his republicanism and his poetry to justify their reactionary stances, as Peter J. Kitson suggests: “The radicalism of their youth and the conservatism of their later years could both find precedents in Milton” (470).27

Although neither poet acquiesced quite so far in royalist ideology as Southey eventually did, both Wordsworth and Coleridge came to express chauvinistic visions of England and her cultural, political, and social institutions. Accordingly, these poets cast Milton as a true English patriot rather than as a disruptor of the status quo. Simon Bainbridge, in Napoleon and English Romanticism (1995), describes how Wordsworth, shortly after the Peace of Amiens failed in 1803, “adopted the sonnet form of Milton, as well as his tones and ethos, to unite the English at a time of national crisis” (109). Wordsworth also idealizes Milton’s republicanism in The Convention of Cintra (1809), a loyalist piece favoring the war with Napoleonic France: “Throughout the tract, as in the well-known sonnet ‘London 1802’, Wordsworth associates Milton with the glorious republican past of England during the Commonwealth. [. . .] It is this glorious past and inheritance that has been
shamed by the generals who ratified the Convention” with the French forces after the British decisively won the Battle of Vimeiro in August, 1808 (Bainbridge 109). For Wordsworth, Milton emblematizes all that is best in the British spirit; moreover, Milton’s Paradise Lost, the great Englishman’s greatest work, yields “a Satanic iconography for Napoleon” (Bainbridge 110) and a literary analogue for the conflict between France and England. Coleridge, for his part, finds national unity in his own age foretokened by the English past; writing in The Friend fourteen months after the Convention, he observes: “Though the Restoration of good sense commenced during the Interval of the Peace of Amiens, yet it was not till the Spanish Insurrection that Englishmen of all Parties recurred in toto to the old English Principles, and spoke of their Hampdens, Sidneys, and Miltons, with the old enthusiasm” (qtd. in Wittreich, RM 189).

As their responses to the Peninsular War and the Convention of Cintra show, the Lake Poets adapted Milton’s radical art and republican politics to suit loyalist perspectives that in turn reflect a new idea of British cultural identity; as the historian Stuart Woolf suggests, “it was in the struggle against Revolutionary-Napoleonic France that the image of John Bull as the trueborn free Englishman acquired its full contours” (94). If the Lake Poets, as Raymond Williams contends, abandoned their youthful “revolutionary ardour” (31) for “differing degrees of Burkean conservatism in their maturity” (31), then the newly emerging sense of Englishness, defined partly by the struggle with Napoleon (whose “overthrow,” Woolf notes, “seemed a posthumous vindication of Burke’s passionate rhetoric”) (94), caused the Lakers to
reframe Milton and his influence. The Napoleonic Wars, Woolf asserts, underscored “Britain’s separateness, stability and economic strength” (98) as late as Waterloo. Furthermore, the Royal Navy’s successes in the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) and during the subsequent blockade of the French empire (begun in 1807 by the Orders in Council) supported England’s distinctiveness from Napoleonic Europe while reinforcing the country’s global status, a position partly defined in the 1790s by George Vancouver’s voyage through North America and the Pacific and Mungo Park’s African expedition. In line with the notions of Englishness that developed during the war years, the Lake Poets remake Milton, offering him as an exemplar of values and tenets belonging to the emergent national identity. Consequently, Milton becomes so flexible a presence that Southey, in A Vision of Judgment (1821), portrays him as redeemed from his anti-monarchism and places him among the Elder Worthies, with Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Newton, who welcome George III into heaven (IX.451-91).

Certainly, Southey’s poem provides an extreme instance of a Lake Poet re-imaging Milton to serve conservative interests. Nevertheless, the fact that Southey, without humor or irony, presents Milton as a friend to kings indicates that not all Romantic-era authors saw the Puritan poet as a permanent threat to monarchy, as Byron does in the “Dedication.” Southey here clashes also with Blake, who, in Milton, portrays the poet as “a man who allowed his pure act of vision to be corrupted by personal commitments to certain ideas” or to “moral law,” as Jerome J. McGann explains (“The Aim of Blake’s Prophecies” 8). Whereas Blake seeks to recover
Milton’s religious vision from its temporal entanglements, whether political, intellectual, or ethical, Southey does away with the poet’s counter-royalist radicalism, not to restore the seer’s access to scriptural truth but to claim him as a proper antecedent for both the Tory-Hanoverian establishment and the paradigm of Englishness that developed during the Napoleonic moment. Whether the Londoner Blake, the Cumbrian Southey, or the expatriate Byron best captures Milton is a question less germane to our purposes than the fact that these poets assert differing images of him, thus significantly complicating Wittreich’s implication that all the Romantics saw the great Puritan in exactly the same way.

Such diversity in the Romantics’ thinking about Milton bears important consequences for Wittreich’s theories of trans-generational literary relations. Although he correctly identifies Milton as the principal historical model for both early and late Romantic authors, Wittreich assigns to Milton’s status and influence a single value and an all-pervasive effect. This interpretation, by extension, portrays the Romantic visionaries indistinctly. Such indistinctiveness creates the impression, for example, that Blake’s intervention into Milton’s poetic vision of the Bible mirrors Wordsworth and Coleridge’s recasting of Paradise Lost, in works such as The Prelude and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, as a vision of the human mind’s private renovation in light of a newly developing British identity (Kitson 469). The consequences, then, are twofold: first, Wittreich’s theories, in application, tend to restrict critical inquiry because any one author in the visionary line adequately represents the others (thus the DiSalvo generation’s almost exclusive interest in
Blake); and second, the description of Milton’s influence, as it stands, cannot account for other authors, such as Burke, Barbauld, Joanna Baillie, Mary Robinson, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Felicia Hemans, who, like Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, found the English literary past to be a key to understanding both the promise and the crises of the Romantic period.

These two problems, in turn, suggest a third: Wittreich constructs much of his theoretical work on a broadly inclusive idea of English literary history. Consequently, he seldom discriminates between or among time periods and thus often looks beyond the individual historical actualities of differing eras. Because he renders the English past so casually, Wittreich fails to distinguish the visionary poets at the level of their respective historical experiences. With respect to the Romantics, Wittreich blends the first generation with the second, thereby imparting a monolithic sense of the period during which these authors lived and wrote (that is, the years encompassed within the 1789-1832 timeframe). By coalescing the first wave Romantics with the second, Wittreich overlooks the fact that both groups understood prophecy and the prophetic role in light of their distinct experiences of the present and the past. Given this study’s focus on Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats, I wish in what follows to discuss the post-Waterloo historical milieu both to elucidate the distinctiveness of that historical moment and to unsettle Wittreich’s frequently nebulous use of history as a theoretical concept.

* * *
Stuart Curran, in his essay “The Siege of Hateful Contraries: Shelley, Mary Shelley, Byron, and Paradise Lost,” writes:

One can never ignore the “peculiar relations” the younger generation of Romantics established with the literature and culture of the past. They survived the intellectual terrors of a quarter-century of war that devastated and impoverished Europe within a pervasive metaphorical assumption. Napoleon pitting himself against that amalgam known as the Holy Alliance was the Satanic rebel defying the upholders of orthodoxy. The Napoleonic Wars appeared to the sensitive minds of the age as a reality whose imperatives were no less categorical for being fruitless, but more so, enforced with historical urgency. To these writers—and to the finest minds throughout Europe—there was no public position that was not reactionary, as the interchangeable empires committed their citizenry to the ruthless mechanism of an inherited paradigm. (“Siege” 227)

With this passage, Curran provides a useful framework through which to discuss what Marilyn Butler calls the “Cult of the South,” that is, the group of younger Romantic authors comprising, among the most prominent, Byron, Percy and Mary Shelley, Keats, Thomas Love Peacock, Leigh Hunt, and William Hazlitt. Although Byron published the first two cantos of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage in 1812 and several of his popular Eastern romances, beginning with The Giaour and The Bride of Abydos, between 1814 and 1816, the second generation Romantics for the most part
composed and published their major works after the Battle of Waterloo decisively concluded the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna restored monarchies throughout Europe. These writers, to varying degrees, sought to distinguish themselves, both in thought and art, from their introspective and pious literary forebears—Wordsworth and Coleridge, respectively (Blake, himself quite unlike either Lake Poet, was virtually unknown during the second half of the Regency).

“The English liberal writers of the post-war period,” Butler notes, “are extrovert not introvert, and pagan not Christian” (123-4).

The Tory literary establishment, through periodicals such as Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine and the Quarterly Review, savaged this new wave of liberal-minded artists; the former, in fact, derisively referred to several of these writers, particularly Keats, Shelley, Byron, and Hunt, as the Cockney School of Poetry, a name that carries, as Jeffrey N. Cox argues, “suggestions of sexual libertinism and effeminacy” (24) as well as implications of “aesthetic and political inadequacy” (27). Additionally, in his “fawning poem” (Priestman 242) on George III’s first actions in the afterlife, Southey damned Byron and Shelley as the foremost members of the Satanic School of Poetry. From the first, bitter ideological disagreements divided the new Romantics from the conservative factions of British literary culture in the mid-Regency.

We should refrain, of course, from viewing the younger Romantics as a politically radical avant-garde that produced literature by consensus; indeed, these artists often clashed over art and personal affairs. For example, Byron and Shelley’s literary and
philosophical conflicts, rather than friendship or ideological like-mindedness, best clarify the nature of the two men’s relationship, as Charles E. Robinson asserts. Furthermore, we may note that Mary Shelley’s feelings toward Percy were deeply conflicted—several Romanticists accept that Shelley created the ambitious Victor Frankenstein in the image of her husband. And, as Cox points out, Keats and Byron never personally met (perhaps fortunately for Keats, given Byron’s open dislike for his work) (48). These three points serve to illustrate the younger Romantics’ independence from one another, thus countering the temptation to see these artists as united in an aesthetic and political coalition against Tory England and the increasingly conservative Lake Poets. At the same time, I think it beneficial for the present discussion to situate the younger Romantics, as a whole, within the historical context of post-war Regency England, thereby suggesting that second generation visionary poetics, although practiced in distinction by individual authors, nevertheless reflects a shared basic experience of the historical moment.

If Butler correctly casts the younger Romantics as cosmopolitan non-Christians, then we must understand that general characterization within the scope of the post-Napoleonic moment, thereby generating a clearer picture of the disillusionment and disenchantment that inspired these authors to break in part with British cultural and literary conventions. The Battle of Waterloo, fought between the French Empire and the Seventh Coalition in the countryside south of Brussels on 18 June, 1815, formally concluded hostilities between France and England. After Waterloo, Napoleon was banished (a second time), the Bourbon King Louis XVIII restored (a second time),
and a time of peace was inaugurated. Auspicious as these beginnings appeared to those who opposed expansionist France, “the defeat of Napoleon,” as Cox reminds us, “had not brought freedom with peace”: “The Restoration staged by the Holy Alliance had already revealed its oppressive power. England’s government, capable of massive mobilization for the war against revolutionary France, had no interest in [resolving] its own internal problems” (55). Europe may have seen the last of Napoleon, but, as Bainbridge reminds us, “Not only had Waterloo restored the Bourbon monarchy to the throne of France, and returned Europe to the pre-1789 position, but it had strengthened monarchical power throughout Europe” (178-79).

The younger Romantics, for the most part, wrote their major works after the Napoleonic drama’s last act brought the curtain down also on the French Revolution’s libertarian promise. These circumstances influenced how the second wave English Romantics responded to the culture, politics, and literary climate of post-war England.

The Seventh Coalition’s victory over Napoleon elevated Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington and commander of the English forces at Waterloo, to British national sainthood. Boyd Hilton notes that Waterloo surpassed Agincourt as “the most publicly celebrated battle in English history” (237) and that Wellington awoke on 19 June 1815 to find himself superlatively famous: “Short of being made King, Wellington could not be given any more titles” (237) to honor him for delivering England from the Satanic Bonaparte and the French demons over whom he reigned. Moreover, Foreign Secretary Viscount Castlereagh—whose very name was anathema
to the Byron-Shelley literary coterie—brilliantly maneuvered England to the forefront of the rejuvenated monarchies that clawed for supremacy in post-Napoleonic Europe. Hilton asserts that Castlereagh “largely effaced Metternich, Talleyrand, and the Tsar in the Vienna negotiations,” thus helping to position England as the principal international power in what appeared to be a new epoch in English history, initiated by both the outcome on the fields near Mont-Saint-Jean and the second Peace of Paris five months later.\textsuperscript{32}

But if Waterloo gestured toward a new age for England, the younger Romantics recognized also that Wellington’s victory—as well as Castlereagh’s statecraft—promised little more than the resuscitation and refortification of the old absolutism that the French Revolution challenged in its nascent phase. Given the less-than-admirable political figure struck by the Prince Regent during this time, the new era of peace, to liberal intellectuals like Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Hazlitt, was in many ways dreadfully anachronistic. The mid-Regency period, as Clarissa Campbell Orr points out, saw the formalization of England’s Personal Union with Hanover, lasting from 1814 to Queen Victoria’s accession in 1837. Orr depicts Regency England as politically retrogressive:

Although George IV was as responsible as any of George III’s sons for bringing the royal family into disrepute, he was also a prince with a strong sense of dynastic history, which was reflected in the fête in August 1814 at three royal London parks, celebrating the centenary of the Hanoverian succession. Hanoverian arms were also prominent in the costumes for his
visit to Scotland in 1822. He was fascinated by the House of Brunswick’s genealogy, and founded the Guelphic order to reward the German legion officers at Waterloo and civilian contributions to Hanover, as well as to commemorate the medieval ancestry of the family—another way of underlining ancient prescriptive rights in an era when Napoleon had occupied Hanover, swept away the old Holy Roman Empire, and redrawn the political and dynastic map. […] The visits to Ireland and Scotland also suggest the aim of representing monarchy, of performing acts of kingship, throughout all the component kingdoms of a typical composite, ancien régime type of monarchy. (250)

Orr’s account of Regency England suggests that, if Napoleon’s fall occasioned a new future for England, then that future was mediated by a political present willfully interlocked with many of the bleakest ideas and worst political systems of both the remote and recent pasts.

The Prince Regent’s anachronistic notions of royal governance, joined to his autocratic temperament and corroborated by Tory policy-makers such as Castlereagh, Liverpool, Sidmouth, and Eldon, helped to foster a repressive political environment in post-war England. Certainly, political repression and oppositional radicalism were hallmarks also of the decade in which Blake published Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794) and Wordsworth and Coleridge collaboratively produced Lyrical Ballads (1798). Kenneth Neill Cameron, in a piece on William Godwin, describes the police state that England became in the 1790s, particularly after the 1794 Treason
Trials at which Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, and John Thelwall, as well as Godwin’s old friend, Thomas Holcroft, were prosecuted: “Habeas Corpus was suspended, trade unions were declared illegal, Ireland was subdued by armed force, the leaders of a mutiny in the fleet were summarily executed, the committee of the London Corresponding Society was arrested, the editor of The Courier—then a liberal, later a Tory paper—was imprisoned (for slandering the Czar of Russia), the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland was made into law” (23). This series of events, according to Cameron, pushed the Lake Poets toward conservatism and the liberal political leaders toward a boycott of the House of Commons (23). We may also note that, following the collapse of the Peace of Amiens, Blake himself was tried for sedition, as had Thomas Paine in 1792 and John Frost in 1793; unlike either Paine or Frost, Blake was acquitted.33

The post-war generation of English writers, like the first wave Romantics, faced a dangerous and volatile national milieu. What distinguishes the younger authors most sharply from their quietist or newly Tory elders was the way in which these second wave Romantics defined themselves as writers vis-à-vis the post-Napoleonic climate of political repression and monarchical authoritarianism (note again that Byron and his contemporaries knew nothing of Blake, who did not step away from his earlier radicalism as the Lake Poets, to varying degrees, distanced themselves from theirs). For the artists with whom I am principally concerned in this study—namely, Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats—the authorial role involved, in part, the adoption of oppositional perspectives and a confrontationist ethic with respect to the Tory-
Hanoverian status quo. Against the Lakers’ respective examples of philosophical introspection and public chauvinism, the post-war Romantics sought, according to their individual visions, to transform rather than transcend or vindicate their world and time.

Of course, we must preserve distinctions in comparing the younger Romantics: for example, neither Byron nor Keats was, like Shelley, a Godwin-inspired social reformist; Keats’s middle-class background, as John Mee suggests, set him apart from the aristocrat Shelley (xxix); and Mary Shelley was not, like her husband, a philosophical anarchist. Furthermore, the post-war writers differed in their responses to the Lake Poets, to whom they were literary heirs. Whereas Byron, in English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (1809), mocked “simple Wordsworth” (917) and his “Christmas stories tortured into rhyme” (245), Keats revered the older poet for having restored the human value of poetry (Mee xxi) and wished to follow Wordsworth “as the next to extend the empire of the human heart” (Mee xxv). Keats found much to admire in Wordsworth, despite the younger man’s disappointment in Wordsworth’s support of the Tories in the 1818 Westminster elections (Mee xxii). And, as she recounts in her journal for January 1824, Mary Shelley, by this time a widow, took comfort in an evening spent with Coleridge because the Lake Poet’s “beautiful descriptions, metaphysical talk & subtle distinctions reminded [her] of Shelley’s conversations” (JMS 474). “I will go into the country & philosophize,” she wrote, hoping “some gleams of past entrancement may visit me there” (JMS 474).

These considerations warn against oversimplifying the later Romantics’ relationships
to each other, to England, and to her literary culture during the post-war Regency period.

At the same time, Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats sought to assert both artistic and ideological independence from the Lake Poets, whose early radicalism now clearly belonged to the past. For example, in his 1816 sonnet, “To Wordsworth,” Shelley offers a representative expression of second generation disenchantment:

In honoured poverty thy voice did weave

Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,—

Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,

Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be. (11-14)\(^{35}\)

Shelley here intimates, with a note of personal mournfulness, that the social and aesthetic value of Wordsworth’s “songs consecrate to truth and liberty” (12) persists, even if the radical Wordsworth now is part of another time. The young Wordsworth’s compassionate Romanticism continues to inspire his heirs, even if the poet himself, like his Lake School colleagues, has come to embody a Burkean reactionary spirit. Shelley and his contemporaries recognized that the Lakers no longer wrote “in honoured poverty” (11), that is, from a liberalist position.

Wordsworth, who censured monarchy and aristocracy in a June 1794 letter to William Mathews, had by 1813 become the Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland.\(^{36}\) Coleridge’s radical utopianism and Unitarianism gave way to political and religious conservatism.\(^{37}\) Southey became Poet Laureate in 1813. Shelley’s poem helps to show how the new Romantics, amid the political repression, social disaffection, and
bloody violence of the times, created their individual authorial identities in varying degrees of contradistinction to the principal figures of the recent literary past.

The younger Romantics, therefore, wrote in part to challenge the cultural, political, and literary establishment of Regency England, and, like Blake, they embraced intellectual liberty, political freedom, and transformational art at a time when opposition to the Crown and Tory administration often incurred severe responses, such as the Gag Acts (1817) and the Six Acts (1819). The record of civil unrest during the Regency period encompasses frame-breaking initiatives in cities such as Yorkshire, Derbyshire, and Nottinghamshire (this industrial sabotage provided the subject of Byron’s maiden speech in Parliament); the Spa Fields Riots of December 1816; and, of course, the Peterloo Massacre of August, 1819, “a bloody encounter between sixty thousand unarmed English citizens at St. Peter’s Square in Manchester and [. . .] a regiment of English hussars, acting on a magistrate’s orders and still adorned with their Waterloo medals” (Chandler, “‘Wordsworth’ after Waterloo” 107). Most of the open protest activity originated north of London, as Roy Porter notes (250), and much of it, like the 1817 March of the Blanketeers, was essentially benevolent; all the same, the government of the Prince Regent and Lord Liverpool, despite introducing legislation such as the Poor Employment Bill of 1817, showed a “tendency to confuse British reformers with French Jacobins” (Derry 140) and so militated against what seemed to be a nascent revolution. Furthermore, as Cox reminds us, radical periodicals like Hunt’s Examiner addressed “such issues as the national debt, the continuing wars in India, Catholic Emancipation, the struggle for
freedom in the Americas, the rights of the poor, child labor, the slave trade, the freedom of the press, reform of military discipline, and prison conditions’’ (43).

The historical particulars I have recounted show that England, at the dawn of the pax Britannica and the British Empire, was a deeply conflicted nation entangled in various crises, most of which involved ideological warfare and human suffering. Accordingly, the post-war English writers respond to a unique historical moment, a consideration relevant to visionary literature as it takes shape after the Napoleonic Wars conclude. Perhaps Wittreich is right in asserting that “prophecy offers a potential release from the tragedy of history” (‘‘Prophecy and Apocalypse in Romantic Poetry’’ 52). But it is crucial to recognize that what constitutes a tragic history for any one generation is seldom the same as what makes up a tragic history in others’ experiences. In light of this simple yet important claim, we may call into question the way in which, for theoretical convenience, Wittreich homogenizes distinct historical periods and flattens out very different authors’ perspectives on the past, present, and future. With respect to the major English Romantics, this approach suppresses nuance and thus renders Romantic prophecy and the seer-poet’s role without accounting for variations in either historical circumstances or authorial visions of what the world is and what it may become.

* * *

Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats found in Milton and the early Romantics a visionary poetics that offered structures, aesthetics, and principles suitable to the crafting of politically engaged literature in the wake of England’s triumph over
France. These four authors, of course, took the visionary tradition in varying directions to accomplish separate objectives. At the same time, we may note that these artists, like Blake, saw in literary prophecy a special authority and disruptive power through which to trouble monarchy and its supports: dynastic continuity, patriarchy, primogeniture, ancient constitutionalism, exchange economics, and proto-imperial law-making. In the hands of the post-war Romantics, visionary poetics becomes a resource through which to attack “the mighty scheme of truth” (Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 1805 XII.302) that the Lake Poets, each in his own way, set forth to make sense of the Girondinist republicans’ overthrow, the Septembriseurs’ brutality, and Napoleon’s eventual rise to power.  

The Lake Poets’ ideas of England and Englishness, as Brenda Banks suggests through her discussion of Wordsworth’s anti-Napoleonic writings circa 1804, are not without traces of revolutionary vigor and subversive potential. Nevertheless, over the course of the next four chapters, I am less interested in speaking to the early Romantics than in describing how their post-war heirs transform the visionary poetics tradition in ways that Wittreich overlooks. If Wittreich’s brilliant, generative work too closely associates the first and second wave English Romantics, these chapters shall attempt to disentangle the two generations through an examination of how Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats respectively view and implement literary prophecy. My wish is not to discredit Wittreich but rather to broaden the scope of his theories and so renew their appeal for the contemporary study of British Romanticism.
contesting Wittreich’s idea of Romantic literary history, I hope to unfold the
continuing value of a critical framework that, if revised with an eye to particularity,
can importantly and cogently elucidate the art of the period.
Chapter Two

“A light like a green star”: Love’s Prophetic Reformation in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound

“My vision then grew clear and I could see
Into the mysteries of the Universe.”

—Spirit of the Hour, Prometheus Unbound III.iv.104-5

Less than half a year before his death by drowning on 8 July, 1822, Percy Bysshe Shelley published the poem Hellas, a piece that closes with a vision. In this vision, Shelley foresees the rebirth in the present of classical Hellenic civilization: “Another Athens shall arise,” Shelley’s Chorus promises, “And to remoter time / Bequeath, like sunset to the skies, / The splendour of its prime” (1084-7). Thus revivified, “the world’s great age” (1060) shall awaken Love, an ancient pagan god (1090-1), whose “altar” (1094) is adorned with neither “gold” (1094) nor “blood” (1094) but “votive tears and symbol flowers” (1095). The poem’s closing stanza, however, reverses the vatic optimism of the preceding six stanzas: “O cease! must hate and death return?” (1096). Hellas concludes by claiming that “the world is weary of the past, / O might it die or rest at last!” (1100-1).

Shelley glosses this vision with the admission that it “is [as] indistinct and obscure as the event of the living drama whose arrival it foretells. Prophecies of wars, and
rumours of wars &c. may safely be made by poet or prophet in any age, but to anticipate, however darkly, a period of regeneration and happiness is a more hazardous exercise of the faculties which bards possess or feign.”

Shelley then invokes Isaiah and Virgil; these pre-Christian seers, he writes, looked beyond “the actual reign of evil which we endure and bewail” to describe “the possible and perhaps approaching state of society.”

I begin with Hellas and one of its prose notes because both poem and commentary help to clarify Shelley’s visionary aesthetics and sense of literary history in the 1820 masterpiece, Prometheus Unbound. This poem, like Hellas, is a lyrical drama, that is, a literary product “containing music, from opera to choral drama,” as Stuart Curran observes (Poetic Form and British Romanticism 198). Although cast in the form of a stage play, the lyrical drama, like a closet drama, is not principally designed for theatrical performance. Beyond this generic similarity, Shelley’s two poems share a concern with questions of social and political change and the respective roles that both history and love play in facilitating such change. Moreover, the prose note places the exploration of reform clearly within the twofold context of visionary poetics and the vatic literary tradition. If Hellas closes nebulously, as the poet states in his gloss that it does, then that nebulosity is purposeful: Shelley couches insight in mystery to unsettle and thus transform his readers, in line with the seer-poet’s role. In this sense, Shelley follows not only Isaiah and Virgil but also Blake, who, in verse-prophecies such as The French Revolution (1791) and Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793), aspires to effect beneficial changes through a disruptive art.
Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, like Blake’s major visions, is driven by what Stephen C. Behrendt calls “the prophetic artist’s public imperative” (Shelley and His Audiences 166). Shelley does not see literary vision as divorced from political and social reform; rather, he believes, as does Blake, that literature facilitates the intellectual and affective conditions necessary for human beings to transform self, community, and state, thereby remaking the world for the better. For Shelley, however, this idealistic perspective partly reflects his response to late eighteenth-century theorists of social perfectibility, particularly William Godwin, who was both a well-known English radical and Mary Shelley’s father, and the French political philosopher Condorcet, whose ideas were introduced to Shelley by his Eton instructor, Dr. James Lind (Kelley 20). Shelley, like Godwin and Condorcet, saw the potential for human social harmony and political freedom in an attainable future state rather than in an irrecoverable past; furthermore, he recognizes in visionary poetics a way both to describe and to bring forth this reformed future state. Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* provides a vision of such a world and, through the actions of Prometheus and his beloved Asia, a program for realizing its glory.

On this basis, Shelley’s poem may be distinguished from Blake’s verse-prophecies insofar as Shelley aligns his vision with Godwin’s principles of gradual reformation rather than with scriptural representations of apocalyptic transformation. “Blake is the only Romantic poet,” Wittreich contends, “to present a united vision of apocalypse in the mind and in history” (“Prophecy and Apocalypse in Romantic Poetry” 59). Shelley, unlike Blake, writes from a rationalist, atheistic position, and
his perspective reflects Enlightenment-era rationalism as he receives it through Godwin and Condorcet, as well as through the young Wordsworth, who was attracted to Godwin’s views of social improvement, as Amanda M. Ellis notes (33). In his lyrical drama, Shelley presents prophetic reform in line with this strain of eighteenth-century secularist thinking rather than forecasting personal and public changes in antinomian or apocalyptic terms, as Blake often does.

By casting Prometheus Unbound as a gradualist, reformatory vision, Shelley places imaginative distance, to our eyes, between his poem and Blake’s work (as far as we know, he was not acquainted with this older poet). At the same time, Shelley here also stands apart from Wordsworth and Coleridge, who have become, as the former claims in his 1805 Prelude, “Prophets of Nature” (XIII.442), singing the beauty of the human mind “which, ’mid all revolutions in the hopes / And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged” (449-50). Insofar as he asserts through the poem a vision of the mind’s unique beauty, Shelley resembles such a prophet; but he does not celebrate, as Wordsworth does, the human mind’s transcendence, that is, its freedom from history. Rather, Shelley posits the idea that the human mind finds both dignity and transformative power through the struggle with history; as P. M. S. Dawson suggests, it is only after Prometheus withdraws his curse against Jupiter that thirty centuries of bitter enmity close and the world’s renovation begins (11-2). By choosing to renounce three thousand years of defiance and hatred, Prometheus confronts history, thereby creating an opportunity for a new age to come into being within history. For Shelley, vision is a way to remake, not to reject, human history.
The world’s reformation, as Shelley presents it in his poem, thus results from evolutionary rather than revolutionary historical processes. Shelley’s gradualist vision, despite its provenance in Godwin and Condorcet, places Shelley in the company of Burke and Coleridge, who “argued that political evolution must be a ‘natural’ process and that the evil of revolution is its ‘unnatural’ attempt to found a rational society,” as Hugh Roberts contends (437). Although Shelley does not dismiss either writer’s counterrevolutionary perspective, we should recognize that the poet reinterprets Burke and Coleridge, as well as the perfectibilarians, by asserting that history’s movement toward a naturally achieved rational society is guided by Love, “that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves” (“On Love” 503). He elaborates by describing Love as a selfless empathy that is universal in scope: “if we feel,” Shelley writes, “we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart’s best blood” (503-4). Love creates “the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists” (504). This idea of Love and its part in history distinguishes Shelley’s own vision of a new human state from contemporary views on both socio-political change and human perfectibility.

