

# DREAM SHAPES AS QUEST OR QUESTION IN SHELLEY'S *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

[ABSTRACT]

In Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, the Oceanides – Asia, Panthea, and Ione – direct the evolution of poetic consciousness through their lyricism which expresses human intuition and what Shelley calls in his 'Defence of Poetry' (1820) 'the before unapprehended relations of things'. Their presence in Shelley's lyrical drama leads from both abstract transcendental and literalist perspectives on reality in Act I to a more flexible and creative inner perspective in Act 2. The internal spaces evoked by the language of the Oceanides, spaces of reverie and dream, are the locus of metaphor – the endowment of absence with meaning and the identification of disparate objects with one another. As in dream, the dissolution of metaphor is integral to its dynamic processes. Asia, her dreams, and the unconscious liberate Prometheus as consciousness from the fixed rigidity which kills both metaphor and purpose; dream unfurls a 'nobler' myth to replace the stagnant one. Although *Prometheus Unbound* cannot narrate its own apotheosis, it weaves the process or spell of metaphor-making: 'These are the spells by which to reassume / An empire o'er the disentangled Doom' (IV, 568–69). After the words have been spoken, meaning must be continually sought in the non-verbal reverberating echoes of the unconscious.

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## **Dream Shapes as Quest or Question in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound***

Where a world of new delights  
Will make thy best glories seem  
But a dim and noontday gleam  
From the shadow of a dream. (Shelley, 'Ode to Heaven', 33–6)

The Oceanides – Asia, Panthea, and Ione – direct the evolution of poetic consciousness in *Prometheus Unbound* through their lyricism which expresses human intuition and 'the before unapprehended relations of things', leading from both

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abstract transcendental and literalist perspectives on reality in Act I to a more flexible and creative inner perspective in Act II.<sup>1</sup> This internal space formed by the Oceanides is the locus of metaphor – the endowment of absence with meaning, the identification of disparate objects with one another – and the dissolution of the resultant tropes. Shelley writes in his ‘A Defence of Poetry’ that poetic language is ‘vitaly metaphorical’ and that all language is originally constituted as poetry: ‘every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem.’<sup>2</sup> It is the role of poets to reanimate the dead metaphors and discover new metaphorical associations in language, what Shelley deems ‘the before unapprehended relations of things’: ‘if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.’<sup>3</sup> In *Prometheus Unbound*, Asia, Panthea and Ione are our ‘new poets’ producing the fresh associations to render the purposes of human intercourse nobler. Moreover, the evolution of the ‘vitaly metaphorical’ language of the Oceanides away from the fixed language of the Jupitorean, which has become ‘dead to all nobler purposes’, parallels a movement from an external realm (Act I) into a world of dreams, particularly in Acts II and IV. Shelley locates the activity of metaphor-making ‘beyond and above consciousness’, an aspect of mind which is similar to the psychoanalytic unconscious through Shelley’s portrayal of the ‘above’ as a descent ‘to the Deep, to the Deep / Down, down’ (II.iii.54–5).<sup>4</sup> Jupiter is located in projected, transcendent imagery, and Asia descends to the Cave of Demogorgon in order to release Jupitorean language, which is also Promethean, from the traditional imagery of heaven and its accompanying moral allegories. In so doing, Asia, her dreams, and the unconscious liberate Prometheus as consciousness from the fixed rigidity which kills both metaphor and purpose; dream unfurls a ‘nobler’ myth to replace the stagnant one.<sup>5</sup>

Donald Davidson writes that ‘metaphor is the dreamwork of language’ and that dream interpretation can reveal how metaphors of consciousness and the unconscious function.<sup>6</sup> Metaphor is the prime ingredient of dream; dream, in its turn, is the seed of myth which weaves a story out of the elements of metaphor and dream – metaphor challenging the primacy of reason and dream exalting metaphor over actuality. The close link between individual dreams and collective myths, as explored in depth by Joseph Campbell, is helpful in understanding Shelley’s poetry. Campbell declared that ‘dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream. Both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche.’<sup>7</sup> That, in anticipation of twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory, Shelley considers dreams to be the origin of myth is apparent in *Prometheus Unbound*. Having presented Jupiter as a projection from the mind of Prometheus in Act I, Shelley takes us in Act II into the world of dream to show that all myths, like the myth of Jupiter (or the Judeo-Christian God which Jupiter also represents), have their genesis in the human imagination. When Asia faces the mysterious source of power, Demogorgon, in the recesses of her own unconscious, she bestows on him some of Jupiter’s mythic characteristics: ‘Fit throne for such a Power! Magnificent!’ (II.iii.11). The throne and the regal image

are restored to their source, an unknown and imageless power ('the deep truth is imageless') revealed to Asia's self through the projected imagery of the unconscious.<sup>8</sup> Since Demogorgon is himself 'ungazed upon and shapeless' (II.iv.5), the anthropomorphic images to describe him owe their existence to human subjectivity: 'yet we feel it is / A living Spirit' (II.iv.6-7).

