

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

An Ecocritical Study of Percy Bysshe Shelley's Selected Lyrical Works
Ekokritická studie vybrané lyrické tvorby Percy Bysshe Shelleyho

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):
Mgr. Miroslava Horová, Ph.D.

Praha, srpen 2024

Zpracovala (author):
Emma Marešová
studijní obor (subject):
Anglistika-amerikanistika

Declaration

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně, že jsem řádně citoval všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma

V Praze, dne 5. srpna 2024

.....

Emma Marešová

Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Mgr. Miroslava Horová, Ph.D. for her guidance, support and patience in the writing of this thesis.

Abstract

This thesis argues that Shelley's idea of a sustainable revolution is based on nature. The term "nature" refers to both human nature (love, emotion) and the natural world (the environment). Nature functions as a balanced system. A society built on the unnatural (violence, immorality) is unsustainable, because its very foundation is unstable. A society based on nature is therefore key to establishing long-lasting social reform. According to Shelley, change should above all be natural for it to be sustainable long-term. Violent revolutions ultimately fail, tyrannical governments meet their end, because they are distanced from nature due to their immorality. In his essay, "A Defence of Poetry", Shelley argues for a morality based on love, empathy, and connection. These emotions are inherently natural for Shelley and therefore they are morally sound. A society incapable of love becomes a hollow shell unable to connect with the natural world, immoral, and therefore unsustainable.

This thesis will discuss Shelley's ideas of sustainable revolution in the short lyrics "Ozymandias" and "Ode to the West Wind", and the dramatic poems *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Revolt of Islam*. Using ideas presented in these texts, supported by arguments in Shelley's essays "A Defence of Poetry" and "On Love", this thesis will attempt to demonstrate that Shelley advocated for the rebirth of humanity through environmental conservation. Writing at a time when the environment was, for the first time, being threatened by mass industrial processes, Shelley's engagement with political and philosophical issues opens his work up to an ecocritical interpretation. This is especially relevant in contemporary literary discourse, when ecocritical narratives are prevalent and awareness of the need for environmental conservation is so widespread. Nature and humanity are so inextricably linked that the suffering of one means the suffering of the other. Human corruption, as an outside influence, disturbs the equilibrium of a naturally sustainable environment, polluting landscapes and damaging ecosystems. A society devoid of empathy lacks the sensibility to treat the environment as a living system, instead commodifying it as a pool of resources at its own disposal. In doing so, humanity, through its immorality, restrict their own nature. If nature cannot be free, neither can humanity, resulting in a cycle of immorality and destruction. Shelley therefore argues for a self-identification more closely tied to nature that would ultimately ensure long-lasting freedom.

Abstrakt

Tato práce se snaží dokázat, že Shelleyho koncept udržitelné revoluce je založen na přírodě. Pojem „příroda“ se vztahuje jak na lidskou přirozenost (láska, emoce), tak na přírodní svět (životní prostředí). Příroda funguje jako vyvážený systém. Společnost postavená na nepřirozenosti (násilí, nemorálnost) je neudržitelná, protože její samotné základy jsou nestabilní. Společnost založená na přírodě je proto klíčem k nastolení dlouhodobé sociální reformy. Podle Shelleyho by změna měla být především přirozená, aby byla dlouhodobě udržitelná. Násilné revoluce nakonec selhávají, tyranické vlády dosáhnou svého konce, protože jsou kvůli své nemorálnosti vzdáleny přírodě. Ve svém eseji „A Defense of Poetry“ Shelley argumentuje pro morální systém založený na lásce, empatii a porozumění. Tyto emoce jsou podle Shelleyho ze své podstaty lidstvu přirozené, a tudíž morálně správné. Společnost, která postrádá schopnost milovat, je prázdnou skořápkou, která nedokáže navázat spojení s přírodním světem. Je nemorální, a proto je neudržitelná.

Tato práce se bude zabývat Shelleyho myšlenkami o udržitelné revoluci v jeho krátkých básních „Ozymandias“ a „Óda na západní vítr“ a v jeho dramatických básních *Odpoutaný Prométheus* a *Vzpoura Islámu*. S využitím myšlenek obsažených v těchto textech a s podporou argumentů v Shelleyho esejích „A Defense of Poetry“ a „On Love“, se tato práce pokusí ukázat, že Shelley obhajoval znovuzrození lidstva prostřednictvím ochrany životního prostředí. V době, kdy bylo životní prostředí poprvé ohroženo masovými průmyslovými procesy, Shelleyho angažovanost v politických a filozofických směrech otevírá jeho dílo ekokritické interpretaci. To je důležité zejména v současném literárním diskurzu, ve kterém převládají ekokritické narativy, a ve kterém je povědomí o potřebě ochrany životního prostředí již značně rozšířené. Příroda a lidstvo jsou nerozlučně spjaty do té míry, že utrpení jednoho znamená utrpení druhého. Lidská zkaženost představuje vnější vliv narušující rovnováhu přirozeně udržitelného prostředí, jež znečišťuje krajinu a poškozuje ekosystémy. Společnost postrádající empatii též postrádá citlivost zacházet s životním prostředím jako s živým systémem, místo toho jej komodifikuje jako zásobu zdrojů, které jsou jí k dispozici. Tím způsobem lidstvo ve své nemorálnosti omezuje svou vlastní přirozenost. Nemůže-li být příroda svobodná, nemůže být svobodné ani lidstvo, což vede k cyklu nemorálnosti a ničení. Shelley proto argumentuje pro sebeidentifikaci blíže propojenou s přírodou, která by zajistila dlouhotrvající svobodu.

Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Chapter II: <i>The Revolt of Islam</i>	4
2.1 On the Nature of Morality.....	5
2.2 Politics of the Body: Shelley’s Vegetarianism and Malthusian Discourse.....	11
Chapter III: “Ozymandias” and the “Ode to the West Wind”	18
3.1 “Ozymandias”	18
3.1.1 The Desert.....	19
3.1.2 Urban Destruction.....	22
3.2 “Ode to the West Wind”	24
3.2.1 Natural Cycles.....	25
3.2.2 The Speaker-Wind Relationship	30
Chapter IV: <i>Prometheus Unbound</i>	33
4.1 Transformation.....	33
4.2 Shelley’s Technotopia.....	40
Chapter V: Conclusion.....	42
Bibliography	44
Primary Sources:.....	44
Secondary Sources:.....	44

Chapter I: Introduction

Dubbed “The First Celebrity Vegan”,¹ and being a self-professed atheist and proponent/practitioner of free love, Percy Bysshe Shelley was arguably one of the most radical literary figures of the Romantic period. The Romantic era saw a wholesale reinterpretation of the relationship between humans and the natural world. The 18th century Burkean aesthetic concept of the Sublime was further developed in the Romantic era as a way of appreciating and conceptualising the vastness (and greatness) of nature and specifically wild landscapes. Gazing upon these landscapes filled the Romantics with much emotion and the aesthetic conceptualisation of this nature-inspired emotion informed much of their literary and philosophical work. Nature became associated with freedom, which was another core concern of the period marked by major revolutionary events, in the wake of both the American War of Independence, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Nature became synonymous with freedom in the defence of “natural rights”, as proclaimed in both the American “Declaration of Independence” and the French “Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens”, the political manifesto of the French Revolution.² In the British Romantic era, the term “nature” comes to mean both human nature (as human natural rights) and the environment, in contrast to the dualist division of the physical environment and the human mind proposed by the philosophies of the Enlightenment.³ The development of scientific observation, especially in astronomy, geology and biology, meant that nature was no longer viewed as an immutable fixture of divine creation, but a self-sustaining system of cyclical processes. Another major revolution was underway at this time, however – the Industrial – which placed further emphasis on the importance of protecting the natural environment, now threatened by an unstoppable spread of exponentially harmful development.

Shelley was an activist. In his work, he actively engages with major political themes of the time, especially social criticism, given the spreading ideology of revolution that defined the latter half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th. He was heavily opposed to the idea of violent revolution because such revolutions create unsustainable and oppressive systems. This thesis will argue that Shelley’s idea of a sustainable revolution is based on the concept of nature as a self-sustaining system of cyclical processes. Timothy Morton, in his article “Shelley’s Green Desert”, argues that it is possible to find “developed

¹ Michael Owen Jones, “In Pursuit of Percy Shelley, ‘The First Celebrity Vegan’: An Essay on Meat, Sex, and Broccoli.” *Journal of Folklore Research* 53, no. 2 (2016): 1. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.53.2.01>.

² Kate Rigby, “Romanticism and Ecocriticism”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 63.

³ Rigby, “Romanticism and Ecocriticism”, 63.

sequences of ecological language in Shelley's work", but not without contradiction.⁴ This thesis will aim to explore this "ecological language" in a much more limited scope, focusing on a selection of two shorter ("Ozymandias", "Ode to the West Wind"), and two longer (*The Revolt of Islam*, *Prometheus Unbound*) works, as a cross-section of Shelley's more mature poetry. These works have been selected for their presentation of natural themes as well as engagement with Shelley's political activism. Shelley's 1813 *Queen Mab*, frequently discussed in Shelleyan ecocritical discourse, has been omitted on account of the immaturity of its ideas, as one of Shelley's earlier works. In the limited scope of this thesis, it has been omitted in favour of the 1817 *Revolt of Islam*, which employs similar themes of nature and social reform to more rounded ends. Shelley's ideas become more developed in works such as *The Revolt* or in the 1820 lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*. This narrow selection allows for a more in-depth analysis within the scope of this thesis.

This thesis is divided into three main chapters, analysing Shelley's works in chronological order. The first chapter focuses on Shelley's 1817 long poem, *The Revolt of Islam*. Here, this thesis discusses the basic points of Shelley's philosophy, with excerpts from Shelley's essays *A Defence of Poetry* and *On Love*. Part I of this chapter focuses on the origins of Shelley's idea of morality, and its connections to nature, and how this is presented as a means of facilitating a sustainable revolution. Part II of this chapter discusses Shelley's prose on vegetarianism, and his attitudes toward the economist Thomas Malthus, whose *Essay on Principle of Population* was published over a decade prior. Shelley argues against Malthus' negativist tendencies, instead maintaining a positive, hopeful outlook on human moral reform.