Shelley’s responses to his literary contemporaries thus register in Prometheus Unbound as surely as do his responses to authors of the Western literary past, including Milton, Dante, and, of course, Aeschylus, whose work provides a classical
model for Shelley’s late-Regency dramatic poetry (including Hellas). But it is his engagement with Byron that most directly influences Shelley’s presentation of a world reformed through prophecy. Shelley’s piece “contains so many studied allusions to Byron’s poems,” Curran argues, “as to constitute a deliberate counterstatement” (PFBR 198). With Charles E. Robinson’s groundbreaking work on the Byron-Shelley relationship in mind, Curran asserts further that “where Byron attains his epic vision by representing irreducible discords,” Shelley strives in his lyrical drama for “intricately modulating harmonies that in its last act aspire to the music of the spheres” (PFBR 199). Shelley’s claim that Love shall transform history speaks to Byron, who, as Jerome J. McGann suggests, finds humankind alone responsible for the past, present, and future, even in the face of “strictly natural phenomena” or what Byron often refers to as circumstance (Don Juan in Context 147). Shelley’s idea of Love thus clashes with Byron’s belief that humankind is both alienated from Nature (and so from Love as Shelley defines it) and solely accountable for altering material history.

This philosophical conflict between Shelley and Byron is relevant also to the former’s use of the figure and myth of Prometheus in his lyrical drama. Prometheus, a Greek god whose philanthropic love for humankind drew Zeus’s wrath, was a popular mythological figure among the later Romantics. Mary Shelley, for example, alternately titled her 1818 novel, Frankenstein, “The Modern Prometheus.” Byron, for his part, composed “Prometheus” (1816), a poem in which he presents the god as a type of the human being, “in part divine, / A troubled stream from a pure
source” (47–8). Prometheus offered the younger Romantics an attractive range of possible interpretations: creator, political victim, benefactor, thief, seer, rebel, teacher, genius, anarchist, Savior, or Arch-Demon. The god’s story, moreover, evoked the classical literary tradition of Hesiod and Aeschylus rather than the Christian British legacy of poets such as Spenser, who refers to Prometheus only once (at II.X.70) over the course of The Faerie Queene’s six finished books, or Milton, who does not allude directly to Prometheus in his major verse works. The Prometheus myth thus appealed to Byron and the Shelleys by virtue of both its classical associations and its adaptability as a metaphor for the modern European experience after Waterloo.

As Shelley explains in the “Preface” to his lyrical drama, Prometheus is a paragon of virtue, a visionary who has taken up the cause of humankind and suffered mercilessly for his patronage (206); on these grounds, the poet describes his protagonist as embodying “the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends” (207). Shelley finds Milton’s Satan to be “the only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus” (206), but he deems the Titan superior “because, in addition to courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is [. . .] exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement”(207). Shelley’s Prometheus epitomizes ethical ideals which are vital conditions of human perfectibility. Moreover, he is a prophet-god; his prescience and fortitude together prepare him to effect humankind’s renovation.
In Shelley’s poem, Prometheus is a moral visionary whose act of selfless love—that is, the withdrawing of his curse against his persecutor—recreates the world both politically and socially. Shelley thus countervails Byron, as Robinson asserts: “Unlike Shelley’s hero, Byron’s Prometheus symbolizes man’s inability to perfect himself in a fallen world” (31). Certainly, both poets were well read in classical literature, including Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*. Robinson notes that, in 1816, Shelley translated the play into English, likely during the summer that Byron and the Shelleys spent together in Geneva, Switzerland (30); he also recounts that “Byron had read Aeschylus’ drama while at Harrow, had included a sixteen-line translation of it in his *Fugitive Pieces*, and had likened Napoleon to Prometheus in his *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*” (30). Both Byron and Shelley recognized Prometheus as a cosmic oppositionist and a champion of human dignity and freedoms.¹³

At the same time, the two poets put the old myth to significantly different uses, thereby reflecting their intellectual dissimilarities. Byron, on the one hand, employs Prometheus as an emblem of noble resolve in the face of a malevolent universe. In this sense, the god’s isolation and disaffection render “a symbol and a sign / To mortals of their fate and force” (“Prometheus” 45-6); Prometheus, through his pain and loneliness, represents the human spirit in conflict with powers that militate against political freedom, intellectual liberty, and happiness. For Byron, the Promethean drama is the struggle with those powers in the here and now. Shelley, on the other hand, implements the Prometheus myth principally as a framework for his gradualist vision. Like Byron, Shelley values Prometheus for his defiance of tyranny
and his loyalty to humankind; but Shelley parts with Byron in imagining the Titan renouncing hatred altogether, thus facilitating both the fall of Jupiter and the liberation of the world. For Shelley, Prometheus lives an inauthentic, hollow life so long as his curse exists. By withdrawing his curse, Prometheus frees his heart after thirty centuries of icy bondage; correlative, this benevolent and altruistic act releases a transformative energy into a spiritually dead world. Shelley thus recasts Byron’s Promethean drama as the struggle to create a new scheme of things.

Shelley’s provocative reinterpretation of Byron also involves an equally provocative revision of Milton, as Simon Bainbridge suggests in his analysis of the “Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte”: “The failure of Satan,” Bainbridge writes, “is transformed into the positive pride of Prometheus, anticipating, and possibly stimulating, Shelley’s use of the mythic hero” (151). Shelley makes clear in his “Preface” that Milton’s Satan is Prometheus’s closest literary relative, and, if we follow Bainbridge, we see that Shelley’s presentation of the fire-stealer answers both Byron and Milton. Although Byron and the Shelleys do not receive the Prometheus myth directly from Milton’s verse, they nevertheless connect the myth to Paradise Lost and to the figure of Satan. The younger Romantics, by relating their versions of Prometheus to Milton’s fallen angel, bridge their work to the principal English visionary text. Such interconnectedness among authors and texts is a hallmark of the visionary tradition and a defining element in the seer-poet’s relationship with the literary past, as Shelley states: “one great poet is a masterpiece of nature, which another not only ought to study but must study” (“Preface” 208).
For Shelley, “the sacred Milton” (“Preface” 208) provides a lastingly meaningful influence in terms of both aesthetics and ideology, and the Puritan’s thought and art represents important developments in the history of prophetic literature which must be carried forward and recast for a new historical moment. Shelley’s Prometheus therefore is a revision of Milton’s Satan, as well as his Byronic counterpart, in light of a post-Napoleonic vision of reform: “The great writers of our own age are [. . .] the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it. The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lightning, and the equilibrium between institutions and opinions is now restoring, or is about to be restored” (“Preface” 208). To articulate his gradualist vision of human perfectibility, Shelley re-imagines Milton, not to free his art from the English literary past but to harness the subversive and transformative energies of that past in order to ameliorate the present.

The vatic literary tradition allows Shelley, in Prometheus Unbound, to reassert what the Fairy Queen of his dream-vision Queen Mab (issued 1813) proclaims: “Futurity / Exposes now its treasures; let the sight / Renew and strengthen all thy failing hope” (VIII.50-2). Shelley understood the years of war with Revolutionary-Napoleonic France as comprising “an age of despair” (241), as he states in the “Author’s Preface” to Laon and Cythna (1817; later The Revolt of Islam, 1818).¹⁴ To articulate his vision of human perfectibility in the face of such malaise, Shelley invokes and modifies both the recent and remote literary pasts. By doing so, Shelley seeks to create a new vision of the human future to counteract the hopelessness
engendered by the collapse of revolutionary idealism in the wake of the Reign of Terror and the wars with Napoleon. Although Hellas will later call into question such an idealistically hopeful vision, Prometheus Unbound represents Shelley’s best attempt to portray humankind’s perfectibility and to offer Love as a force for life-affirming changes in the midst of historical catastrophes. The following sections address how Shelley pursues these objectives over the course of his lyrical drama’s four acts.

* * *

In Prometheus Unbound, Shelley presents human history as crucial to the realization of a new age, thereby partly resolving an intellectual conundrum that had been with him, as Greg Kucich argues, since Queen Mab. Kucich claims that this early poem “sensitized [Shelley] to fundamental contradictions in his procedures” for representing both historical realities and possibilities (16). Queen Mab, for Kucich, compels Shelley to reassess his approach to history because “the poem’s contrast between the eternal ideas of an imagined future state and the ruins of time [. . .] highlights two competing strategies of historical narration—an ideal historical progression toward millennial completion versus a material account of actual human misery” (16). Shelley’s interest in rethinking his ideas of history owes much to the direct influence of William Godwin, who fired Shelley’s mind with a fresh enthusiasm for reading in history almost immediately after they met in late 1812 (Kucich 17). For the last ten years of his life, Shelley strove to work out the relationship between material history and his vision of human perfectibility.
Prometheus Unbound dramatizes the birth of a future state in which the principle of Love frees living beings from social, political, intellectual, and affective distress. In the piece, a process of general transformation is begun when Prometheus publicly expresses remorse at having long ago spoken a bitter curse against his captor and the sovereign deity, Jupiter. This act of benevolence liberates the prophet-god from three thousand years of agonized captivity; the spell of history breaks and the world is slowly renewed. Like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, who by blessing the “happy living things” (282) of the sea causes the dead albatross to fall from around his neck, Prometheus renovates himself through selfless compassion and, in turn, catalyzes the renovation of others. Prometheus transforms the world with a single altruistic act that discontinues Jupiter’s reign and helps to realize a new state of existence for the victims of thirty centuries of history. The poem thus presents Love as a source of personal and communal reform within history, and it does so in accordance with the artistic techniques of the visionary poet: “Imagination provides forms on which thought can operate and from which history will take its shape” (Hoagwood 134).

These considerations cast light upon Shelley’s poem, which, from the first, places the relationship between historical actuality and visionary possibility in the forefront of its concerns. As act one begins, we find Prometheus chained against a “Precipice” in “a Ravine of Icy Rocks” as the night gradually gives way to the dawn (s.d. 209). Two female immortals, Panthea and Ione, rest close by and so see and hear all that takes place and is said. We soon learn from Prometheus that he has suffered through “Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours / And moments” (I.12-13) without
acquiescing, despite the fact that the natural world participates in Jupiter’s efforts to torture him into submission: “The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears / Of their moon-freezing chrystals” (I.31-32). Yet Prometheus finds in his prophetic foreknowledge of Jupiter’s fall a source of both consolation and forgiveness; perhaps for the first time, the god discovers in his heart what Stuart Peterfreund calls “unapologetic and loving empathy” (226):

> Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee.—What Ruin
> Will hunt thee undefended through the wide Heaven!
> How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,
> Gape like a Hell within! I speak in grief
> Not exultation, for I hate no more
> As then, ere misery made me wise.—The Curse
> Once breathed on thee I would recall. (I.53-9)

If Prometheus alone is responsible for the oath against Jupiter, then he alone can withdraw it and thereby redeem all life, as Wittreich suggests: “Only the human mind, once it becomes unbound, can suppress the serpent, seal the pit, and summon up a new heaven and a new earth in history” ( “Prophecy” 56). To inaugurate a new historical moment, Prometheus must put an end to the age of Jupiter, an era partly upheld by the negativity and violence of his own radically defiant anti-monarchism, as well as by his darkest feelings toward his persecutor. Moreover, Prometheus’s altruism has immediate social consequences, as Dawson notes (12); by disavowing his curse with the words “I wish no living thing to suffer pain” (I.305), the Titan
shows mercy not only to Jupiter but to all the beings who have endured generations of conflict between Prometheus and the King of Heaven. “Prometheus is beginning to recognize,” Dawson explains, “that such concern [as the god shows for others] can hardly express itself in the form of a curse, for a curse is a form of hatred, and hatred is one of the central aspects of Jupiter. To oppose Jupiter in this way is to help keep him in existence” (12). We may also observe, with Dawson, that “some kinds of uncompromising opposition actually work to support what they ostensibly oppose” (12), a lesson which Prometheus appears to be learning.

Thus Prometheus, with the authority of visionary insight and a prophet’s freedom of imagination, seeks to inspire others to reform both themselves and their world through love and compassion. We may here recall Shelley’s “Sonnet: To the Republic of Benevento,” published posthumously in 1824 but composed in mid-1820. In the piece, Shelley cautions that the truly emancipated individual “must rule the empire of himself” (11), “establishing his throne / On vanquished will” (12-13) after “quelling the anarchy / Of hopes and fears” (13-14). The new golden age, in other words, begins with the visionary few and ends in universal peace achieved without physical or intellectual violence. This reformist ideal, embodied by Prometheus in the first act of the lyrical drama, is so alien to the characters who witness the god’s foreswearing of his curse that they believe him finally broken by three thousand years of loneliness and pain.

Several Shelley critics comment upon this ironic response; Desmond King-Hele, for one, notes that Prometheus’s “willingness to forgive is a necessary prelude to
liberation, though The Earth misinterprets it as a sign of weakness” (173). Michael Scrivener argues that the Earth laments her son’s magnanimity because she mistakes a new historical course for an old pattern of failure and submission to tyranny (156-57). Gerald McNiece contends that Prometheus himself loses heart as the first act continues, particularly at the point when the Furies arrive to torture humankind’s benefactor with visions of Christ’s Passion and the French Revolution (228). In sum, these critics highlight Shelley’s sense of the true prophet’s difficult social role, an understanding the poet draws as surely from the Gospels—for example, Matthew 13.57—as from the English literary past and his Romantic contemporaries.16

Prometheus’s reformed perspective is tested almost at once by Mercury, who, at “the great Father’s will” (I.354), arrives at the same moment as the Furies. Commanding these bloodthirsty creatures to wait before attacking, Mercury solicits the secret of Jupiter’s fate (I.345-80). Mercury’s interest in Prometheus’s visionary insight sparks the Titan’s defiance, showing that Shelley has not simply remade Byron’s Prometheus to render a fireless counterexample. Rather, Shelley’s Prometheus, who gestures toward the realization of human perfectibility, must recast his cosmic resistance as an act of Love rather than hate. As a prophet of Love, Prometheus becomes responsible for the positive transformation of all life in the human and natural world, in keeping with Shelley’s idea of Love as the interconnectedness of all that exists. Accordingly, the seer-god must reinvent his Satanic defiance as a function of his new role. Prometheus recreates his past; analogously, Shelley adapts both Byron and Milton to suit a new poetic prophecy.
After he fails in his task, Mercury gives Prometheus over to the Furies, but not before he says, in astonishment, “Alas! I wonder at, yet pity thee” (I.428). This commiseration, if sincere, may reflect that the herald-god truly sees Prometheus in a new light. Possibly, the general renovation that Prometheus begins through his personal transformation shows its first effects in Mercury. Nevertheless, the Furies’ savagery reasserts the dark passions that Jupiter’s reign encourages and which in turn perpetuate his sovereignty, as Stuart M. Sperry notes: “Representing the tide of human hatred and mistrust, [the Furies] are a perfect metaphor for Shelley’s conception of evil because, for all the horror they inspire, they take their reality from the fear and terror of their victims” (84). Like Jupiter, the Furies are powerless save within a nightmarish world of violent feelings and hopelessness, a scheme of things that establishes Heaven’s supremacy and creates the illusion that Jupiter’s authority is limitless. For the Furies to torment the now repentant Prometheus, they must transport his mind to their realm of fear and false prophecy.

In answer to the seer-god’s challenge to “pour forth the cup of pain” (I.474), the Furies reveal a twofold vision, involving both images of Christ’s Passion and scenes of the French Revolution’s bloody aftermath. By transmitting this knowledge of the future to Prometheus, the Furies hope to inspire fear and despondency regarding the distant historical prospects for humankind, the Titan’s “beloved race” (I.386). Christ’s fate among those for whom He is incarnate prefigures the patterns of intellectual error and spiritual folly which shall reappear when Revolutionary France succumbs first to the Reign of Terror and afterward to Napoleon’s authoritarian rule.
This vision strikes at Prometheus by shaking his hopes for human perfectibility; history merely reiterates a destructive cycle. Just as Christ—who represents for Shelley a “symbolic and ethical complex” (Hoagwood 146) signifying Love and moral perfectibility—shall be a victim of others’ fear and ignorance, so the French Revolution shall fail because, centuries earlier, “Prometheus kindled in man a consuming thirst for knowledge which outstripped man’s ability to use his knowledge humanely” (McNiece 229). The Furies seek to persuade Prometheus, through vision, that history is foreordained and thus Love and hope are mirages; the future shall bring not Rousseau’s “ideal republic, founded on virtue” (Breunig 46) but Robespierre’s Republic of Virtue, “the heart of the Terror” (Breunig 46).

Unlike Panthea, who looks away from the vision because she cannot bear her heartbreaking clairvoyance, Prometheus recognizes the Furies to be false prophetesses. Just as the ancient Greeks distinguished between the true and false dreams that pass through the gates of horn and ivory respectively, a seer such as Prometheus cautiously interprets the visions vouchsafed to him. Thus the Furies inadvertently steel Prometheus to his task, as he reveals in crying out heavenward: “The sights with which thou torturest gird my soul / With new endurance, till the hour arrives / When they shall be no types of things which are” (I.643-45). The seer-god knows that the Furies’ power to prophesy is framed within the scope of Jupiter’s unreal authority; consequently, by presenting the narrative of human history conclusively and fatalistically, the Furies render it falsely. Panthea’s fears reflect the Olympian world-illusion that Prometheus, Love’s prophet, fights against.
A counterexample to the Furies is provided at once by Earth, who summons a group of spirits that Panthea likens to “flocks of clouds in spring’s delightful weather” (I.665) as they approach the icy ravine wherein the god is captive. “A commentator bent on showing the classical symmetry of the act,” Carlos Baker contends, “might point out that Shelley has balanced the visitation of the Furies [. . .] with a chorus of fair spirits, who prophesy that love and unselfishness will in the end prevail” (100). Yet the arrival of these beautiful spirits points to more than Shelley’s faithful reproduction of classical dramatic conventions. Rather, the contrast between the Furies and the Spirits suggests a change in the intellectual and affective climate of the poem’s world, the beginnings of a transformation facilitated by Prometheus’s visionary intervention into the lives of the beings around him. Consider the solace that Earth offers her child:

I felt thy torture, Son, with such mixed joy
As pain and Virtue give.—To cheer thy state
I bid ascend those subtle and fair spirits
Whose homes are the dim caves of human thought
And who inhabit, as birds wing the wind,
Its world-surrounding ether; they behold
Beyond that twilight realm, as in a glass,
The future—may they speak comfort to thee! (I.656-663)

Presumably, Earth all along possesses this invocative power—a precise counterpart to Jupiter’s command of the Furies—but she reveals her access to
sources of prophetic foresight only now because Prometheus has revivified the transformative and life-affirming energies of vision itself. As dawn breaks over the frozen escarpments, three thousand years of spiritual winter draw to a close because Prometheus has restored the vatic imagination. Thus Earth, who has prayed for revenge, now calls upon a benevolent chorus of spirits “from unremembered ages” (I.672) to convey a historical vision organized around Love’s part in human affairs. Such consolation reflects a renovated world in which hope has been restored. Consequently, Earth’s maternal compassion occasions a vision of history that would have been vain and inauthentic had it appeared at the beginning of the poem, before Prometheus the prophet-god remade the world through selfless love.

The principal incidents and ideas of the poem’s first act, as I have recounted them, point to the uniqueness of Shelley’s historical vision in second generation Romantic literature. Shelley proposes Love as the most important reforming agent within history, the guiding principle for human perfectibility. This notion of Love and its relation to history distinguishes Shelley’s idealism from the more materialistic approaches offered by Mary Shelley, Keats, and especially Byron. To be sure, Shelley draws much from both Godwin and Condorcet, the French philosopher whose theories of human perfectibility bridge Rousseau, d’Alembert, and Diderot with Madame de Staël and the French ideologues whom Napoleon so hotly despised (Herold 91-5). Shelley’s idea of Love also combines elements of classical and Christian thinking, evoking works such as Plato’s Symposium, in which Love connects humankind to the divine reality of the World of Forms (Hamilton 20-21),
and St. John’s First Epistle, which claims that “God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him” (I John 4.16). If Love is to facilitate a new course for history, the principle itself must belong to history, whether Hellenic or Christian, recent or remote. By asserting the historical reality of Love and its reformative potential, Shelley parts ways with his three foremost contemporaries, none of whom demonstrates a similar faith in universal human perfectibility or its historical precedents.

The first act of Prometheus Unbound, as I have asserted, portrays a reformation rather than a revolution. In line with this interpretation, I wish to discuss the poem’s second act as a continuation of the process of renovation initiated by Prometheus’s compassion for his heavenly persecutor. This compassion reflects Love’s transformative power; at the same time, Love is not mercy alone. Shelley accounts for the erotic qualities of Love through the introduction of Asia, Prometheus’s spiritual and intellectual bride. After the Spirits depart, Prometheus says:

How fair these air-born shapes! and yet I feel
Most vain all hope but love, and thou art fair,
Asia! who when my being overflowed
Wert like a golden chalice to bright wine
Which else had sunk into the thirsty dust. (I.807-811)

Without Asia, Prometheus’s vision is confined to the ice-encrusted ravine; with her, the renewal of all beings may truly begin: “I said all hope was vain but love,” the Titan confides to Panthea, adding, after a pause, “thou lovest. . .” (I.824).
Like Keats’s *Hyperion* (1820), the second act of *Prometheus Unbound* begins in a vale, although in Shelley’s poem there is not the deposed Saturn amid the waste forests, but rather Asia, who celebrates the revivification of Nature that follows Prometheus’s repentance: “thou hast descended / Cradled in tempests; thou dost awake, O Spring!” (II.i.5-6). “This is the season,” she says, “this the day, the hour” (II.i.13). Her apostrophe to the time of year suggests from the first that Asia, as Linda Brigham notes, enjoys a special harmony with the natural world (257). Brigham’s observation is significant in light of Asia’s role as a facilitator of the visionary reformation that Prometheus initiated in the first act, since, as Angela Leighton asserts, “Asia continues [this] work [. . .] by returning to the second world beneath the grave” (88). Asia is thus prepared for her otherworldly task by virtue of her thorough integration with a natural world which, as act two opens, is in the nascent moments of a general rejuvenation.

The promise of a new world is underwritten at this point in act two by recurring references to stars and starlight. In visionary literature, the star is a conventional symbol, an image typically associated with rebirth or purification, as in the case of the Star of Bethlehem that presages Christ’s Nativity (Matt. 2.2) or in the closing verses of Dante’s *Purgatory*: “From those holiest waters I returned / to her reborn, a tree renewed, in bloom / with newborn foliage, immaculate, / eager to rise, now ready for the stars” (XXXIII.142-45). The star image also recalls Shelley’s earlier, less
successful attempts at poetic prophecy, particularly Laon and Cythna, in which “a wandering meteor”—that is, a shooting star—consecrates the sexual union of the protagonists (VI.XXXII.283). In these instances, stars are harbingers of hope and renewal.

As the second act begins, however, Shelley employs the image of Venus, or the Morning Star, to signify the indecisiveness and fragility of Prometheus’s vision. Asia notices that “one white star is quivering still / Deep in the orange light of widening morn / Beyond the purple mountains” (II.i.17-19). She describes how the star fluctuates: “through a chasm / Of wind-divided mist the darker lake / Reflects it—now it wanes—it gleams again” (II.i.19-21). But within a moment Asia proclaims, “‘Tis lost!” (II.i.24). If Asia feels hope in the coming of spring, she senses uncertainty and impermanence in the fading of Venus. Furthermore, Asia’s sympathy with natural processes attunes her to the material consequences of the reformation Prometheus has instigated. Thus she intuits, before knowing what took place in the icy ravine of act one, that a new, generative energy infuses the world around her; simultaneously, she fears that this life-affirming power is as transitory as the Morning Star at dawn. This conflict between hope and loss represents that the world’s renovation is at this point provisional. Asia must intervene if the human and natural worlds are to be freed of Jupiter’s rule.

By recasting the star as an equivocal symbol, Shelley modulates a convention of the visionary poetics tradition, adapting it to the drama of reform that he presents in his poem. Similarly, Shelley re-imagines the vatic tropes of dreams and dreaming.
Shelley’s use of dreams in act two, for Hoagwood, invokes “a prophetic commonplace” that has its provenance in the Book of Daniel (158). Shelley remakes this commonplace, however, to accord with his poem’s presentation of Love as both the interconnectedness of all life and a transformative agent in human history. In act two, Panthea comes to Asia to tell her “great Sister” (the two women, as well as Ione, are Oceanides) (II.i.35) a dream she has had in which Prometheus appeared, free and enveloped in light. Panthea recounts: “I saw not—heard not—moved not—only felt / His presence flow and mingle through my blood / Till it became his life and his grew mine” (II.i.79-82). After Panthea relates this first dream, Asia sees a second, forgotten dream in her sister’s eyes; the Dream itself then speaks, encouraging the women to “follow, follow” (II.i.131).

The precise content of Panthea’s two dreams is less interesting in the context of Shelley’s visionary poetics than the method of the dreams’ transmission. “In the dream that Panthea can remember,” Donald H. Reiman observes, “Prometheus’ soul [has] merged into Panthea’s” (58). Through this night-vision, Earth’s son and the ocean’s daughter are one. Asia then shares this first dream, as well as its forgotten counterpart, through a communion enacted at the level of bodily vision. Such interaction suggests more than familial sympathy between the two sisters. Rather, Asia, with her sister and her beloved, becomes a part of “the One Mind,” the “Being, or Life” with which, according to Earl Wasserman, “Prometheus is identical” (143). As a foreshadowing of the future spiritual unity among all living beings, this joining of souls through Panthea’s dreams revives human community, liberty, and love.
As he did with the Venus symbol, Shelley reconfigures the prophetic dream convention to serve his poem’s particular aims. In this respect, Shelley shows less interest in using this convention to establish continuity with scriptural, medieval, or Renaissance precedents than to depict the ideal end of his reformist vision. Panthea’s two dreams, like Asia’s experience of the Morning Star’s brightening and dimming, foretell the future state of perfection while at the same time revealing that human perfectibility is a chimerical notion unless the present world is first remade through Love. Thus Shelley’s use of dreams, in terms of its allusiveness, suggests a closer engagement with Byron, who in his dream-poem, “Darkness” (1816), depicts a global cataclysm, than with Daniel, Chaucer, Milton, or even the Lake Poet Coleridge, whose struggled throughout his career to understand both the imaginative and medical implications of dreaming, as Jennifer Ford has shown.20

If he seeks to counter the nightmare of “Darkness” through Panthea’s hopeful dreams, Shelley responds also, as Sperry notes (100), to Byron’s Manfred (1817) by shifting the action from Asia’s vale to the lair of Demogorgon, an oracle to whom the Dream calls the two sisters. Asia and Panthea follow to the very threshold of Demogorgon’s Cave, located on “a Pinnacle of Rock among Mountains” (II.iii.s.d.) that evokes “the Summit of the Jungfrau Mountain” (Manfred II.iii.s.d.) on which act two, scene three of Byron’s dramatic poem takes place.21 In Shelley, the pinnacle astonishes Asia with its pristine beauty and benevolent grandeur, inspiring her to praise Nature’s splendor against the “savage sea” (M II.iii.4), “rugged breakers” (M II.iii.6), and “dead whirlpool’s image” (M II.iii.8) of Byron’s Alps. “How glorious
art thou, Earth,” Asia rejoices (II.iii.12), adding, “I could fall down and worship [. . .]
thee” (II.iii.16).

Through her impassioned outburst, Asia makes a sovereign of Nature, thereby
committing a grave mistake that, in Sperry’s view, the poet was swift to guard
against: “Shelley was always aware of the human tendency to anthropomorphize and
worship the power behind the natural universe and its eternal process of creation and
destroying” (99-100). Asia’s error, in other words, is to substitute one sort of
monarch with another; by imaging herself as Nature’s subject, Asia simply replaces
Jupiter with Nature in a relationship that recycles the king/subject historical dynamic
from which Prometheus seeks to free the world. Like Prometheus’s own change after
recanting his curse, Asia’s renewal is gradual and imperfect. Thus Sperry
acknowledges that, before her first speech in the scene concludes, “Asia refuses to
bow down and adore a might that, for all its sublimity, she recognizes as inhuman and
amoral” (100). Rather, she realizes that all sovereign powers are susceptible to
reformative pressures, as in the case of “the sun-awakened avalanche! whose mass

    Thrice sifted by the storm, had gathered there

    Flake after flake, in Heaven-defying minds

    As thought by thought is piled, till some great truth

    Is loosened, and the nations echo round

    Shaken to their roots: as do the mountains now. (II.iii.36-42)

This epiphany better prepares the two sisters for their audience with the oracle in
the forthcoming scene. Also, the avalanche metaphor challenges Melynda Nuss’s
recent claim that, in Shelley’s work, the world’s transformation “just happens, without any need for any sort of human agency that would dirty the hands of [Shelley’s] peaceful and nonviolent heroes” (420). The passage I have quoted demonstrates that reformation, as Shelley conceives it, is the work of human communities striving for freedom and solidarity, often over the course of great spans of time (consider that, in Prometheus Unbound, the world’s liberation is thirty centuries in coming). If humankind is indeed perfectible through Love, and such perfectibility may be facilitated by prophecy, then the process of change must follow an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary course. The sisters’ encounter with Demogorgon reveals, against Nuss’s view, the great difficulties facing those who labor to bring forth the state of human perfection as Shelley imagines it in his lyrical drama.