For Shelley, religion is the result of a metaphorical structure which risks fixity: 'Hence all original religions are allegorical or susceptible of allegory, and like Janus have a double face of false and true'.<sup>9</sup> A metaphor such as 'Jupiter reigns', taken literally, dies as metaphor and becomes frozen, at which point Jupiter becomes a tyrant whose words are law - 'All else has been subdued to me [Jupiter]' (III.i.4) - and populations become captive to their images of a transcendent reality: 'pity the self-despising slaves of Heaven' (I.429). For Shelley, an elaborate metaphorical structure of myth - that Jesus Christ is the son of God who was incarnated on earth to save humanity - once literalized becomes religion. The lyrical drama's language is revitalized through its divestment of obligations to traditional usage and its refusal to be answerable to the signified. The outcome of the poem's radical refiguration of figuration is a restoration of the primitive metaphorical basis of words. Similarly, the way to temper what Shelley saw as the tyranny of religion is to restore it to the level of myth by locating the source of religion in the dreams from which religion arises, a re-positioning of religion as myth which happens through recognition, or, as Barbara Judson observes, 'he presents the mind as capable of understanding the unconscious, and thus of self-determination'.<sup>10</sup> Once Shelley has led his readers to recognize the subjective status of religion as a poetic creation employing anthropomorphic images (for example, God has the form of a man), the imagination becomes free to dream and create newer and more vital metaphors instead of being enslaved by those 'blunted by reiteration' and thus 'dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse'.

According to Carl Jung, dream draws upon primitive or mythic archetypes ('primordial ideas') which form a universal collective unconscious.<sup>11</sup> Such archetypes in literature do not conflict with a poetics of ineffability, for although language may be incapable of containing or expressing mythic archetypes, these can nevertheless be intimated through words. An acknowledgment of mythic structures in the mind does not entail any acceptance of the privileged status for those patterns in relation to history. In anticipation of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century psychology, Shelley recognized archetypes as ideas and images rather than as transcendent religious symbols or doctrines. He charted the direction to be taken in order to examine such ideas inwardly rather than outwardly - 'As my own soul would answer' (II.iv.125). In 'A Defence of Poetry', Shelley implies the existence of an unconscious from which poetry emerges:

Poetry, as has been said, in this respect differs from logic, that it is not subject to the controul of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence has no necessary connexion with consciousness or will.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike in Freud's work or in modern psychoanalytic theory, however, the unconscious is seen as progressive rather than regressive.<sup>13</sup> Although the possibility of a transcendent world is not excluded by Shelley's vision, the continuously transformed and transforming inner world is seen as poetically far more fertile.

In Act I of *Prometheus Unbound*, the source of tyranny is the fixed world of dead metaphor, illustrated by the idea of tyranny figured, and deified, as a literal being, Jupiter, whom a willingly deluded Prometheus accepts as a separate god, 'O Mighty God!' (I.17). Paradoxically, the world of illusory evil in which Jupiter participates is the actual, historical world, whereas the realm of dream which succeeds it in Act II is more real though less actual; as Gaston Bachelard writes, 'dream is stronger than experience'.<sup>14</sup> Shelley maintains that the hidden workings of the unconscious are more powerful than the life of consciousness, and for this reason, Prometheus is unable to free himself through any act of conscious will. Only the secret workings of the unconscious, dramatized by the dreams and journeys of the Oceanides, can liberate him from his own ego projection in the form of Jupiter. According to Judson, '*Prometheus Unbound* mobilizes a feminine unconscious and masks its aggression in the interests of revolutionary change' and hence the movement from Act I to Act II, witnessed as an evolution from referentiality to lyricism and potentiality, and as a dissemination of allegory into metaphor, can be read as a descent from the conscious mind into the more fertile and uncontrolled recesses of the unconscious.<sup>15</sup>

The movement away from consciousness at the end of Act I leads to an examination of the nature of the dream world in Act II, where 'Shelley goes on to deliberately invoke the revolutionary potential of the unconscious'.<sup>16</sup> Freud speculates in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that dreams are born from desire and that every dream is wish-fulfillment in the realm of the psyche.<sup>17</sup> Whether this assertion is valid or not, it is true of the dreams in *Prometheus Unbound*, and the dream's status as wish fulfillment is important to an understanding of the lyrical drama's thematic content. As Michael Scrivener has observed, 'the subterranean, ghostly, unconscious world of dream and desire that must now perform the work of liberation' is the motivating force which leads from Act I into Act II.<sup>18</sup> The ensuing dreams in Act II are all wish-fulfillments, each consummating the spiritual and sexual longings proper to its dreamer(s). Thus Prometheus and Panthea dream of unification with each other – 'only felt / His presence flow and mingle through my blood / Till it became his life and his grew mine / And I was thus absorbed' (II.i.79–81) – and, more obliquely, with Asia, 'whose shadow thou [Panthea] art' (II.i.70).

Freud's theory of distortion also elucidates these dreams:

We should then assume that in every human being there exist, as the primary cause of dream formation, two psychic forces (tendencies or systems), one of which forms the wish expressed by the dream, while the other exercises a censorship over this dream-wish, thereby enforcing on it a distortion.<sup>19</sup>

Three separate dreamers – Panthea, Ione, and Prometheus – experience the first vision, told by Panthea. The tendency toward distortion or displacement of the dreamer’s wish is evident in each of their dreams: Prometheus dreams of Panthea in the place of Asia, ‘whose shadow thou [Panthea] art’ (II.i.70); Ione dreams of Panthea in the place of Prometheus or Asia; and for her part, Asia dreams about Panthea as a substitute for Prometheus:

And then I [Asia] said: ‘Panthea, look on me’.  
But in the depth of those beloved eyes  
Still I saw, *follow, follow!*  
(II.i.160–62)

This displacement, through dream, of Asia’s desire onto Panthea influences consciousness in that it ultimately leads her to find and join with Prometheus. Notably, Panthea acts as the element of distortion in all these dreams. Since she is metaphorically connected to both Asia and Prometheus, her role is as a censor for the dream-wish, the desire of Prometheus and Asia for each other.