Chapter II focuses on the two shorter lyrical poems, "Ozymandias" and the "Ode to the West Wind". The chapter's first section is dedicated to "Ozymandias", discussing desert imagery and themes of civilisation's failures show in the symbolism of urban decay. Section II focuses on the "Ode", examining the cycles of nature as presented in Shelley's work, as well as the way the poem presents the speaker-wind relationship, broadly interpreted as a representation of the human-nature connection. Both poems give particular attention to the power of natural forces. The third and final chapter focuses on *Prometheus Unbound* and is also divided into two sections. The first discusses the narrative of transformation, as a result of the acceptance of love, a natural, primordial force in Shelley's philosophy, and the second considers Shelley's engagement with technological themes. The drama defends technology as

⁴ Morton, Timothy. "Shelley's Green Desert." *Studies in Romanticism* 35, no. 3 (1996): 410. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25601182>.

a tool, dependent on the morality and knowledge of those using it. With moral intentions, technology can become a means for living in sustainable harmony with the natural world.

Chapter II: The Revolt of Islam

Shelley's ecological thought is diverse, his concerns often relating to what we nowadays term the school of deep ecology. However, he is most prominently cited as a social ecologist,⁵ a subdivision that argues that ecological problems are largely caused by social issues, and therefore require social solutions.⁶ The field of social ecology deals with the interaction between individuals and the environment, and the effect this has on both parties involved. Pastoral ecocriticism, a sub-division of social ecology, became particularly prominent in the Romantic era. The movement explores the dichotomy of urban and rural life, often vilifying urban spaces in favour of the natural; a "retreat from the city to the countryside". In his foundational study, *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard states that, in pastoral ecology, nature is viewed as a "stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies."⁷ Shelley's ideal society is something of an arcadia, a society seamlessly functioning according to natural processes. An endeavour towards imagining such a society is presented in his 1817 poem, *The Revolt of Islam*.

The Revolt of Islam, formerly titled *Laon and Cythna*, to a large extent conceptualises Shelley's criticism of the French Revolution. The poem is not so much concerned with the actual events of the revolution, rather using it as a model for reflection upon the mistakes of violent uprisings. The French Revolution (1789-99) was a conflict fraught with political violence and civil disorder, resulting in a power vacuum that ultimately allowed the take-over of increasingly radical politicians, ultimately leading to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte between 1799 and 1804, and his military conquests across Europe, and after his fall in 1815, the re-establishment of restrictive ancient regimes.⁸ In the preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, Shelley labels the French Revolution a result of "a defect of correspondence between the knowledge existing in society and the improvement or gradual abolition of political institutions".⁹ The poem functions much as a philosophical treatise as a work of Romantic poetry. But its aim is not to be didactic; Shelley claims that it is, primarily, a narrative poem.¹⁰ This is a notable shift from his 1813 poem *Queen Mab*, which contains much of the

⁵ Morton, "Shelley's Green Desert," 411.

⁶ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 31.

⁷ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 63.

⁸ François Furet, "The French Revolution Revisited," *Government and Opposition* 16, no. 2 (1981): 213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44483389>.

⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Revolt of Islam", in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Vol II, Plays, Translations & Longer Poems*, ed. A. H. Koshul, ((London and New York: J.M. Dent & Company, 1925), 3.

¹⁰ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 1.

same themes of nonviolence, but conveys them in a much more didactic manner.¹¹ The preface describes *The Revolt* as an “experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far the thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives”.¹² The poem is a call to action for those who have perceived the mistakes of the French Revolution, but rather than focusing on the greater political picture, it illustrates individual spiritual and moral growth, as a sustainable path towards “slow, silent change”.¹³ The poem’s publication is as much an act of revolution as Laon’s speech in Canto V. It is important to Shelley that the general public reach their own conclusions upon reading his work. The use of the imagination is imperative, because through it the individual will gain this sense of empathy toward all living things. It was Shelley’s intention that, in reaching their own conclusions, the reader undergoes a process of individual transformation, to finding love and empathy within themselves, thereby taking the first decisive step towards wider societal change.

2.1 On the Nature of Morality

Shelley’s work was notably influenced by William Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*.¹⁴ He most likely first read the work in 1809, in his final year at Eton, which marked a notable turn in his philosophy and writing.¹⁵ Godwinian philosophy was greatly popular among Romantic thinkers. The Godwin household was very influential in the London radical circles, on account of William Godwin’s literary and philosophical work, as well as the work of his first partner/wife, Mary Wollstonecraft. Godwin, like Shelley, was an atheist, and one of the first modern thinkers to promote certain principles of anarchy as a way to reform the political system. In his *Political Justice*, he argues that reality is based on the dichotomy of stasis and flux.¹⁶ The human mind is defined by flux, as ideas and impressions come and go, especially in relation to the creative process. Moreover, no two minds perceive reality in the same way. This is the dynamic process of reason. In contrast, social and political institutions, like the system of law, are static. Godwin perceives these static superimposed systems as a force of evil, generating a “dialectic of unreason”,¹⁷ because they restrict the action of the dynamic human consciousness. Such static institutions are therefore in conflict with the

¹¹ Art Young, *Shelley and Nonviolence*, Studies in English Literature, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015. 60. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=1466667&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

¹² Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 1.

¹³ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 1.

¹⁴ Michael H. Scrivener, “Godwin’s Philosophy: A Reevaluation,” (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no. 4, 1978) 615. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709445>.

¹⁵ Michael O’Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Literary Life* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1989), 19.

¹⁶ Scrivener, “Godwin’s philosophy”, 615.

¹⁷ Scrivener, “Godwin’s philosophy”, 619.

dynamic nature of the human being. Godwin therefore proposes a utopian system of anarchy to replace current institutions.

What was most important for Shelley in *Political Justice* was the idea of human perfectibility. The essay is hopeful of human progress, as a result of Godwin's concept of "flux". Human perfectibility does not refer to a state of utter perfection, but rather the idea of continuous, perpetual improvement; an approach towards perfection rather than perfection itself.¹⁸ The idea is of gradual, unforced change. It is because of this principle that both Godwin and Shelley reject the idea of revolution. Revolutions involve a swift, decisive change in social ideals that can be, and often is, implemented by force.¹⁹ To Shelley, human perfectibility is only possible through personal and political liberty; through freedom, not through force, which is often restrictive.

The Revolt's first canto is prefatory. The narrator recounts watching a battle between an eagle and a serpent, staged as a battle between good and evil. The scene becomes almost allegorical. But where the eagle would traditionally represent the good, and the serpent the evil, their roles are reversed. The Spirit of Good used to embody a star; following its defeat, it has simply been reduced to serpent form at the hands of worldly despotism. The poem references the murder of Abel, at the hands of his brother, Cain: "In dreadful sympathy - when to the flood / That fair Star fell, he turned and shed his brother's blood" (I, 26).²⁰ According to Shelley, and contrary to biblical lore, this betrayal was man's first fall, not the later fall of Adam and Eve.²¹ Upon the serpent's defeat, the spirit as well as the witnessing poet are taken onto a boat by a nameless woman. She tells the poet of times past, that tyranny has declared the Spirit of Good as representative of disobedience and therefore the root of all evil:

And the great Spirit of Good did creep among
The nations of mankind, and every tongue
Cursed and blasphemed him as he passed; for none
Knew good from evil, though their names were hung
In mockery o'er the fane where many a groan,
As King, and Lord, and God, the conquering Fiend did own,—
[...]
'The Fiend, whose name was Legion: Death, Decay,
Earthquake and Blight, and Want, and Madness pale, (I, 28-29)²²

¹⁸ Scrivener, "Godwin's Philosophy", 615.

¹⁹ Scrivener, "Godwin's Philosophy", 621-622.

²⁰ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 19.

²¹ Young, *Shelley and Nonviolence*, 66.

²² Shelley, *The Revolt*, 19-20.

This misinterpretation haunts humanity as they, and the natural world, suffer under endless tyrannical rule. They spurn the Spirit of Good as they are unable to see beyond its battered physical state, therefore blind to its positive qualities. Meanwhile, the Spirit of Evil resides in palaces, controlling “King, and Lord, and God”. But the woman reassures the narrator that all hope is not lost; there is good in the hearts of men and there is potential for moral renewal.

The ensuing revolution is based on principles of non-violence, as violence is the root of all things evil in the world. A ruler who perpetuates violence can never maintain a successful empire, because his rule lacks a fundamental empathy. Similarly, a revolution built on violence, like the French Revolution, can never succeed in establishing a just system. In *The Revolt*, Laon’s homeland suffers under tyrannical rule: “The land in which I lived, by a fell bane / Was withered up” (II, 4).²³ Tyranny here has direct environmental consequences. Just as its people suffer, the land dies along with them. His rule is a conspiracy; the tyrant maintains his power through slavery, as well as the misinformation spread by historians and chroniclers, who “worship ruin”.²⁴

The poem then states that, to remove the darkness that has claimed society, men must let the beauty of the world into their hearts,²⁵ meaning humanity must enlighten itself and open its arms to true morality. For Shelley, the image of true morality can be drawn from nature. He uses the term “natural” to reference a “desirable state of human nature”.²⁶ Nature is truly moral to Shelley namely because there is no injustice or power imbalance in natural systems; Morton remarks that Shelley’s use of the term ‘nature’ is “frequently code for that which is beyond prejudice.”²⁷ In his *Defence of Poetry*, an essay concerned with the social function of poetry, Shelley also argues for a morality based on love, empathy and connection:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.²⁸

²³ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 28.

²⁴ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 28.

²⁵ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 29.

²⁶ Timothy Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 230.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=2074&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

²⁷ Morton, “Nature and Culture”, 199.

²⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” in *Shelley’s Prose Works, vol. II*, ed. Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906), 11.

Love and empathy are natural emotions for Shelley, meaning they are morally sound. The natural world is a complicated, interconnected system; it functions harmoniously because of its universal empathy. In his essay *On Love*, Shelley argues that love is the connecting force binding together all living things.²⁹ To be truly moral, one must become open to love, the most natural force of all. Throughout *The Revolt of Islam*, Laon undergoes this slow transformation into moral good, reflective of the Godwinian theory of perfectibility. His progress to being governed by love and nature is gradual; his being is constantly in flux. At the beginning of the poem, he allows himself to become incensed and kills three of the soldiers who take Cythna, which leads to his own imprisonment. His arguments in Canto V, after his return from infirmity, are emblematic of this empathy that Shelley argued for; his conviction is much stronger after he spends years recuperating in nature. He allows himself to be stabbed with a spear without fighting back, and argues for non-violence, which inspires feelings of kinship:

Lifting the thunder of their acclamation,
Towards the City then the multitude,
And I among them, went in joy—a nation
Made free by love;—a mighty brotherhood
Linked by a jealous interchange of good; (V, 14)³⁰

His arguments for peace help re-establish feelings of brotherhood amongst the soldiers; Laon is spreading the light of the Spirit of Good. Love fills the rebels' hearts, and they are consequently freed from the imposed shackles of darkness of the tyrant's rule. They, like Laon, become inspired to spread this positive change within themselves, and therefore band together to overthrow the tyrant. The theme of love and empathy is explored further in Chapter IV of this thesis.

Shelley's arguments about imagination and connection in *A Defence of Poetry* have natural significance. Morton notes that the *Defence* is as much an essay regarding biology as it is about poetry and philosophy, demonstrating a deep connection between language, life and the natural world. Human beings are as much a part of their environment as the environment is a part of them; they are inherently inseparable. Shelley argues that:

²⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "On Love" in in *Shelley's Prose Works, vol. I*, ed. Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906), 427.

³⁰ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 60.

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound; even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre.³¹

Philosophically, Shelley argued for a self-identification much more closely tied with nature. This theory is anti-dualist, as it argues for a continuity between the human mind and the natural world rather than a separation between the two; according to Shelley, culture is inseparably linked with its environment.³² Shelley's environments are often enveloping, fully surrounding the subject at hand. The image of man as a lyre played by and harmonising with natural forces, as described in the *Defence*, implies that not only is the human being subject to impressions from nature, but their harmonising reflects back on nature in turn.³³ Both man and nature are active participants in this process. At the beginning of *The Revolt's* second canto, Laon recounts his youth:

The starlight smile of children, the sweet looks
Of women, the fair breast from which I fed,
The murmur of the unreposing brooks,
And the green light which, shifting overhead,
Some tangled bower of vines around me shed,
The shells on the sea-sand, and the wild flowers,
The lamp-light through the rafters cheerly spread,
And on the twining flax—in life's young hours
These sights and sounds did nurse my spirit's folded powers. (II, 1)³⁴

Central to his memory is the atmosphere of place; he was raised and nurtured by his physical environment as much as the people around him. The “culture” of the “lamp-light through the rafters” harmoniously flows into the “nature” of the vines and sea-shells. There is no boundary between the two concepts, and neither is there a distinction between the “inside” and “outside”,³⁵ much like Shelley's understanding of the mind and its environment as merging entities. There is therefore little distinction between the natural world and the human

³¹ Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” 2.

³² Timothy Morton, “Nature and Culture”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 186.

³³ Morton, “Nature and Culture”, 187.

³⁴ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 28.

³⁵ Morton, “Nature and Culture”, 186.

being. Moreover, in *The Revolt*, nature is reflective of the characters' emotional and moral states. Immoral actions, or loss of self, are continuously accompanied by tumultuous weather patterns, just as peaceful and harmonious action is accompanied by the calm, gentle state of nature. Morton remarks that the way Shelley uses the environment is the inverse of a pathetic fallacy.³⁶ Instead of projecting human features and behaviours on the natural world, the natural world is ascribed to humanity. For instance, Laon's imprisonment and subsequent loss of self is set during a "tameless hurricane",³⁷ mirroring Laon's inner turmoil. He is imprisoned atop a column upon a rock that "overhangs the town", so far from the nature that is a part of him as much as his own mind. He may gaze upon the ocean and forests that surround him, but in his immediate vicinity upon the rock can find only weeds, sown by eagles, as symbols of the Spirit of Evil. This distancing from the natural world leads to his loss of self, because he is in a way being kept away from something essential to his identity. His environment is dominated by metal: he is thrown through a brass grate and bound with chains of the same metal. Metal here functions as a symbol of oppression, antithetical to nature, and reminiscent of the shackles that literally as well as symbolically bind the human spirit in an oppressive regime, something we often find reflected in William Blake's work as well as Shelley's.

Throughout the poem, nature is seen as a place of rejuvenation. Following his rescue, Laon's recovery in Canto IV occurs in a sheltered natural environment, a place where once again the natural is blurred with culture. The tower in which he recovers is weathered, slowly being reclaimed by nature: it is covered in ivy, with sand strewn across the floor. The sun, moon and breeze permeate the building's window lattices, and the lake comes up to the doorway. The image of seashells, which Laon associates with his youth, is once again invoked, implying a sort of nursing back to health, as he was nursed in his infancy. His sense of self is dependent on contact with nature, so his return to nature has allowed him to reclaim his mind: "Thus slowly from my brain the darkness rolled, / My thoughts their due array did re-assume" (IV, 7).³⁸ His powers are "revived" as spring sweeps across the land: "serene earth wears / The blosmy spring's star-bright investiture, / A vision which aught sad from sadness might allure" (IV, 32).³⁹ In Canto XII, Laon and Cythna reach enlightenment in death, as their love for one another binds them together. The paradise they are transported to is a natural haven in which they are finally able to observe the hidden truth of the world: "[...] we did

³⁶ Morton, "Nature and Culture", 189.

³⁷ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 46.

³⁸ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 50.

³⁹ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 56.

know, / That virtue, thought obscured on Earth, not less / Survives all mortal change in lasting loveliness” (XII, 38).⁴⁰ Nature is, therefore, according to Shelley, a healing force; fostering a closer connection to the natural world will eliminate despotism and restore humanity to its natural state.

2.2 Politics of the Body: Shelley’s Vegetarianism and Malthusian Discourse

The orang-outang perfectly resembles man both in the order and number of his teeth. The orang-outang is the most anthropomorphous of the ape tribe, all of which are strictly frugivorous. There is no other species of animals in which this analogy exists. In many frugivorous animals, the canine teeth are more pointed and distinct than those of man. The resemblance also of the human stomach to that of the orang-outang is greater than to that of any other animal.⁴¹

Shelley’s 1813 essay *A Vindication of Natural Diet* advocates for the vegetarian diet as the natural diet of the human being. Given the closer resemblance between man and the frugivorous orangutan than man and the carnivorous animal, Shelley argues that the human being is not naturally omnivorous, rather better suited to a herbivorous diet.

This argument is an example of the rising discourse on the similarities between nature and humanity, two previously entirely separate philosophical fields. The Romantic period saw the rise not only of appreciation for natural landscapes but also interest in the mental and emotional life of animals.⁴² Kate Rigby notes the acknowledgement of the animal-like qualities of the human being in Shelley’s prose and poetry, as well as Byron’s mock epic *Don Juan*, or the animal poetry of Wordsworth and Clare.⁴³ In Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, part of the Mariner’s redemption is the acceptance of the surrounding slimy sea creatures as beautiful.

The period between 1790 and 1820 saw a rising interest in understanding food consumption as a social issue. Rising food prices in Britain at the turn of the century (particularly in 1800-1801), caused by extended war blockades, made for a serious food shortage, and, even if there was little demographic impact, caused social unrest.⁴⁴ The common labourer could no longer afford to buy meat, limiting them to a crop-based diet until

⁴⁰ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 142.

⁴¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Vindication of Natural Diet”, *Project Gutenberg*, accessed 24th June 2024. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/38727/pg38727-images.html>

⁴² Rigby, “Romanticism and Ecocriticism”, 66.

⁴³ Rigby, “Romanticism and Ecocriticism”, 66.

⁴⁴ Williams, J. E. “The British Standard of Living, 1750-1850.” *The Economic History Review* 19, no. 3 (1966), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2593165>, 591.

as late as 1844.⁴⁵ An all-vegetable diet was therefore not uncommon at the time, but vegetarianism by choice was very much an issue of the upper classes. Many people, Shelley among them, chose to adhere to this vegetable diet not because of economic concerns, but for moral and medical reasons. Shelley's close friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, in *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, notes Shelley's enjoyment of panada (bread soaked in water, sprinkled with brown sugar and nutmeg). In response to a comment of Hogg's, he announces that in doing so he is "[lapping] up the blood of the slain! [supping] up the gore of murdered kings!"⁴⁶ Suppers at the Shelley household were, according to Hogg, an "empty, idle ceremony," since Shelley was indifferent to hosting etiquette and would eat his own food outside of mealtimes.⁴⁷

Morton notes that "[i]n daily practice Shelley was a politicized consumer, across a spectrum ranging from such statements to his habitual disdain for the social niceties of the meal."⁴⁸ His eating habits were as much a refusal to adhere to restrictive social norms as a turn to a more 'natural' manner of consumption and food content. Shelley adopted vegetarianism during his years at Oxford and maintained the diet until he left England for Italy in 1818.⁴⁹ His vegetarian practices advocated for social justice as well as animal welfare; Shelley became greatly concerned with the connection between health and morality.