Demogorgon’s part is to trouble Asia and Panthea’s thoughts and unsettle the women’s imaginations; the burden of interpretation lies with the oracle’s auditors. Purposefully cryptic, Demogorgon responds to Asia’s questions—only the last of which (II.iv.128) concerns the future—in order to enlighten the sisters beyond the level of simple declarative knowledge. The ancient being frustrates the women’s search for truth because he knows—and the sisters must discover—that truth lies within the human heart, rather than within an oracle’s sanctuary. Thus Sperry is correct to assert that the “pointlessness” of this exchange “is Shelley’s point” (101), as Dawson is right to note that “Demogorgon can only tell Asia what she already knows” (117). Pilgrims before a strange and powerful intelligence, Panthea and Asia
receive from Demogorgon the transforming insight that “all things are subject but eternal Love” (II.iv.120), a revelation that helps the two women to move forward in the process of renewal.

The Demogorgon figure represents the third major reconstitution of the visionary poetics tradition that Shelley undertakes in the poem’s second act. Shelley recasts Demogorgon, who in Spenser and Milton is a terrifying primal deity, as both “Eternity” (III.i.52) and Jupiter’s own son (III.i.54) and usurper. This complex redefinition falls in line with Shelley’s effort to remake the conventions and commonplaces of English prophetic literature to fit a new vision of reform guided by Love. As Love begins to free the men and women of the poem’s world, these people must come to terms with how the future relates to the present and the past. Demogorgon challenges Asia and Panthea, who are here humankind’s representatives, to understand how human history reflects the eternal truths which Love reveals. Demogorgon provides the women with the knowledge they require in order to comprehend Love’s historical reality. Asia and Panthea, in their turn, must transform themselves in light of what Demogorgon, albeit cryptically, imparts to them. Shelley thus refashions the mythic character to perform an important role in Love’s renovation of humankind. On this count, Shelley resembles Coleridge circa 1820, since, as Mary Anne Perkins argues, the Lake Poet at this time held that “the re-creative imagination of the present” must engage “the creative imagination of the past” to forge “a vision for the future” (189). Shelley follows Coleridge’s tenet in his revision of the Demogorgon myth.
The sisters’ intellectual and spiritual progress is represented by the continuation of their journey through worldly space and time. With a spirit who identifies himself as “the shadow of a destiny” (II.iv.146), Asia and Panthea depart Demogorgon’s realm on a chariot drawn by “coursers” (II.iv.163) that subsist on lightning, “drink of the whirlwind’s stream” (II.iv.164), and “bathe in the fresh sunbeam” (II.iv.166). In this series of images, a life-affirming picture of Nature supersedes the frozen waste land of the first act. Correspondingly, Asia undergoes a positive metamorphosis; Panthea marvels:

How changed thou art! I dare not look on thee;
I feel, but see thee not. I scarce endure
The radiance of thy beauty. Some good change
Is working in the elements which suffer
Thy presence thus unveiled. (II.v.16-20)

A new day arrives; nevertheless, as Hoagwood reminds us, “the fallen world” is “redeemed, not replaced” as act two closes (170). The renovation of history through vision is forthcoming but as yet incomplete: Jupiter still reigns, and Prometheus remains a prisoner in the icy ravine. The poem’s third act further depicts Love’s reformative power and historical agency by way of the Olympian’s dethronement and the Titan’s liberation.

* * *

The penultimate act of Prometheus Unbound depicts, in fairly quick succession, the fall of Jupiter, Prometheus’s release by Hercules, and the reunion of Prometheus
and Asia. Essentially, the last vestiges of Jupiter’s ancien régime vanish as the new world comes into being. For Timothy Webb, the major incidents of act three have less to do with actual patterns of political change than with Prometheus’s change of heart: “When hatred has been rejected,” Webb asserts, “and the vacuum filled by love [. . .], Jupiter necessarily falls” (148). The monarch’s fate, in Webb’s view, has its provenance in the question Shelley poses to conclude “Mont Blanc” (1817): “And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind’s imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?” (142-44).23 With these verses in mind, Webb frames the collapse of Olympian rule within the context of the new Promethean mind: “If man can populate the universe with the divinities he imagines to himself, he also has the power to recall those images and demythologise them” (148).

Such an analysis risks the conclusion that the poem’s drama begins and ends in Prometheus’s moral and intellective transformation. If we consider all conflicts resolved by the middle of the piece, we neglect the basic fact that “Prometheus Unbound is not merely a poem, it is a drama” (Curran, Shelley’s Annus Mirabilis 42). To deny the work its claim to dramatic unity is to halve the poem, thereby inviting readings in which the vision of renewal begins where ancient hatreds end. Although not theatrical after the fashion of a traditional stage play, Prometheus Unbound nevertheless features conflicts, tensions, and structural cohesiveness, all of which suggest that the process of reformatory transformation—the very heart of the poem’s drama—continues well after Asia’s beatification and Demogorgan’s bloodless victory. If act three were simply a sequence of incidents demonstrating a radical shift
from a totalitarian state to utopia, then Shelley would merely be creating an imaginative reversal of the historical pattern set by the French Revolution as it moved from libertarian idealism and democratic ardor to Robespierre, the Septembriseurs, and Napoleon.

At the same time, Shelley’s reader might understandably ask how three thousand years of despotism could close within the scope of fewer than three hundred verses. Whether we consider the old state’s last gasps or the new world’s first moments, we face important questions regarding Shelley’s dramaturgy of vision. Are the poem’s principal conflicts fully resolved in act three? And if so, does Shelley imply that history loses all meaning with the emergence of a golden age in which human perfectibility is realized?

The key to making sense of Shelley’s dramatic technique in act three is to recognize that the poet strives, here and throughout the work, to remake visionary poetics as a way of mirroring the individual, social, political, and natural transformations he depicts. That is to say, Shelley recasts various hallmarks of literary prophecy to suit them to his individual vision, as we see in his authorial experimentation in act two with Venus, Panthea’s two dreams, and Demogorgon. In the poem, the particular vision in question involves Love as a reforming power that fosters human perfectibility. Shelley refits literary conventions to accommodate this unique vision, and his reworking of tradition encompasses the genre of drama as well as the genre of poetry. Shelley thus does not do away with dramatic conflict; rather, he reinvents it to accord with an original artistic contribution.
In the literature of the theatre, dramatic conflict provides structure, direction, energy, and meaning; through the resolution of conflict, growth and change become possible. This principle was as familiar to the ancient Greek and Roman playwrights as it is to contemporary dramatists such as Brian Friel, Marie Jones, and Alan Bennett. Shelley too understood both the nature and the power of literary conflict (consider, for example, the tragic conflicts of his play The Cenci, which, unlike Prometheus, was written with stage performance in mind).

To suggest, then, that Shelley’s third act serves simply as a coda to the first two acts or an overture to the fourth seriously misrepresents the fact that the poem continues to employ the technique—and thus achieve the outcomes—of traditional dramatic conflict. But Shelley also tailors generic aesthetic standards to his visionary ideals. Scrivener writes to this point by claiming that Shelley, in his “anarchist poem” (174), must “create images and dramatic actions that embody authentically Promethean values” (175). This task, as Scrivener describes it, requires Shelley the lyrical dramatist to intermediate between the known and the unknown. The third act of Prometheus Unbound, especially after scene one, represents Shelley’s efforts to strike an imaginative balance between radical innovation and literary common sense.

After Jupiter is deposed, the poem turns to the question of the development of a new social reality under Love’s auspices. Shelley often aligns his artistic tenets with his social theories, as he does in “A Defence of Poetry” (1821; published 1840), an essay containing his most important statements on literary prophecy. “The social sympathies,” Shelley writes, “begin to develope themselves from the moment that
two human beings coexist; the future is contained within the present as the plant
within the seed; and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence become
the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a
social being is determined to action [. . .] and constitute pleasure in sensation, virtue
in sentiment, beauty in art, truth in reasoning, and love in intercourse of the kind”
(“Defence” 511).25 Shelley here expresses his belief that human social relations
inherently involve both the nucleus of human perfectibility and the interconnectivity
that he associates with his principle of Love. Moreover, art and artists from the first
play a part in the development of human communities over historical time: “In the
infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry;
and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good which
exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly
between perception and expression” (512).

These statements help to elucidate the principal conflicts of the third act, insofar as
these conflicts reflect Shelley’s thinking on the relationship between social history
and the poetical imagination. Two incidents in act three dramatize this relationship.
Few Shelley critics discuss the first; conversely, the second is one of the poem’s best
known episodes. Let us begin with the latter of the two. This incident involves
Prometheus’s reunion with Asia, at which point Prometheus articulates his wish to
withdraw with her to a halcyon cave, “paved with veined emerald” (III.iii.13) and in
the midst of a vernal alpine forest (III.iii.10-21). Prometheus promises Asia that, in
this “simple dwelling, which shall be our own” (III.iii.22), the two shall make a
new life together: “we will sit and talk of time and change / As the world ebbs and
flows, ourselves unchanged” (III.iii.23-24). In this sanctuary, Prometheus and Asia
shall pursue artistic creativity (III.iii.49-63) as a way to celebrate Love’s generative
and liberating power. Microcosmically, the scene establishes the beginning of Love’s
new social order and promotes the significance of all the arts, but especially poetry
(III.iii.54-56), to the success of a nascent world.26

The incident preceding the lovers’ reunion, however, receives far less commentary
from Shelley critics; typically, this moment in the poem is viewed as a flat
interpolation between Jupiter’s fall and Prometheus’s emancipation. Yet the second
scene of act three, during which the deities Apollo and Ocean discuss their fates in the
post-Olympian scheme of things, presents an important picture of historical
continuity between the old and new worlds. The episode also illustrates how Shelley
depicts conflict in the poem after Jupiter, the principal antagonist, is overthrown.

In this brief scene, Apollo and Ocean respond hopefully to the change in power;
Ocean, in fact, foresees freedom and peace on the seas, thereby evoking, as Kenneth
Neill Cameron suggests, recent memories of the Battle of Trafalgar and other nautical
engagements between England and France during the Napoleonic Wars (Shelley: The
Golden Years 531). Ocean frames his thoughts as a prophecy: “Henceforth the
fields of Heaven-reflecting sea / Which are my realm, will heave, unstain’d with
blood / Beneath the uplifting winds” (III.ii.18-20). Once the site of atrocious
bloodshed, the seas soon “will flow / Round many-peopled continents and round /
Fortunate isles” (III.ii.21-23). The Morning Star—in act two a symbol of in-
determinacy—now emblematizes Nature’s constant benefaction (III.ii.25-28) as the world’s populations are united by peaceful sea-travel. Thus Venus, accompanied by “the light-laden moon” (III.ii.26), unfailingly guides human beings, who sail without “blood and groans / And desolation, and the mingled voice / Of slavery and command” (III.ii.29-31). Such a prophecy bears obvious relevance for early nineteenth-century England, a slave trade nation (until 1833) whose “naval supremacy was never challenged after 1805,” the year of Admiral Horatio Nelson’s victory at Trafalgar (Harvie 435).

Shelley thus recasts, by way of the Promethean renovatio mundi, the scope and nature of dramatic conflict to accord with both visionary tradition and his sense of his own times. Prophecy’s dramatic tenor, as Wittreich shows (with reference to Joseph Mede, Thomas Goodwin, and David Pareus), is established by the Book of Revelation: “The whole drama of cosmic conflict is played out on the stage of John’s prophecy; and that stage, first in the prophet’s mind, is shifted into the mind of the reader. Thus what Coleridge once said of The Faerie Queene, that its domain is neither history nor geography but mental space, is true of all prophecy” (VP 40). Wittreich further elaborates that “John’s prophecy is not dramatic in the usual sense of showing characters in conflict with one another; rather, according to Goodwin, its drama is internalized, presenting a ‘true portrait of the Holy Ghost’s mind’” (VP 40). Whether in the Christian perspective of John of Patmos and Goodwin or in Shelley’s atheistic view, prophetic conflict is less individual characters clashing—Clytemnestra against Agamemnon, Hamlet against King Claudius, Victor
Frankenstein against his Creature—than the clashing of historical moments both in the world and in the human heart.

As Ocean’s prophecy suggests, humankind shall now battle that which threatens the all-embracing vision of dignity and peace that Love engenders; in other words, conflict becomes interiorized, and all rule becomes the rule over one’s self, a moral self-discipline that, for Dawson, reflects Shelley’s idea of harmony in Love (130-31). Human perfectibility in a real-world future state is possible, but only through individuals’ unwavering dedication to the gradual reform of their own minds and souls. Shelley presents this ideal with an eye to both prophetic precedents, such as Revelation, and the historical particulars of post-war England, now a Great Power and key member of the Concert of Europe (Breunig 121). By the time Shelley published his poem in August 1820, the Spa Fields Riot (1816), the death of Princess Charlotte (1817), the Peterloo Massacre (1819), and the passage of the Six Acts (December 1819 and January 1820) had created political and social instability throughout England. On the continent, where the expatriated Shelleys were living, the year 1820 saw uprisings in Spain, Naples, and Sardinia (Breunig 138-140). The post-Napoleonic moment, marred by unrest, violence, and governmental repression, posed serious obstacles for the vision Shelley articulates in Prometheus Unbound.

Shelley thus invokes prophetic precedents in his lyrical drama with a sure sense of the contemporary historical realities surrounding the poem’s composition. In this respect, the piece’s dramatic conflict is clarified both by visionary conventions, such as Wittreich describes, and by the post-war scene in England and on the continent.
Consequently, the two questions asked earlier in the section may be answered together: act three eliminates neither dramatic conflict nor history because, after Jupiter’s fall, the poem turns toward the new conflict between human perfectibility and historical actuality as that conflict plays out in both the intellectual and socio-political realms.

* * *

Like the first, the fourth act of *Prometheus Unbound* comprises a single scene; the closing act, however, is two hundred and fifty-five lines shorter than act one, has very little plot to recount, and does not feature Prometheus at all. Written in autumn 1819, well after Shelley completed work on the rest of the poem, the fourth act—perhaps best described as a composite song of individual and choral voices sung in the forest beyond Prometheus and Asia’s retreat—is closer to Blake’s prophecies (which Shelley probably never read) than to most of the major works of Byron, Mary Shelley, or Keats.33

The poem’s concluding act, according to Hoagwood, replaces “the sequence of time” with a “sequence of perspectives” (171), thus bringing the poem as a whole into line with the literary prophetic tradition originating in scripture, especially Revelation (171). The importance of multiple and changeable perspectives also suggests, in Hoagwood’s view, a similarity between Shelley’s poem and the radical writings of authors such as Godwin and Robert Owen, whose 1813 piece, *A New View of Society*, Hoagwood claims, evinces a clear “concern with perspective—a new view precedes and precipitates a new social order” (173).
Hoagwood’s reference to Romantic-era radicalism evokes early nineteenth-century Utopian Socialism and figures such as Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and, of course, Owen himself, all of whom held beliefs that Karl Marx later deemed “excessively abstract, not sufficiently grounded in the facts of history,” as Charles Breunig writes (175). Several British Romantic authors took interest in utopian schemes and ideologies. Coleridge and Southey, for example, sought (and failed) in the mid-1790s to create a Pantisocracy, that is, an ideal egalitarian community, on the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. In a book-length study, Nicholas M. Williams treats the utopian elements of William Blake’s verse. And Shelley’s poetic vision of human perfectibility arguably gestures toward Victorian-era socialist utopias such as one finds in Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1887) and William Morris’s News from Nowhere (1890).

The Romanticist who views Shelley and his work in light of later developments in nineteenth-century political and social philosophy of course risks superimposing an artificial structure on the past, an analytical error that troubled many Romantic-era intellectuals, Coleridge particularly (Perkins 183). We may note, with Jean-Paul Sartre, “that the historian is himself historical” (643). By seeing Shelley as a Romantic prototype of social reformists such as Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky, or by reading the renovated world of Prometheus as a blueprint for Bellamy’s Boston or Morris’s London, one perhaps assigns a role to the poet and a value to his text retrospectively, therefore neglecting the distinctiveness of the man, his work, and his historical moment.
At the same time, by juxtaposing Shelley and Owen, Hoagwood invites us to consider whether the fourth act of *Prometheus Unbound* offers a utopian vision. To address this question, we may begin by recalling, with Susan Bruce, that Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), being the principal English source of the word and concept, is a notoriously indecisive work; the very name of the island commonwealth, for example, is in part a jest, a pun on the Greek that translates into “no-place” (xxi). She deems the work “a tissue of paradox and contradiction” (xix) that promotes, “even to its last lines, an ambivalence which it never resolves” (xxv); this indeterminacy is so pronounced that some interpreters find the piece to be “a vision of an ideal Catholic society” while other analysts “see it as a proto-Communist text” (xix). Furthermore, the two books of *Utopia* frustrate a conclusive understanding of the work; we are never quite sure which island, England or Utopia, More wishes to praise or damn (Bruce xix). In sum, the work from the first creates “an April Fool atmosphere” (Turner 22) which imparts ambiguity and irony to any subsequent applications of the terms *utopia*, *utopian*, and *utopianism* in critical discussion.

By prophesying an ideal future or otherworld, Shelley may appear to anticipate Utopian Socialist thinking (or Marxist socialism, as Eleanor Marx, Karl Marx’s daughter, argued in an 1888 essay). But Shelley, as Reiman reminds us, “was a philosophical anarchist rather than a socialist” (“Shelley and the Human Condition” 6). Reiman claims that a privileged childhood in rural Sussex inculcated in the youth a hatred for both conformity and violence, especially within social relationships (intensified by his experiences at Eton and Oxford) (5). The works of Godwin and
Condorcet inspired Shelley to champion gradualist reformism over revolutionary upheaval as a corrective for social and political wrongs. Reiman thus casts the mature Shelley as a radical social reformer whose anti-monarchism, atheism, and liberal economic theories reflect the poet’s lifelong belief in a continuing process of universal social amelioration: “Ultimately, he foresaw a democracy that would give each person one vote in the political process, but this was to be achieved over a series of stages, as a growing economic equality gave the poorer classes a stake in avoiding violent revolution and as improved education gave them a clearer sense of their own interests, so that they would resist manipulation by demagogues” (6).

Shelley’s reformist principles clarify his use of prophecy in Prometheus Unbound and are of salient importance to the social vision presented in act four. For Shelley, poetry and prophecy help to remake a world whose history, as Behrendt notes, “is the record of the failure of love” (SHA 185). The visionary imagination facilitates both the realization of human perfectibility within history and the recreation of all social relations through Love. In this respect, Shelley shares much with Blake, who, in “There is No Natural Religion [b]” (1788), writes: “If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character. the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again” (3). Blake concludes: “Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is” (3). For Shelley and Blake alike, vision and prophecy, especially as expressed through art, moves human history forward by creating transformative energies and ideas.
However, Shelley’s fourth act cannot properly be read as prophesying a proletarian Eden; the new Promethean world is not analogous to an ideal community after the fashion of Owen’s New Lanark experiment in the first years of the nineteenth century. “My purpose,” Shelley writes, “has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness” (“Preface” 209). Although he finds in Godwin and Condorcet both doctrinal and structural principles for his reformist vision, Shelley has not couched a utopian manifesto within his poem’s final act. Rather, he brings together the poem’s characters, whether as voices or presences, to perform what amounts to a polyphonic encomium to Love and a rejuvenated humanity. In this sense, act four celebrates a new social beginning, charged with utopian hopefulness, without proposing any systematic program for the actualization of a utopian state.

Shelley is in fact cautious to advocate neither a utopian republic nor an empire of Love. Love may renew social relationships and create a world community—but not by means of revolution, bloodletting, or aggression. Thus the central dramatic event of act four involves Demogorgon preventing a nascent expansionist desire on the part of the Spirits of the human mind. As a prophet of gradual reform, Shelley approves of a philosophical anarchism that may in time foster an ideal community or brother-
hood of man. Nevertheless, as act four’s resolution makes clear, he declines to represent any sort of political plan whereby such a state may be realized. “If conquest is to be repudiated,” Dawson points out, then “the desire for conquest must itself be conquered” because “regenerated man will have the scope for the absolute domination previously associated with Jupiter” (132).

Accordingly, Demogorgon, the representative of eternity, intercedes before utopian hopefulness develops into full-blown imperial ideology. He convokes the various characters who appear throughout the act—including the sisters Ione and Panthea, Earth, Moon, the “Demons and Gods” (IV.529) who guide the celestial bodies, the “happy Dead” (IV.534), “elemental Genii” (IV.539), and the Spirits of earthly Nature—and declares that “Conquest is dragged captive through the Deep” (IV.556) because now

Love from its awful throne of patient power
In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour
Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,
And narrow verge of crag-like Agony, springs
And folds over the world its healing wings. (IV.557-61)

Demogorgon offers “Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance” (IV.562) as the guiding principles of the new social order and states that the citizens of a world renovated by Love are “to suffer” (IV.570), “to forgive” (IV.571), “to defy” (IV.572), “to love” (IV.573), and “to hope, till Hopes creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates” (IV.573-4). He consecrates the pursuit of both an inward utopia of
moral self-rule and an outward utopia of peaceful and benevolent social relations. In this sense, Demogorgon describes in his concluding speech the ethical, intellectual, and affective qualities necessary to actualize utopian hopes. Demogorgon’s address thus constitutes a utopian social prophecy enfolded within the reformative prophecy of Love that is the poem itself. We may therefore conclude that act four dramatizes the continuing process of renewal as that process is set into motion by the visionary imagination.

* * *

In this discussion, I have sought to present a reading of Prometheus Unbound that stresses the distinctiveness and originality of Shelley’s prophetic stance. Although he participates in the English tradition of visionary literature, and so adopts certain aesthetics in line with that tradition, Shelley modifies the legacy of British visionary poetics to accord with his poetical ideas, his gradualist reformism, and his special perspective on the post-Napoleonic historical moment.

At the same time, Shelley evokes through his visionary poetics the spirit of the older Romantic poet-prophets, especially Blake (although, as we know, Shelley’s evocation of Blake is decidedly coincidental). Shelley, for example, writes that the seer-poet “beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time” (“Defence” 513). Shelley contends also that “a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one” (“Defence” 513). We may compare Shelley’s claims in “A Defence of Poetry” with
Blake’s in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (1810): “The Nature of Visionary Fancy or Imagination is very little Known & the Eternal nature & permanence of its ever Existent Images is considered as less permanent than the things of Vegetative & Generative Nature” (555). For Blake, a poet-prophet is moved by “the daughters of Inspiration” (holy revelation) (554), rather than “the Daughters of Memory” (worldly history) (554), to revive eternal truths through imaginative production: “The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative it is an Endeavour to Restore <what the Ancients calld> the Golden Age” (555).

As this comparison helps to illustrate, Shelley, for all his uniqueness, partly carries forward the spirit of the first generation Romantic visionaries, namely, Blake and the Lake Poets. But if Shelley continues first generation visionary poetics into post-war Romantic literature, then Byron, Shelley’s contemporary, friend, and competitor, represents a point of discontinuation between the older Romantic seer-poets and their heirs. In *The Vision of Judgment* (published 1822), Byron confronts the older Romantics, Southey particularly, through his ironic, materialist perspective on vision and its relationship with both poetry and history. At the same time, Byron’s ongoing intellectual dialogue with Shelley during the late Regency years influences this confrontation in crucial and perhaps surprising ways. Although Byron never acquiesces in his fellow poet’s visionary idealism or notion of an all-transforming Love, he responds to Shelley by writing a prophecy of compassion into his comic vision.
Chapter Three

The Privilege of Southey’s Damnation:
Visionary Poetry and the Devil’s Scripture in Lord Byron’s

The Vision of Judgment

“The past is nothing—and at last
The future can be but the past” —Hugo, Parisina 304-5

After reigning almost sixty years, King George III died on 29 January, 1820. In praise of the late monarch’s life and character, Robert Southey, England’s Poet Laureate, published A Vision of Judgment in April 1821. The twelve-part poem, written in hexameters, depicts the speaker’s vision of George’s triumph over his accusers (parts IV-VII), beatification and entry into heaven (parts VII-VIII), and reunion with his wife, the late Queen Charlotte, and departed children, among whom the youngest, Princess Amelia (1783-1810) was the most famously mourned (part XII). Once in heaven, the king is welcomed by myriad figures from English history, including, in part IX, Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Cranmer, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Isaac Newton, and George Berkeley. Surprisingly, John Milton too is present, but “of passion now as of blindness / Heal’d, and no longer here to Kings and to Hierarchs hostile” (478-79). In this particularly British afterworld, Milton recovers both his sight, like the Apocryphal Tobit, and his political senses, like Southey himself, who started a Jacobin radical but became a Tory royalist.
Southey’s Vision, by virtue of its strained prosody and shallow historical revisionism (for not only is Milton now a monarchist, but George Washington speaks on the king’s behalf in part VI), receives a good deal of critical scorn from those Romanticists who bother to read it. When Romanticists do discuss the piece, their point of interest almost invariably is the poem’s relation to Byron’s The Vision of Judgment (published October 1822), a brilliantly mirthful response to the Poet Laureate, who prefaced his Vision with an ad hominem attack of Byron as the principal representative of what Southey fancied the Satanic School of Poetry. Although much has been written, and reasonably so, on the personal dimensions of the two poets’ public conflict, Romanticists have offered far less on the aesthetical disputes between Byron and Southey, especially as these disputes pertain to Romantic-era visionary poetics. With respect to the English vatic tradition, Southey’s Vision would qualify as a false prophecy rendered by a false prophet; rather than a disruptive remaking of history, the poem is a politically-motivated manipulation of it, a conspicuous instance, as Peter W. Graham puts it, of “paid kowtowing to a repressive establishment” that sickened the “Popean gentleman-poet” Byron (68).

Byron’s quarrel with Southey yields far more than an amusing, satiric rejoinder to a poet whom Byron saw as an apostate and royal propagandist. Byron’s contest with the erstwhile radical poet in fact contributes significantly to general changes in Romantic prophecy after Waterloo. By counterstriking Southey’s poem through his decidedly materialist visionary poetics, Byron broadens the possibilities of visionary literature by testing the vatic technique’s capacity to accommodate unorthodox
political commentary and historical analysis. Furthermore, he asserts the idea of history as a record of opposition rather than a principal foundation of the status quo for which Southey is a prominent, if at times absurd spokesman. And, perhaps most startlingly, Byron finds in his battle with Southey an occasion for a poetical gesture of mercy toward both the Poet Laureate and the late sovereign, a concession that dignifies Byron’s poem and commends the piece over its chauvinistic Tory rival.

* * *

In Tom Stoppard’s 1993 comedy Arcadia, the Coverly family’s private tutor—a charmingly rakish Trinity College man named Septimus Hodge—is challenged to a duel by a conceited poet, Ezra Chater, after Chater learns of his wife’s sexual intimacy with the young teacher. Hodge cleverly mollifies Chater, and so avoids the threatened combat, by appealing to Chater’s vanity: “There are no more than two or three poets of the first rank now living,” Hodge protests, with the literary culture of 1809 England in mind, “and I will not shoot one of them dead over a perpendicular poke in a gazebo with a woman whose reputation could not be adequately defended with a platoon of musketry” (1.1). To sweeten this life-saving lie, Hodge claims that he “would say the same to Milton were he not already dead” (1.1); but, when a guardedly delighted Chater asks if Hodge would count Robert Southey also among the great living English poets, Hodge replies, “Southey I would have shot on sight” (1.1).

In Arcadia, Hodge condemns Southey because the former, a practiced amorist, hopes to flatter his way out of a sticky wicket. Beyond the incidents of Stoppard’s
play, however, Hodge’s virulence toward Southey mirrors a long-standing critical take on this least-esteemed of the Lake Poets: for most Romanticists, Southey is clownishly incompetent, a royalist hack whose verse is almost from the first as abominable as his politics in general became. Moreover, this perspective has deep roots: its history reaches back to Regency-era works such as Thomas Love Peacock’s Melincourt (1817) and the eighth of William Hazlitt’s Lectures on the English Poets (1818).