Panthea as dream displacement or distortion closely mirrors her connection with metaphor or figuration, for she is also symbolic of the metaphorical process, a creative act to bridge the gap between two separate and distinct objects or beings. The metaphorical status of the Oceanides in Act II introduces the problem of absence or the gap between the separate objects at the centre of metaphorical expression. Dreams, like metaphor, create a similar paradox of absence constellated as presence. In the dreams recounted in Act II, Panthea functions as a psychic bridge between Asia and Prometheus, who are absent from each other in consciousness, in body, and in space. In Derridean terms, Panthea is the metaphorical ‘appropriation’ which attempts to join them, while, in Freudian terms, she is the distorting factor which nonetheless strives to unify the dreamer with the object of his or her desire.<sup>20</sup>

Language, always for Shelley a system of signs separate from what they express, is inadequate for the task of unification. It resists cooperating in a metaphorical vision or in a dream which tries to explode the division of word from meaning. Patricia Berry, in ‘An Approach to Dream’, an article which outlines various problems and approaches to Jungian dream analysis, writes about the conflict between language and dream. Because ‘images are primary’, any verbal transposition of them fails.<sup>21</sup> The dream’s coherence cannot be translated into verbal coherence, since the dream relies on non-verbal impressions and some degree of simultaneity of its images. Language, on the other hand, is experienced linearly and is incapable of reproducing either the simultaneity or intensity of dream. Asia confirms this theory when, after she has heard Panthea narrate her dream, she replies: ‘Thou speakest, but thy words / Are as the air. I feel them not’ (II.i.109). Words, like Panthea’s eyes, ‘droop beneath the load / Of that they would express’ (II.i.111), and the sensations which give rise to these words are irretrievable. Bringing a dream into language is an attempt to transfer it to consciousness.

Asia, as implied reader and metaphor-interpreter, seeks to incorporate the dream into consciousness, but this process is impossible because the unconscious can never be made conscious, its dream operations may only be 'remembered' in consciousness. What enters language from the world of dream, therefore, is distanced from its source, and so Panthea's second dream is verbalized with 'follow, follow' (II.i.133), words which imply the distance between the consciousness that hears them and the unconscious from which they come.

Metaphor attacks or undermines one of the main premises of conceptual language, the Cartesian split of subject from object. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley animates matter with mind in figures such as Earth, Moon, and the Echoes who are spirits living in the crags and rocks of the Indian valley. Dream and metaphor radically challenge rational assumptions about the nature of reality, for example when individuals metamorphose from one identity to another, as in Panthea's dream, 'Till it became his life and his grew mine' (II.i.81). Because both metaphor and dream conflict with conscious views of experience, which is bound up in a linear and referential language, Shelley's initiatives to verbalize these voiceless imaginative constructs must either propel us into the meanings in silence or teeter into unknowing, such as when Panthea stretches the limits of language in order to imply something beyond words: 'though still / I listened through the night when sound was none' (II.i.91-2). Barbara Gelpi argues succinctly that 'Shelley does not insist on the clear, clean line, believing on the contrary that the mergings and the dissolution of reverie serve as legitimate, even privileged loci of moral intuitions' (172).<sup>22</sup> If the vehicle of love is dream, 'the shapes and acts' compelled in the mind which constitute the psychodrama of *Prometheus Unbound*, where language fails, dream may initiate or communicate something more vital to freedom – it might mediate the experiential, emotional, and sensory understanding of liberation.

The movement from voice to voicelessness, from image to imagelessness, and from actuality to dream is tenuous and, to some extent, self-defeating.<sup>23</sup> In 'Prometheus Made Capable Poet in Act 1 of *Prometheus Unbound*', Daniel Hughes outlines some of the linguistic difficulties which leave the poet 'muted, even exhausted' by the end of Act I.<sup>24</sup> Since in Hughes's reading, Prometheus is the poet of the entire drama, his disappearance from most of the remaining text after Act I indicates how a good poet should paradoxically become voiceless. The multiple voices of the Oceanides which subsume his voice are better suited to the purpose of transforming language, but are nevertheless unable to abolish the need for language. Critics such as Richard Holmes see the poem as deteriorating in its lyricism, for Shelley is attempting the impossible and the inexpressible cannot be linguistically expressed.<sup>25</sup> This loss which accompanies the abandonment of faith in language is the poem's inescapable direction, because something as revolutionary as the subversion of consciousness and its modes of thought and expression entails the dissolution of equilibrium.