Shelley links animal cruelty with crime and disease, which are caused by unnatural, that is to say, for humans, omnivorous/carnivorous, diet. Vegetarians of the Romantic era likened the consumption of meat to the Christian Fall.⁵⁰ He argues that from violence stems more violence: because meat as food is attained through violence, its consumption can only lead to more violent tendencies.⁵¹ In *The Revolt of Islam*, the commodification of farm animals is synonymous with tyrannical regimes. Meat consumption makes humanity indifferent to the exploitation of animals and by extension to the environment as a whole. Avoiding meat consumption is a step on the path to the recovery of health and natural disposition, in line with Shelley's empathetic ideals. Adoption of the vegetarian diet results in

⁴⁵ Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 13-14.

⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. II., (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1858), 321-22.

⁴⁷ Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 322.

⁴⁸ Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 64.

⁴⁹ Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 208.

⁵⁰ Ralph Pite, "How Green Were the Romantics?" *Studies in Romanticism* 35, no. 3 (1996), 363. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25601179>.

⁵¹ Nandita Batra, "Dominion, Empathy, and Symbiosis: Gender and Anthropocentrism in Romanticism." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 3, no. 2 (1996): 107. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44085433>.

the tendency to act with a softer, gentler disposition.⁵² Vegetarianism, at the time simply called “natural diet”, and abstinence from alcohol, were very masculine, revolutionary endeavours, acquiring their effeminate connotations only later.⁵³ In his vegetarian prose, Shelley recounts many such arguments from Joseph Ritson’s *Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food*, as well as John Frank Newton’s *The Return to Nature* (which similarly argues that vegetarianism restores health and soothes human suffering).⁵⁴

The Revolt is Shelley’s manifesto of non-violence. It argues not only against human-on-human violence, but also against the slaughter of animals, and therefore for the vegetarian diet. The spilling of blood represents the absolute loss of humanity. During his imprisonment atop the column in Canto III, Laon consumes his own flesh in his thirst:

Two days thus passed—I neither raved nor died—
Thirst raged within me, like a scorpion's nest
Built in mine entrails; I had spurned aside
The water-vessel, while despair possessed
My thoughts, and now no drop remained! The uprest
Of the third sun brought hunger—but the crust
Which had been left, was to my craving breast
Fuel, not food. I chewed the bitter dust,
And bit my bloodless arm, and licked the brazen rust. (III, 21)⁵⁵

This is mirrored by the chains that bind him, as the symbol of oppression “[eats] into [his] flesh.”⁵⁶ Not only is he separated from nature and therefore losing his sense of self, but the instruments of imprisonment he is bound with actively contribute to the process. His cannibalistic tendencies are also accompanied by cannibalistic dreams:

Methought that grate was lifted, and the seven
Who brought me thither four stiff corpses bare,
[...]
Leaning that I might eat, I stretched and clung
Over the shapeless depth in which those corpses hung
[...]
Alas, Alas! it seemed that Cythna’s ghost
Laughed in those looks, and that flesh was warm
Within my teeth! [...] (III, 25-26)⁵⁷

⁵² Pite, “How Green Were the Romantics?”, 363.

⁵³ Timothy Morton, “Joseph Ritson, Percy Shelley and the Making of Romantic Vegetarianism”, *Romanticism* 12, no.1 (2006), 52. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rom.2006.0006>

⁵⁴ Pite, “How Green Were the Romantics?”, 363.

⁵⁵ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 45.

⁵⁶ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 43.

⁵⁷ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 46.

The flesh he consumes in his dream is not that of some nameless corpse; he dreams he is consuming that of Cythna, she who Laon feels closest to. Cannibalism, and autocannibalism, were characteristic in “the representation of famine in Europe,” most frequently portraying some human “other”, meaning a lower class, ethnicity or nation).⁵⁸ Laon’s devolution into cannibalism signifies his complete loss of humanity, and thereby his loss of self. If, according to Shelley, self-identification should be drawn from nature, then cannibalism, as the ultimate extreme of meat consumption, represents total departure from humanity, because it is wholly unnatural. The blood motif is representative of violence throughout the poem, therefore identified with the cruel, or the unnatural. Blood is a commodity that the tyrant is far too willing to dispense, hence the immorality of his rule. Gore and poison are a blight upon the world as they bring about suffering. Oppression is accompanied by poisonous food: “Poison, a snake in flowers, beneath the veil / Of food [...]” (I, 29).⁵⁹ Poison here corrupts the perfection of natural resources and symbolises wholesale oppression.

The theme of cannibalism recurs later, following the ecological disaster caused by the tyrant’s re-taking of the land. People grow desperate; they begin to sell human flesh in the marketplace, as food:

There was no corn—in the wide market-place
All loathliest things, even human flesh, was sold;
They weighed it in small scales —and many a face
Was fixed in eager horror then [...] (X, 19)⁶⁰

The re-established tyrannical regime forces its population into taking drastic measures, losing their humanity in the process. The “blinding instinct” of hunger eclipses all rational thought, as food becomes insufficient to feed the entire population.

Malthus’ 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* posits that population growth is exponential, while the growth of agriculture is arithmetic. This means that unchecked population growth will lead to food shortages; high population density is therefore a threat social stability. The *Essay on Population* was especially relevant to Shelley because of the discourse between Malthus and Godwin, who Shelley revered. Shelley specifically mentions Malthus in his preface to *The Revolt*: “Metaphysics, and inquiries into moral and political science, have become little else than vain attempts to revive exploded superstitions, or sophisms like those of Mr Malthus, calculated to lull the oppressors of mankind into a

⁵⁸ Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 111.

⁵⁹ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 20.

⁶⁰ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 119.

security of everlasting triumph.”⁶¹ Shelley criticises Malthus’ theories for their support of the very oppressive systems that Shelley seeks to replace. Morton remarks that Malthus “reduces politics to the discussion of the gross, material body.”⁶² He argues against political idealism, criticising Godwin’s theory of perfectibility, which Shelley coveted. He criticises Godwin’s egalitarian ideas of utopia, citing that “man cannot live in the midst of plenty. All cannot share alike the boundaries of nature.”⁶³ Malthus’ ideal society is based on small settlements, an equal share of labour, and a vegetarian diet. The vegetarian diet can feed a much larger number of people.⁶⁴ The *Essay on Population* claims that a vegetarian diet, if land productivity is increased, could support double the population of the day.⁶⁵ However, he does concede that a nation-wide adoption of the vegetarian diet may prove difficult, for the infertility of English soil. The cessation of all use of animal food is problematic, because by-products of cattle farming (manure) are necessary for the renewal of soil nutrients to produce sufficient crops, especially if the goal is to produce large amounts of food on a nation-wide scale.⁶⁶ The utopian vision is, therefore, flawed.

For Malthus, vegetarianism is purely an economic solution; he is not concerned with its humanitarian implications, like Shelley and many other Romantic thinkers.⁶⁷ In his 1812 pamphlet, *Proposals for an Association*, Shelley criticises Malthus’ cynicism: “Many well-meaning persons may think that the attainment of the good which I propose as the ultimatum of philanthropic exertion is visionary and inconsistent with human nature; they would tell me not to make people happy for fear of overstocking the world [...]”,⁶⁸ referencing Malthus’ arguments against excess. One of Shelley’s greatest qualms with Malthus’ theory is that the economist treats famine as an apolitical issue. He makes famine seem a natural phenomenon, because agriculture is a natural concern. Shelley, on the other hand, argues that famine is born of political oppression.⁶⁹ The solution to his trifecta of “temporal and eternal evil” (“war, vice and misery”)⁷⁰ is precisely this utopian vision of excess. Famine is political because political systems favour the rich and those in power, while famine predominantly affects the poor. The

⁶¹ Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 4.

⁶² Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 209.

⁶³ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, in Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 211.

⁶⁴ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (London: J. Johnson, 1798), 183.

⁶⁵ Malthus, *Population*, 188.

⁶⁶ Malthus, *Population*, 187.

⁶⁷ Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 212.

⁶⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Proposals for an Association*, in *Shelley’s Prose Works, vol I.* ed. Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Chatto and Windus, 1906), 280.

⁶⁹ Morton. *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 210.

⁷⁰ Shelley, *Proposals for an Association*, 281.

dichotomy between the rich and the poor is augmented by violence: the rich support violence, while the poor “pay with their blood, their labour and their happiness, for the crimes and mistakes which the hereditary monopolists of earth commit”.⁷¹ The “evil” of the world directly results from oppressive systems, like monarchies, the “hereditary monopolists”.

The politicisation of diet is central to *The Revolt of Islam*.⁷² The poem advocates for the vegetable system of diet, encompassed within the rhetoric of non-violence. Following the removal of the tyrannical ruler, Laone’s speech in Canto V celebrates the peace of vegetarianism:

'My brethren, we are free! The fruits are glowing
Beneath the stars, and the night-winds are flowing
O'er the ripe corn, the birds and beasts are dreaming—
Never again may blood of bird or beast
Stain with its venomous stream a human feast (V, 51.5)⁷³

At the subsequent feast, the revolutionaries only consume plant-based foods, like various fruits and rooted vegetables, equated with liberty, hope and justice, dubbed “Earth’s children”.⁷⁴ The banquet remains untainted by such things as “gore” or “poison”; the meal can therefore be shared in “peace and innocence.”⁷⁵ The vegetable diet is once again heralded as a product of nature: “Their feast was such as Earth, the general mother, / Pours from her fairest bosom, when she smiles / In the embrace of autumn” (V, 55).⁷⁶

Moreover, this banquet is described as feeding a substantial host of people, something that would require much more time and effort had their diet been meat-based. Shelley argued that a greater amount of people can be fed more equitably on a vegetarian diet.⁷⁷ In *The Revolt*, food is presented as a gift from the Earth. The celebration’s overflowing stockpiles of fruit and vegetables result from the Earth’s joy at the revolutionaries’ peaceful reconciliation. The Earth, as the sustaining force of all living things, is given a parental role. This personification gives the natural world agency, and above all established the natural world as the highest power, above human conflict, but nonetheless affected by it. Shelley’s point here is that the Earth can only nurture those who care to be nurtured. Humanity should therefore strive toward love and empathy, and thereby become as close to nature as possible. The Earth

⁷¹ Shelley, *Proposals for an Association*, 281.

⁷² Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 110.