But it is Byron’s The Vision of Judgment that most thoroughly asserts the lastingly persuasive image of Southey as court poet and court jester all in one man, as Raymond Williams suggests (22). This comical portrayal of Southey has proven so successful that many Romanticists transfer Byron’s irreverent merriment to their critical analyses of Southey’s poem. Susan J. Wolfson, for example, writes that Southey “knocked himself out” in composing A Vision of Judgment (171). In a similar vein, Edward T. Duffy contends that “the pretentiousness of Southey’s [poem] is immediately evident from its opening, where the poet laureate assimilates his sitting down to grind out a piece all but required of his position to: a rush of Pentecostal spirit, Dante’s onset of vision at the beginning of the Commedia, and the bodily assumption of the Virgin into heaven. Southey’s spiritlessly mechanical invocation of some of our more prestigious literary and spiritual signifiers stretches to absurdity Coleridge’s dictum that poetry should make evident in the symbols of time the translucence of eternity” (189). Accordingly, Duffy claims that Southey’s “flight of vision” is in reality “a gaping abyss of the inappropriate and the absurd” (189).
If many good Byron critics evoke the levity and sarcasm of Byron’s Vision at the expense of analytical impartiality, thus rendering Southey a caricature as ridiculous as Stoppard’s Chater, Williams helpfully reminds us, in *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, that “a caricature is not a life” (22). “In his social thinking at least,” Williams argues, “Southey remains an influential if unacknowledged figure; and his approval of [Robert] Owen reminds us of the complexity of this difficult period. Where [William] Cobbett sneered at Owen’s ‘parallelograms of paupers’, Southey, with very many of the new generation of English industrial workers, approved” (22). Williams astutely cautions against oversimplifying either the individual Romantic poets or their shared historical moment, and this lesson has particular merit in the case of Byron and Southey’s literary war during the later Regency years. Byron’s oppositional values, incisive wit, and poetic brilliance sway many Romanticists in ways that Southey’s loyalist sympathies, self-righteous solemnity, and limited talents never have. At the same time, the seriousness of both the Lake Poet’s false prophecy and Byron’s counter-vision is lessened if, with Wolfson and Duffy, we see Southey as little more than a hopeless buffoon.

Of course, Byron’s own characterization of his conflicts with Southey partly contributes to the critical atmosphere that has long enveloped studies of the poets’ relationship. For example, in a 12 January, 1822 letter to Sir Walter Scott, a man he warmly admired, Byron writes, “I’ll work the Laureate before I have done with him—as soon as I can master Billingsgate therefor.—I like a row” (*BLJ* 9.86). After Southey published a heated attack on Byron in the *Courier* in January 1822,
Byron accelerated his efforts to publish the completed Vision while arranging to call the Poet Laureate to account, that is, to challenge him to a duel. In a letter to Douglas Kinnaird dated 6 February, 1822, Byron instructs Kinnaird “to print fifty copies” of the poem “at my expence” (BLJ 9.100) and, in a postscript, wonders whether Southey would appear for the duel and so justify Byron’s return to England (BLJ 9.101). Kinnaird never delivered Byron’s letter of challenge.

In an important sense, Southey was indeed Byron’s “dark double,” as McGann asserts. But in thinking about Byron as a Romantic visionary, it is perhaps helpful to consider that his conflicts with Southey—and, by extension, with the Cumbrian Romantics or so-called Lake School of Poetry—are too complicated to couch in terms of a Henry Jekyll-Edward Hyde opposition. As the older Romantic poet who benefited most during Byron’s lifetime from his alignment with the Tory royalist establishment, Southey appears the proper and natural target for a poet who casts himself, in Don Juan, as having once been deemed “the grand Napoleon of the realm of rhyme” (XI.LV.440). The open personal animosity between the young lord and the Poet Laureate simply adds a spice of drama to Byron’s ongoing quarrel with the Lake Poets’ political and aesthetic views. Thus when he laughingly censures the Lakers as “the very Botany Bay of moral geography” (Don Juan III.XCIV.842), Byron has more than the older Romantic poets’ loyalist counterturn in mind, as McGann points out: “Byron had heard Coleridge’s lectures on Shakespeare, he read the Biographia, he knew Wordsworth’s ‘Prefaces,’ and he was familiar with Keats’s early poetic manifesto ‘Sleep and Poetry,’ where Keats rashly attacked Byron’s
Augustan hero [namely, Alexander Pope]. He was, in short, thoroughly familiar with contemporary aesthetic theory, not only from his own reading, but from his frequent intercourse with persons like Hunt, Shelley, and Mme de Staël. Consequently, when he singled out the Lakers for attack, he was going to the fountainhead of the new poetic theories as they were being advanced in England” (DJiC 107).

For McGann, Byron came to fancy himself a Horace among Juvenals, that is to say, as a plain-speaking, flexible poet, honoring and honored by literary tradition, who wished to distinguish himself against the self-important, hypocritically high-minded, and shallowly anti-traditional Lake Poets (DJiC 70-3). Horace’s clarity and humanity provided Byron with a classical model whereby authorial truthfulness and accessibility were privileged to the sort of “assertiveness and bombast” (McGann, DJiC 71) Byron found in Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, as well as in much of his own youthful verse, especially the Eastern Romances of 1812-1816. By evoking Horace’s satiric techniques in his later works, Byron countervails the “Romantic stylistic revolution” undertaken by the Lake Poets: “Byron attacked the pretensions of his age according to the terms and rules which that age had repudiated” in order “to show that Romanticism was in danger of losing when poets ‘systematically’ turned their backs upon past poetic traditions” (McGann, DJiC 73).

As Graham suggests, Byron found the “theory-based innovations tried out by the Lake poets” (68) especially distasteful. This contention reflects the younger Romantic’s acrimony toward intellectual systems in general. Because they restrict freethinking, foster inauthentic conformity, and typically benefit the few to the loss
of the many, Byron distrusts and indict such systems, particularly with respect to the writing and reading of literature (although certainly Byron’s thinking on systems extends beyond questions of art into the realms of culture, politics, social relations, economics, theology, and morality). What is more, Byron did not hesitate to condemn the literary systems of his peers as well as of his elders, a fact borne out by his November 1815 letter to Leigh Hunt: “I have not time nor paper to attack your system—which ought to be done—were it only because it is a system—so by & bye—have at you” (BLJ 4.332). Although we may not wish to overstate this point, as Graham does by calling Byron “a declared foe to system in all forms” (67), we may nevertheless allow that Byron’s conflicts with Southey, and so with the Cumbrian Romantics as a whole, involve aesthetic as well as personal disagreements.

Byron’s complex relationship with the older Romantics is thus obscured by the commonplace and easily amplified critical paradigm in which Byron the witty Romantic genius silences Southey the insufferable oaf with a single text. After teasing Scott in English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, Byron wrote cordially to this fellow countryman and author of The Lay of the Last Minstrel (1805) and Marmion (1808). In 1813, the young lord helped to bring Coleridge’s play, Remorse (formerly Osorio, 1797), to the Drury Lane stage. Moreover, Byron supported the Lake Poet financially during the Waterloo year, as he recounts to his publisher, John Murray, in an 11 September, 1822 letter concerning “Rogue Southey”: “in 1815 Mr. [William] Sotheby wrote to me saying that Coleridge was in great distress [. . .] I immediately sent him one hundred pounds—being at a time—when I could not
command 150—in the world” (BLJ 9.206-7). Byron’s words on Coleridge’s behalf persuaded Murray to publish “Kubla Khan” and “Christabel,” both older pieces, in 1816 (Sibylline Leaves, a full volume, appeared in the following year). And, in the suppressed prose “Preface” to the first two cantos of Don Juan, Byron laments that Wordsworth, perhaps Southey’s best rival for the lord’s disesteem, “has long abandoned a mind capable of better things to the production of such trash as may support the reveries which he would reduce into a System of prosaic raving that is to supersede all that has hitherto by the best & wisest of our fathers [. . .] been deemed poetry” (qtd. in McGann, DJIC 71).

As his relationships with Scott and Coleridge demonstrate, Byron could be humble and generous; not all of his literary quarrels threatened to end in duels (even in Wordsworth’s case). Yet “Rogue Southey,” at first glance, appears a different matter entirely, and not simply because of his vitriolic remarks against Byron or his political sycophancy. Clearly, George’s heavenly reward disconcerts the Whig Byron—“for by many stories, / And true, we learn the angels all are Tories” Byron’s speaker quips (TVJ 26.207-8). Yet Southey’s more serious infraction pertains to his seer-poet pretensions and his countenancing of false prophecy for decidedly opportunistic ends. For Byron, the author of “Darkness” and “The Prophecy of Dante” (1819), Southey is a ravening wolf in sheep’s clothing (Matt. 7.15), who must not simply be mocked but also revealed and repudiated.

Southey’s unconscionable abuse of visionary poetics, moreover, is exacerbated by a selective glorification of history as a pattern thankfully yielding the Hanoverian
dynasty and British international hegemony. In his poem, Southey casts George’s reign as uninterruptedly benevolent; any voice of opposition—Satan, John Wilkes, Junius, Washington—is either silenced or enlightened, as it were, through heaven’s divine altruism. Even Milton, the arch-radical and apologist for regicide, atones for his former republicanism in Southey’s Celestial City. Such conspicuously Tory chauvinism appears elsewhere in Southey’s Regency-era writing, for example, in The Poet’s Pilgrimage to Waterloo (1816), a piece in which Southey offers the battle “as a decisive event in a progressive and providential model of history,” as Simon Bainbridge notes (177). Whether he takes seriously such a view of history, Southey presents it as a matter of course in his work as Poet Laureate, and Byron, a contemporary oppositional voice, consistently provides counterexamples through his atheist, materialist perspective.

Southey envisions Waterloo as a historical confirmation of British royal power and loyalist ideology, as Bainbridge suggests (177). Such a view contrasts sharply with Byron’s verses, from the third canto of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage (also 1816), on the Belgian countryside where Napoleon fell:

As the ground was before, thus let it be;—
How that red rain hath made the harvest grow!
And is this all the world has gained by thee,
Thou first and last of fields! king-making Victory? (17.150-53)

Has Napoleon “the Lion” (CHP III.19.169) been overcome simply so a new age of historical victims may genuflect on “servile knees to thrones” (CHP III.19.171)?
Byron’s questions cast Waterloo primarily as neither a military nor an ideological victory for England; rather, Byron stresses the persistent threat, emblematized by the site, that monarchial rule poses to human freedom, whether the liberty is intellectual or political in nature.

Furthermore, Byron allows that this threat, even in the wake of France’s defeat and the restoration of monarchies across Europe, may be counteracted through continuing resistance; thus Byron answers his own questions by writing, “No; prove before ye praise” (CHP III.19.171). History, for Byron, is less a “Polybian cycle of rise and fall,” as Cian Duffy claims (160), than the chronicle of the struggle between long-standing powers, like God or the world’s Crowns, and the opponents of these powers, like Prometheus, Cain, Alp, or Hugo, who represent the historical imperative for change but typically must fight from positions of dispossession, alienation, and disaffection. Although Byron writes that “History, with all her volumes vast, / Hath but one page” (CHP IV.108.968-9), we cannot, with Duffy, read this statement as hopelessly fatalistic (160); rather, we must realize that Byron asserts not merely the recurrence of tyranny but the relentless striving against it as well. His oppositional sense of history thus puts Byron in direct conflict with Southey over both the topical question of Waterloo’s historical significance and the more general issue of what history actually is.

Byron indicts Southey’s historical outlook from the very moment that the demon Asmodeus (who shares his name with Sara’s tormentor in the Apocryphal Book of Tobit) brings the Lake Poet before Heaven’s gate in the Vision. When the
Archangel Michael inquires after the living mortal’s identity, the devil, nearly breathless with exhaustion, replies:

‘Confound the Renegado! I have sprain’d

My left wing, he’s so heavy; one would think

Some of his works about his neck were chain’d.

But to the point: while hovering o’er the brink

Of Skiddaw (where as usual it still rain’d),

I saw a taper, far below me, wink,

And stooping, caught this fellow at a libel—

No less on History than the Holy Bible. (86.681-88)

“‘The former is the devil’s scripture,’” Asmodeus says, “the latter yours, good Michael; so the affair / Belongs to all of us, you understand’” (87.689-91). The demon, of course, has caught sight of Southey at work on A Vision of Judgment in his Keswick home near Mount Skiddaw (a mountain north of the town in the Lake District’s Northern Fells). Southey’s presence in the poem at this point serves a twofold purpose beyond the obvious comic opportunities: first, it allows Byron, through Asmodeus, to assert the worldly, material nature of human history; and second, it permits Byron to expose both Southey as a false prophet and A Vision of Judgment as deceitful. Thus Byron puts Southey’s mendacity on display almost at once: the Lake Poet first offers to write a life of Sathan (Byron’s spelling), not to commemorate him as an oppositionist, but to flatter him for profit (99.785-92); when Sathan declines, he solicits the same commission of the Archangel (100.793-800).
In part, Byron presents Southey’s weathervane performance to ridicule a poet whose disregard for historical reality emboldened him to recast Milton, a man who “equated monarchy with Antichrist” (Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* 106), as a friend to the British Crown. Given Hill’s contention that “the one form of idolatry to which [Milton] was never tempted was king-worship, for that denied the dignity of man” (*MER* 179), Milton’s redemption in *A Vision of Judgment* evokes, for the contemporary reader, Winston Smith’s conversion at the close of George Orwell’s novel *1984* (1949) or young Alex’s cure in Anthony Burgess’s novella *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). As Byron knows, Milton’s recovery in the Southey piece is a brazen authorial imposition rendered to harmonize the blind poet with the prevailing value system of late Regency England. Moreover, the Lake Poet “also carefully omitted Dryden and Pope” from Heaven, as Claude M. Fuess points out (191). In Byron’s eyes, Southey plays the part of a false prophet not by misrepresenting God’s everlasting truths but by twisting English cultural and literary history, that is to say, by blaspheming the devil’s scripture.

Accordingly, Byron strikes a visionary stance to countervail Southey’s self-serving poetic contrivances and to contest the Laureate’s claim to vatic authority (perhaps explaining why Byron particularizes his poem’s title with a definite article). Byron pursues these aims in his *Vision* by applying satiric tropes to prophetic ends, that is to say, he crafts his vatic counterattack with an eye to literary satire’s conventions. The interrelatedness of satire and prophecy, as Michael G. Cooke has argued, is a basic characteristic of much British Romantic poetry: “satire [. . .] re-
quires prophecy to give voice to its own inner needs and concepts. The world that satire cannot find prophecy makes” (15). In the upcoming section, I discuss how Byron employs satire in The Vision of Judgment to enrich both his subversion of Southey’s poem and his subtle compassion toward his rival.

* * *

In Dramatic Satire in the Age of Walpole, 1720-1750 (1976), Jean B. Kern asserts that literary satire is eclectic and thus somewhat difficult to define clearly (6): “Obviously satire borrows techniques—wit from comedy, irony from rhetoric, allegory from morality, invective and physical abuse from farce” (7). In her study of stage satire in the first half of the eighteenth century, wherein she gives special attention to Henry Fielding, Kern offers the general point that all literary satire, essentially, “is rational criticism of human conduct” (11).20 “The satirist does not concern himself with the irrational in nature,” she elaborates, “nor is he concerned with the cosmic ironies of history; he is concerned with the conduct of humans whom he perceives as rational but” who seldom behave so (11). Consequently, “the folly of irrational behavior is constantly held up to the cold light of reason” (Kern 11) not for spite but for edification: “Beneath the satirist’s attack on irrational behavior from men who are capable of knowing better lies the serious implication of human responsibility, although the satirist’s intention may be so masked by ridicule that his audience or readers do not immediately grasp the implication of what produced their laughter at the exposure of folly” (Kern 11-12). Kern’s specifications helpfully frame the satiric tradition as Byron engaged it during England’s Regency period.
Byron revered Pope and greatly admired Charles Churchill, whose Dover gravesite he visited before departing England permanently in April 1816; the Romantic poet was fascinated by both the history and the contemporary value of literary satire. Of course, both first and second wave Romantic poets experimented with this genre. Blake, for example, composed a satire, entitled An Island in the Moon (1785), that foreshadows later pieces such as The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1792). Also, before Lyrical Ballads appeared in 1798, Wordsworth and Francis Wrangham worked together to write imitations of Juvenal (Liu 289). Furthermore, in late 1819, Shelley produced “Peter Bell the Third,” a satiric retelling of Wordsworth’s homiletic “Peter Bell” (also 1819). But in an age when satire was a tremendously popular vogue, as Gary Dyer shows in his book-length study of Romantic-era satire, Byron distinguished himself as the wittiest and most prolific satirist among the major British Romantic poets.24

Byron’s status as the principal Romantic satirist, however, distracts many fine Romanticists from recognizing that Byron is a visionary poet as well. M. H. Abrams, for example, excludes Byron from Natural Supernaturalism “because in his greatest work he speaks with an ironic counter-voice and deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries” (13), a resolution that has drawn fire from critics such as Wittreich (“Prophecy” 53) and Jane Stabler (19). Despite Wittreich and Stabler’s respective objections, Abrams’s perspective has proven lastingly influential in analyses of The Vision of Judgment. Shirley Clay Scott, for one, follows Abrams by asserting that “Byron, by means of frequent ironic
allusions and pointed references to *Paradise Lost*, sets his poem against the pseudo-visionary poetry of a poet like Southey and, more ambitiously, against the tradition of visionary poetry that derives from Milton” in an effort “to subvert the mythic impulse itself” (207) because “myth—any myth—deprives men and women of their flesh and blood potential to contend with the conditions of existence” (209).

Clay Scott’s emphasis on Byron’s materialist poetics, defensible as it is in part, creates a shallow impression of Byron’s complex poem and its discreet vision of mercy toward both Southey and the late king. In fairness to both Clay Scott and Abrams, Byron himself encourages an uneven interpretation of his materialism vis-à-vis his visionary perspective; writing in his 1821-1822 journal, Byron strikes a distinction between “men of the world” like Walter Scott and Thomas Moore and “visionaries out of it,” like Shelley (BLJ 9.30). Nevertheless, we should realize that, if he at first sought in his *Vision* to cross swords with Southey specifically and the Lake Poets by extension, Byron ended by achieving a coup d’état in Romantic prophecy that enriches the genre without being uncritical of it. Moreover, what Caroline Franklin writes of Byron’s “mythological drama,” *Heaven and Earth* (published January 1823), helps also to clarify the *Vision* because in both poems “Byron takes on the very materiality of humanity and demonstrates that nobility arises as a consequence of it, not despite it” (247). Accordingly, we may better appreciate Byron’s intricate blending of satiric materialism and vatic idealism in *The Vision of Judgment*, a poem that invokes simultaneously both the English wit tradition of Dryden, Pope, and Churchill and the visionary legacy of Milton.
If we accept that satire reveals and ridicules human folly and that prophecy creates visions of new and better worlds, then we may see how innovative Byron’s commingling of the wit and vatic traditions in the Vision actually is. Byron, as we know, closed the tyrant-hater he begun: shortly after the death of his daughter by Claire Clairmont in April 1822, Byron promised Douglas Kinnaird that “your present Public [. . .] shall not interrupt the march of mind—nor prevent me from telling the tyrants who are attempting to trample on all thought—that their thrones will yet be rocked to their foundation” (BLJ 9.152). Yet the passionately anti-monarchical poet writes George III into heaven after the Archangel Michael and Sathan fail to resolve who has the right to the king’s soul. Dyer, for one, holds the young lord less than charitable by so favoring the king, if indeed heaven is the royalist paradise Southey describes (91). Nevertheless, Byron’s accommodative conclusion reflects a spirit of radical tolerance that appears throughout the piece and is rendered possible through the confluence of the satiric and visionary traditions. Were the poem simply a burlesque of Southey modeled on classical, Augustan, and Italian sources, then Byron’s twofold show of compassion toward the king and the laureate (who falls from heaven back to Keswick rather than to the infernal regions) could not be realized as strikingly or as cogently.

The Vision of Judgment thus represents a composite of satire and prophecy that speaks not only to Southey but also to Shelley, whose direct influence on the poem registered his sharpening impatience with Southey and the Quarterly Review, as Charles E. Robinson notes (190-95). By virtue of the ongoing dialogue between the
two younger Romantic poets, Byron responds to the Lake Poet with significant implicit reference to Shelley’s ideas and poetics. If Shelley undertook *Prometheus Unbound* in part to counter what he perceived to be a fatalistic tendency in Byron, as Robinson claims (113), and so “replace the Byronic triumvirate of Heaven, Fate, and Hate with the principle of divine and liberating Love” (115), then we may view the *Vision* as a response in turn to Shelley’s notions of human perfectibility, gradualist reformation, and restorative Love as these are set forth in Shelley’s works. In short, Byron takes Shelley seriously without accepting his thoughts uncritically. Rather, Byron draws on Shelley’s prophetic idealism selectively, answering his friend’s challenge by re-imagining the ways in which poetic vision can realistically facilitate human change.

In the poem, Byron brackets out Shelley’s reformist alacrity and hopes for human perfectibility but engages closely his friend’s tenets regarding compassion and reconciliation. Consequently, Byron’s intertextual conversation with Shelley contributes meaningfully to the poem’s less than scathing conclusion. In the closing stanzas, George III finds his way into heaven, and Southey is shown the way back to Keswick; but Byron gives neither man over to the devil. Byron rejects a cosmic revenge, at least partly because he sees in Shelley’s idealism a truth about human relations too intricate to be represented by his earlier Promethean vision and its rhetoric of absolute defiance. Warren Stevenson asserts that “Byron refuses to damn the king, partly out of aristocratic good manners [. . .] and partly because he agrees with Blake (whom he had probably never read) that hell is a state of mind rather than
a place” (147). For Stevenson, Byron’s resolve to “jettison damnation, whether of the Hellenic or Judaeo-Christian variety,” suggests intellectual maturity and “helps clarify Byron’s developing vision of a world restored” (147). We may also note Martin Priestman, who contends that Byron, “for all his ‘Satanism’, […] leaves the damning of others to the angelic party” (242).

Byron’s brilliant mirth and satiric facility perhaps prevent us from realizing that the poet shows mercy just when he has George III and Southey where one imagines that he wants them. If we read the poem strictly as a satire, we may cite Horace’s mollifying influence as a way to clarify Byron’s leniency. However, if we approach the piece as a purposeful intersection between satire and prophecy, then we may see that Byron strives, with Shelley’s prophetic idealism in mind, to renovate his world and times through an authorial benevolence toward a monarch and a poet he alike despised.26

Whatever the degree of Shelley’s implicit or explicit input, the lenity Byron shows his political and literary adversaries in the poem’s closing moments is not an afterthought; rather, Byron’s altruistic conclusion amplifies the work’s recurring stress on the positive value of interpersonal deference and public acts of mercy. Sathan and Michael, as they meet outside heaven, exemplify the former, whereas John Wilkes and Junius, as they provide testimony at the king’s trial, epitomize the latter. In the following section, I discuss these characters and incidents in greater detail to demonstrate that Byron’s clemency toward his two principal foes is part of a fully developed vision rather than a textual anomaly.
Byron’s Sathan, as Clay Scott has pointed out, bears little conspicuous resemblance to his Miltonic predecessor: “such moral ascendency as Satan has in the poem derives from the fact that he has demystified himself and has trimmed his own ego in the knowledge that the evil in the cosmos is far too great to be of his making or subject to his control. Byron’s Satan knows he is not Milton’s Satan—and that is his strength” (209). Clay Scott submits that the Sathan of the Vision parts ways with the Satan of Paradise Lost principally in that the first eschews the cosmic hatreds and lust for vengeance which fire the mind of the second. Byron’s rather mild Sathan is far removed from the saboteur of human happiness one finds in Milton’s visionary epic.

Much of the difference between Byron’s devil and Milton’s owes to the characters’ individual senses of purpose. In Paradise Lost, Satan makes his objectives plain to Beëlzebub early in Book I:

    Fall’n Cherub, to be weak is miserable
    Doing or Suffering: but of this be sure,
    To do aught good never will be our task,
    But ever to do ill our sole delight,
    As being contrary to his high will
    Whom we resist. (I.157-62)

Although fallen, Satan promises to continue the war with God, restoring hostilities at any cost. His initial commitment to malevolence proves more than a moment of bravado, as his soliloquy early in Book IV bears out:
So farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear,
Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost;
Evil be thou my Good; by thee at least
Divided Empire with Heav’n’s King I hold

By thee, and more than half perhaps will reign [. . .] (IV.108-12)

Satan speaks these verses as he first sees Eden and “conscience wakes despair” (IV.23); thus renewed malice resolves his impassioned longing for heaven, stirred by the sight of the earthly paradise. As these two moments illustrate, Satan carries within him the hell that is his thirst for revenge. Lost in his obsession, he claims, “For never can true reconcilement grow / Where wounds of deadly hate have pierc’d so deep” (IV.98-9).

Little of this cosmic resentment drives Byron’s Sathan. Rather, Sathan asserts his right to George’s soul through a process of litigation that relies upon rational public debate to settle disputes. Certainly, Byron does not take the law’s part in a poem that casts a skeptical eye on political, social, and literary institutions; the Vision in fact lampoons the law and its practitioners by presenting a celestial court so disordered by Southey’s presence that George sneaks into heaven before a verdict is reached. Although it has much to say about tolerance and broad thinking, the poem does not acquiesce in what Mark L. Barr calls “the legal institutionalization of mercy” (362). Rather, Byron renders a picture of Romantic-era bureaucracy (a subject of which Regina Hewitt has written recently) (305) in order both to humble Sathan and to highlight the naturalness of human compassion vis-à-vis the law’s infernal machinery.27
Byron indeed takes pains to cast his otherworld in what, to a Romantic-era audience, would have been an increasingly recognizable context of administration and official transaction; a point of Byron’s materialist critique is that heaven, where George’s eternal fate is to be decided, more closely resembles the Inns of Court or Parliament than the cosmos in which Paradise Lost takes place. In his Vision, Byron provides a heaven scarcely more sublime than a banker’s office in Threadneedle Street. The poem’s first moments, for example, present “six angels and twelve saints” who “act as a business-like Board of Clerks,” as Fuess notes (193). In short, Byron dispels the respective mystiques of the scriptural and Miltonic visionary traditions in order to introduce a new interpretation of Satan and his literary milieu.

By the same token, although to a lesser extent, the reader encounters in Sathan a re-imagined version of the relentlessly scornful, formidably unfunny Byronic hero, long familiar from Byron’s Childe Harold and Eastern romances, such as The Giaour and The Bride of Abydos (both 1813). The Byronic hero—typically a proud, outcast aristocrat who carries with him some mysterious burden of guilt— influenced many authors across Europe in the decades following Byron’s death in 1824. Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights and Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (both 1847), for example, embody the Byronic hero in Heathcliff and Rochester, respectively. The Russian author Aleksandr Pushkin borrows elements of the Byronic hero for the title character of his Eugene Onegin (1833); another Russian, Mikhail Lermontov, invokes the type through Pechorin, who appears in A Hero of Our Time (1840). Of course, Byron’s less somber works, especially Beppo (1818) and Don Juan, appealed to
writers like José de Espronceda, Stendhal, and Adam Mickiewicz, as Peter Cochran discusses; all the same, the Byronic hero enjoyed myriad international reincarnations in nineteenth-century literature.²⁹

Yet by the time Byron produced The Vision of Judgment in late 1821, his haughty, alienated protagonist underwent significant transformations, as Sathan, in part a descendent of the Byronic hero, exemplifies. In the “neutral space” (33.257 and 35.273) where Michael first confronts “his former friend and future foe” (32.252) over the affair of George’s soul, the Enemy comports himself not simply with civility but with amity; before a word is spoken between angel and devil, “a mutual glance of great politeness” (35.280) is shared. Whether this scene, as Stuart Peterfreund suggests, evokes the early Regency House of Lords, with Sathan and Michael representing Byron and Lord Eldon respectively, what strikes one immediately is the guarded yet unaffected politesse with which these otherworldly beings interact.³⁰

From the outset, this forbearance recasts the Byronic hero’s hauteur, as well as the overreaching ambitions of Milton’s fallen angel, by intimating not divisive passion but rather a quiet empathy which complicates the idea that an absolute enmity exists between the two beings. Thus when Michael and Sathan meet at the gates of heaven, “a high, immortal, proud regret” (32.253) is “in either’s eye, as if ‘twere less their will / Than destiny to make the eternal years / Their date of war, and their ‘Champ Clos’ the spheres” (32.254-6).

During this initial meeting outside heaven, Sathan, who by turns contradicts and amplifies elements of the Byronic hero, brings to mind Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage
III, in which Byron writes “that two, or one, are almost what they seem” (114.1065) and “that goodness is no name, and happiness no dream” (114.1066). If Michael represents for Sathan a true friend and peer, Sathan fears, without saying as much, that the Archangel’s friendship is eternally inaccessible, for the devil stands, as does Harold, “alone,—remembered or forgot” (CHPIII 112.1048). Thus “the Prince of Air” (39.305) evokes the Byronic hero’s conflicting impulses to both hope and despair. In the Vision, however, Byron recasts this conflict within a visionary context, thereby allowing that the old inner battle may be resolved finally in favor of the obstinate hopefulness inherent in the Byronic hero’s psyche at least from the time of Childe Harold. By showing an austere benevolence toward Michael, Sathan begins to resolve this internal turmoil and thus remakes his own spirit as well as the Miltonic and Byronic protagonists that he recapitulates.