According to Panthea, the entry into this unconscious dream world induces both pleasure and sorrow:

since dissolved  
Into the sense with which love talks, my rest  
Was troubled and yet sweet – my waking hours  
Too full of care and pain.  
(II.i.53–5)

That which is achieved by the disruption of consciousness, however, compensates for the lost stability, since the result of Shelley's movement from Act I to Act II is the liberation of humanity and the universe. Lost is the security of a fixed view of reality which enslaves both thought and action: freedom with all its groundlessness is gained, and the poem dramatizes the pain involved in the process of freeing thought:

From all the blasts of Heaven thou hast descended –  
Yes, like a spirit, like a thought which makes  
Unwonted tears throng to the horny eyes  
And beatings haunt the desolated heart  
Which should have learnt repose.  
(II.i.1–5)

The unconscious, a locus of wish-fulfillment and pleasure, is also the source of anxiety and nightmare, as in Panthea's second dream imaging the destruction of living forms:

As we sate here the flower-infolding buds  
Burst on yon lightning-blasted almond tree,  
When swift, from the white Scythian wilderness,  
A wind swept forth wrinkling the earth with frost . . .  
I looked, and all the blossoms were blown down.  
(II.i.134–38)

Nightmares (like the French Revolution) foster liberation because they force repressed wishes to consciousness and shake the will into self-redemptive action. Thus the dream of death, ending with the words 'follow, follow' (II.i.131), incites the sisters to a quest for knowledge. The problem, as Shelley sees it, is that human beings 'like panic-stricken slaves' reject freedom.<sup>26</sup> According to *Prometheus Unbound*, the terror of freedom conspires with the constraints imposed by referential language, the language of dead metaphor, to ensure the continuation of psychic imprisonment and its human suffering.

So far, then, we have explored how dream, the metaphorical unconscious, is a source of poetry in Act 2. Our initial interpretation of Panthea's and Asia's respective dreams are as fulfillment of their shared desire, yet the meaning of a dream, according to Freud, Jung, and psychoanalysis generally, is much deeper than its most obvious motivations, and the number of potential associations

that derive from a dream (Freud calls these the ‘dream thoughts’) is almost endless.<sup>27</sup> In Act II, Scene I, dream thoughts are represented by a series of echoes and shapes evoked by the telling of the dreams, echoes which convey Asia’s vision and direction:

In the world unknown  
Sleeps a voice unspoken;  
By thy step alone  
Can its rest be broken,  
Child of Ocean!  
(II.i.190–94)

Asia’s steps, her journey, are able to supply the unconscious, a ‘world unknown’, with a voice. Only then can she free the conscious mind of Prometheus from the entrapment of his allegorical preconceptions and his binding heroic language of defiance.

While the conscious mind operates according to modes of restraint, the unconscious freely explores the hidden world of desire in which everything is permitted, including the incestuous embrace of the sisters, Ione and Panthea:

for when just now  
We kissed, I felt within thy parted lips  
The sweet air that sustained me, and the warmth  
Of the life-blood for loss of which I faint  
Quivered between our intertwining arms.  
(II.i.102–06)

Like the sororal incest dream, metaphor yokes the improbable together: ‘Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact – but not by standing for or expressing the fact’.<sup>28</sup> The meaning of Panthea’s first dream, then, is discovered in the dreams and shapes which grow associatively out of it, thereby compelling the sisters to journey more and more deeply into the unconscious: ‘To the Deep, to the Deep, / Down, Down! / Through the shade of Sleep’ (II.iii.54–6). Shelley inverts the historically established hierarchy of two modes of thought, intuition and reason, now exalting the former over the latter. The conscious mind, dominated by reason, is ‘the shadow’, and the unconscious with its free but significant play of imagination represents the ‘substance’.<sup>29</sup>

Earlier we considered Shelley’s theory that once a metaphor becomes ‘blunted by reiteration’, it dies as metaphor, and this observation also holds true of dream. Once the contents of a dream have entered the conscious mind, and particularly once they enter language, they cease to be dream. Hence, not dreams but their residue are the subject of Act II: Panthea is described as ‘the memory of a dream’ (II.i.8), carrying with her ‘a remembered dream’ (II.i.36). We see that when



a dream is paraphrased and given a fixed interpretation, it is treated allegorically, becomes part of the normal associations of consciousness, and is annihilated as dream. Perhaps this problem is one reason why Panthea's experience of her dreams is defeatist and sorrowful:

But not as now since I am made the wind  
Which fails beneath the music that I bear  
Of thy most wordless converse; since dissolved  
Into the sense with which love talks, my rest  
Was troubled and yet sweet – my waking hours  
Too full of care and pain.  
(II.i.50–5)

However, the death of dream in *Prometheus Unbound* is a dissolution ('since dissolved') and not a hardening: 'How the notes sink upon the ebbing wind!' (II.i.195). *Prometheus Unbound* treats reverie through an emphasis on its process, its translation, and its effects in the phenomenal world. Since a dream cannot be adequately paraphrased or spoken, one possibility for understanding it is through a kind of re-enactment. Asia's reading of Panthea's dream is an attempt to re-envision the images seen in Panthea's eyes, rather than to extract a meaning: 'Lift up thine eyes / And let me read thy dream' (II.i.55–6). The eyes, 'horny' (II.i.3), are equally transparent and opaque, representing the dream's narration and also the poetic text. Reading becomes an interaction with the dream-text through identification – 'what canst thou see / But thine own fairest shadow imaged there?' (II.i.112–13) – by which, Asia is invited imaginatively to reconstruct the vision and make it her own. Thus, after she gazes into Panthea's eyes for a few moments, the dream image appears in Asia's mind:

I see a shade – a shape – 'tis He, arrayed  
In the soft light of his own smiles which spread  
Like radiance from the cloud-surrounded moon.  
Prometheus, it is thou – depart not yet!  
(II.i.120–23)

This response is twice removed from Panthea's original dream, both through verbalization and through her entering another subjectivity: Asia's. Yet Shelley urges that some residual impact of the original impression may be felt across the barriers of language and individual subjectivity: 'its voice is heard, like the footsteps of Astraea, departing from the world'.<sup>30</sup> And so Asia's imaginative effort overcomes the initial linguistic restriction – 'thy words / Are as the air' (II.i.108–09) – as it penetrates the poetic text and vision of her own: 'I see a shade – a shape –' (II.i.120). Having briefly closed the gap between her imagination and Panthea's, Asia confronts the distance between herself and her dream-wish for Prometheus

– ‘What shape is that between us?’ (II.i.127) – and she determines to follow the dream shape as quest or question.