⁷³ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 71.

⁷⁴ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 73.

⁷⁵ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 73.

⁷⁶ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 73.

⁷⁷ Rigby “Romanticism and Ecocriticism”, 66.

(natural systems, personified) cannot control human behaviour, but can withhold vital support systems if necessary: the ecological disaster depicted later in the poem is a result of tyrannical rule:

There was no food, the corn was trampled down,
The flocks and herds had perished; on the shore
The dead and putrid fish were ever thrown;
The deeps were foodless, and the winds no more
Creaked with the weight of birds, but, as before
Those winged things sprang forth, were void of shade;
The vines and orchards, Autumn's golden store,
Were burned;—so that the meanest food was weighed
With gold, and Avarice died before the god it made. (X, 18)⁷⁸

The land is literally poisoned by the tyrannical regime. Shelley describes the process thoroughly in Canto X: first comes the gore; the tyrant's slaying of the revolutionaries, which "streams through the city" on the sixth day of battle. Armies trample fields, limiting crop growth. The land becomes "death-polluted" as the unburied bodies rot in the sun. This leads to the spread of disease, which affects wild predators. Death spreads across the land, poisoning fish in streams; birds and insects in the forest; flocks and herds, all perish because of the spread of disease. Come winter, people have no food stocked, which leads to widespread famine. Then the same disease falls upon man, and the dead begin to pollute city water sources, limiting water resources and resulting in water scarcity.

Here, *The Revolt* becomes a narrative representation of Shelley's arguments in his *Proposals for an Association*. Famine itself affects the larger population but not the tyrant locked away behind palace walls; it affects the poor, not the rich: "Famine had spared the palace of the king:— / He rioted in festival the while, / He and his guards and priests [...]" (X, 24).⁷⁹ The king is subject to the consequences of his own actions, but he is killed by plague, not famine. Wide-spread vegetarian practices are a way of identifying with the oppressed, whether that be labourers, nature or animals, at the hands of those in power.⁸⁰ Shelley's vegetarianism is therefore another manifestation of his rhetoric of empathy.

⁷⁸ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 119.

⁷⁹ Shelley, *The Revolt*, 120.

⁸⁰ Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 240.

Chapter III: “Ozymandias” and the “Ode to the West Wind”

Much of Shelley’s work revolves around the idea of nature as an enduring, weathering force. There is rigorous emphasis on nature as a beautiful space which is to be respected and appreciated. Nature, furthermore, has agency in Shelley’s work; it does not function merely as a flat tableau, or a background of human processes. This is notably presented in two of Shelley’s most well-known short poems, *Ozymandias* and the *Ode to the West Wind*.

3.1 “Ozymandias”

“Ozymandias” is often excluded from critical discourse, on the grounds of its popularity and short length.⁸¹ In his 1958 *The Romantic Poets*, Graham Hough remarks that: “*Ozymandias* is an extremely clear and direct poem, advancing to a predetermined end by means of one firmly held image.”⁸² While the experimental sonnet may be focused on a singular scene, its engagement with natural landscapes and Shelley’s philosophy opens it up to ecocritical interpretation.

Most scholars trace Shelley’s source for “Ozymandias” to Diodorus Siculus’ *Biblioteca Historica*, the only work to reference Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II. using the name “Osymandyas”.⁸³ Ramesses II. was a strong ruler whose reign marked a period of dramatic expansion of the Egyptian Empire. The pharaoh undertook 15 campaigns (all but one successful), developed cities, built temples and commissioned numerous monuments to his rule. His image is often conflated with the tyrannical Pharaoh that enslaved the Israelites in the *Book of Exodus*.

To Shelley, the quintessential image of the ‘unnatural’ was a tyrant.⁸⁴ He understood tyranny as a political establishment which violated such natural rights as freedom, justice and equality. Tyrannical figures exercise their power in an oppressive manner, aiming to subjugate as many people as possible until this power becomes absolute.⁸⁵ In his essay, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, Shelley criticises such regimes and expresses the need for social reform.⁸⁶ Because these rulers deny their subjects natural rights, they represent inherently ‘unnatural’ regimes. The “Ozymandias” ruler is therefore a tyrant. His arrogant,

⁸¹ James Brown ““Ozymandias’: The Riddle of the Sands,” *The Keats-Shelley Review*, (1998) 12:1, 51, <https://doi.org/10.1179/ksr.1998.12.1.51>

⁸² Graham Hough, *The Romantic Poets* (London: Arrow Books, 1953), 142.

⁸³ Johnstone Parr, “Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias.’” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 6 (1957): 32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30210020>.

⁸⁴ Morton, “Nature and Culture”, 198.

⁸⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “tyrant (*n.*), sense 3,” March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2931361751>.

⁸⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform* (Oxford University Press, 1920), 1.

authoritarian demeanour indicate his less-than-stellar character, which implies he was a ruler who wielded his power harshly. This is antithetical to Shelley's idea of morality, based on empathy and care, and it is this philosophy which underpins the short but powerful and influential poem.

3.1.1 The Desert

Romantic writing featured desert landscapes much more frequently than preceding literatures, largely due to changes in how the desert was perceived.⁸⁷ European travellers prior to the 19th century considered deserts a form of environmental abjection, a morally unsound place of uncultivated wilderness. During the Romantic period, the boundary between the human and the natural shifted to encompass an appreciation of nature in all its forms. The re-evaluation of the human relationship to nature also prompted a reinterpretation of desert landscapes. However, the desert does not become central to the Romantic notion of the sublime because it is characterised by an overall absence. Deserts do not exhibit typical signifiers of landscape like vegetation or mountains. Late 18th century and early 19th century explorers remark upon the homogeneity of the desert expanse, particularly in the Sahara, and deserts in Southern Africa, that leaves one with feelings of emptiness and disappointment.⁸⁸ The explorer expects to be met with a sublime landscape but finds a lifeless version of it stretching as far as the eye can see. The desert's primary characteristic is its uniformity.⁸⁹ It is not central to the sublime because it lacks complexity, rather it is a single enormous blank space, impressive only in size but not its composition. It is, as is remarked by Burke, "only one idea, and not a repetition of similar ideas: it is therefore great, not so much on the principle of infinity, as upon that of vastness."⁹⁰

The "Ozymandias" desert is described very much in the same way. The sonnet's final lines shift the focus of the poem from the ruin outward and expand the poem's scope to encompass everything within sight. This emphasises the irregularity of the ruin within its setting. In many ways the crumbling statue is the only thing in the area the eye can rest on because it breaks the landscape's uniformity.

⁸⁷ Aidan Tynan, *The Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy: Wasteland Aesthetics*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) Accessed May 29, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central, 16.

⁸⁸ Tynan, *The Desert*, 101.

⁸⁹ Tynan, *The Desert*, 101.

⁹⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful*, (London, 1757), 139-140.

The sonnet may be interpreted in two ways, depending on whether the area was a desert before the civilisation was established, or became a desert after the fact. The former implies a battle between man and nature. The “Ozymandias” desert is by no means presented as a hospitable environment. The words “stand”, “survive” and “remains” imply an ongoing struggle for survival, a battle between two destructive forces which refuse to desist. The proud tyrant presumed to try to sustain a civilisation in the open desert. Establishing an empire in a place so hostile to life is in itself a competition of who will become the greatest tyrant.

The desert is the victor because its processes are much more stable: they are gradual, which makes acclimation easy. Territorial expansion is the result of conflict and therefore usually a sudden change. A sudden, significant change is much more difficult to conform to than a change implemented slowly over time. The desert’s unceasing erosion weathers the stone foundations of the tyrant’s domain, which is unable to withstand and eventually crumbles. The empire is reduced to dust, reclaimed by the desert they once tried to conquer.

The latter implies an ecological disaster presumably caused by the civilisation’s presence. W.H. Auden remarks of romantic desert imagery:

[...] the desert may not be barren by nature but as the consequence of a historical catastrophe. The once-fertile city has become, through the malevolence of others or its own sin, the waste land.⁹¹

Desert settlements are traditionally concentrated around rivers, which provide water necessary for survival, transport and growth. The sonnet situates the ruins in a purely desert environment:

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.⁹²

One must assume the settlement was originally built next to a water source, meaning said water source dried out and the settlement’s populace either moved or died out. This drying out can be due to either human or natural causes.

Historically, abusive regimes have not been overly concerned with environmental conservation. Armies have waged war and left deserts in their wake.⁹³ Modern-day globalised

⁹¹ W. H. Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 15.

⁹² Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias”, in *Selected Works: Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Alma Classics, 2022), 59.

agriculture under capitalist systems exploits landscapes. Practices like deforestation and the overuse of GMO crops lead to the death of biodiversity in affected areas. Assuming the “Ozymandias” tyrant settled an environmentally rich, diverse area, the empire may have overtaxed its resources. The establishment of civilisation therefore may have led to both their own downfall and ecological death in the area. The ecological collapse here is catastrophic, the tyrant and his empire have thoroughly decimated the area, and therefore themselves.

In the case of “Ozymandias”, however, ecological death is more likely due to natural causes. The environment may have reacted to the tyrant’s impure morality. The tyrant is, after all, the invading force, the environment is only defending itself. This reflection of morality on one’s surroundings is prevalent in Shelley’s work, like the cosmic processes of change in *Prometheus Unbound*, where the natural world decays as the imprisoned Prometheus vows revenge. As a result, his morality becomes polluted. Once again Shelley argues that tyrannical rule is unsustainable. Tyranny breeds violence and carelessness. This impure morality reflects on the tyrant’s surroundings, which begin to decay, creating an unsustainable environment. To establish a long-lasting society, one must be in tune with natural order (clear, pure morals). Shelley’s social ecology emphasises the importance of the environment for a successful civilisation. An empire cannot sustain itself with no water source, if only because water scarcity affects food production. It is therefore imperative for a society to treat its surroundings with empathy. The consequences of neglect result in death, as presented in “Ozymandias”.