Through Sathan and Michael, Byron offers a sophisticatedly nuanced approach to his characters, and this technique recurs in his depiction of John Wilkes and the enigmatic Junius. In life, both Wilkes, an anti-Bute member of Parliament, and Junius, an anonymous Whig letter writer, directly opposed George III; not surprisingly, both men draw Southey’s asperity in the sham trial scene of A Vision of Judgment. But George’s “two shamefaced accusers,” as Fuess observes, have changes of heart when Byron transports them from Southey’s poem: “Wilkes scornfully extends his forgiveness to the king, and Junius, while reiterating the truth of his original accusations, refuses to be enlisted as an incriminating witness” (194). Although not precisely writing what we today refer to as history from below, Byron
nevertheless anticipates the Annales school by allowing oppositionists like Wilkes and Junius to represent the past as something other than the story of the victors. Even more basically, Byron refines his vision of compassion through Wilkes and Junius, both of whom, though summoned by Sathan to testify against the late king, break the law of retribution that Southey winks at in his poem.  

As a witness for the prosecution, Wilkes rationally and freely chooses mercy over revenge. At Michael’s request, he speaks to the case at hand: “‘Why,’

   Replied the Spirit, ‘since old scores are past,

   Must I turn evidence? In faith, not I.

Besides, I beat him hollow at the last,

   With all his Lords and Commons: in the sky

I don’t like ripping up old stories, since

   His conduct was but natural in a prince.

   ‘Foolish, no doubt, and wicked, to oppress

   A poor unlucky devil without a shilling;

But then I blame the man himself much less

   Than Bute and Grafton, and shall be unwilling

To see him punish’d here for their excess,

   Since they were both damn’d long ago, and still in

Their place below; for me, I have forgiven,

   And vote his “habeas corpus” into heaven.’ (70-1.554-568)
Whether we take Wilkes at his word that George’s folly owed more to prime ministers like the Earl of Bute (who served May 1762 to April 1763) and the Duke of Grafton (who served October 1768 to January 1770) than to forthright personal malice, we may appreciate, with Clay Scott, that Wilkes becomes “the center of value in the poem” (211) by pardoning the king. Through his magnanimity (which incidentally startles the prosecution), Wilkes represents an ideal of compassion, as Clay Scott contends: “Byron knows, with Blake, that mercy, or any other virtue that makes human life possible, has a human face” (212). Byron knows also that Wilkes’s forbearance strikes a telling counterexample to what we find in Southey’s royalist account of George’s all-too-happy life after death. The Wilkes episode both amplifies the sober benevolence of Sathan’s first moments with Michael and foreshadows the redemptive qualities of the poem’s closing stanzas.

Like Wilkes, the cryptic Junius declines to help Sathan in the pursuit of the old monarch’s soul. Junius maintains that his animosity for the king belongs to earthly history and so has little relevance in the afterworld: “‘My charges upon record will outlast / The brass of both his epitaph and tomb’” (83.657-58). With reference to Pontius Pilate’s well-known disavowal in the Gospel of Saint John (19.22), he adds, “‘What I have written, I have written: let / The rest be on his head or mine” (84.665-66). Sathan’s second witness, like the first, fails to bring a conviction. Both Wilkes and Junius thus refuse to participate in George’s damnation, not because they are now, like Southey’s Milton, fond of sovereigns, but rather because mercy, within the scope of the poem, proves the most advanced and self-assertive form of opposition.
That is to say, Byron posits human mercy as a source of special power over the darker aspects of one’s self; as Wilkes and Junius show, compassion allows one to overcome one’s hatreds and recriminations, not as Winston Smith finds a “victory over himself” (245) in Orwell, but rather as a visionary freely remakes his own heart as a step toward remaking humankind. In this sense, mercy opposes that which is negative both in the self and in the world by revealing that true power lies in forgiveness rather than in coercion, persecution, or revenge.

Byron thus answers Shelley by recasting his contemporary’s visionary ideals within a more modest though no less meaningful context. In the Vision, Byron argues for the value of mercy as a transformative quality in human relations, as Shelley does also in works such as Prometheus Unbound. However, Byron shows a reluctance to follow his friend in asserting that a single act of mercy can wholly renovate material realities. Although Wilkes and Junius, like Shelley’s Titan, discontinue a long-standing pattern of malignity toward a royal figure, their respective acts of compassion do not spark a grand reformation of heaven, hell, or earth. The angels and devils still hold power in the otherworld, and George’s trial continues despite the hesitance of Sathan’s key witnesses to participate. Byron agrees with Shelley that the spirit of mercy provides an ideological weapon against monarchical power, whether such power is earthly, heavenly, or hellish in nature; nevertheless, the two poets part ways over the question of mercy’s consequences in the material world. Whereas Shelley foresees the possibility that one compassionate act can set into motion a global reformation, Byron presents human mercy as a type
of rational opposition that vexes hegemonic power structures without claiming that such resistance alone can undermine those structures and so transform the world.

Accordingly, Byron offers a Romantic vision of mercy anchored in a practical, materialist perspective, a point of view that in turn reflects his intellectual inheritance from the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment and writers such as David Hume and Adam Ferguson as well as his literary inheritance from Horace, Dryden, Pope, and Churchill.

Byron thus discounts neither Shelley nor the visionary tradition; rather, he approaches both through a skeptical rationalism drawn from eighteenth-century Scottish philosophy and English satire alike. To put this point in Wittreich’s terms, Byron comes to the line of vision by way of the line of wit. Consequently, The Vision of Judgment represents a crucial intersection of the two literary traditions. In my concluding remarks, I wish to discuss this synthesis more fully and suggest how Byron’s poem, by hybridizing the two lines, contributes significantly to Romantic prophecy while preparing the way for Mary Shelley and John Keats to take Romantic prophecy apart.

* * *

Byron’s pointedly topical poem, composed and published in the heat of battle with Southey, appears a somewhat anomalous addition to the corpus of Romantic visionary works. Furthermore, Byron presents a perplexing case as a visionary poet because he approaches the visionary poetics tradition with expressly materialist concerns and a strong affinity for satire, a literary form belonging to the competing
witt legacy. At a glance, Byron seems more closely affiliated with Dryden and Pope than Spenser and Milton, and a great many Byron critics advance this interpretation in their readings of The Vision of Judgment. Edward T. Duffy, for example, likens the poem to Pope’s The Dunciad (1728), one of the great English satires (190). Moreover, Fuess sees Byron’s poem in dialogue with Dryden’s Absalom and Achitophel (1681) rather than Milton’s Paradise Lost and notes Byron’s fascination with “the mocking, grotesque, colloquial, and humorous manner of [Luigi] Pulci and [Giambattista] Casti” (199), a point taken up more recently by Peter Vassallo in his book on Byron’s Italian sources.35

Given his many successes with satire, one can understand to a degree why critics like Duffy and Fuess place Byron principally in what Wittreich terms the English line of wit. At the same time, Byron’s contributions to Romantic prophetic literature, particularly as rendered by the Vision, merit closer scrutiny. Byron’s poem, without question, is superb comedy; nevertheless, behind the poem’s humor is a vision of change that makes the piece something more than an exercise in Romantic travesty or mimesis. No less than Dryden or Pope, Byron possesses a facility with classical forms and English neoclassical conventions. Yet he also demonstrates a command of the visionary idiom and a pronounced understanding of prophecy’s subversive and revivifying potential. Although within his element in either tradition, Byron, as author of the Vision, represents the focal point at which the two lines meet, and the poem itself stands at the cusp of these traditions. Thus to compartmentalize the poet and his work as purely neo-Augustan in spirit risks blurring the fact that he creates,
through a distinctly materialist poetic, a vibrant new model for Romantic visionary literature.

As we have seen, Byron privileges Southey and the king alike by re-imagining damnation through a vision of mercy, an authorial act that is much more than simply noble and altruistic. By challenging himself to forgive his adversaries in print, however subtly, Byron reveals a personality and imagination far more complicated than the critical caricature of him as a vitriolic, Anglophobic exile allows. With stanzas 47, 48, and 49 of Beppo in mind, Richard Lansdown and Dosia Reichardt have asserted recently that “combative opposition was by no means all there was to Byron’s attitude to bourgeois, post-Napoleonic Europe” (70-1). 36

Although he contested royal authoritarianism, Tory statecraft, and propagandist literature such as Southey’s Vision, Byron possessed too keen a mind to fight one sort of reaction with another and to answer hate with hate. Rather, Byron adopts in the Vision a position which may be clarified with reference to Beth Lau’s description of the influential arguments offered by Adam Smith in The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) and by William Hazlitt in An Essay on the Principles of Human Action (1805). Lau notes the influence of Smith’s piece on Shelley and writes that Hazlitt “sought to refute Hobbes’s claim that human beings are inherently selfish by demonstrating that, in order to calculate their interests, people must project themselves into their own futures, and this ability to identify with one’s future self is the same imaginative act as that of identifying with other people. According to Hazlitt, the tendency to enter into the perspectives of others, whether other people or
one’s future self, is one of the most common habits of the human mind, which therefore can be considered ‘naturally disinterested’ rather than inherently selfish” (91). Lau’s analysis, which she thereafter applies to her discussion of Negative Capability in John Keats and Jane Austen, casts light also on Byron’s compassion toward Southey and George, insofar as “the sympathetic imagination” (91) was an important intellectual concern of the poet’s times. This fact too is missed if one reads The Vision of Judgment without considering the poem as a purposeful confluence of the wit and visionary traditions.

Byron’s materialist experimentations with the vatic literary mode, couched in a verse counterstrike against England’s Poet Laureate, yield an important and unique poem that is both remarkably funny and wholly serious. If it shouts at Southey, this complex, innovative piece speaks in an aside to Shelley, whose influence, as I have asserted (by way of Robinson), helped to shape Byron’s thought and art from the time that the two poets met in 1816 (a favor, so to speak, that Byron granted Shelley as well). Yet Byron’s Vision, for all its daring and literary sophistication, gestures not to the perpetuation of Shelley’s visionary poetics, which in itself carries forward the spirit of first generation Romantic prophecy, but rather to a decisive confrontation with the countervailing aesthetic articulated by Mary Shelley in her 1826 novel, The Last Man. Although she composes and publishes the novel only after both Shelley and Byron had died, Mary Shelley challenges both of these writers by radicalizing Romantic prophecy and its historical bases. Shelley thus subverts the subversive visions of both her husband and her friend through her late Romantic prose work.
Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel The Last Man, too often read as a prose séance couched in a roman a clef or as a mere catastrophe narrative, is rather a sophisticated product of post-Waterloo visionary poetics. Shelley’s third published book, in fact, may be seen as the capstone achievement in Regency-era vatic literature. In her late Romantic prophecy, Shelley to an extent continues the subversive projects enacted by her literary coterie in works such as Percy Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound (1820) and Byron’s The Vision of Judgment (1822). At the same time, Mary Shelley overtakes and surpasses her contemporaries by authoring a work that radically reconfigures the historical source of authority upon which the English prophetic tradition is founded, thereby uniquely revivifying the genre’s subversive and ameliorative possibilities. Specifically, Shelley restores the Sibyl, a prophetic figure from Western antiquity, as the principal authority in vatic Romantic literature. In this reconfiguration, the visionary line originates not in patriarchal, Judeo-Christian history but in the matriarchal, pagan past.

Moreover, Shelley’s novel unsettles hierarchical, linear understandings of human temporality. Her apocalyptic narrative presents history as founded indecisively on disrupted time, thus allowing Shelley great freedom to explore the literary, cultural, and political pasts through the Romantic prophetic lens. Whether an expressly
Godwinian performance, as Pamela Clemit suggests (196), or a self-assertive quest for authorial identity “in a culture of mass, anonymous readership” (120), as Samantha Webb claims, Shelley’s disturbing novel brings together history and sibylline prophecy to take apart the specious first principles of culturally sanctioned belief systems. To accomplish this subversive end, Shelley resuscitates the Sibyl, thereby provisionally recovering the sibylline feminine from the Mosaic patriarchal, as Wittreich contends (“Prophecy” 50). Shelley engages Romantic prophecy for a twofold purpose: first, to renew the younger Romantics’ visionary critique of the post-Napoleonic world; and second, to amplify that critique to encompass a new vision of human possibilities unfolding in the face of history.

In what follows, I discuss how Shelley, in her first novel after the deaths of her husband and Byron (1822 and 1824, respectively), assays the Romantic visionary tradition in order to assert that history, despite its myriad nightmares, is never foreordained; like humankind itself, history is flexible, unfixed, and changeable. The chapter is divided into three sections: the first part treats Shelley’s use of temporal distortions in *The Last Man*, a work comprising a cryptic frame narrative as well as Lionel Verney’s account of an annihilating plague; the second part examines Shelley’s use of the Sibyl as the origin of vatic authority; and the third part explores the crucial implications of Shelley’s radical experiment with Romantic prophecy.

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Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* reaches a particularly poignant moment as Lionel Verney—soon to find that he is helplessly alone in a plague-savaged world—records
the movements of the last few English survivors (as a group, they have abandoned their dead island) across a depopulated continent:

We rambled through Romantic Switzerland; till, fear of continuing winter leading us forward, the first days of October found us in the valley of La Maurienne, which leads to Cenis. I cannot explain the reluctance we felt at leaving this land of mountains; perhaps it was, that we regarded the Alps as boundaries between our former and future states of existence, and so clung fondly to what of old we had loved. (334)

For Verney, Europe’s sovereign mountains figure tellingly both in landscape and in timescape, the latter collapsing and coalescing past, present, and future—history and time themselves—into a temporal state within which, to borrow Verney’s later remark, “each moment contain[s] eternity” (348). The Alps emblematize a division, in the here and now of Verney’s narrative, between the post-monarchical English past (Verney’s story begins where the history of England’s royalty ends) and a stateless future.

That the Alps suggest to Verney a clear delimitation in the English refugees’ sense of their own history is unsurprising, given that he often describes temporal matters in spatial terms. For example, as he and his fellow countrymen prepare to sail from Dover to Calais, Verney notes: “Death had hunted us through the course of many months, even to the narrow strip of time on which we now stood; narrow indeed, and buffeted by storms, was our footway overhanging the great sea of calamity” (291). And long before Adrian, who is England’s Lord Protector, Verney’s closest friend,
and an avatar of Percy Shelley, arranges the survivors’ evacuation to France, Verney claims: “Time and experience have placed me on an height from which I can comprehend the past as a whole; and in this way I must describe it, bringing forth the leading incidents, and disposing light and shade so as to form a picture in whose very darkness there will be harmony” (209).

In tracing out his approach to historiography, Verney casts light also on his sense of history itself. By using a topographical metaphor to express historical perspective, he appears to posit human history as a closed pattern; seemingly, the pandemic discontinues the relation of the past with the present and, by extension, with the future. Although the natural world’s deep time is unaffected by the plague—animals live on, the seasons change, the seas maintain their magnificence and the mountains their grandeur—human history, in Verney’s eyes, has ceased.²

As Verney’s plague-chronicle continues, we see this idea of history significantly unsettled by the sibylline influence that is everywhere throughout The Last Man. Deidre Lynch notes, in her analysis of Mary Shelley’s thoughts on history vis-à-vis Sir Walter Scott’s, that the novel “challenges such closure” as one finds in Scott’s Waverley (1814) “by running the tape of history backward” (139): “the convention that diagrams time’s linear, progressive advance as a westward migration of civilization from Greece to Rome to England to America” is put “into reverse” when “the plague arrives in England on a ship that has voyaged east across the Atlantic from Philadelphia” (140). Lynch suggests that Shelley thus purposefully counters the hierarchical, chronological, and mistily nostalgic method that Scott prefers.³
As a Romantic visionary, Shelley seeks to undermine the idea that history is lineal and unidirectional; for her, history is not organized by the same logic that posits the past as an authority for dynastic succession, primogeniture, imperialist aggression, and whole traditions of oppression. To borrow from Ina Ferris’s discussion of Romantic-era writers such as Lady Sydney Morgan and Michael Banim, the “sense of the past as unclosed, as an ongoing power that be turned to present account, prompt[s] an understanding of history writing as neither memorializing remembrance (as in nationalist historiography) nor as impartial knowledge (as in the emerging Rankean model) but precisely—and romantically—as active recollection” (141-2).

Accordingly, these writers create “a model of history as a pointed intersection of the horizons of past and present directed to a shaping of the horizon of the future” (142). By virtue of her novel’s sibylline timescape, Shelley achieves what Anne McWhir calls a “visionary synchronicity” (xxvii) that complicates history as a resource for institutional forms of power.

Time collapses throughout Verney’s account of the pandemic that devastates humankind in the late twenty-first century. For example, upon revisiting the now empty home of his late sister, Perdita, Verney says, “The time when in proud and happy security we assembled at this cottage, was gone—soon the present hours would join those past, and shadows of future ones rose dark and menacing from the womb of time, their cradle and their bier” (202). Later, in one of his last moments with her, Verney gently admonishes his wife, Idris, who has been imaging their love’s continuation in the afterworld: “Let us not [. . .] neglect the present. This present
moment, short as it is, is a part of eternity, and the dearest part, since it is our own unalienably. Thou, the hope of my futurity, art my present joy” (268). In both of these important scenes, Verney articulates his emotions through thoughts and words that point to time’s indistinctness; in essence, Verney sees his world and the people around him as belonging to a reordered temporal scheme in which past, present, and future commingle to the point of inseparability.

This reconfiguration of time appears tellingly in Verney’s passage on the last plague victim’s interment in the ice caves at Chamonix, the “rocky vale” at which the pandemic’s “barbarous tyranny” finally ceases (332). Verney dryly commemorates the nightmare’s passing, unable to forget the tremendous scope of the plague’s ravages—so far as he knows, only four people outlive the disease (332). He likens the now spent plague to a female sovereign: “She abdicated her throne, and despoiled herself of her imperial scepter among the ice rocks that surrounded us. She left solitude and silence co-heirs of her kingdom” (332). This metaphoric representation is a bitterly ironic counterpoint to his earlier notation of the King of England’s abdication in 2073 and the subsequent creation of an English republic (15). By likening the plague to a royal person, Verney brings his chronicle back to its beginning. Less an insight into Verney as a political thinker than as a man struggling to make sense of time and history, the plague-as-queen metaphor bridges the novel’s last moments with its first.5

Chamonix thus takes on a twofold significance, serving as both the site of the last plague-grave and as a new cradle of civilization, a place of human nascence. At
Chamonix, though, the waters of life are suspended in icefalls, séracs, and the Mer de Glace. Amid this glacial icescape, Verney further explores his conflicted sense of temporality and history:

My present feelings are so mingled with the past, that I cannot say whether the knowledge of this change visited us, as we stood on this sterile spot. [. . .]
The coming time was a mighty river, down which a charmed boat is driven, whose mortal steersman knows, that the obvious peril is not the one he needs fear, yet that danger is nigh; and who floats awe-struck under the beetling precipices through the dark and turbid waters—seeing in the distance yet stranger and ruder shapes, towards which he is irresistibly impelled. What would become of us? O for some Delphic oracle, or Pythian maid, to utter the secrets of futurity! O for some Œdipus to solve the riddle of the cruel Sphynx! Such Œdipus was I to be—not divining a word’s juggl, but whose agonizing pangs, and sorrow-tainted life were to be the engines, wherewith to lay bare the secrets of destiny, and reveal the meaning of the enigma, whose explanation closed the history of the human race. (332-33)

For Verney, history appears to be at an end, and the unforeseeable future promises little save further cause for fear and trembling. Yet his distress is put into question by his invocations of the classical world. Verney associates vatic power with antiquity, that is, with a past so far removed from the current moment that no recourse to prophecy now exists. His readers, however, realize that the Cumaean Sibyl’s continually vital power, as established in the brief frame narrative (which I address
at length in the next section), governs the recovery and reconstitution of his text. The very prophetic authority that he laments as irretrievably lost in the past in fact prevents his account of the future from becoming irretrievably lost in the past.

Her experiments with time in *The Last Man* reflect the fact that, in the Romantic period’s closing years, Shelley was personally interested in questions of narrative temporality and fictional historiography, a point evinced by her novel *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), a work which concerns the fifteenth-century pretender to the newly established Tudor throne in England. “In one chilling episode [of Warbeck],” Lynch argues, “Richard/Perkin breaks into the Tower of London, his prison during childhood. When he suddenly recognizes the chamber in which he has sought sanctuary, he wonders whether time has not gone backward” (142). In this scene, Lynch claims, one “glimpses a view of history that foregoes the notions of linear advance and modernization usually stressed by the novel’s narrator”; consequently, “time moves in circles” (142). In light of this example, we see that Shelley’s innovations in her 1826 novel point not only to her criticism of Romantic prophecy but also to some of her general concerns at this point in her career.

Recent Romantic scholarship by Karen Hadley and Christopher Miller has shown that the question of time, like the question of history, mattered deeply to English writers of the period. Wordsworth’s nocturnal poetry, for example, is haunted by the “de-sanctification” and “secularization” of human time by “the clock-reckoning of modernity,” as Miller asserts (3). The predictability and regularity of time as measured by clocks and watches (and, Hadley reminds us, as taxed by William Pitt
in the late 1790s) led Romantic writers to ascertain a conflict between what William Deresiewicz, in *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets* (2004), calls “Bergsonian temps”—linear, unidirectional clock-time (37) and what John Wyatt, in *Wordsworth and the Geologists* (1995), calls “deep time” (157), that is, the unquantifiable time of the earth and the cosmos. Such humanly produced records of time and history as the clock, the timeline, and the museum typically register the principal ideologies and powers of the moment (the Great Exhibition of 1851 being a case in point). As a part of her visionary aim, Shelley disrupts linear temporality in *The Last Man* to call into question artificial clock-time and chronological history, two of the basic props of the highly industrialized, expansionist nineteenth century.

Although she effects this disruption throughout the novel, Shelley establishes the logic for it in her brief frame narrative, in which a Regency-era Englishwoman describes both her visit to the Cumaean Sibyl’s cave in Italy and her subsequent collation of the sibylline leaves she discovers there. By virtue of her editorship, the unnamed woman reconstitutes Verney’s narrative; moreover, the circumstances of its recovery recast the text as a foretelling, despite the fact that Verney offers it as factual. The brevity of the framing device belies its importance, however, for its invocation of the sibyl (who does not appear as a living member of the book’s dramatis personae) creates an environment in which time and history, as these were most commonly understood in postwar England, fall to pieces. In the following section, I discuss Shelley’s use of the sibyl more closely in order to show how the ancient priestess’s presence and power shape the novel’s radical visionary poetics.
The Last Man is not simply Lionel Verney’s account of a biological catastrophe in the late twenty-first century. The novel’s “Introduction,” set in 1818 Naples, contextualizes this terrifying story of human loss and cosmic isolation. The “Introduction,” in effect, repositions the historical account of what takes place between 2073 and 2100—“the last year of the world” (365)—within the frame of the sibylline prophetic tradition. If we are to see Shelley’s doomsday narrative as ultimately redemptive, we must keep foremost in mind that Verney’s bleak history is in fact mediated by his 1818 editor, who reinterprets Verney and remakes his story’s “destructive, anti-civilizing power” (McWhir xxv) as part of an augury of hope.

Although the Sibyl herself does not appear as a character in the work, her presence and influence pervade the book. She occasions, in 1818, the recovery of a text that may be the work of a person long dead or as yet unborn. This text receives definite form only through the ambitious redaction of an Englishwoman who comes across its fragments in what she believes is the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl; therefore, Verney’s history is in reality the composite product of two minds separated by at least two centuries. Verney recounts his life and sad fate as a series of events in time, taking place in a clear, relatable order. All the same, the sibylline collapse of time that we find in the “Introduction” reappears in the three volume plague-chronicle; cases in point include the visit to Perdita’s desolate cottage and Verney’s discussion with Idris of eternal life. The Sibyl’s vatic influence causes lineal ideas of time and history to break down; what is more, because of the framing sibylline context, Verney’s sketch
of the future, in its nihilistic forecasting of a single pattern for history, fails to speak the last word on humankind’s destiny.

Shelley’s “Introduction” establishes the Sibyl’s cave as a nexus of collapsed time-states, the cusp at which past, present, and future blend in an extraordinary continuum. In this milieu, the frame narrator chances upon the sibylline leaves and afterward devotes herself to their reconstitution:

Sometimes I have thought, that, obscure and chaotic as they are, they owe their present form to me, their decipherer. As if we should give to another artist, the painted fragments which form the mosaic copy of Raphael’s Transfiguration in St. Peter’s; he would put them together in a form, whose mode would be fashioned by his own peculiar mind and talent. Doubtless the leaves of the Cumæan Sibyl have suffered diminution of interest and excellence in my hands. My only excuse for thus transforming them, is that they were unintelligible in their pristine condition. (4)

Whether brought forward or backward in time to 1818, the last man’s narrative, because it is set in the late twenty-first century, performs the part of an especially unpleasant prediction of the future. Beyond the fact that its provenance is uncertain, the work is restored through another’s intellectual labors; moreover, the redactor does not share Verney’s feeling of alienation from classical sources of visionary insight. Framed as it is by the 1818 narrative, the plague-chronicle—perhaps from the past, perhaps from the future—is mediated at all times by a contemporary, feminine perspective.
The Englishwoman’s endeavors, as recounted in the frame narrative, accord with Wittreich’s description of how visionary artists remake their respective literary inheritances. In this sense, Verney’s chronicle is not a message in a bottle; rather, the work represents an intricate process of co-authorship properly associated with the visionary poetics tradition as Wittreich theorizes it. Just as St. John of Patmos engages and recreates his scriptural predecessors or as the Romantics study and revise Spenser and Milton (as well as biblical seers such as the author of Revelation), so the traveler to the Sibyl’s cave resets Verney’s thoughts and words within the scope of her own day and her own life. Thus the linearity and cohesiveness of the plague tale are illusory, simply impressions rendered through the Englishwoman’s diligent redaction of the fragmented chronicle.

That chronicle, in fact, represents a trans-generational collaboration between Verney and the unnamed woman. “What is important,” Wittreich says with respect to this point, “is a decipherer—someone to integrate and explain and give continuity to the fragments. Prophetic works are, by definition, fragmentary, the particles of a vision that receives articulation and definition only to the extent that an author of a prophecy is able to make its fragmentary parts cohere, each with the others” (“Prophecy” 51). Webb supports Wittreich in this regard, albeit indirectly: “Both the plague and the fragmented text that writes of it are alien, their authorship unaccountable. They beg to be assimilated into an epistemology, to be made intelligible, to be ‘framed’” (121). To provide such a frame, Shelley calls upon a sibylline vatic authority which vexes customary notions of time and history. The
future collapses into a past recovered in the present by a woman whose collative art suggests that she is not unlike the seer-poet who intervenes in past visions to create new ways of seeing and being.

If in the novel Shelley “asserts the urgent necessity of collective psychic transformation,” as Kari E. Lokke claims (133), then she does so with the visionary’s unshakeable beliefs in the value of human life and the openness of human history. By design, Shelley employs the poet-prophet’s subversive strategies to effect intellectual and spiritual transformations in her audience. Thus she complicates our understanding of history, as well as our basic sense of what it means to be human, partly to challenge the deterministic, even fatalistic perspective of history as the record of absolute necessity. Clearly, her novel is more than a fictional reiteration of the 1650s debate between Thomas Hobbes and Bishop John Bramhall regarding chance and necessity or a revisiting of the early eighteenth-century conflicts between the philosophers Anthony Collins, a necessitarian, and Samuel Clarke, a Newtonian libertarian. At the same time, the book touches upon a polemic in English philosophy by evoking the old quarrel between determinism and indeterminism and by exploring how this quarrel relates to the question of humankind’s role in history.

An important part of Shelley’s visionary project in The Last Man is the presentation of history as the realization of possibilities, that is, of what may be as opposed to what must be.

The figure of the Sibyl, who connects worldly to otherworldly power, is crucial to Shelley’s explorations of necessity and free will in the novel. By transferring vatic
authority from the patriarchal Judeo-Christian scriptures to the matriarchal sibylline leaves, Shelley significantly unsettles the masculine bias in Romantic prophecy—consider the fact that Byron’s radically innovative *The Vision of Judgment* features an all-male cast—and so places “the whole prophetic tradition, previously withheld from women,” into contact with “a newly emerging female literature” (Wittreich, “Prophecy” 50). Of course, Coleridge published a collection of poems entitled *Sibylline Leaves* in July 1817, the same month and year in which *Biographia Literaria* first appeared. All the same, Coleridge invokes the sibyl in his title as a way of commenting on the volume’s fragmentary contents, including the supposedly incomplete dream-poem “Kubla Khan” (which was first composed in the late 1790s). Shelley, however, looks to the Sibyl and her prophetic agency as a means to counter the prevailing tenets and values of England in the late Romantic moment rather than to create a metaphor for either her authorship or her work.