The capacity of words to describe the inexpressible relies on the desire to endow absence with meaning. While in sleep desire fills vacancy with dreams, in consciousness desire counters absence with words, and is also evoked by them:

As you speak, your words  
Fill, pause by pause my own forgotten sleep  
With shapes.  
(II.i.141–43)

Here Panthea’s words recall Asia’s own desire. On the literal level, Asia simply yearns for a reunion with her lover, but in an allegorical sense, the object of desire is the unified existence of conscious and unconscious, and the fully integrated self: ‘Man, one harmonious Soul of many a soul / Whose nature is its own divine control’ (IV.400–01).

In the conjoined spheres of referential language and actual experience, *Prometheus Unbound* presents disunity among people and in their disparate and fractured thoughts, so ‘a voice / is wanting’ (II.iv.115–16). In the emergent world of the questing oceanic dreamers, unification and harmony are sought, imagined, and ultimately posited, albeit offstage and outside the text. Although in actuality, complete unity, in the sense of total identification between beings, does not exist, metaphorical expression suggests that the harmonization of human thoughts is a potential or imagined reality.<sup>31</sup> It might be said that the female ocean nymphs usher the contents of the unconscious (theirs) into consciousness by seeking ‘the before unapprehended relations of things’. Panthea’s dream of unification with Prometheus in one body is both sexual and magical – ‘My being was condensed’ (II.i.86) – because the metaphorical capacity of the imagination is wide enough to defeat materiality.

Norman O. Brown’s analogy between ocean and the unconscious explains a traditional connection between them:

The unconscious is rather that immortal sea which brought us hither; intimations of which are given in moments of “oceanic feeling”; one sea of energy or instinct; embracing all mankind, without distinction of race, language, or culture, and embracing all the generations of Adam, past, present, and future, in one phylogenetic heritage; in one mystical or symbolic body.<sup>32</sup>

Shelley’s figures of the Ocean nymphs mimic the partly hidden operations of the mind, as, born from the sea, they remain metaphorically expressive of its fluidity and depth, performing the liberation of humanity that Brown suggests is the natural role of the liquid body of the unconscious. Throughout the drama they are imaged in relation to every kind of water, including clouds (II.i.11), tears (II.i.28), dew (II.i.29,78), vapours (II.i.83), drops (II.i.84), ‘liquid responses’ (II.i.171), mist

(II.iii.19, 43), lake (II.iii.20), waves (II.ii.21; II.v.99), sea (II.iii.43), foam (II.iii.44), the ocean (II.iii.45-6), boat (II.v.72), a river (II.v.79), rivulet (IV.196) bath (IV.503), water (IV.503), and stream (IV.505), and this rhetoric is consistently reiterated in the language of and about the Oceanides, thus strengthening their archetypal symbolization as the liquid embodiment of unconscious emotion and thought.

After Asia's spiritual transformation, however, she is represented as light and fire: 'Child of Light! thy limbs are burning' (II.v.54). Nonetheless, this metamorphosis does not detract from Asia's flowing nature, the light of whose presence is depicted as 'liquid splendour' (II.v.63). Gaston Bachelard in the *Psychoanalysis of Fire* stresses that fire possesses a liquid quality which, in addition to its creative and destructive powers, relates it to human thought as 'the prime element of reverie'.<sup>33</sup> Water and fire both are recognized as predominant archetypes in the unconscious. In contrast to air and earth these two elements provoke constant change in their environment and are therefore appropriate metaphors for creative transformation. Fluid and shifting images of elemental mutability underlie the *mythos* of *Prometheus Unbound*.

Employing mythological figures in order to reveal the status of mythology as psychic projection, Shelley reveals the poetic validity of mythic characters as representatives of the unconscious mind. In 'The Difference between Eastern and Western Thinking', Jung writes that 'Psychology therefore holds that the mind cannot establish or assert anything beyond itself'.<sup>34</sup> Asia discovers a similar truth in the Cave of Demogorgon, and Shelley's philosophy of thought is consistent with Jung's, since *Prometheus Unbound* proposes the psychological origin of all mythology. When deep in the cave of the unconscious, Asia hears about 'God'. She learns that the word 'God' is unstable, when Demogorgon qualifies his disclosure: 'I spoke but as ye speak' (II.iv.112). God, then, is another primordial idea which may be imagined or named but never known or defined. Religion is imagined and 'real' in a neo-Platonic sense, yet projected divinities like Demogorgon do not have legitimate autonomous power beyond this subjectivity:

So much I asked before, and my heart gave  
The response thou hast given; and of such truths  
Each to itself must be the oracle.  
(II.iv.121-23)

Here Asia may open up the possibility of Jung's perspective on psychological knowledge, that the mind can know no more than itself.