The sonnet is centred around the opposition of human endeavour, that is culture and the wilderness the desert embodies. The desert is a smooth expanse naturally contrasted with the irregular sightlines of cultivated inhabited spaces.⁹⁴ The vast homogeneous expanse of the desert evokes a sense of greatness, but also feelings of abjection. It is the extreme of wilderness and therefore the farthest location from humanity (civilisation, society). It becomes a place of judgement, where one may face punishment or find a chance for redemption.⁹⁵ The desert performs the act of social reform, desert sands and winds levelling the tyrant’s unjust empire. It acts as judge, jury and executioner. Tyranny is recognised and defeated, making way for a new, utopian system, but one where humanity has no place. “Ozymandias” is an example of a negative outcome in Shelley’s rhetoric of redemption.⁹⁶ the tyrant was judged unworthy. The process of transformation is still underway as parts of the

⁹³ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 23.

⁹⁴ Tynan, *The Desert*, 101.

⁹⁵ Auden, *Enchafèd Flood*, 14.

⁹⁶ Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 220.

empire have yet to be erased, therefore the landscape cannot yet begin its rejuvenation. Cycles in the desert do not involve yearly death and rebirth, rather functioning within their own time frame – the desert is an ecosystem so extreme it has the power to bend the laws of nature (the yearly cycle of renewal).

3.1.2 Urban Destruction

The sonnet is centred around the idea of impermanence of human endeavour. The desert endures while the human factor withers away. Human power and pride are transient; the desert lasts forever. Had the empire caused ecological death in the area, they would have been forced to abandon their civilisation, leaving behind an empty city. The desolation implied by the statue ruins invokes modern day abandoned buildings undergoing urban decay, where nature begins to take over human elements. Desert forces assimilate Ozymandias' empire until the remnants of past tyranny too become part of the lifeless landscape. The uniformity of the desert presents a united front against the remnants of humanity, but the desert is the ultimate fate for unsustainable cities. The image of the desert's reclamation of the statue mirrors the process of nature reclaiming urban spaces.

The image of the crumbling statue is a literal representation of an advanced stage of urban decay; the statue, or what is left of it, is the last standing remnant of what assumably was at its peak a monumental palace in the midst of a thriving city. Human constructions strive for longevity, but all ultimately crumble. Because they are static and unable to renew themselves, human achievements like the monument pictured in "Ozymandias" are subject to destruction. Decay is a natural process, and monuments such as this one, carved of stone, strive to avoid it. Natural processes, like sand and wind erosion, will always prevail, because they act consistently over a long time period. If a society is morally polluted and therefore unsustainable, it will not last. With the society die its physical accomplishments. "Ozymandias" therefore highlights the theme of urban decay, where the upkeep of cities becomes neglected, so they fall into disrepair over time.

The sonnet's judgement lies in its irony. The boastful tyrant's statue bears the inscription: "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" (10-11).⁹⁷ The image is heavily ironic; Ozymandias' "works" have been lost to time and the desert. The sonnet critiques the tyrant's belief that his creation was permanent. It is a parody of political arrogance, emphasising the hollow nature and pretention of imperial

⁹⁷ Shelley, "Ozymandias", 59.

societies.⁹⁸ The sonnet's imagery directly correlates to Shelley's condemnation of British Imperial exploits during his lifetime; the depicted land is both ancient Egypt and a reflection of modern imperialism.⁹⁹ The late 18th and early 19th century saw the increased involvement of British rule in the affairs of the East India Trading Company, as well as the colonisation of Australia in the 1770s, and territorial expansion on the African Continent.¹⁰⁰ Shelley was greatly opposed to imperial expansion and the empire's oppression of the colonised. Much like the French Revolution, imperialism was based on violent conquest, and therefore unsustainable. The "Ozymandias" sonnet depicts the outcome of the trajectory of the British Empire of Shelley's time; remembered not as great, but as a tyrannical regime defined by greed.

Shelley was an anti-monarchist.¹⁰¹ He believed equality was a natural state.¹⁰² Especially in early 19th century England, in the wake of the French Revolution, there were many censorship restrictions dictating what could and could not be published. To Shelley, as well as oppressing foreign lands through colonisation, the current political institution was blindly enforcing general laws and therefore violating natural laws of freedom.¹⁰³ According to Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, the establishment was no longer moral, which was something that Godwin wished to be restored. The destruction and pointlessness that is the aftermath of these regimes is presented in "Ozymandias". The tyrant's bold words inscribed on the pedestal of a now ruined statue are hollow, just as the might of his empire was, fundamentally, hollow.

Art (Ozymandias' statue) has outlasted its creators, both the tyrant, who ordered its creation, and the artist, but its significance has changed over time. The tyrant's image decays as much as his empire deteriorates. In the sculpting process, the artist read the ruler's true essence, sculpting a figure with a "wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command" (5),¹⁰⁴ branding him a tyrant for as long as the statue's face remains intact. Art is a way of ensuring the empire's survival.¹⁰⁵ However, it too stands no chance against natural cycles of renewal. The tyrant assumed his rule would be memorable, and yet his memory is to this moment being

⁹⁸ Michael O'Neill, "Sonnets and Odes", in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Michael O'Neill and Anthony Howe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 330.

⁹⁹ O'Neill, "Sonnets and Odes", 330.

¹⁰⁰ Saree Makdisi, "Introduction: Worldly Romanticism," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65, no. 4 (2011): 430 <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2011.65.4.429>.

¹⁰¹ Michael O'Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 13.

¹⁰² Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, 70-71.

¹⁰³ O'Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Shelley, "Ozymandias", 59.

¹⁰⁵ O'Neill, "Sonnets and Odes", 330.

erased by the slow but persistent processes of the desert. Overconfidence in human engineering leads to a neglect of sustainability. The tyrant's boastful declaration is almost a taunt, and at the moment of its inscription it foreshadowed the empire's downfall at the hands of pride. Ozymandias' tyranny is a prelude to his own downfall. The image of the statue: "half sunk a shattered visage lies" (4),¹⁰⁶ implies a drawn-out funeral; the statue is quite literally being buried by desert sands.

Nature's victory over the tyrant's creation demonstrates its power and therefore challenges the anthropocentric worldview. Humans are far from being a dominating force on Earth, which is demonstrated by the transient nature of human constructs. This transience is explored even through the poem's perspectives, of which there are several.¹⁰⁷ The sonnet's speaker appears only in the opening two lines, replaced then by the point of view of a traveller who himself saw these ruins. Presumably, Ozymandias' words held genuine power at the civilisation's peak. The sculptor engraving these words onto the pedestal and capturing the "[...] frown / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command" (4-5),¹⁰⁸ had cause to fear the man. But over time, the significance of these words has changed. They no longer hold any power; they only ridicule the tyrant's supposed impressive legacy. The words have been interpreted as ironic by the traveller, who juxtaposes Ozymandias' proclamation with a description of the barren landscape in the following line: "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair! / Nothing beside remains [...]" (11-12). The traveller then passes this interpretation onto the speaker. The contrasting use of near and far reference in the traveller's narrative: "Tell that its sculptor well *those* passions read / Which yet survive, stamped on *these* lifeless things" (6-7),¹⁰⁹ solidify the difference between Ozymandias the living being and Ozymandias the memory.¹¹⁰ The poem's use of perspectives therefore further emphasises the impermanence of the human factor. After death, one can no longer cultivate their own image; it is left entirely up to outside interpretation.

3.2 "Ode to the West Wind"

Shelley was greatly interested in science.¹¹¹ He was particularly knowledgeable about meteorological processes, which is reflected in his literary work. To contextualise the

¹⁰⁶ Shelley, "Ozymandias", 59.

¹⁰⁷ Brown "Ozymandias": The Riddle of the Sands," 53.

¹⁰⁸ Shelley, "Ozymandias", 59.

¹⁰⁹ Shelley, "Ozymandias", 59.

¹¹⁰ Brown, "Ozymandias", 54

¹¹¹ Patrick Swinden, "Shelley: 'Ode to the West Wind.'" *Critical Survey* 6, no. 1/2 (1973): 53.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41553911>.

environment depicted in the “Ode”, it is important to establish the environmental properties of where it was written. The poem was composed in 1819, a year after Shelley left England permanently for Italy. In his note to the “Ode”, Shelley remarks that:

This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains.¹¹²

During his stay in Florence, Shelley often took walks through the surrounding countryside.¹¹³ For Shelley, being outdoors and experiencing the movement of the wind and the oncoming storm stirs much thought and emotion. Directly experiencing the natural phenomenon he describes brings the poet and subject closer together; the contact ensures better appreciation.¹¹⁴ Perhaps more closely than “Ozymandias”, the “Ode” depicts the relationship between the human and the natural, with heavy political symbolism of the natural cycles of change.

3.2.1 Natural Cycles

The “Ode” was composed in an area dominated by western winds. During the autumn months, a west wind originating from the Atlantic Ocean sweeps across Italy. With it the autumnal west wind brings storms and moisture, marking the end of Summer and the beginning of colder months with higher precipitation. The coming of the west wind is a turning point in the yearly cycle, something Shelley was very much aware of. In his note, Shelley observes the wind accumulate vapours that will subsequently make up storms that will converge on the Mediterranean countryside. This west wind then returns at the end of winter, ushering in a new age of spring. The wind therefore has dual connotations; it functions as both a force of destruction and a force of preservation.

Essential to the image of the wind in Romanticism is movement. The West Wind is constantly in motion, reshuffling and purging the landscape of dying elements. The summer

¹¹² Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Note to the Ode to the West Wind”, in *Selected Poetry: Percy Bysshe Shelley*, (London: Alma Classics, 2022), 287.