The Sibyl, whose prophecies were gathered into sacred books which the classical Romans turned to for help in times of crisis, represented a distinctly matriarchal authority within a patriarchal culture. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price state that “many innovations were inspired by the Sibylline Books, the collections of oracles, kept and consulted by the *duoviri sacris faciundis*, which served both to initiate change and to provide [legitimacy] for what might otherwise have been seen as deviations from the ancestral tradition” (62). Beard, North, and Price specify that these writings, rendered in Greek verse (62), later came to be associated with the Cumaean Sibyl and “were believed to contain the destiny of the Romans” (62), a
people whose empire included parts of Asia and North Africa as well as most of Europe. These sibylline prophecies enjoyed a special status in imperial Rome because, unlike most oracular utterances, they were written down, and “the Roman empire,” David Potter reminds us, “was an empire of the written word” (95). The Cumaean Sibyl thus was distinguished from other sibyls by virtue of the cultural faith that the Romans showed in her visions as these were recorded in written language.

Sibylline prophecy influenced the literature as well as the political affairs of classical Rome. For example, the Roman poet Vergil, as Potter notes, evokes the Cumaean Sibyl in his *Fourth Eclogue* (which Potter dates circa 44 to 40 B.C.) (70), a work that so persuasively recapitulates the Sibyl’s prophecies of “the coming of peace [. . .] that the poem has been taken to be an actual prophecy” (70). The Sibyl also facilitates Aeneas’s journey to the underworld, where his father shows him Rome’s future, in Book VI of *The Aeneid*.

We need not look only to classical literature, however, for imaginative representations of the Sibyl and her vatic power. Robert Graves’s 1934 novel *I, Claudius* scrutinizes the private lives of the first three Roman emperors—namely, Augustus, Tiberius, and Caligula—from the perspective of the fourth, Claudius, who for most of his life is generally (though not universally) vilified by other members of the imperial family for his physical impediments and personal eccentricities. After specifying that he writes for “an extremely remote posterity” some “hundred generations ahead” (5), Claudius—who plans to conceal his manuscript in the earth until its prophesied restoration in the 1900s A.D.—describes his direct encounter with
the renowned prophetess:

I went to Cumæ, in Campania, a little less than eighteen years ago, and visited the Sibyl in her cliff cavern on Mount Gaurus. There is always a Sibyl at Cumæ, for when one dies her novice-attendant succeeds; but they are not equally famous. Some of them are never granted a prophecy by Apollo in all the long years of their service. [. . .] It was cold December weather. The cavern was a terrifying place, hollowed out from the solid rock, the approach steep, tortuous, pitch-dark and full of bats. I went disguised, but the Sibyl knew me. (5-6)

When Amalthea, the current sibyl, appears, she is “seated on an ivory throne in the shadows” (7). Within a few moments, she slips into a trance: “Gradually her face changed, the prophetic power overcame her, and she struggled and gasped, there was a rushing noise through all the galleries, doors banged, wings swished my face, the light vanished, and she uttered a Greek verse in the voice of the God” (7). The priestess speaks a prophecy, at the time scarcely comprehensible to Claudius, in which she foretells both his accession to the emperorship and the end of the Julian-Claudian imperial line following the death of Nero in 68 A.D (11-12).

Whether we draw our illustrations from classical authors like Vergil or modern-era writers like Graves, the Sibyl is an especially powerful figure in the European tradition of visionary literature. She represents a connection between Apollo—the god of prophecy, medicine, and poetry—and all people, because, as Potter suggests, the visionary tradition to which she belongs “provided material for discussion, com-
fort, and information both for members of the highest aristocracy and for the humble inhabitants of the cities and countryside” (96-7). The Cumaean Sibyl receives particular attention in literary history for several reasons: her Greek origins (Potter dates the nascence of the Italian sibylline tradition at around the sixth century B.C.) (73) situate her within both the Hellenic and Roman classical pasts; she possesses a special relationships with the deity of art; and her prophecies found their way into books which in turn were archived and consulted by the imperial government for help in times of the greatest need. Like all sibyls, she is a specifically feminine source of vatic authority. But the ancient Romans distinguished the Cumaean Sibyl also by attributing contemporary political relevance to her written prophecies. These points cast light on Shelley’s interest in the Sibyl as a prophetic and cultural figure whose power transcended patriarchal constrictions on women and whose authority arose from a classical rather than Judeo-Christian visionary tradition.

A striking contrast to the Cumaean Sibyl whom T. S. Eliot evokes in the epigraph to his poem *The Waste Land* (1922), Shelley’s priestess is not subject to temporal and historical disturbances; rather, she designs such disturbances as part of her continually vital role. In Eliot’s epigraph—a passage taken from Petronius Arbiter’s *Satyricon* (mid-first century)—the Sibyl withers, like Tennyson’s Tithonus, who also received everlasting life without obtaining eternal youth as well. Unlike her counterpart in Shelley’s novel, the Sibyl here is at a loss; she prays for death to free her from time and history. Throughout Eliot’s poem, her prophetic power is diminished almost to absurdity, and her authority is transferred to others, some human
(like Tiresias and Madame Sosostris), some non-human (like the thunder of part five).
Shelley’s Sibyl is silent, invisible, seemingly a historical association only—yet she is
the novel’s principal influence, commanding time and text from the work’s margins.
In this sense, the Sibyl, who never appears in person, is the book’s central presence.

Shelley thus recovers the sibylline prophetic tradition to challenge the patriarchal
aspects of Romantic visionary literature without departing from historical precedents.
It should be noted that this interpretation countervails Webb’s contention that the
Sibyl, by 1826, had become a powerless symbol of Western antiquity. “For the
nineteenth-century reading public,” Webb claims, “the Sibyl does not carry the
prophetic authority she once did. Therefore the editor, as the figure who grounds the
frame for this novel in the contemporary world, receives the Sibylline text as an
artifact, a historical curiosity from a bygone era, which achieves its value as a rare
object, not as a prophetic warning” (132). She likens Shelley’s frame narrator to
Scott’s Peter Pattieson, who, in the 1816 novel Old Mortality, “reworks” the title
character’s “biased history into an ‘authoritative’ one” (132); consequently, the frame
narrator “refuses to appropriate the scattered Sibyl’s leaves for the prophetic purpose
they would have carried in ancient Rome—as a kind of revelatory sacred document
that inscribes the end of the world by merely describing it” (132-33).

By portraying the frame narrator as an antiquarian (132-33), Webb misses the fact
that she is also a modern-day chresmologue, that is, a collector who facilitated the
circulation of prophetic texts in the classical Roman world (Potter 95-6). “The
chresmologos,” Potter states, “did not claim authority as a prophet for himself
(as far as we know this seems to have been an overwhelmingly male profession): his claim to importance rested upon his credibility as an accurate purveyor of ancient wisdom” (95). Although the chresmologue seldom redacted the prophetic books within his possession, he contributed significantly to the promulgation of these works, as Potter notes by writing that “it was the ubiquitous chresmologos who spread the wisdom of the inspired sages throughout ancient society” (96). As the “Introduction” suggests, the unnamed Englishwoman performs the chresmologue’s role by presenting the reading public with what she has recovered from the sibylline leaves, not because the plague-chronicle is a historical oddity but because the work possesses a visionary importance imparted to it by the spirit of the Cumaean Sibyl.¹²

In much Shelley criticism, this point is lost because the anonymous redactor too often is identified as Shelley herself. The novel’s roman a clef features partly encourage this mistake: if Adrian, the well-born idealist, and Raymond, the willful aristocrat, reincarnate Percy Shelley and Byron respectively, then the frame narrator, for many critics, surely represents Mary Shelley, who of course edited and published much of her late husband’s work.¹³ Thus Morton D. Paley asserts that “almost everyone who has written about this novel adverts to the personal element of isolation in it” (109). With reference to Mary Shelley’s own journals, Paley usefully distinguishes between fiction and reality: “The introduction recapitulates an excursion to the supposed Cavern of the Sibyl on the Bay of Naples. In reality, that trip, made by Mary and Percy Shelley with Claire Clairmont [Mary’s stepsister] on December 8, 1818, had proven disappointing” (110).¹⁴ Yet many fine Romanticists
confuse the author with her creation; for example, just before quoting at length from the “Introduction,” Wittreich writes: “This is Mary’s account of her visit to that cave” (“Prophecy” 50).

In contrast, Audrey A. Fisch insists that The Last Man’s “political acumen” (267) becomes less accessible if readers conflate Shelley and the frame narrator. She expatiates on her claim by noting that the Englishwoman who redacts the sibylline leaves “seems strangely unaware of any public and political function for the prophetic narrative” (279); consequently, “the manuscript, instead of offering lessons about politics and survival, instead of functioning as prophecy, has offered ‘solace’” (280).

In Fisch’s analysis, the nineteenth-century redactor mitigates the prophetic power of the sibylline leaves because she fails to see, or at least neglects to discuss, the recovered narrative’s revolutionary potential. 15

Fisch is not alone in seeing Shelley’s Englishwoman as purposefully lessening the force of Verney’s doomsday account. Webb, for instance, remarks: “What is striking about Shelley’s editorial frame is that the editor reaction to the story is so muted. Rather than showing the editor is disturbed or frightened by the apocalyptic narrative, as one would expect, her framing narrative seems to indicate she is engaged in a solipsistic exercise in personal nostalgia” (131). Such striving after consolation through literary work, Webb judges, compromises the work’s authority as a vision: “Rather than framing the Sibylline text as a warning and as a prophesy [sic], the editor frames it through its gathering and assimilates it to a personalized past rather than to a terrifying generalized future” (132).
If Fisch and Webb share some surprise at the frame narrator’s seeming lack of interest in the Verney material’s overarching implications, it is because both critics—who are among the novel’s most incisive and eloquent readers—see written prophecy as essentially predictive in nature. Prediction differs from prophecy in that the former presupposes a single direction or pattern for human history (whether at the personal or collective level), whereas the latter posits history as neither settled nor foreordained. We may look to one of the central scenes in English vatic literature, namely, Adam’s vision of the human future in the two closing Books of Paradise Lost, as illustrative of how prophecy addresses “the contradictions and conflicts of the historical process” (97), to borrow from David Loewenstein. “As Adam learns from Michael’s historical drama,” he states, “the history of the human race involves no linear process; rather it consists, as Adam himself observes, of men in successive ages treading ‘Paths indirect’ (XI.631)” (97). On this basis, Loewenstein discerns in Adam’s vision a way for Milton “to probe the causes and patterns of those tragic conflicts which had so often frustrated the progressive historical process in his own deeply divided age” (97).

Adam’s vision, as Paley argues, is crucial to both the structure and content of The Last Man. Shelley draws the novel’s epigraph from the penultimate Book of Paradise Lost (XI.770-72); the verses she selects are an especially piteous outcry from the first man: “Let no man seek / Henceforth to be foretold what shall befall / Him or his Children.” Although she quotes these words only, Shelley, who writes from a perspective of post-Waterloo disenchantment, surely also has in mind the
lines which follow:

I had hope

When violence was ceas’t, and War on Earth,
All would have then gone well, peace would have crown’d
With length of happy days the race of man;
But I was far deceiv’d; for now I see
Peace to corrupt no less than War to waste.  (XI.779-84)

If the novel were linearly predictive, these explicit and implicit allusions to *Paradise Lost* would support Paley’s assertion that Shelley gives “a terribly pessimistic coloring [. . .] to prophetic vision” (115). But this criticism, in light of both Loewenstein’s analysis and Milton’s poem itself, proves at best the right finding from the wrong premise. We need look only one hundred lines further into Book XI to discover, with Loewenstein, “a vision of apocalyptic renovation” (97) that moves Adam, after witnessing five strife-filled visions (including the vision of the lazar-house), to rejoice in the promise of a new covenant between man and God that shall follow the great Flood:

O thou who future things canst represent

As present, Heav’nly instructor, I revive

At this last sight, assur’d that Man shall live

With all the Creatures, and their seed preserve.  (XI.870-73)

Whether such happiness, as Loewenstein contends, owes to Adam’s inexperience as a student of history (100), we see that Michael’s prophecy blends “tragedy and
renewed hope” and so diversifies the significances to which the spectacle of history points (124). Accordingly, we should qualify Paley’s assessment of Shelley’s use of Milton by recognizing that the author’s choice of epigraph encompasses the whole of Adam’s troubling but not hopeless vision. Prophecy disallows the closure of history to possibilities. Thus Adam and Eve depart Eden with “the World [. . .] all before them” (XII.646) and so enter history, as Loewenstein suggests, “with humility and courage” (125). Despite what Adam has seen with his eyes and what Eve has seen in her dreams, hope continues because history promises myriad possibilities rather than a single, inevitable outcome.

Just as the concluding verses of Paradise Lost complicate the idea that history invariably follows a single course, the few pages comprising the “Introduction” to The Last Man transform the notion of unidirectional history that Verney’s three-volume chronicle of the future advances for many readers. If the frame narrator is not distressed by her look into the twenty-first century, it is because she knows she has gazed simply into one possible future, and she realizes that what she has seen is best interpreted as a general delineation of human truths rather than a precise description of what awaits humankind in the years to come. Although Shelley’s Englishwoman comes upon Verney’s account accidentally, she redacts that account purposefully, demonstrating that she possesses the visionary’s sense of history without telling her readers so. Furthermore, her editorship suggests that we receive nothing from Verney that we can trust is his work alone: the linear unity and individual authorship of his narrative are thus illusive. By recasting the sibylline leaves, the frame narrator
prophetically intervenes into the plague-chronicle and, by extension, into history itself.

In this respect, *The Last Man* presents a prophecy within a prophecy, or, rather, a vision of history within a vision of history. Verney and his female redactor collaborate across time: his vision imperceptibly intertwines with hers, a crucial fact given that the woman’s imagination integrates distinct ideas regarding non-linear historical time, sibylline vatic agency, and the private past. The frame narrator acknowledges her role in bringing together “the slight Sibylline pages” (4) without diminishing the Sibyl’s part: “Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form. But the main substance rests on the truths contained in these poetic rhapsodies, and the divine intuition which the Cumæan damsel obtained from heaven” (4). Thus the narrative that Shelley’s Regency-era traveler recovers is a restorative prophecy, not a literal prediction; moreover, the restored text bears relevance to the Englishwoman’s past and present as well as to Verney’s life in the forthcoming years. Consequently, a chronicle of the future, inscribed on ancient leaves, tells the story of the present.

The sibylline tradition allows Shelley a way to critique both Romantic visionary literature and the postwar West. For all its resourcefulness, however, Shelley’s use of this tradition is not subversive or revolutionary per se; after all, the Cumæan Sibyl played an important and culturally sanctioned role in Rome’s patriarchal, imperial government. Her complicity in Roman statecraft notwithstanding, the Sibyl represents a matriarchal presence whose vatic authority rests principally on written
prophecy. Moreover, she provides Shelley with the means to disrupt linear time and
history, to the effect that “the end of man [. . .] will have always already coincided
with the moment of predicting, the moment of translating, and the moment of
writing,” as Barbara Johnson states (266). Shelley thus recasts the sibylline legacy
for the sake of her novel’s radical post-Waterloo critique, and it is in this sense that
the Sibyl possesses subversive potential. In the closing section of this chapter, I
consider how, for these reasons, The Last Man represents both a new beginning and a
decisive ending for the Romantic visionary line.

* * *

Shelley’s re-imagining of time and the Sibyl in The Last Man is, for Wittreich,
anticipated by Milton’s Paradise Lost, a poem that ends “as it began, with a prophecy
whose vision of history, not full of glad tidings, is fraught with the misery, fever, and
fret of human existence” (“Prophecy” 43). Wittreich claims that the last two Books
of Milton’s epic present “the history of the poet’s own time. Prophecy of the past
masking as prophecy of the future is actually being written in the present tense”
(“Prophecy” 43). Accordingly, the temporal distortions and historical non-linearity
that we find in Shelley’s novel reflect Miltonic precedents; in this sense, Shelley’s
radicalism may be seen as anchored in the vatic tradition. All the same, Shelley
amplifies these distortions to a remarkable extent, thereby assaying the possibilities of
visionary poetics without disregarding its basic conventionalities.

Like Frankenstein, The Last Man reflects the influence of Milton on Shelley’s
authorial imagination and sense of the literary past. Shelley understands prophecy
primarily through Milton, who understands it through Spenser, Chaucer, and the Bible. Foretelling what is to come is a task of little appeal to Shelley, who follows Milton in seeking to fashion the future rather than forecast it. Thus *The Last Man*, as Sylva Norman suggests, is a fairly murky crystal ball: Shelley, who “was thinking, or should have been, some 240 years ahead [. . .] never tried to picture a world advanced in industry, transport, architecture, or technology of any kind” (77-8).

But if the novel cannot properly be read as a prototype of the speculative fiction genre—that is, as a precursor to Jules Verne or H. G. Wells—it also resists classification as an allegorical index of Shelley’s times. Alan Bewell, for example, reads the work as a register of the collective distress with which Europeans regarded incidents such as the Bengalese cholera outbreak of 1817 (296).17 The novel’s eschatological significance, though, involves much more than the epidemiological circumstances of the early nineteenth century. Although she thinks and writes as a woman of the late Romantic and early Victorian periods, Shelley seldom presents synchronic history for its own sake. Rather, she explores both private and public history not simply as an accumulation of particulars but as a series of interrelated phenomena accessible to the seer-poet’s imagination and reinterpretation.

Her sense of the poet-prophet’s role, then, allows Shelley to write critically and with equal sophistication of past, present, and future all at once. Moreover, Shelley writes from a position of unique witness; her personal losses (three of her four children died between 1815 and 1819, and her husband drowned in 1822), together with her experience of international war and a questionable peace, contribute to what
Lokke sees as a novel that anticipates later postwar literature rather than the emerging speculative fiction genre. Lokke claims that, with *The Last Man*, Shelley speaks to “the horrors of the French Revolution, the subsequent carnage of the Napoleonic wars, and the metaphysical and cultural uncertainties attendant upon Romantic-era attacks on religious and political authority” (116). She adds that the piece “bears comparison with twentieth-century existentialist, absurdist, and nihilist reactions to two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb, such as Camus’s *La Peste* or Ionesco’s *Les Chaises*” (116). Like Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Nazi death camps 130 years later, Waterloo marked a moment of historical catastrophe which compelled intellectuals like Shelley to answer “a demand to choose definitively between hell and reason,” to borrow Camus’s comment on the bombing of Hiroshima (111). Lokke posits that Shelley’s choice of responses provides a key to *The Last Man*: “In the aftermath of the failed French Revolution and the grim Restoration of the *ancien régime* all over Europe after the fall of Napoleon, Shelley surveys the political theories and practices of her day and finds them all inadequate” (129).

Shelley’s personal acts of witness, consequently, provoke her literary acts of visionary intervention. The genre of prophecy offers Shelley a powerful medium through which to present new possibilities for thought and action in an age of renewed monarchies and conspicuous repression. The claim that her novel stands in special relation to Romantic vatic art helps to clarify that the work is not simply a *roman à clef* like Thomas Love Peacock’s *Headlong Hall* (published December 1815) or his *Nightmare Abbey* (1818). Nevertheless, the book’s relatively late publication
date (1826) bears upon its status as a contribution to British Romantic literature. By the time that the work appeared in print, Keats, Byron, and Shelley all were dead, as were Mary Robinson (1800), Charlotte Smith (1806), Anne Yearsley (also 1806), Jane Austen (1817), and Anna Letitia Barbauld (1825). Within twelve years of the book’s publication, several more Romantic authors passed away, including Blake (1827), Hazlitt (1830), Scott (1832), Hannah More (1833), Charles Lamb (1834), Coleridge (also 1834), Felicia Hemans (1835), and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1838). Southey, now the Poet Laureate, and Wordsworth, now a supporter of the Earl of Liverpool’s Tory administration (which had controlled Parliament since Spencer Perceval was assassinated in 1812) showed that the Lake Poets’ 1790s radicalism was long past. As a critique of Romantic visionary literature, The Last Man reflects the fact that Shelley, by the age of twenty-nine, witnessed not only wartime violence and postwar authoritarianism but also the first and final years of second wave British Romanticism.

By the mid-1820s, the community of British Romantics was considerably depleted, and Mary Shelley did not benefit from a continuing textual dialogue with a working contemporary such as Percy and Byron enjoyed, according to the theory that Charles E. Robinson posits regarding the two poets’ relationship. These considerations bear relevance to the fact that The Last Man, despite its radical innovations to Romantic visionary poetics, “remained virtually forgotten (in sharp contrast to the fate of Frankenstein) from shortly after its publication in 1826 until 1965 when it was first reprinted in the United States,” as Patrick Parrinder points out
Shelley’s experimental critique of Romantic prophecy thus stands at a short but important distance from the high point of second wave British Romanticism, and this removal complicates our analysis of the work as a prophecy and Shelley as a member of the English visionary line. From this evidence, a twofold question may be asked: Is Shelley, like Aphra Behn, “a rejected mother in the national literary tradition, leaving an inheritance that was richly influential but more often denied than acknowledged” (Spencer 11), or is she the principal figure in a matrilineal line of vision, a writer who creates through her works, as Barbara Jane O’Sullivan argues, a legacy that establishes continuity among authors as diverse as Florence Nightingale, Virginia Woolf, and the German author Christa Wolf?

Although it is tempting to portray Mary Shelley as the focal author in a female visionary line that counters the male-dominated, Milton-centered tradition, The Last Man does not adequately support such a recasting. The novel is too deeply embedded in both the coterie aesthetics of the Byron-Shelley circle and the intellectual concerns of postwar England to serve later generations of women writers as a touchstone piece (to adapt Matthew Arnold’s idea for the measure of great verse from the 1880 essay, “The Study of Poetry”). While The Last Man represents an especially sophisticated contribution to Romantic visionary literature, the work fails to carry forward the spirit of second wave Romantic vision as Percy Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound revivifies first generation Romantic prophecy. Rather, Shelley introduces several significant innovations, such as experimentations with temporal reality and the restoration of the Sibyl as a vatic authority, to critique the male Romantics and
their aesthetics, not to perpetuate them. Shelley thus employs these innovations to subvert and disrupt Romantic visionary poetics, as well as to challenge the prevailing reactionary ideologies of her time. In this sense, the novel serves as a requiem for Romantic visionary art; ironically, the work also stands as perhaps the most daring experiment in a genre that Shelley forthrightly contests.

If Shelley’s oeuvre offers the possibility of a distinctly female line of vision, as O’Sullivan suggests, then we must acknowledge from the first that *The Last Man* poses formidable difficulties as part of a hypothetical counter-tradition. The circumstances of the work’s composition and publication, as I have described them, prohibit the notion that Shelley sought to revive the Romantic visionary idiom at a late moment in the period. Moreover, as Parrinder reminds us, *The Last Man* languished in obscurity for well over a century; despite its originality and complexity, the work, unlike *Frankenstein*, did not lastingly enter the international imagination (consider, for example, the Spanish director Victor Erice’s use of *Frankenstein*’s narrative and imagery, as rendered through twentieth-century cinematic adaptations, in the 1973 film, *The Spirit of the Beehive*). The literary critic who would construct a female vatic line with Mary Shelley at its heart, then, neglects certain basic facts involved in why and how Shelley engages Romantic visionary poetics in her 1826 novel.

With *The Last Man*, Shelley enriches the tradition of English visionary literature. At the same time, she calls that tradition to account insofar as the younger Romantics, mainly during the later years of the Regency period in England, engaged with it in
several of their poetical works. By providing so thoroughgoing a critique, Shelley offers the final word on postwar Romantic prophecy. By virtue of her critical perspective regarding visionary poetics, Shelley shares much with John Keats, the brilliant young London poet who died five years before The Last Man’s publication. Although she does not write Keats into her novel and the two were never close, Shelley first met Keats in February 1817 and was familiar with both him and his poetry. Yet the two younger Romantics, despite a lack of personal or professional intimacy, demonstrate a like-minded discontent with literary prophecy and its cultural role in the post-Napoleonic world. The concluding chapter of this study examines Keats’s own critique of post-Waterloo visionary poetics and its idealistic, transcendent implications.
“Let the fish philosophise the ice away from the Rivers in winter time and they shall
be at continual play in the tepid delight of summer.”

—John Keats to the George Keatses, the 14 February-3 May 1819 letter

“Do you not think this of great import? You will hear by the papers of the
proceedings at Manchester and [Henry] Hunt’s triumphal entry into London—I would
take me a whole day and a quire of paper to give you any thing like detail—I will
merely mention that it is calculated that 30.000 people were in the streets waiting for
him—The whole distance from the Angel Islington to the Crown and anchor was
lined with Multitudes.”

—John Keats to the George Keatses, the 17-27 September 1819 letter

In much of his mature writing, John Keats, like Byron and Mary Shelley, calls into
question the transformative power of Romantic literary prophecy. Keats surpasses
both contemporaries, however, in the outspokenness and intellectual confidence of his
persistently materialist critique of visionary poetics. This critique, as expressed in
both his verse and his prose, distinguishes Keats as the principal opponent of a kind
of art which, whether implicitly or explicitly, promotes the hope of transcendence
over the clear-sighted struggle with human life on its own terms. Moreover, the poet’s criticism of the Miltonic tradition and its aesthetic legacy significantly complicates Wittreich’s theory of a unified, Romantic visionary line. In fact, Keats breaks almost completely from the vatic tradition, asserting his materialist perspective against what in that tradition is idealistic, even escapist, in nature. Consequently, his work sets the stage for Mary Shelley’s The Last Man (an 1826 novel discussed in the previous chapter) and anticipates any number of the British Victorians, very few of whom adopt the visionary stance with the alacrity and success of their Romantic-era forebears.

In his 14 February-3 May 1819 letter to George and Georgiana Keats (who in early 1818 had emigrated from England to the United States), and after referencing his reading in both Voltaire and the Scottish historian William Robertson (II.100), Keats offers his analysis of human existence in a material world which he likens to a “vale of Soul-making” (II.102). Given that 1819 was an especially productive year for Keats—he composed at this time the great Odes and Lamia, among other pieces—the thoughts he shares by letter with his brother and sister-in-law help to represent the poet’s frame of mind at a moment when he was writing some of the period’s finest verse. Keats states that human beings are “subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and disquietude” (II.101); accordingly, the poet discounts the concept of human perfectibility because “the nature of the world will not admit of it—the inhabitants of the world will correspond to itself” (II.101). He provides a metaphor to illustrate his point: “suppose a rose to have sensation, it
blooms on a beautiful morning it enjoys itself—but there comes a cold wind, a hot
sun—it can not escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances—they are as native to the
world as itself: no more can man be happy in spite, the world[ly] elements will prey
upon his nature” (II.101).

Keats’s view of the human condition, as these remarks suggest, reflects a
fundamentally materialist, non-Christian perspective through which the poet, despite
what seems his note of cheerlessness, finds hope in life without seeking theistic
solace or otherworldly consolation. This perspective, moreover, provides the
principal tenet of Keats’s aesthetic practice, as Jack Stillinger notes: “his significant
poems center on a single basic problem, the mutability inherent in nature and human
life, and openly or in disguise they debate the pros and cons of a single hypothetical
solution, transcendence of earthly limitations by means of the visionary imagination”
(The Hoodwinking of Madeline 100). So important is this point to Keats criticism
that Stillinger offers an elaboration of it as a key to the poet’s imaginative
productions: “If one were to summarize the career in a sentence, it would be
something like this: Keats came to learn that this kind of imagination was a false
lure, inadequate to the needs of the problem, and in the end he traded it for the
naturalized imagination, embracing experience and process as his own and man’s
chief good. His honesty in treating the problem and his final opting for the natural
world, where all the concrete images of poetry come from and where melodies
impinge on ‘the sensual ear’ or not at all, are what, more than anything else,
guarantee his place ‘among the English poets’” (Madeline 100).²
Stillinger’s reference to the well-known 14-31 October 1818 letter to the George Keatses evokes an earlier, more personalized illustration of Keats’s distinction between real life and visionary experience. Keats describes his feelings after having met a young lady named Jane Cox, an Indian-born relation of the Reynolds Family, with whom the poet was intimate: “I believe tho’ she has faults—the same as Charmian and Cleopatra might have had,” the woman nevertheless “speak[s] in a worldly way: for there are two distinct tempers of mind in which we judge of things—the worldly, theatrical and pantomimical; and the unearthly, spiritual and ethereal—in the former Buonaparte, Lord Byron and this Charmian hold the first place in our Minds; in the latter John Howard, Bishop Hooker [. . .] and you my dear Sister are the conquering feelings” (I.395-96).

Although Aileen Ward maintains that these comments reveal the poet’s maturing “self-assurance” (225) with women, the statements also point to his thoughts on the roles of vision and reality in poetry, as well as to his sense of British literary history and its connection to contemporary politics.³ Keats foresees himself “among the English Poets after my death” (I.394) and makes clear that he counts Milton among the great intellectual lights of the national past. Further, he laments that, at a time when politics are “only sleepy because they will soon be too wide awake” (I.396), “our national Honesty” (I.396) is at risk because “there are none prepared to suffer in obscurity for their Country—the motives of our wo[r]st Men are interest and of our best Vanity—We have no Milton, no Algernon Sidney” (I.396). By invoking Milton and republican history, Keats associates literary greatness with political radicalism.
Moreover, he looks to England’s past rather than to her present for ideals of selfless libertarianism, and his remarks encompass any number of contemporaries and intimates, including Byron and Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Leigh Hunt and Hazlitt, who, as the poet implies, prove poor heirs to Milton’s legacy.