By following dreams, the Oceanides act as myth-makers, restoring religion to the domain of poetry. Although Shelley chooses an ancient myth for the foundation of his play, he rewrites that story and, in doing so, he unfixes mythology and demonstrates that the original myth has no precedence or authority over subsequent myths. Panthea, a maker of metaphors and myth, broadens the Greek *mythos* by envisioning Prometheus as Christ. When the Titan is being tortured by Furies, Panthea beholds him transformed:

*Ione*: What didst thou see?  
*Panthea*: A woeful sight – a youth  
With patient looks nailed to a crucifix.  
(I.584–85)

This transposition of myth on myth reflects Shelley's remark that the philosophy of ancient Greece and Christianity shared poetic truths:

Plato, following the doctrines of Timaeus and Pythagoras, taught also a moral and intellectual system of doctrine comprehending at once the past, the present, and the future condition of man. Jesus Christ divulged the sacred and eternal truths contained in these views to mankind, and Christianity, in its abstract purity, became the exoteric expression of the esoteric doctrines of the poetry and wisdom of antiquity.<sup>35</sup>

Although in Shelley's view the church corrupted these doctrines, his estimation of the 'sacred and eternal truths' informing the underlying mythologies is positive, and Prometheus and Christ become two equally valid images of the patient sufferer and the liberator of humanity, archetypes of salvation still socially and politically resonant for Shelley in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Or, as David Bromwich observes: 'Prometheus is not the hero of the work that bears his name. He is the name of a mental power that creates the possibility of action in others'.<sup>36</sup>

The problem in mythology, as Shelley saw it, was not to be found in the myths themselves, but in the human tendency to literalize them. In *Re-Visioning Psychology*, James Hillman writes that literalism is also a danger in psychology, as he lauds the literary critical interest in metaphor. For Hillman, as for Shelley, literalism hardens into religion:

Literalism prevents mystery by narrowing the multiple ambiguity of meanings into one definition. Literalism is the natural concomitant of monotheistic consciousness.<sup>37</sup>

In Shelley's drama, the Oceanides de-literalize myth by focusing on the psychic processes which create it, emphasizing the process of metaphor-making and rejecting strictly referential language in order to turn myth back upon its genesis in the human mind. When we travel far enough into those unconscious mental operations, as Asia and Panthea do in the Cave of Demogorgon, then, behind all the dreams and images, we encounter only mystery, 'a mighty Darkness' (II.iv.2). This mystery or absence of meaning, the imageless 'mighty darkness', is the distant source of mythology whose images poets and mythmakers supply:

Ungazed upon and shapeless – neither limb  
Nor form nor outline, yet we feel it is  
A living Spirit.  
(II.iv.5–7)

Shelley's radically sceptical phrasing about Demogorgon – even its identity as 'a living Spirit' is *felt* but not known – may go so far as to question the existence of Demogorgon whose non-appearance occurs at the end of a prolonged and confusing dream sequence which foregrounds human subjectivity's encounter with unknowable and ineffable power.

In Act II, Panthea and Asia discover the mythic contents of the unconscious, including the idea of God, the creation of the world – 'There was the Heaven and Earth at first' (II.iv.32) – the installation of Jupiter's power, and his ensuing reign of terror. Articulating her perception of the myth, Asia brings unconscious projections into consciousness. When summarizing the mythological history of the world, she poses three questions: who brings evil, who is Jupiter's master, and is Jupiter also a slave? (see II.iv.100–09). In *Prometheus Unbound*, a lyrical drama which so fully repudiates the hierarchical dichotomy encoded in Asia's other question of Demogorgon – 'Who is the master of the slave?' – we must wonder if these are appropriate questions for her to be asking. *Prometheus Unbound* attempts to dissolve the hierarchies on which such paradigms are predicated, and it turns tyrannical institutions into figments of the human imagination, structures capable of being unimagined and re-imagined, like Coleridge's secondary imagination which 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate', and *Prometheus Unbound* presents our human structures, institutions, and languages as highly soluble substances in which the Oceanides and others enact the diffusive spells of the imagination.<sup>38</sup> Jupiter, as a metaphor for these forms of institutional control, reigns over the living world, but Prometheus, we are told, bequeathed him his initial power. Asia seeks some sort of monolithic truth from Demogorgon and discovers that the answers she seeks are in herself: 'So much I asked before, and my heart gave / The response thou hast given; and of such truths / Each to itself must be the oracle' (II.iv.121–23). Her sense that Demogorgon is the repository of truth shows itself to be as much an illusion as Prometheus' conception of Jupiter's power over him. Although Jupiter has had Prometheus bound and tortured, a linguistic construct, Prometheus' curse of Jupiter may have been the initial torturer that defined and patterned the nature of Prometheus' suffering.

In Act II, Demogorgon makes an awkward foray into the deconstruction of Asia's problematic question:

All spirits are enslaved which serve things evil.  
Thou knowest if Jupiter be such or no.  
(II.iv.110–11)

Asia realizes that Jupiter is neither the source of evil, nor its master ('not Jove'), but that he is enslaved by evil. Who then has power over him? Demogorgon replies simply: 'Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change—To these / All things are subject but eternal Love' (II.iv.119–20). If we were to accept the language and structure of Asia's initial question concerning master and slave, a question suspiciously reminiscent of the defiant, Miltonic language of Act I, Demogorgon in his

reply might be suspected of meaning that it is Asia who represents the dominant agency: love. Asia, the character who loves the most strongly, is the one who must liberate Prometheus and humanity from the tyrannical myth of Jupiter: ‘and yet I [Prometheus] feel / Most vain all hope but love’ (I.807–08). Under the scrutiny of Asia’s imagination, the mythic Jupiter is revealed as powerless beyond those myth-creating forces of the human mind. Moreover, the force of Asia’s love is sufficient to dislodge him from his imaginary throne, and Prometheus tells her that she is his one hope:

Asia! who when my being overflowed  
Wert like a golden chalice to bright wine  
Which else had sunk into the thirsty dust.  
(I.809–11)

At the moment of transformation – ‘Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more’ (I.820) – Shelley posits a human recognition of the metaphorical nature of myth as humanity’s condition for being in control of its own thought and freedom: ‘the King / Over himself’ (III.iv.196–97). Here also we encounter, in a moment reminiscent of the ‘master/slave’ question, the hierarchical language which the Oceanides thoroughly dismantle in Act II. Yet, in the wake of Shelley’s exposing of the problem of linguistically constructed tyrannies, Love cannot be ‘master’ and the person under love’s sway is certainly no ‘slave’. While Asia has been interpreted as the questing hero who releases her lover from captivity, she is neither master nor slave of that freedom. Her soul, ‘an enchanted Boat’ (II. iv.72), does not participate in such dichotomies and their treacherous verbal limits, but is rather a mysterious process of enacting release from a world of atrocities in which the alienation of the isolated and suffering ego holds power and from which the blending and merging of identities and dichotomies promise release.

In Act III’s dramatization of self-liberation (the unbinding of Prometheus), after the attainment of dream knowledge from Act II and the realization that the visionary source of myth is in the mind, religion, in the sense of dogma, is exposed as an illusion and its personification in the form of Jupiter is dragged back into the mysterious source of power from which it was originally projected:

Ai! Ai!  
The elements obey me not . . . I sink . . .  
Dizzily down – ever, forever, down –  
(III.i.79–81)

Yet the restoration of human freedom is not accomplished with the dissolution of the allegorical. What happens offstage in Asia’s and Prometheus’ nuptial cave during Act IV may be eternal, but in the remainder of the drama, liberation is a continuing process of metaphor-making and creating anew the associations of language. Ione and Panthea sing and rhyme about the creative actions on earth

and in the cosmos, illuminating verbally the metaphorical myths which spring from the depths of humanity's freed desire in the unconscious.

Act IV therefore continues the process of freeing literal thought and language through new Oceanic re-enactments of the unconscious, expressed as a mythic cosmic dance between Earth and Moon. Ione's vision of the moon's potentiality in marriage with Panthea's vision of the earth's actuality reworks the myth of union between the potential of the unconscious and the actuality of consciousness symbolized by the marriage of Asia and Prometheus taking place off-stage at the same time. The cosmic harmony is expressed in the words of the moon to her lover, the earth:

As in the soft and sweet eclipse  
When soul meets soul on lovers' lips,  
High hearts are calm and brightest eyes are dull;  
So when thy shadow falls on me  
Then am I mute and still, – by thee  
Covered; of thy love, Orb most beautiful,  
Full, oh, too full!  
(IV.450–56)

Archetypally, the divine marriage, like the one of Christ and the New Jerusalem in *Revelation*, operates simultaneously on several levels: the union of Asia and Prometheus is the prototype for the marriage of the ineffable with language, potentiality with actuality, dream with experience, the unconscious with consciousness, the moon with the earth, and the feminine with the masculine.

*Prometheus Unbound* ends with meditations on poetic language, and a presumably awakened Earth chants that:

Language is a perpetual Orphic song,  
Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng  
Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were.  
(IV.415–17)

Words overflow their referential boundaries, as they structure with sound the primordial chaos of dream. Panthea persists in performing the role of metaphor rising from the fluid unconscious:

I rise as from a bath of sparkling water,  
A bath of azure light, among dark rocks,  
Out of the stream of sound –  
(IV.503–05)

Ione indicates that the Orphic song is fading: 'the stream of sound has ebbed away from us' (IV.506). The final lyrical passages of Panthea and Ione are like

the last drops of water falling from their Oceanic bodies, until Panthea invokes silence, 'Peace! peace!' (IV.510). Although *Prometheus Unbound* cannot narrate its own apotheosis, it weaves the process or spell of metaphor-making: 'These are the spells by which to reassume / An empire o'er the disentangled Doom' (IV.568–69). From the depths of unconscious intuition, Ione offers one answer as to how a reader may make the journey:

Listen too,  
How every pause is filled with under-notes,  
Clear, silver, icy, keen, awakening tones  
Which pierce the sense and live within the soul.  
(IV.188–91)

After the words have been spoken, meaning must be sought in the non-verbal and new myths created in the reverberating echoes of the unconscious.