¹¹³ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Notes to the Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, [Waiheke Island]: The Floating Press, 94, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=350514&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

¹¹⁴ Henry S. Pancoast, “Shelley’s Ode to the West Wind”, *Modern Language Notes* 35, no. 2 (1920): 98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2915394>.

months are warm and comfortable; the world grows complacent, lulled into a false sense of security, therefore becoming blind to its non-functioning aspects. An agitating force is needed to call attention to and purge these hindering factors: the West Wind therefore sweeps across the land and with it rips away dying leaves, scattering them across the landscape. These leaves will decay, creating fresh, nutrient-rich soil that will foster new growth. Without the action of the Wind, accumulated leaves would pollute the landscape. Trees shed leaves faster than leaves decompose, so they would collect in surplus and subsequently deprive underlying vegetation of sunlight, consequently having an overall negative environmental impact, fostering mould and disease. They must be scattered to prevent further death, and instead support new life. With these leaves, the West Wind will also disperse seeds, which will then wait for warmer conditions to sprout, continuing the cycle. The wind therefore removes and destroys the old while simultaneously ushering in the new, functioning as the driving force behind the process of ecological renewal.

Shelley's "Ode" invokes the autumnal West Wind, but also anticipates its vernal counterpart:

[...] until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth [...] (8-10)¹¹⁵

Where the autumnal West Wind creates space for new growth, the spring West Wind fosters it. The "Ode" ends on the famous hopeful note, the coming of spring: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (L70).¹¹⁶ In Shelley's philosophy, death does not connote finality but an opportunity for renewal; it is ultimately hopeful. The dispersal of dead leaves stands for the decay of all things in autumn. This is a necessary step in the renewal process. Matter is finite, it must therefore be cycled around again and again to for nature to sustain itself. Living things must die and their matter must decompose to provide nutrients and resources for new life.

Much like "Ozymandias", the process of renewal cannot begin until remnants of the past are completely eliminated. The scattering of leaves in Autumn must be followed by a mild Mediterranean winter, to make way for Spring rejuvenation. However, this cycle is a yearly occurrence, therefore much more regular than the processes of the "Ozymandias" desert landscape. The usual laws of nature (seasonal shift) apply here.

¹¹⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind", in *Selected Works: Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Alma Classics, 2022), 105.

¹¹⁶ Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind", 107

The “Ode” effectively separates the natural world into two categories: immortal forces of change and those affected by said change.¹¹⁷ The wind is unstoppable; it arrives at the same point of the cycle regardless of material or spiritual circumstances.

Shelley believed the world was governed by an eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth.¹¹⁸ Central to this cycle is the idea of balance. Prolonged periods of comfort (life) lead to a complacency that conceals festering wounds (death, decay; things that are no longer actively useful in the natural system). Moreover, this excessive comfort means the interruption of the renewal cycle; it becomes unproductive. Nature must constantly be purged of dead and dying things so it can sustain itself long-term. Abundant, concentrated death has negative environmental consequences. The West Wind therefore acts as an instigator of the process of rebirth. The “blue Mediterranean [...] / lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams” (30-31)¹¹⁹ in the third stanza must be broken out of its comfort-induced stupor for the processes of the yearly cycle to advance.

The romantic ocean in a way operates the same way as the romantic desert: Auden remarks that “both are wilderness, i.e., the place where there is no community, just or unjust [...].”¹²⁰ Much like the erosive forces of the desert, the ocean is the source of strong winds and storms. But the desert is characterised by its stillness, while fundamental to the ocean is a constant state of flux (movement) - it is the “symbol of potentiality”.¹²¹ Gazing upon the flat expanse of the ocean does not fill the romantic thinker with dread but with hope. The desert embodies death, as a landscape lacking in water, essential for the support of any living organism, while the ocean represents life, as an environment teeming with it: below the ocean’s surface resides, hidden from view, an entire ecosystem. The ocean does not act of its own initiative, its surface must be agitated by atmospheric forces. The Mediterranean contrasts with the wild Atlantic, where the Wind comes from: it is much warmer, much calmer; a sea rather than an ocean. Here, the vegetation hidden underneath the surface grows comfortably, sheltered by warm waters. The flowers’ sweet scents lull the sea into a sense of security.

The Wind is the master of both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. As the instigator of change, it must set other forces into motion for change to reach places the air cannot reach itself, like the underwater environment. The ruins described in the poem’s third stanza are

¹¹⁷ I. J. Kapstein, “The Symbolism of the Wind and the Leaves in Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind.’” *PMLA* 51, no. 4 (1936): 1070. <https://doi.org/10.2307/458084>.

¹¹⁸ Kapstein, “The Symbolism of the Wind”, 1070.

¹¹⁹ Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind”, 106.

¹²⁰ Auden, *Enchafed Flood*, 15.

¹²¹ Auden, *Enchafed Flood*, 19.

cast in a soft light but bear a similar significance to those central to “Ozymandias”. The ruins are being taken over by vegetation, undergoing a similar process of urban decay. They are representative of complacency rather than tyranny, both of which are morally negative. The imagery of ruins here serves as a reminder that civilisations have fallen in the past. They are being eroded much like the “Ozymandias” statue, but by ocean currents driven by winds.

The cycles presented in the “Ode” reflect Shelley’s interest in social reform. Shelley argued for a society more entwined with nature. Invoking the West Wind, a radical force of change, allows for a swift and natural solution to the issue of a morally polluted society. The autumn comes to liberate humanity of impure morals; the Spring then comes as a hope for the establishing of new, pure morals. Shelley advocates for reform according to the laws of nature. Nature endures because of its regular processes of renewal. It is in a constant state of flux, therefore able to accommodate new circumstances like changes in weather, as well as being able to recover from more significant changes like ecological disasters. If humanity were to construct a society based on natural systems, its existence would become renewable, and therefore long-lasting. Shelley emphasises the flexibility of these systems. This is evidenced several of Shelley’s other works, very prominently, for instance, in the 1820 poem “The Cloud”.

The poem follows a cloud as it actively participates in environmental processes. There is constant emphasis on interaction between the cloud and different parts of the natural world. The cloud is pluriform. It can fulfil many functions in nature, acting as a roof, a girdle for the sun and moon, watering “thirsting flowers” but also covering them with hail and snow. This emphasises the interconnectedness of the natural system: many different factors are dependent upon one another. In “A Defence of Poetry”, Shelley argues that the key to pure morals is a similar interconnectedness; he calls for a self-identification based on empathy with others, both between humans and with the natural world.¹²²

“The Cloud” underscores Shelley’s ideas about transformation and renewability. Much like the “Ode”, “The Cloud” is concerned with meteorological processes:

I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;
I change, but I cannot die.
For after the rain when with never a stain
The pavilion of Heaven is bare,
And the winds and sunbeams with their convex gleams
Build up the blue dome of air,
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,

¹²² Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defense of Poetry”, 11-12.

And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
I arise and unbuild it again (75-84)¹²³

Shelley's depiction of these natural processes underscores their importance in sustaining ecological function. The precipitation/evaporation/condensation cycle is a key part of sustaining life. The cloud's actions directly affect the growth of plants, strength of rivers and the overall health of the environment. Environmental awareness is an important part of the ecological process. Personifying key elements of such processes imbues them with more personal significance, encouraging the reader to better appreciate and protect the environment. These works give phenomena like the West Wind or the cloud agency, foregrounding nature as an active system rather than a passive backdrop. The emphasis is on the process and the interaction of individual factors that make up a seamless whole.

The cycles depicted in these two poems present nature as dynamic. The cloud is resilient because it is flexible; it has the ability to adapt to change. Transformation is in its nature; it moves around and supports various parts of the ecosystem. The cloud is representative of nature as a whole. Natural processes, whose immortality lie in their mutability, are all subjects of change (nature itself is not immortal, but a series of repeating destruction/reconstruction processes). The West Wind, as stated previously, is not a subject of change, but the ruling force instigating it. It rules not only vegetation on the Earth's surface, but the atmosphere and weather. The Wind is the bringer of autumnal storms; it gathers moisture and heralds the coming of new seasons.

The poem was written outdoors, establishing a connection between the poet and the nature that surrounds him. There is interaction between the mind and the landscape, as in the concept of the Sublime.¹²⁴ The "Ode" depicts a stereotypical sublime landscape as the West Wind conjures feelings of terror, but also greatness and beauty. The "Ode's" first three stanzas depict the beauty of the natural world as the West Wind sweeps across it. These descriptions of natural phenomena celebrate the beauty of nature as a whole, eliciting feelings of appreciation and respect for the natural world. This emphasis on the aesthetic value of the nature, as well as its function, instils within the reader a desire to preserve it, aligning with ecological approaches.

¹²³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Cloud" in *Selected Poems: Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Alman Classics, 2022), 146.

¹²⁴ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 73.

3.2.2 The Speaker-Wind Relationship

Far from a manifesto, the “Ode to the West Wind” is a much more personal poem than “Ozymandias”; it expresses Shelley’s own fears and anxieties in literature and activism.¹²⁵ The West Wind drives not only natural change, but also social reform. The poet calls on the West Wind to use him as a mouthpiece, so this process of renewal may also be applied to human society. He concedes that he no longer has the power to be a force of change, so he instead must call upon the power of nature to right societal wrongs: “A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd / One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud” (55-56).¹²⁶ In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley argues for the power of poetry:

Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists. [...] The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thought of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food.¹²⁷

According to Shelley, the role of the poet should therefore resemble that of the West Wind in the natural world of Northern Italy. If the imagination is the connecting force of all living human beings, the poet is the one to cultivate it. The poet “lifts the veil” to make true perception of the beauty of the world just as the West Wind removes the blindfold of complacency in the autumn months. However, even though both the poet and the West Wind share characteristics, their fundamental difference is that one is immortal, and one is not. The chains of time are something that do not affect the Wind, which returns every year as the same revolutionary force, and carries out the same function, something the poet cannot do. “Thorns of life” have caused him to “bleed”, losing something essential to himself.

As well as experiencing frequent medical issues, Shelley was hurt after receiving scant and largely negative reviews on his *Revolt of Islam*, a work he intended to be revolutionary, and therefore felt he had lost his literary power.¹²⁸ Because he was unsuccessful on his own, Shelley asks the wind to spread his ideas: “Scatter, as from an

¹²⁵ O’Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Literary Life*, 105.