That Keats imagines himself placed, albeit posthumously, in the company of England’s greatest writers is much more than an instance of youthful exuberance or a hope against hope (as we know, conservative periodicals such as Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine reviled Keats’s “Cockney School” verse). Keats’s faith in his imaginative and compositional talents, as he confides to his brother and sister-in-law, suggests that the young Romantic saw within his work to date a revolutionary promise anchored within English literary tradition. Thus Keats aspires to create poetry which challenges both the aesthetic conventions and political commonplaces of his day, in accordance with the paradigm established by Milton a century and a half earlier.

Given his belief in the worth of his art and his claim to literary immortality, it is perhaps not surprising that Keats casts certain statements later in the piece within a vatic idiom. “If I had a prayer to make for any great good, next to Tom’s [John and George’s brother’s] recovery,” Keats writes, “it should be that one of your Children should be the first American Poet. I have a great mind to make a prophecy and they say prophecies work out their own fulfillment” (I.398). Subsequently, Keats includes fifty-six lines of verse which describe a small child’s daring grasp of a flaming lyre, an act that symbolizes the first ardor with poetry and the courageous initial step
toward the artist’s life (I.398-99). After the child seizes the instruments and touches its strings, Keats celebrates: “Bard art thou completely” (48, I.399).

This passage puts us in mind of what Hermione de Almeida calls Keats’s “declared and lifelong commitment” to the myth of the Greek god Apollo, whose “legendary energy [. . .] has always extended broad and tutelary sway over the parallel domains of poetry and medicine, music and disease, prophecy and prognosis” (17). From the first, Keats adopts the patron of healers and seers as a guiding principle: for example, the “Ode to Apollo,” composed in 1815, presents the classical deity as “the great God of Bards” (47) as well. In this early poem, Keats’s reader finds Milton, Shakespeare, and Spenser at song in Apollo’s “western halls of gold” (1), by all appearances permanent guests at the god’s court. Throughout his writing, Keats invokes Apollo with striking consistency, although, as Vincent Newey argues, he recasts the god’s image to accord with the changing circumstances of his life.

The recurrence of the Apollo figure in Keats’s body of work, long noted and thoroughly discussed, helps to show that Keats, from the outset of his brief poetic career, significantly vexes Wittreich’s ideas regarding the English vatic tradition as the younger Romantics receive and engage it. If Keats seems a conundrum, it is essentially because he synthesizes a fairly conventional perspective on English literary history with a non-Christian understanding of prophecy and an abiding, assertive intellectual radicalism which is frequently political and invariably materialistic. Thus Keats, like Mary Shelley, disrupts Wittreich’s theoretical model, anchored as it is by the idea that English visionary writers necessarily emulate their
scriptural predecessors as part of the traditional vatic project. To describe the poet’s relationship with his biblical progenitors, we may borrow Stillinger’s contention that “Keats was one of the least anxious writers in English literature” (“Wordsworth and Keats” 176). The next section of this chapter examines the ways in which Keats complicates Wittreich’s theories.

* * *

In his writing on the English Romantics, Wittreich confesses that Keats proves a sticky wicket because he “is the poet least rooted in prophetic tradition; yet he is also the poet who gathers into sharpest focus the turns and counterturns of Romantic poetry, its fleeing from and then flying back into vision, as well as the perennial problem of whether the poet speaks oracularly or merely gives vent to his dreams” (“Prophecy” 45). For Wittreich, Keats’s Ode to a Nightingale (1820) neatly illustrates the conflict between transcendent visionary experience, a type of essentialism, and the realities of human life as lived in the material world.

In this familiar piece, the poem’s speaker hears the nightingale’s “high requiem” (60) and strives at once to make sense of the song’s mystery. This endeavor causes the speaker serious misgivings regarding his personal state and, by extension, the shared lot of humankind. Although the nightingale’s music offers historical transcendence—“The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown” (63-4)—the speaker finally cannot acquiesce in the freedom from immediate circumstances that the nightingale’s song and flight represent. The poem closes without a decisive resolution:
Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now ‘tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep? (71-80)

In his poem’s conclusion, Keats plays out a basic conflict between ideal and reality, that is to say, between the desire to stand outside of history and humankind’s ineluctable implication within history. The former offers a way past historical circumstance and accident, but at the cost of what makes us human; the latter offers a place within the shared fate of humankind, but at the cost of heaven and the release from time, place, and suffering. With both the Nightingale ode and The Fall of Hyperion (written 1819) in mind, Wittreich claims: “What gnaws at Keats clearly is that those who fly after their visions may also be flying from social and political responsibility” (“Prophecy” 45). Wittreich casts this apparent tension within the scope of Romantic prophecy as a whole: “In the very act of making such distinctions, Keats opens a gulf between poets and visionaries, between poetry and prophecy, that the other Romantics had sought to bridge. Coleridge called any distinction between
the artist and the visionary a cold-blooded hypothesis; and Shelley wrote his *Defence of Poetry*, in part, to argue for the interconnectedness of poetry and prophecy” (“Prophecy” 45).

Wittreich concludes that Keats, like the other major Romantics whose interests and writings place them within the English vatic tradition, is “impelled to scrutinize prophecy, to examine its limitations” in accordance with the seer-poet’s subversive function (“Prophecy” 45). Thus Keats studies and then rewrites the Lake Poets and the Satanic School, just as William Blake studied and then rewrote Milton and the Bible years before Keats took up poetry. Accordingly, if Keats’s uneasiness with the transcendent dimension of Romantic prophecy fosters a “critique of the visionary ideology in which prophecy itself had established its moorings” (“Prophecy” 49), this discomfort, for Wittreich, suggests that Keats is in fact devoted to asking the questions that a seer-poet must ask in order to summon historical change.

By interpreting Keats in this way, Wittreich offers an analysis that puts one in mind of Marilyn Butler, who reads *The Fall of Hyperion* as a purposeful engagement with Romantic visionary convention and its principal architects: “By relocating the action [of the poem] in the consciousness of a modern poet, Keats takes up a topic more familiar in the work of Shelley and Peacock—contemplation of the role of the writer, especially in the light of the religious, vatic stance urged by the living older poets” (152). She adds that the work “begins with some observations unsympathetic to privacy, spirituality, primitive or fundamentalist insights, the various strands which go to make up the seer-poet recently sketched by the Lakists” (152). Butler thus
reads Keats’s piece as a confrontation with literary history and its makers, recent and remote alike—although it is worth noting that she identifies Dante, rather than Milton, as the foremost influence on the second *Hyperion* fragment and determines that Coleridge, rather than Wordsworth or Southey, is the main target of the poem’s more vituperative passages. All the same, Butler’s interpretation of Keats as a critic of the Romantic visionary mode is in consonance with Wittreich’s argument, to the effect that Keats appears, strangely enough, to fall in line with both the Lake Poets and the Byron-Shelley literary circle because he calls their respective aesthetic creeds into questions.

Wittreich’s view of Keats, though correct in some particulars, mistakenly counts him among the Romantic seer-poets simply because he presents his critique of contemporary visionary poetics in a manner resembling the poet-prophet’s intervention into his forbears’ work. If Wittreich’s analysis seems insufficient, its insufficiency owes to the fact that Keats is far more than the student-critic of Romantic prophecy for whom Wittreich is theoretically prepared. Rather, Keats enters the visionary tradition as a poet less interested in revising his poetic teachers than in revising the notion that poetic vision can be taught or learned at all. In this sense, Keats asserts that vision, unless proved upon our pulses, always runs the risk of being merely an aesthetic phenomenon and so for the most part unreal.

In light of these contentions, we may better understand Nicholas Roe’s point that “to aspire to a perfected existence—through the use of medicine, by means of political revolution, or in achieving unity with ‘divine immortal essence’”—is to
know oneself already forlorn,” a complex truth which persuades Keats to consider that “the only course open for humankind may be to live in and through negative capability, aware that our welfare depends upon the interdependence [. . .] of self, humankind, and the natural world” (201). For Keats, the vatic stance endangers this awareness of our connectedness to others and to Nature by replacing the material realities of history and life with airy illusions, such as those which seduce Keats’s knight at arms in “La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad” (1820) and leave him “alone and palely loitering” (2; 46) in a waste forest where “no birds sing” (4; 48).

Certainly, Keats’s thoughts on poetic vision and material reality clash with Romantic prophecy’s emphasis on the possibility of transcendence. His ideas of human sympathy, crystallized in the concept of negative capability, also set Keats at odds with contemporaries such as Shelley, who, in works such as Prometheus Unbound (1820), presents human perfectibility and all-pervasive Love as an attainable vision of hope. As Greg Kucich points out, negative capability—“when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (I.193)—is more than a celebration of Shakespeare’s imagination; for Keats, it is both a theory of past literary achievement and an ideal for his own art and life (Kucich 193). Moreover, the concept bears “associations with the reform politics that Keats endorsed” (Kucich 193); partly influenced by Hazlitt’s radicalism, Keats eventually recognized in his negative capability idea a principle upon which “communal sympathies and egalitarian politics” could be founded (Kucich 193). In short, Keats expresses a belief in the power of art and artists to
catalyze change without recourse to a poetics of idealism or transcendence. Thus he engages the English visionary tradition from an intensely materialist position that reflects both his maturing political altruism (“I would jump down Ætna for any great Public good,” Keats tells J. H. Reynolds in a 9 April 1818 letter) (I.267) and his intellectual self-assertiveness.

Keats makes this position clear in “Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed,” a poem he composed as he worked on his adaptation of Boccaccio, entitled Isabella; or The Pot of Basil, and which he sent in a letter to Reynolds in March, 1818. After inventorying the phantasmagoric images that he witnessed while falling asleep the evening before, including “two witch’s eyes above a cherub’s mouth” (6), “Voltaire with casque and shield and habergeon” (7), “Old Socrates a-tying his cravat” (8) and “Hazlitt playing with Miss Edgeworth’s cat” (10), the speaker longs for a type of vision in harmony with the world of circumstance:

O that our dreamings all of sleep or wake
Would all their colours from the sunset take:
From something of material sublime,
Rather than shadow our own soul’s daytime
In the dark void of night. (67-71)

The speaker warns against the “imagination brought / Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined” (78-9) by its privileging of vision over reality: “It is a flaw / In happiness to see beyond our bourn” (82-3) because this foreknowing “forces us in summer skies to mourn” (84) and “spoils the singing of the nightingale” (85).
As this poem shows, Keats’s thoughts on visionary art are far more complex than Wittreich allows. Wittreich casts Keats as belonging to the Romantic continuum of authors whose work, taken collectively, recalls the vatic aesthetics and performances of authors such as Chaucer, Spenser, and of course Milton. Yet Keats, if not precisely a destroyer, is scarcely the preserver who Wittreich wants him to be. The truth lies somewhere between the two extremes.

* * *

Keats’s posthumously published sonnet, “Before he went to live with owls and bats” (circa 1817), unlike “Written on the Day That Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison” (composed 2 February 1815), “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (published 1 December 1816), or “To Kosciusko” (published 16 February 1817), has received little formal attention from Romanticists, despite recent discussions by John Kandl and Susan J. Wolfson regarding Keats and the sonnet tradition. The poem’s marginalization owes partly to difficulties in classifying it. For example, Lawrence John Zillman, in his 1939 book on Keats’s sonnets, presents a table of “principal themes” (84) in which he places “Before he went” with the political sonnets but includes a bracketed question mark (of the sixty-six sonnets Zillman lists, only one other, “How fever’d is the man,” is similarly designated) (84). In this section, I want to argue that the poem, notwithstanding the critics’ general silence, superbly illustrates Keats’s materialism and political liberalism in relation to both traditional and late-Regency visionary poetics. Through the sonnet, Keats intensifies the dynamic between the possible and the actual, the essential and the material, the time-
less and the timely to such an extent that he renders chimerical any notion of a visionary poetry that does not bear the freight of precise political, social, and economic problems.

Although it is one of Keats’s least familiar pieces, the sonnet invokes one of the best known scriptural prophetic books, namely, the Book of Daniel. Among the Romantics, the Book of Daniel was a favorite source of images, characters, and incidents: William Blake, for example, draws from the Book to create his famous 1795 depiction of the monarch Nebuchadnezzar (a piece housed today in the Tate Gallery, London); and Byron includes in Hebrew Melodies (1815) a poem entitled “Vision of Belshazzar.”¹³ John J. Collins’s analysis helps to clarify the Book’s appeal to Romantic poets such as Blake, Byron, and Keats. For Collins, there is an “essential bond between the wisdom of the visionary and his political stance” (224), and the Book of Daniel reminds us that the visionary’s “interest in and allegiance to the heavenly world serves to sharpen his confrontation with the kingdoms of the earth” (223). Therefore, the Book’s “relevance is greatest in times of change and uncertainty when the beasts of chaos seem again to rise from the sea” (223).

Although he cites William Butler Yeats and the period of the two World Wars, Collins could just as easily reference the period of the Hanoverian reign, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars when he notes that “Daniel speaks most eloquently to situations where a radical change is required” (224).

Keats looks to the earlier chapters of the Book of Daniel, particularly chapters two and four. In the former, Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of “a great
image” (2.31) composed of gold, silver, brass, iron, and clay (2.32-3); in the latter, Nebuchadnezzar himself recounts his seven years “with the beasts of the field” (4.32) after “a voice from heaven” (4.31) confirms that Daniel has interpreted another of the king’s dreams correctly. This dream, in which “a watcher and an holy one from heaven” (4.23) commands the monarch to fell a majestic tree while leaving the stump and roots undisturbed, transforms the king by humbling him before God: “And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation” (4.34). This important scriptural instance of renewal and self-renovation tempts us to see the fourth chapter of the Book of Daniel in the intellectual background of the fourth part of Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, a poem first published in Lyrical Ballads (1798) and revised significantly between 1800 and 1834.14 But if Coleridge uses this particular biblical material to represent the Ancient Mariner’s self-effacement before the natural world, then Keats takes the reinterpretation of the Book of Daniel much further by adapting the scriptural text to his critique of late-Regency politics and visionary art.

In its opening quatrain, “Before he went,” as John Barnard notes, invokes “the Peace celebrations of 1814” (612) through reference to the staged naval battles presented in England after Napoleon’s first abdication: “Nebuchadnezzar had an ugly dream, / Worse than a housewife’s, when she thinks her cream / Made a naumachia for mice and rats” (2-4). The grand spectacle of the “naumachia” (4) interweaves
with an image of domestic life that itself suggests, if not squalor, then at least some serious limitedness of, and danger to, resources and provisions. This startling commingling of images hints at any number of intriguing contrasts, among which we may count juxtapositions between public and private life, excess and economy, the international and the parochial, and even between a presumably patriarchal show of martial force and a specifically matriarchal regard for the continuation of life and well-being. The quatrain also democratizes the visionary experience: in a prelude to the emperor and clown who hear the melody of Keats’s nightingale, Nebuchadnezzar and the housewife—types of the king and the commoner—are equals at the level of dreams.

Just as the act of dreaming levels the boundaries separating sovereigns and subjects, the art of interpreting dreams vexes political and social codifications. As we may infer from the sonnet’s second quatrain, Keats offers the prophet Daniel, who is among the best-known dream-readers in the Judeo-Christian heritage, as a voice of political opposition. Although its allusions to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (III.i.76) and to St. Luke’s gospel (6.42) perhaps combine to strike an ironic note, the quatrain is less critical of Daniel than of the king who summons him:

So scared, he sent for that “good king of cats,”

Young Daniel, who did straightway pluck the beam

From out his eye, and said—“I do not deem

Your sceptre worth a straw, your cushions old door mats.” (5-8)

Notwithstanding that it is King Darius, rather than Nebuchadnezzar, who unwillingly
casts Daniel into the lions’ den (6.16-23), this quatrain registers an idea of monarchy consistent with the political radicalism one finds also in the late-Regency works of Byron and Shelley, such as the former’s “Vision of Belshazzar” and “To the Prince Regent” (1819) and the latter’s “England in 1819” (published by Mary Shelley in 1839), to cite only a few of myriad possible examples.\textsuperscript{16}

By virtue of his strong liberalist disposition, Keats shares much with his principal younger Romantic contemporaries. At the same time, he is too vibrantly independent, both intellectually and artistically, to follow either Byron or Shelley like a small dog trailing his companion. Thus while the sonnet’s octave places Keats comfortably among the Byron-Shelley literary coterie in principle, the sestet renders a formidable attack on the postwar vatic Romanticism best represented by his two well-born fellow poets:

\begin{quote}
A horrid nightmare, similar somewhat, 
Of late has haunted a most valiant crew 
Of loggerheads and chapmen;—we are told 
That any Daniel, though he be a sot, 
Can make their lying lips turn pale of hue, 
By drawling out—“Ye are that head of gold!” (9-14)
\end{quote}

Taken as a whole, Keats’s poem invites us to read the political figures of England in 1817 as its referents. Ward asserts that Keats’s “cryptic sonnet” (149) reflects the poet’s “elation” (149) upon learning, in late December 1817, that William Hone, the radical political satirist, was acquitted after his “successful defense of himself at his
three well-publicized trials” in December of that year (Dyer 73). In these trials, Hone was prosecuted for publishing three popular parodies, namely John Wilkes’s Catechism, The Sinecurist’s Creed, and The Political Litany (all 1817), that critiqued the Tory government via satiric “re-writings of Anglican liturgy” (Dyer 75). Ward notes that “twenty thousand Londoners cheered him as he emerged from the courtroom” (149). At a time when “parody was the dominant technique of populist radicalism,” as Gary Dyer observes (75), Hone was beloved by liberal intellectuals like Keats and reviled by Tory administrators and authorities like Lord Ellenborough, who, as Keats wrote to his brothers George and Tom in late December 1817, “has been paid in his own coin” by Hone’s acquittal (I.191).17 Barnard follows Ward in identifying Keats’s sonnet as a “political satire” of the Tories in which Daniel represents Hone, Nebuchadnezzar is King George III, and the “valiant crew” (10) “stands for the Tory ministry, who were terrified that the regime, maintained by force, might be overthrown by popular revolt” (Barnard 612).18

While Barnard and Ward properly focus on the poem’s contemporary political relevance, “Before he went” also bitingly critiques Romanticism’s visionary strain, particularly through the six closing verses. The sestet significantly unsettles the Romantics’ general recourse to Christian tradition as a source of visionary authority. Contrary thus not only to Wittreich’s analysis but also to Robert M. Ryan’s claim that, for Keats, “all human thought is presided over and directed by a ‘mighty providence’ that raises up prophets and reformers in each age to lead mankind toward a purer, more refined religious consciousness” (172), the sonnet, both in part and as a
whole, questions the scriptural paradigm for prophetic insight and so, by extension, the very basis of Romantic visionary literature.

The sonnet’s first quatrain, as I have stated, posits dreams and dreaming as democratizing agents that place the housewife on the same plane as the king, and such democratization suggests Keats’s political egalitarianism. Moreover, if dreams create a provisional classlessness among human beings, then the interpretation of dreams offers a similar leveling of political and social distinctions. Thus, in the second quatrain, the emperor calls for Daniel, who, despite being an alien captive in Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom), openly censures the king. This quatrain recreates the sense of the biblical scene without evincing particular fidelity to the specifics of the second chapter of the Book of Daniel. For example, Keats applies a Shakespearean phrase appositionally (and anachronistically) to introduce Daniel—the “‘Good King of Cats’” (5) is what Mercutio calls Tybalt just before the latter slays the former (*Romeo and Juliet* III.1.76). Furthermore, Daniel’s association with the lions is established in the scriptural text only after Nebuchadnezzar’s death (that is, in the sixth chapter). Such confusions should not be taken as evidence of Keats’s unfamiliarity with biblical sources; the poet, in a 31 March 1819 letter, advised his sister, Fanny Keats, to study the imagery of Daniel’s second chapter as preparation for her Confirmation (II.50). Rather, Keats purposefully mixes these allusions to demystify Daniel and, with an undercurrent of humor, to humble the prophet without discrediting his anti-monarchical message.¹⁹ Thus Keats’s pastiche of scriptural and Shakespearean references serves to uphold equality among housewife, seer, and king.
Unlike the typical Italian sonnet—that is, one styled after the Petrarchan model with respect to rhyme scheme and the movement of ideas—“Before he went” does not resolve in its sestet the problem that is introduced in its octave. Instead, the poem’s closing verses sharpen the critical tone of the first eight lines as the focus shifts from the scriptural past to the Regency present. Keats thus indicts the art and artists of his day, as well as the Tory government, by contemporizing the poem’s frame of reference. What he ultimately condemns is vatic Romanticism itself, a type of poetic expression that, when he composed the sonnet in 1817, was evoked most recently by Coleridge’s volume *Sibylline Leaves* (which Keats read shortly after its publication) and, later in the year, by Shelley’s long poem *Laon and Cythna* (which he mentions in the “Negative Capability” letter of December 1817) (I.194). This condemnation, moreover, reflects Keats’s basic distrust of the transcendent idealism upon which vatic Romanticism is founded.

Ronald A. Sharp, in *Keats, Skepticism, and the Religion of Beauty*, writes that “unlike Blake or Wordsworth or Coleridge, Keats maintained a deep and abiding skepticism about the possibility of knowing with certainty any kind of transcendent or higher reality” because “the imagination was an exclusively human agency serving purely human ends. Its religious function was not to mediate a holy communion with higher reality but to endow human life with beauty, which he regarded as holy not because it was part of some grand scheme of things, but simply because it made life worth living” (5). Keats is never oblivious to the dangers of vatic Romanticism. In the early piece, “Sleep and Poetry” (1816), for example, Keats celebrates that poetry
shall bear his speaker to “the fair / Visions of all places” (62-3) “if I can bear / The o’erwhelming sweets” (61-2). As his career progresses, Keats reiterates his hesitance regarding visionary experience; in The Fall of Hyperion, the poem on which he was working at the time of the Peterloo Massacre in August 1819, Keats asserts that “Poesy alone can tell her dreams” (I.8) because “the fine spell of words alone can save / Imagination from the sable charm / And dumb enchantment” (I.9-11).

Vision, therefore, may properly be articulated only by poets and in written art, “Since every man whose soul is not a clod / Hath visions” (Fall I.13-14). Keats’s idea of the visionary poet thus recalls the words of Theseus in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream (c. 1594-95):

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,

Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;

And as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen

Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name. (5.1.12-17)

In this way, Theseus distinguishes poets from “lovers and madmen” (5.1.4); similarly, Keats, in the Fall, asserts the difference between poets and “fanatics” (I.1). This difference, for Keats, sets the poet apart from both the scriptural Daniel and the Daniel of the Regency pub, neither of whom performs the artist’s work. Without such a distinction, the poetic imagination loses its special value as a force for political, social, and intellectual change.
Through its skepticism, Keats’s “Before he went” both recapitulates “Sleep and Poetry” and anticipates The Fall of Hyperion. Accordingly, the sonnet serves to indicate the poet’s developing thoughts on both Romantic aesthetics and postwar political critique. In his 17-27 September 1819 letter to George and Georgiana, Keats sketches out his view of the current political milieu vis-à-vis his take on the history of English politics and arrives at the conclusion that English and French liberalism “sowed the seed of opposition to […] Tyranny” that inspired the French Revolution (II.193). The Revolution, however, “had an unlucky termination. It put a stop to the rapid progress of free sentiments in England; and gave our Court hopes of turning back to the despotism of the 16 century” (II.193). The Hanoverian regime, in Keats’s analysis, from the first exploited the French Revolution “in every way to undermine our freedom. They spread a horrid superstition against all innovation and improvement” (II.193). The poet summarizes by proclaiming that “the present struggle of the people is to destroy this superstition” (II.193).

For Keats, postwar political repression reflects the anachronistic worldview shared by both the crown and the government, a retrogressive perspective that works against the “grand march of intellect” (I.282) of which he wrote to J. H. Reynolds on 3 May 1818. Given that he employs this phrase to describe the differences between Wordsworth and Milton (the former being a superior poet of “the human heart”) (I.282), we may infer that Keats aligns, by the time of the St. Peter’s Field Massacre, his thought on literary history with his interpretation of contemporary politics. “Before he went” reflects this important alignment by criticizing what its author
deems anachronistic within Romantic visionary poetry itself. The sonnet offers the view that the scriptural inheritance behind Regency-era ideas of prophecy hinders rather than helps the development of political critique at a time when such critique is crucial. For Keats, the Bible is “figurative” ([LJK II.67]), a source of insight into worldly human existence, not a revelation of divine truth. By adopting scriptural precedents too seriously and uncritically, poets forfeit their power to speak to human beings in the here and now. As a result, postwar English poetry fails to contribute in a real way to intellectual and political progress because it appropriates an idiom, identity, and purpose which is not its own.

Keats’s sonnet is not an attack on Christianity; although suspicious of the “pious frauds of Religion” ([LJK II.80]), Keats acknowledges, “Yet through all this I see his splendour” ([LJK II.80]). The poet appreciates Christ Himself as a great philosopher, a help to humankind. At the same time, Keats distinguishes carefully between the mysteries of theology and the realities of poetry. As M. H. Abrams claims, Keats ascertained “that a poem, like any other work of art, is a material as well as a significant thing,” perhaps “the most intimately human” material art (38). By nature, poetry belongs to the material realm, and its role is defined by the fact: “Nothing ever becomes real,” Keats writes, “till it is experienced—Even a Proverb is no proverb to you till your Life has illustrated it” (II.81). Therefore, when he speculates on God, the poet admits that he is “straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness” (II.80). Given such distinctions, we better understand that “Before he went” criticizes Christianity less than it chastises the prevailing aesthetics of the day.
The sonnet warns against the consequences of spiritualizing, even etherealizing poetry to meet the requirements of the theological tradition. The poem thus asserts a skepticism toward Romantic visionary poetics that appears throughout Keats’s work but bears particular relevance as the poet’s thinking on art and politics matures.

* * *

Keats wrote all of his major poetry by late 1819; between his engagement to Fanny Brawne in December of that year and his death in Italy in 1821, he lived only fourteen months. What this fact establishes—and what the arrangement of this study’s chapters perhaps conceals—is that Keats’s œuvre predates the publications of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, Byron’s *The Vision of Judgment*, and Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*. While it is the case that Keats’s body of work chronologically precedes these key works of Romantic prophecy, the influence of the former on subsequent generations of British writers far surpasses the influence of the latter. This assertion bears a twofold significance: in the first and more general sense, we may claim, with David Bromwich, that Keats exerted “an immense influence on the Victorians” by experimenting with both poetic form and subject matter (*Hazlitt* 401); in the second and more particular sense, Keats subverts vatic poetics so thoroughly that his canon, together with Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel, essentially discontinue the nineteenth-century line of vision.

This discontinuation, of course, is neither immediate nor complete. For example, Herbert F. Tucker argues that Alfred Tennyson’s juvenilia, including poems such as “Armageddon” (c. 1824-25; later “Timbuctoo,” 1829), register Tennyson’s attempt to
craft verse in the Romantic visionary vein (40-1). But even after Tennyson abandons his youthful fascination with Romantic prophecy, he maintains a passionate interest in Keats: “Nothing he ever read moved Tennyson more deeply,” Tucker asserts, “than Keats’s renditions of inevitable process in ‘To Autumn,’ Hyperion, and elsewhere” (77). And although he “often denigrated Keats’s poetic style,” Tennyson “unswervingly” applauded Keats’s “genius” (Tucker 77). Tucker’s analysis of the young Tennyson provides simply one important illustration, from myriad possibilities, of Keats’s lasting influence on the British poets of the early Victorian period. Critical treatments of the subject include George Harry Ford’s classic Keats and the Victorians and, more recently, James Najarian’s book-length study entitled Victorian Keats.21

Keats’s legacy was of importance also to the more literate reformers of the early Victorian years. The Chartist leaders William Lovett and Thomas Cooper, as Richard D. Altick notes in The English Common Reader (1957), were especially interested in literature’s value as an instrument of political and social reform: “Chartist meetings were unusual in the history of English political agitation in that, when no immediate political topic required discussion, Cooper lectured on Milton, Shakespeare, and Burns” (207). Furthermore, “at least one Chartist publication, W. J. Linton’s The National: A Library for the People (1839) printed selections from great English authors” whose works engaged the principles and ideals of Chartist populism. Linton included Keats along with Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Leigh Hunt (Altick 207).
As the examples of Tennyson’s juvenilia and the Chartists’ literary interests illustrate, Keats significantly influences the intellectuals who come to prominence in the years following the passing of the Great Reform Bill (1832) and the accession of Queen Victoria (1837). In light of this claim, we may better evaluate how his challenge to Romantic-era vatic art helps to put a hasty end to the visionary line in Victorian England. Certainly, Keats’s skeptical view of Romantic prophecy reflects that the young poet possessed a critical, assertive mind and a preference for material realities over metaphysical speculations. Keats rejects a literature that, whether forthrightly or by implication, fosters the hope of transcendence at a moment of historical crisis, specifically, the years of the postwar Regency in England. The grounds of this rejection, however, bear relevance beyond the scope of Keats’s lifetime because the poet’s skepticism and radical materialism anticipate the artistic temperament and intellectual concerns that prevail in the early decades of the Victorian period.