## Notes

- 1 Quoted from *Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: New Mexico University Press, 1954), 278: Hereafter all quotations from Shelley's prose will be from this edition, cited as *Prose*. All quotations from Shelley's poetry are from *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).
- 2 Shelley, *Prose*, 278, 279.
- 3 Shelley, *Prose*, 278.
- 4 Shelley, *Prose*, 278.
- 5 One of the reasons that *Prometheus Unbound* has been studied in such a great variety of philosophical and mythical contexts is its flexible metaphorical basis. Nathaniel Brown in *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) has described the work in relation to feminism. J. A. Notopoulos concentrates on its Platonism in *The Platonism of Shelley* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969). P. M. S. Dawson in *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) discusses the 'lyrical drama' in relation to the surrounding political and social issues of Shelley's time. John Murphy, *The Dark Angel: Gothic Elements in Shelley's Work* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975) places *Prometheus Unbound* in the context of Shelley's Gothicism. Carl Grabo in *A Newton Amongst Poets: Shelley's use of Science in Prometheus Unbound* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930) examines Shelley's engagement with various contemporary debates in natural philosophy. Stuart Curran in *Shelley's 'Annus Mirabilis': The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1975) focuses on Zoroastrian and Dionysian themes while demonstrating the richness and variety of numerous mythological patterns and allusions in Shelley's work. These are only a few among the many versatile possibilities of meaning in a drama with the scope and depth of *Prometheus Unbound*. The number of diverse readings attests to the amalgamation of many meanings without any single one accorded the primacy or authority of being the lyrical drama's 'correct' literal or allegorical interpretation.
- 6 Donald Davidson, 'What Metaphor Means', in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), 29.
- 7 Campbell, Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2008), 14.
- 8 Thomas R. Frosch in *Shelley and the Romantic Imagination: A Psychological Study* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007) writes that 'Asia confronts the aspect of the unconscious that concerns human experience in general: she is the very sense of strangeness, an unknown, within us' (167).
- 9 Shelley, *Prose*, 279.
- 10 Barbara Judson, 'A Sound of Voices: The Ventriloquial Uncanny in *Wieland* and *Prometheus Unbound*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 21–37.
- 11 Carl Jung, *The Portable Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Viking, 1971), 60.
- 12 Shelley, *Prose*, 296.
- 13 Barbara Judson adopts the psychoanalytic framework of the movement into the unconscious as regression: 'Asia and Panthea engage in a regressive movement back to an unconscious further feminized in the image of the volcanic crater that houses Demogorgon'. See, Barbara Judson,

- 'The Politics of Medusa: Shelley's Physiognomy of Revolution', *English Literary History* 68, no. 1 (2001): 135–54, quotation on 143.
- 14 Bachelard, Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 20.
- 15 Judson, 'The Politics of Medusa', 144.
- 16 Judson, 'The Politics of Medusa', 142.
- 17 Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1950), 32.
- 18 Michael H Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 167.
- 19 Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 52.
- 20 In 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy' *New Literary History* 6 (1974): 7–74), Derrida suggests that every metaphor relies on the process of metaphorization itself and the unity or idea that the metaphor compels, that is, 'appropriation' and 'idealization': 'any metaphor may always be read at once as a particular figure and as a paradigm of the very process of metaphorization: *idealization* and *appropriation*'.
- 21 Patricia Berry, 'An Approach to the Dream', in *Spring 1974* (New York: Spring Publications, 1974), 58–79.
- 22 Barbara Gelpi, *Shelley's Goddesses: Maternity, Language, Subjectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 172. See too Jerrold Hogle, 'Shelley's Poetics: The Power as Metaphor', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 31, (1982): 159–97. Susan Brisman also notes that 'illustrating Shelley's persistent distrust of language, she [Panthea] seems to express the idea that the perfect medium of love is not the word but the shapes and acts it compels in another's mind'. See 'Unsayings His High Language: The Problem of Voice in *Prometheus Unbound*', *Studies in Romanticism* 16, (1977): 51–86.
- 23 Richard Fogle describes the paradox of Shelley's expression through imagery of that which is imageless in his essay 'Image and Imageless. A Limited Reading of *Prometheus Unbound*', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 1, (1952): 23–36.
- 24 Daniel Hughes, 'Prometheus Made Capable Poet in Act One of *Prometheus Unbound*', *Studies in Romanticism* 17 (1978): 3–11.
- 25 Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), 507. Even a favourable critic like Daniel Hughes recognizes the pitfalls of moving away from language towards the unconscious realm of desire, arguing that: '*Prometheus Unbound* moves from its masculine first act to its feminine second act in terms of a highly characteristic Shelleyan desire. Still, even at this climactic moment, a typical Shelleyan sadness threatens the ongoingness of the poem . . . The freeing of word and image has cost Prometheus, in Eliot's phrase, 'not less than everything'. See Hughes, 'Prometheus Made Capable Poet', 11.
- 26 Shelley, *Prose*, 266.
- 27 Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 174.
- 28 Davidson, 'What Metaphor Means', 44.
- 29 Shelley, *Prose*, 277.
- 30 Shelley, *Prose*, 286.
- 31 Sexual union, mythically understood, can be interpreted as a desire for an androgynous ideal: following Plato's hypothesis in *The Symposium* that men and women originally developed from one androgynous being, Shelley distills a psychological truth. As Ross Woodman argues, the archetype or 'Primordial image' of the androgyne acts as a propelling force in the play's action.

He examines the Oceanides in the second act as symbolic of the unconscious and proposes that the androgynous ideal towards which the action is directed is a union of the feminine unconscious with the masculine consciousness of Prometheus. See Ross Woodman, 'The Androgyne in *Prometheus Unbound*', *Studies in Romanticism* 20 (1981): 225–47, quotation on 234.

32 Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (New York: Random House, 1966), 88–9.

33 Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 18.

34 Jung, *The Portable Jung*, 481.

35 Shelley, *Prose*, 288.

36 David Bromwich, 'Love Against Revenge in Shelley's *Prometheus*', *Philosophy and Literature* 22, no. 2 (2002): 239–59.

37 James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 149.

38 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Biographia Literaria', in *The Portable Coleridge*, ed. I. A. Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950), 516.