Within twenty years of Keats’s death, a number of important national reforms were enacted, including Catholic Emancipation (1829), the 1833 Factory Act (which placed restrictions on child labor), the abolition of slavery throughout the empire (1834), and the Municipal Reform Act (1835). The Anti-Corn Law League came into existence in 1838, as did the radical Chartist movement. The age was one of rapid political and social change, and much of the day’s literature reflects the reformist spirit that brought about positive legislation in the 1830s and agitated for further improvements well into the troubled 1840s and beyond. Novelists such as
Elizabeth Gaskell, Fanny Trollope, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Dinah Maria Mulock, and Benjamin Disraeli produced fiction, set either in the contemporary moment or recent past, in which various social and political problems receive intensive treatment. Harriet Martineau and Thomas Carlyle, of course, were also important social reformers who worked in prose. And the poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Caroline Norton, and Thomas Hood, like the prose authors whom I have mentioned, addressed political and social wrongs in their works, especially during the 1830s and 1840s.\textsuperscript{23}

Despite the fact that several Romantic poets espouse reformist ideals through their visionary texts, the writers of the post-Romantic era—a time distinguished by struggles to transform the political organization, social structure, and economic realities of the nation—favor a type of materialist realism perhaps more evocative of the wit tradition than the line of vision. This shift in the literary atmosphere of the times is partly explained by “the achievement of cultural hegemony by the bourgeoisie” during the Romantic period, as Jackie DiSalvo notes (“Blake” 181).\textsuperscript{24}

The ascendance of middle class ideology and taste in early nineteenth-century England reverberates in Victorian literature from the 1830s on. The Romantic vatic stance, although it develops in concurrence with the rise of the bourgeoisie, appears by the dawn of the Victorian age to belong to a distinctly separate moment in cultural history. To be sure, the reformist values of Romantic poet-prophets like Blake and Shelley endure beyond 1832; but their individual aesthetic codes, their visionary poetics, for the most part do not.
Douglas Bush offers an illuminating example of this second point by asserting that the Romantic poets “had been both teachers and artists” and, with these writers, “however ornate they might be, style remained a means, it did not become an end in itself” (201). In Tennyson, however, discernable changes take place:

In *The Palace of Art*, for instance, Tennyson poses much the same question that had troubled Shelley and Keats: can the individual live in an intellectual and artistic world of his own, or does he need the nourishment of ordinary human life and sympathy with the common lot? In spite of the artistic faults of *Alastor* and *Endymion*, no one can doubt that Shelley and Keats are stirred to their depths by the problem they try to solve. Tennyson is more palpably didactic [. . .] he is not struggling toward a glimpse of the truth, he has apparently always known it. (201-2)

Tennyson’s poem, as Bush interprets it, embodies aesthetic preferences which reflect the early Victorian bourgeois cast of mind. These preferences include a stress on moral edification, as well as an emphasis on stylistic embellishment. Both considerations, of course, evoke the aesthetics of wit rather than the poetics of vision. If we allow Tennyson to represent the early Victorian literary imagination, and if we view *The Palace of Art* as an emblematic product of the 1830s and 1840s, we may recognize that both the poet and his poem stand at a remarkable distance from the Romantic seer-poets and their vatic art.

By virtue of his skepticism and materialist perspective, particularly as these bear on his idea of visionary poetry, Keats helps to facilitate the downfall of Romantic
prophecy as a viable poetic approach in the era of the Great Reform Bill. Certainly, Keats shares little, either artistically or ideologically, with his Victorian heirs. At the same time, his critique of Romantic prophecy bequeaths to the Victorians a distrust of transcendent idealism that, very quickly after his death, becomes a cultural instinct at a moment when social reform and political agitation promised to bring what Keats hoped to see in his own lifetime, that is, “a continual change for the better” (LJK II.193).

Of course, the Victorian era saw instances of engagement with the English visionary tradition, including shorter pieces such as Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” (c. 1885-87), longer poems such as Tennyson’s Idylls of the King (completed 1888), and novels such as William Morris’s novel News from Nowhere (1890). Rudyard Kipling’s Kim (1901) plays on a convention of the tradition to frame the title character’s youthful adventures; he is told: “there will come for you a great Red Bull on a green field, and the Colonel riding on his tall horse, yes, and [. . .] nine hundred devils” (2). A survey of such engagements, including those rendered with comic irony (the Colonel and devils are soldiers of the British Raj), reveals that the visionary idiom so important to the British Romantics became marginal, even eccentric, throughout the Victorian period. Much more representatively Victorian is the narrator’s proclamation in George Eliot’s novel, Middlemarch (1871-72): “Among all forms of mistake, prophecy is the most gratuitous” (I.x.77). If Hopkins, the older Tennyson, and Morris recall the Lake Poets and Shelley, then Eliot surely evokes Keats and the fled music of Romantic vision.
In light of this assertion, the reader may see that Keats’s placement at the end of this study reflects his lastingly significant influence on the Victorians. Although he wrote virtually all of his poetical works before *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Vision of Judgment*, and *The Last Man* appeared in print, Keats provides a critique of Romantic visionary poetics that echoes throughout the literature of Victorian England. Moreover, Keats accomplishes through verse what Mary Shelley achieves through prose, namely, the subversion of the visionary mode as a practicable compositional technique. The final effects of this literary sabotage become clear after the age of Liverpool and George IV passes. All the same, its beginnings may be traced back to Keats’s earliest postwar work.

* * *

In this study, I have presented a critical narrative that partly counters Joseph Wittreich’s description of the Romantic line of vision. My purpose has not been to discredit the theory of an English visionary lineage in which constituent artists share aesthetic and ideological codes across generations. Rather, I have sought to reconsider Wittreich’s own critical narrative with a twofold focus on the distinctiveness of the younger Romantic poets and the particularity of the post-Napoleonic historical moment. By conducting my analysis in this fashion, I have endeavored to redraw the sketch of the British Romantics that Wittreich offers, thereby demonstrating that the visionary line theory continues to provide a useful framework through which to study the Romantics, their works, and their relations to the literary past. My hope is that this discussion reveals the model’s adaptability and
contemporary relevance to the study of frequently neglected writers such as Anne Bannerman, Louisa Costello, Mary Tighe, Margaret Chalmers, and Anna Seward, to cite only a few examples. Further interventions into Wittreich’s work may help to amplify the scope of the scholar’s incisive theories while sharpening their historical specificity. In this light, the case of the second generation British Romantics, as I have presented it, suggests not the end of the English visionary tradition but rather a new critical beginning.
Notes

Introduction


2 I use the adjectives *wartime* and *postwar* to describe the first and second generations of British Romantic writers, respectively. The former, at times also referred to in this study as the older or early Romantic generation, includes artists such as William Blake, Mary Robinson, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Joanna Baillie, Sir Walter Scott, and the Lake Poets, namely, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey. The latter, also referred to as the younger or later Romantic generation, includes Byron, the Shelleys, and Keats, as well as artists such as John Clare and Felicia Dorothea Hemans. Although most of these authors wrote during the Regency period, the older Romantics produced important work over the course of the wartime period (1793-1815), before most of the younger Romantics reached maturity.

3 Throughout this study, I employ words and phrases from Wittreich’s critical vocabulary, including *visionary poetics*, *line of wit*, and *line of vision*. Generally, the first of these terms refers to a representative code of aesthetics, whereas the second and third terms pertain to the ways in which Wittreich theorizes English literary history. In the essay, I use *visionary poetics* as a singular compound noun. Also throughout the piece, I treat the words *prophecy* and *vision* synonymously; moreover,
for the sake of variety, I interchange the terms as poet-prophet, seer-poet, visionary, and vates to describe writers who work in the Miltonic vein (this point is asserted also in chapter one, page eleven).

4 Although I reference William Blake and his work throughout this essay, I wish to note that Blake was largely unknown in his own time. Consequently, the younger Romantics, who at times put the reader in mind of Blake, most likely did not have Blake in mind when they composed their visionary works.

5 The term visionary poetics is not restricted solely to literature rendered in verse. Throughout this study (and in the fourth chapter particularly), the term encompasses relevant prose as well as poetry. Accordingly, I regard Mary Shelley’s The Last Man as a work of visionary poetics and interpret the novel as such.

Chapter One

Visionary Poetics and Regency Romanticism

Wittreich heatedly contests Bloom’s The Anxiety of Influence in Angel of Apocalypse: Blake’s Idea of Milton (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1975); see especially 221-250. Wittreich refrains generally from remarking on Bate; but James Rieger, in his essay “Wordsworth Unalarm’d” from the Wittreich-edited Milton and the Line of Vision (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1975), positions his reading of Wordsworth against Bate and Bloom alike (and, by extension, Havens; see 185-86 and n. 3, 186-87). Tellingly, Lucy Newlyn praises Bate’s “Freudian explanation of anxiety” (see Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader, 14). Reeves and Fletcher are
cited throughout Wittreich’s 1970s corpus. Wittreich indicts Havens for creating “a model of poetic influence which led T. S. Eliot to conclude that Milton had been a bad influence—could only be a bad influence—on his successors” (“Preface,” MLV, xiii). Curiously, Robin Jarvis likens Wittreich to Havens; see Wordsworth, Milton and the Theory of Poetic Relations, 136. Wittreich critiques Taylor—a prominent source for Sharon L. Jansen’s Political Protest and Prophecy under Henry VIII (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991)—by claiming that Taylor’s “description of prophecy is insufficiently pointed and generally unsophisticated” (Visionary Poetics 219 n. 6). He acknowledges that Taylor was one of the first scholars to see prophecy “as a clearly defined literary genre” (VP 219 n. 6) but adds that “Taylor’s conclusions are extrapolated from non-biblical prophecy [. . .] and the form he describes has but one characteristic—obscurity” (VP 219 n. 6). Jansen writes more approvingly of Taylor; see Political Protest and Prophecy, 9-10 and ns. 1 and 2, 9-10.

Although he references both Roston’s Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1965) and Murray’s The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), Wittreich rarely engages either critic directly in his 1970s work. On the other hand, he takes Kerrigan to task for asserting, in The Prophetic Milton (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1974), “‘the prophetic Milton’ as his own discovery” (VP xvii). Wittreich notes that Kerrigan “does not admit to being preempted in the early nineteenth century by William Blake or William Ellery Channing [. . .] nor to having been anticipated in his own century” by scholars such
as Herbert J. C. Grierson, Charles Roden Buxton, Merritt Y. Hughes, Angus Fletcher, and Michael Lieb (VP 218 n. 5).

I mention Peter F. Fisher because his study, The Valley of Vision: Blake as Prophet and Revolutionary (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1961; reprinted 1971), seems to me to be in dialogue with several of Wittreich’s arguments (e.g. Fisher 75-77, 227-228). Wittreich does not expressly reference Fisher in any of the major 1970s works on the English visionary tradition.

2 Hereafter, I abbreviate Milton and the Line of Vision as MLV in all parenthetical citations.

3 As the mention of James Joyce suggests, Wittreich’s idea of visionary poetics does not preclude authors whose principal accomplishments are works in prose rather than in verse. This specification is particularly relevant within this study to Mary Shelley, whose novel, The Last Man, I consider as a key part of the Romantic visionary corpus.


6 Barbara Lewalski, in Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), asserts a relevant point:

Milton’s assumptions about the prophetic role accord generally with those of the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonist John Smith, for whom the term encompasses all forms of divine illumination of the mind. Smith’s lucid summary of Hebrew tradition identified many kinds of prophets: those of the highest rank who (like Moses) were illuminated by direct impression upon their intellect; those several varieties of “true” prophets who received their revelation through the imagination—in visions or the lower mode of dreams; and those who (like David the Psalmist and other biblical poets) spoke “by the Holy Spirit,” as enlightened but not directly inspired. Prophets of all kinds were alike, however, in having to devise appropriate conceptual and stylistic forms for the revelations they received in their several ways from God. (25)


10 See William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar (1599), 1.2.18-24, and Macbeth (c. 1606-1607), 1.3.48-78.


12 Lewalski, Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms, 254-55.

13 Stuart Curran maintains that Romantic-era authors frequently invoked Milton and Paradise Lost simply as a conventional gesture that answered certain readers’ basic expectations: “Milton’s achievement in this culminating section of the poem provided the model for a set piece borrowed by his emulators and usable in a variety
of situations. It was so much a set piece for Southey that he removed ‘The Vision of the Maid of Orleans’ from *Joan of Arc* and printed it separately. There is a fictive prophetic vision in *Gebir*, and, as a concluding book, in Cottle’s *Messiah* and Richard Payne Knight’s *Alfred*” (171). See Curran’s *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986).


15 Anne Bannerman (1765-1829) is best known for *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (1802); Louisa Stuart Costello (1799-1870) published *The Maid of Cyprus Isle and Other Poems* in 1815.

16 By giving DiSalvo the primary position in this generation, I do not wish to suggest that the other three critics should be defined or measured against her. My use of her surname in the phrase DiSalvo generation simply acknowledges that she was the first of these fine scholars, to my knowledge, to publish on the English visionary tradition (specifically, in 1975, with her essay, “Blake Encountering Milton: Politics and the Family in *Paradise Lost* and *The Four Zoas,*” 143-84, in *Milton and the Line of Vision*).

17 The two Hill works most important to my study are *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (1972; London: Penguin, 1991) and *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1977). In parenthetical references, the former is abbreviated as *World* and the latter as *Milton*.

18 Also see Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 164.
19 Hill elaborates his perspective on this point in “A Nation of Prophets,” the sixth chapter of *The World Turned Upside Down*, 87-106; see especially 90-6.

20 Anne Janowitz, in *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), makes a comment on Chartist literature that touches upon the discussion at hand: “For in an important sense, in the late 1830s a confident bourgeois literary culture was only shaping itself and gathering strength as an aspect of what would become the liberal, political, and intellectual hegemony later in the century. Chartist poetry quite interestingly exhibits the strains of a struggle to define itself literally in a context in which the working class was also just coming into being as a coherent force. Chartist poetry and literary culture took on the task of wresting away the middle class’s own claim to universality by providing its own alternative, though equally purposive genealogy” (144). Quoting from an 11 July, 1840 piece that appeared in the Chartist Circular, Janowitz suggests that the Chartists sought to align themselves with poets such as Burns, Byron, and Percy Shelley as a means to establish class identity: “the Chartist poetic notion of popular sovereignty aimed to define a nation, and the nation would be born not from pure Painite and rationalist first principles, but out of and in relation to an inherited tradition, a tradition linked to the land, a tradition named and diffused through first- and second-generation Spenceans, and finding form again in the Chartist Land Plan of the later 1840s” (144-45).

21 Tannenbaum treats each poem in a separate chapter: he discusses America in chapter v., 124-51; Europe in chapter vi., 152-84; The Song of Los in chapter vii.,
185-200; The Book of Urizen in chapter viii., 201-24; The Book of Ahania in chapter ix., 225-50; and The Book of Los in chapter x., 251-81.

22 Tannenbaum also states that “Blake later abandons this project, as he becomes more interested in fusing biblical prophecy with the epic mode, casting the entire vision of the Bible in a single work” (7), and he mentions three works, namely The Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem, through which Blake pursues this ambition. For a discussion of the relationship between epic and prophecy, see Wittreich, Visionary Poetics, 26.


25 For her views on Harold Bloom, see Newlyn, Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader, 14-15.


nineteenth-century British expansionism.

29 All references to Southey’s A Vision of Judgment are to Byron and Southey: Vision of Judgment, edited by E. M. Earl and James Hogg (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1998).


31 For representative commentary on this point, see Maurice Hindle’s introduction to Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus (London: Penguin, 1992), xix-xxxv.


33 For specifics on Blake’s trial for sedition, refer to Peter Ackroyd, Blake (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 244-53.


36 See The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth (1787-1805), ed.


Chapter Two

“A light like a green star”:

Love’s Prophetic Reformation in Percy Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound

1 All quotations of Shelley, unless otherwise specified, are drawn from Reiman and Fraistat, eds., Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 2nd edition (New York and London: Norton, 2002).

2 See Shelley’s note seven to Hellas in Reiman and Fraistat, 463-4.

3 See Shelley’s note seven to Hellas in Reiman and Fraistat, 463-4.


5 Wittreich’s essay appears in The Age of William Wordsworth: Critical Essays on


7 As indicated earlier, quotes from The Prelude are drawn from the Wordsworth, Abrams, and Gill edition.


10 For the text of “Prometheus,” see McGann, The Complete Poetical Works IV, 31-33.


13 See also Stuart Curran’s “The Political Prometheus” in Spirits of Fire: English Romantic Writers and Contemporary Historical Methods, ed. G. A. Rosso and Daniel
P. Watkins (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990), 260-84.


16Note that throughout this study I use the Authorized King James Version of the Bible, as introduced and annotated by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

17Sperry draws here on the speech of the First Fury, who says “We are the ministers of pain and fear / And disappointment and mistrust and hate.” See *Prometheus Unbound* I.452-53.

18Consider also McNiece’s note, informed by Jean Charles Lacretelle’s account, that “the more violent and fanatical women of the French Revolution were often called the Furies” and that “the [anonymous] author of *The Female Revolutionary* Plutarch had a chapter entitled ‘Furies of the Guillotine.’ It described the activities of an organization so named by Robespierre” (fn.2, 28). McNiece argues that Lacretelle, “who completed in a quite different spirit the history of the Revolution which Rabaut St. Étienne had begun” (31), “was interested in causes and motives” (31):

    He shows how the Constituent Assembly paved the way for August 10 and what he called the triumph of savagery and mediocrity. He analyzes the defects
of policy and temperament of the Girondists. He explains how the approach of the foreign armies and the civil war in the Vendée brought about the September Massacres. He describes how the seat of power shifted from the Assembly to the Jacobins and the Commune, how attempts to stop the progress of tyranny merely redoubled the violence. After reading this dramatic account of the fear, hatred, and anarchy of the Terror, Shelley must have understood better Napoleon’s rise and his role in the Revolution. (31-32)

McNiece deems The Female Revolutionary Plutarch “mainly a gossip book, both antirevolutionary and anti-Napoleonic, and it is inscribed to the revered memory of Marie Antoinette” (28). He adds that the work offers a warning to “Englishmen who might nourish hope for reform” by highlighting the fact that “18, 613 French citizens, reformers and reformed, died at the guillotine” (29). See McNiece, Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), 28-32.

19See Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, Volume II: Purgatory, trans. Mark Musa (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985). Note also the concluding lines of Dante’s Inferno (“I saw the lovely things the heavens hold, / and we came out to see once more the stars”), XXXIV.138-39, and the final verses of Paradise (“My will and my desire were turned by love, / The love that moves the sun and other stars”), XXXIII.144-45. For the former, see The Divine Comedy, Volume I: Inferno, trans. Mark Musa (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984); for the latter, see The Divine Comedy, Volume III: Paradise, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988).
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24 For Wittreich’s view on *The Cenci*, see “Prophecy,” 57.

25 For the text of Shelley’s essay, see Reiman and Fraistat, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 509-35.

26 For Shelley on the sister arts, see “A Defence of Poetry,” Reiman and Fraistat, 513.


28 I borrow the Latin phrase from Wittreich, *Visionary Poetics*, 75.
29 For the source of the quote from Thomas Goodwin, see Wittreich, Visionary Poetics, 232, fn. 102.

30 Mary Shelley’s novel, Frankenstein, was adapted for the stage by Richard Brinsley Peake in 1823 as Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein.

31 For a discussion of the Book of Revelation as a visionary drama, see Wittreich, Visionary Poetics, 39-40.


33 For the date of completion for act four, refer to Reiman and Fraistat, 202.


39 See Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, “Figures of Romantic Anticapitalism,” in
Spirits of Fire, 23-68, especially 54.


41 For example, see Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, IV.143 and IV.153-58.

Chapter Three

The Privilege of Southey’s Damnation:

Visionary Poetry and the Devil Scripture in Lord Byron’s *The Vision of Judgment*


3 The reference to the Book of Tobit (specifically, Tobit 11.7-15) was in part suggested by Paul Turner’s introduction to his translation of *Utopia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 8.


7 See both McGann’s commentary, *The Complete Poetical Works*, Vol. VI, 672,
and Byron’s Letters and Journals, Vol. 9, 95-100.

8Byron’s Letters and Journals, Vol. 9, 102 and fn. 1, and 116-118.


14The Vision of Judgment is shortened to TVJ in all parenthetical citations.

15Bainbridge adds: “There is no evidence to suggest that Byron had read The Poet’s Pilgrimage before writing Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage III. Yet it is tempting to suggest that he would have been aware of this latest example of ‘cant’ ‘political’ and ‘poetical’, particularly as it had provocatively usurped his own notion of ‘Pilgrimage’ and yoked it to a poem which sought to legitimize not only the social and political establishments of restoration Europe, but the writer’s own position as Poet Laureate” (177). For further discussion of Byron’s take on Waterloo and its aftermath, see Bainbridge, Napoleon and English Romanticism (Cambridge:
Cambridge UP, 1995), 177-82.

16 See Complete Poetical Works, II, for the text of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.

17 Cain is the central protagonist of Cain, A Mystery (1821); Alp and Hugo are Byronic heroes who appear in the Eastern romances The Siege of Corinth and Parínsa, respectively (both 1816).

18 The moment commands some interest as a Romantic-era precursor to the mise en abyme technique employed in the twentieth century by writers such as André Gide and Italo Calvino. See The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, 513.

19 Hill’s Milton and the English Revolution is cited as MER in parenthetical citations throughout the remainder of this chapter.

20 For Kern on Henry Fielding, see Dramatic Satire in the Age of Walpole 1720-1750 (Ames: Iowa State UP, 1976), especially 45.

21 For the text of “Churchill’s Grave,” see Complete Poetical Works, Vol. IV, 1-2; for commentary, see 447-48.


23 See Reiman and Fraistat, Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 337-38.


25 By 26 April, 1821, Byron had read Shelley’s The Cenci but not Prometheus
Unbound. See Byron’s Letters and Journals, Vol. 8, 103-4.

26 See also Wolf Z. Hirst’s essay, “Byron’s Revisionary Struggle with the Bible,” in Byron, the Bible, and Religion: Essays from the Twelfth International Byron Seminar, ed. Hirst (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1991), especially 87. In this essay, Hirst discusses Byron’s disinclination to accept the idea of sinners’ everlasting suffering. Warren Stevenson’s “Hebraism and Hellenism in the Poetry of Byron” also appears in this collection.


31 For speculation on Junius’s identity, see Collected Poetical Works, Vol. VI., 676-7.

32 To this point, see Edward T. Duffy, “Byron Representing Himself against Southey,” History and Myth, 188-201, especially 192.

33 As a point of reference, see Paul Langford’s essay, “The Eighteenth Century (1688-1789),” in The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain, 352-418.

34 See The Vision of Judgment, stanzas 72 and 73, ll. 569-584.


Chapter Four

Time and the Sibyl in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man

1 All quotations of Shelley’s novel are drawn from Anne McWhir’s edition of The Last Man (Peterborough: Broadview, 1996).


3 Lynch contends that Scott’s Waverley, for example, exhibits a “political quietism” in certain of its “image[s]” representing history: “Scott’s determinism closes down the political possibilities that republican historiographers such as Godwin and [J. C. L. Simonde de] Sismondi were attempting to keep open” (139). Lynch states also that “beneath William Godwin’s interest in seventeenth-century English republicanism and Shelley’s friend Sismondi’s research on Italy’s medieval city-states lay the belief that, by studying the past, one would not only discover the
inner mechanism of historical change, but would by that means demonstrate that the forward progress of liberty was only temporarily halted” (138). See Lynch’s essay in The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003): 135-150.

4 The actress and poet Mary Robinson, of course, was known as Perdita, after her most famous stage role. It is unclear whether Shelley had Robinson in mind when naming this character. It is also uncertain whether she chose her protagonist’s surname to reflect some connection with Sir Edmund Verney, a royalist who fell at the Battle of Edgehill, or with any other member of the Verney family. On Sir Edmund, see Ian Gentles’s “The Civil Wars in England” in The Civil Wars: A Military History of England, Scotland, and Ireland 1638-1660, ed. John Kenyon and Jane Ohlmeyer (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 133. On the Verney family, see Adrian Tinniswood, The Verneys (New York: Penguin Group, 2007).

5 For a discussion of Verney’s somewhat conflicted use of political rhetoric (including his generous citations of Edmund Burke, startling enough given that Shelley was Mary Wollstonecraft’s daughter), see McWhir’s introduction to The Last Man, xxxiii-xxxiv.


7 For an interesting discussion of the museum during the Romantic period, see Laurie Kane Lew, “Collection and Recollection: William Hazlitt and the Poetics of


9The information here is drawn from the “Chronological Tables: 1772-1834” section of The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 16.1.1., lxxii.


15See Audrey A. Fisch, “Plaguing Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction, and The Last Man,” The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein, especially 267-86.


20 See Barbara Jane O’Sullivan, “Beatrice in Valperga: A New Cassandra,” in The Other Mary Shelley, 140-158. The Wolf piece that O’Sullivan references is the 1982 work, Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays (142; 157, fn. 4). Although she focuses on Shelley’s second published novel, O’Sullivan offers through her argument a way of looking at Shelley’s The Last Man that benefits the present analysis.


22 See The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814-1844, ed. Feldman and Scott-Kilvert, 162.
Chapter Five

“Fled is that music”: John Keats’s Challenge to Romantic Vision


2 Parenthetical references to Stillinger’s The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats’s Poems (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1971) are hereafter shortened to Madeline.


4 De Almeida states also that, “through the figure of Apollo, Western mythology has connected poetry and the making of music with the creation of medicine and that power of life and death inherent in the practice of physic; in Apollo’s legendary foresight amid his arts it has allied, furthermore, the physician’s tasks of diagnosis and prognostication with the basic powers of divination and prophecy” (17). For further discussion of Keats’s idea of Apollo, see de Almeida, Romantic Medicine and John Keats (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 39-42, 276.


6 Newey addresses the depiction of Apollo in Hyperion (Fall 1818 to April 1819) and in The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream (July to September 1819) and concludes that Saturn, the sovereign god displaced by the Olympians (of whom Apollo is one), resembles not only “fallen dynasts [like] Napoleon and Lear,” but suggests “also a


8 An interesting analogy may be made to Albert Camus’s remarks in a journal entry for December, 1938:

*Faust* the other way around. The young man asks the devil for the goods of this world. The devil [. . .] gently replies: “But you already have the goods of the world. You must ask God for what you lack—if you really do think that you do lack anything. You can strike a bargain with God, and in exchange for the goods of the next world you can sell him your body.”

After a pause, the devil lights an English cigarette and says: “And that will be your eternal punishment.” (113-14)


Keats casts the theory of Negative Capability with express reference to Shakespeare; see The Letters of John Keats I.191-94, especially 193. I include Kucich’s name in the parenthetical reference, despite mentioning his name beforehand, to distinguish his page numbers from those for Keats’s letter.

See The Letters of John Keats, I.259-63.

Hereafter, I shorten the title of Keats’s sonnet to “Before he went.” Although Ward, among others, refers to the sonnet as “Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream” (149), I adopt the title that Stillinger employs in his critical edition of Keats’s verse. For further discussion of Keats’s sonnets in general, both in terms of content and style, see John Kandl’s “The Politics of Keats’s Early Poetry,” especially 3-8 and 13-17, and Susan J. Wolfson’s “Late Lyrics,” especially 104-12, in The Cambridge Companion to Keats, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

The image is so recognizable among Romanticists that Pickering and Chatto Publishers employ it for the cover of a 2008 catalogue of titles in Romanticism.


These citations are provided by John Barnard in his annotations to the sonnet (which he entitles “Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream,” as Ward does) in John Keats, The Complete Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 612.

For Byron’s “Vision of Belshazzar” and “To the Prince Regent,” see The
Complete Poetical Works, III.303-4 and IV.242, respectively. For Shelley’s


18 Barnard notes that “Keats also uses the image of the downfall of Babylon to
prophesy the end of Tory tyranny in Endymion III, 18-21” (The Collected Poems
612). See also Ward, John Keats: The Making of a Poet, 149.

19 For a discussion of Keats’s sense of humor, see Jack Stillinger, “Multiple
Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats,” in The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial
Essays on Keats, ed. Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (Amherst: U of

20 Keats mentions Coleridge’s volume of poems in a November 1817 letter to

21 See George Harry Ford, Keats and the Victorians (Hamden: Archon, 1962), and
James Najarian, Victorian Keats: Manliness, Sexuality, and Desire (New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

22 The dates here are drawn from the “Chronology” section of The Oxford
Illustrated History of Britain, ed. Kenneth O. Morgan (Oxford and New York:

23 See Shirley Foster’s introduction to Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton (Oxford:
Oxford UP), x-xii.

24 See Jackie DiSalvo, “Blake Encountering Milton: Politics and the Family in
Paradise Lost and The Four Zoas,” in Milton and the Line of Vision, ed. Joseph
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