¹²⁶ Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind”, 106.

¹²⁷ Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” 11-12.

¹²⁸ O’Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 58.

unextinguish'd hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!" (66-67).¹²⁹ Much like the dead leaves which will in time provide fresh soil for new life, with the West Wind's help the poet's revolutionary ideas will disperse like sparks and ignite a revolution across the continent. Shelley's sonnet, "On Launching Some Bottles Filled with Knowledge into the Bristol Channel", relates the poet doing just this: distributing thought just as the West Wind disperses seeds. It is based on an actual event in Shelley's life, when he placed texts like the *Declaration of Rights* in bottles and threw them out off the coast of Wales into the Irish Sea in hopes of spreading the word of liberty to the oppressed in Ireland.¹³⁰ However, he can no longer carry out this physical activity and must therefore ask the Wind for help instead.

Once again Shelley imparts that society has strayed from the moral and natural, which is something that must be remedied. Society will, metaphorically, crumble and a new, harmonious order will rise from the ashes, the West Wind, a natural phenomenon, as its instigator. This exploration of the human-nature relationship suggests ecological sensibility. Seeking renewal, the poet looks to nature for a catalyst for change, demonstrating a deep connection between man and the environment.

The West Wind is depicted as a being of elemental, almost divine power. It becomes a spiritual force capable of driving change within the natural world. It is characterised as ruthless and powerful; its actions are violent and unforgiving, but its interference is also necessary for survival. Its depiction likens it to a ruler sweeping through his domain, frightening his subjects out of their stupor. It represents the power and autonomy of natural forces, which operate beyond human control and influence.

The poet is in awe of the Wind's power, which is contrasted with frail human mortality. While time has "chain'd and bow'd" the poet, the West Wind has no such limitations. The poet understands human vulnerability to natural forces. Emphasis on the intricacies of natural cycles like seasonal shift, or the water cycle, stresses man's dependence upon them. Their collapse would have catastrophic consequences not only for the natural world, but also for the human sphere. This again challenges anthropocentric perspectives, where humans are the central element of all existence,¹³¹ and stresses the importance of the non-human in the life of man, therefore promoting an ecological worldview.

This interaction with the Wind expresses a desire for connection between the human and the natural. The imagery of the lamb not only connotes the gentleness of spring but also

¹²⁹ Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind", 107.

¹³⁰ Morton, "Nature and Culture", 190.

¹³¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "anthropocentrism (*n.*)," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1858374228>.

sacrifice. The speaker offers his own existence for the Wind to take. He understands the inherent similarity between the human and the natural and surrenders his own autonomy to restore the connection between the two parties, which are, after all, part of the same biosphere.

Chapter IV: Prometheus Unbound

4.1 Transformation

The figure of Prometheus is, in mythological terms, the bringer of progress for mankind. In the Greek myth, Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gives it to humanity, and through it various kinds of knowledge. For his theft, he is condemned to eternal torment bound to a rock as an eagle each day, again and again, consumes his liver, which grows back overnight. Prometheus casts a “sufferer’s curse” on Jupiter, wishing “ill deeds” to be “[heaped] on [his] soul”, causing him suffering throughout his rule (Act I, 292).¹³² As a titan, Prometheus is one of the children of Gaia, one of the primordial Greek gods, the goddess of Earth. Prometheus thus is quite literally the child of nature itself.

Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, the first and only preserved part of his trilogy, ends with Prometheus’ vow of revenge against Jupiter, born of fear and ill-intention. His imprisonment in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* becomes a literal representation of the state of his morality. Aeschylus’ now-lost drama was meant to portray Prometheus as he renounces his curse to make peace with Jupiter, an outcome that Shelley sought to avoid in his re-telling. In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley notes that he was “averse [to] reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind,”¹³³ because, to Shelley, this reconciliation would dissipate the drama’s moral interest. Shelley understands Prometheus as “the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends.”¹³⁴ In his understanding of both Prometheus and Jupiter, their reconciliation would mean the morality of established power systems would remain corrupt.

Shelley’s morality is, as mentioned in previous chapters, synonymous with nature. Prometheus’ departure from what is moral therefore also distances him from the natural world, which causes both parties to suffer. *Prometheus Unbound* concerns itself with similar themes to those of *The Revolt of Islam*. The lyrical drama is once again centred around non-violent revolution, once again utilising a figure of despotism; the figure of Jupiter stands in as a general tyrant. Under his rule, the natural world suffers, just as the world suffers in *The Revolt*. Tyranny is, as in much of Shelley’s lyrical work, a polluting force; in *Prometheus Unbound*, moral pollution manifests as physical pollution. However, as one of Shelley’s more mature works, the issues presented in *Prometheus Unbound* are much more introspective;

¹³² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Vol. II, Plays, translations and longer poems*, ed. A. H. Koshul (London and New York: J.M. Dent & Company, 1925), 156.

¹³³ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 145.

¹³⁴ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 145.

where *The Revolt of Islam* focuses on actively instigating social change, *Prometheus* is concerned with spiritual revolution. The lyrical drama opens with Prometheus' monologue, as he renounces his vow of revenge:

[...] 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. (Act I, 56-59)¹³⁵

His imprisonment over three thousand years has caused him great pain but has allowed him to reach the conclusion that the true evil of the world is not Jupiter, but the concept of evil itself. His feelings of hatred made Prometheus no better than the tyrant, because hatred and revenge are corruptive forces.¹³⁶ Any one person can become consumed by hatred, an emotion distinctly antithetical to harmony of nature; the feeling is not limited to the tyrant figure, meaning anyone can become just as destructive. Revenge is a cycle that repeats ad infinitum, therefore disruptive of the natural order of empathy and love that defines Shelley's ideal world. It is precisely Prometheus' curse that allows Jupiter to maintain his reign. In Act II, the Demogorgon remarks that "[a]ll spirits are enslaved which serve things evil" (Act II, Sc. 4, 110).¹³⁷ Through Prometheus, the entire world becomes enslaved under Jupiter's tyrannical rule. This is because, at this point, he and Jupiter share a common motive: hate, the emblem of worldly oppression. In his book, *Radical Shelley*, Michael Scrivener remarks that: "Jupiter was created by Prometheus at the moment the human soul divided itself, installing a powerful deity in heaven to worship and fear, but maintaining hope in the eventual downfall of the tyrant."¹³⁸ Jupiter is a part of himself which Prometheus has cast out, who subsequently imprisons him for his curse.¹³⁹ Prometheus' curse is a revolution in itself, and an unsuccessful one at that; it only serves to exacerbate Jupiter's fury, intensifying his despotism.¹⁴⁰ Like the rebels in *The Revolt of Islam*, Prometheus must understand that revolution built on revenge will only serve to support forces of evil in the world. Shelley once again echoes the mistakes

¹³⁵ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 150.

¹³⁶ Art Young, *Shelley and Nonviolence*, 99.

¹³⁷ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 184.

¹³⁸ Michael Henry Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: the philosophical anarchism and utopian thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Course Book. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 156.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400856879>.

¹³⁹ Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, 156.

¹⁴⁰ Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision*, (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1975), 40.

of the French Revolution. Prometheus must instead become motivated by love, a motive shared with Asia, his wife.¹⁴¹ This is the key to Shelley's gentle revolution.

The effect of Prometheus' curse has been catastrophic; after his proclamation, voices from across the Earth tell him of the various hardships they have had to endure since he voiced his curse, which they remember but dare not repeat. The words are burned into nature like a brand. Much like his morality, the world has been corrupted:

When Plague had fallen on man and beast and worm,
And Famine; and black blight on herb and tree;
And in the corn, and vines, and meadow-grass,
Teemed ineradicable poisonous weeds
Draining their growth, for my wan breast was dry
With grief, and the thin air, my breath, was stained
With the contagion of a mother's hate
Breathed on her child's destroyer (Act I, 172-179)¹⁴²

Shelley uses the same themes of plague, famine, and poison, as symptoms of despotism. These symptoms they dissipate when balance is restored, suggesting they are unnatural. Here Shelley once again opposes Malthus' assertion that famine is a natural issue, "natural", here, meaning both borne of natural causes, but also as unavoidable. These phenomena are non-existent in Shelley's utopia, meaning they are possible to eschew with proper connection to the natural world. Pollution is therefore a direct result of Prometheus' moral state. While Jupiter's rule has severed the connection, it is Prometheus' imprisonment that prevents its restoration, because Prometheus, as a son of the Earth, represents this connection. His imprisonment parallels the connection's suspension. As a result, humanity has become blind to suffering and seeks to subjugate the environment. Moral ideals like peace, love and liberty become difficult to practice as famine and disease put enormous amounts of stress on humanity's moral capacities.¹⁴³ Moral corruption implies a corrupting force; all humans are inherently capable of being moral, but outside influence and hardship clouds their judgement. Conditions like hard labour, restrictive law, greed and misery make it equally difficult to feel sympathy, so humanity becomes careless. The restoration of this connection removes the veil:

We come from the mind

¹⁴¹ Richard Isomaki, "Love as Cause in Prometheus Unbound." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 29, no. 4 (1989): 655-73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/450605>.

¹⁴² Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 153.

¹⁴³ Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, 157.

Of humankind,
Which was late so dusk, and obscene, and blind;
Now 't is an ocean
Of clear emotion,
A heaven of serene and mighty motion. (Act IV, 93-98)¹⁴⁴

The greatest visible impact is seen in the natural environment, as humans begin to exploit natural resources. The impacts of despotism are especially visible when, after Prometheus' release, Ione and Panthea see visions of these despotic environments being abandoned:

[...] anchors, beaks of ships;
Planks turned to marble; quivers, helms, and spears,
And gorgon-headed targes, and the wheels
Of scyth'd chariots, and the emblazonry
Of trophies, standards, and armorial beasts,
Round which death laughed, sepulchred emblems
Of dead destruction, ruin within ruin!
The wrecks beside of many a city vast,
Whose population which the earth grew over
Was mortal, but not human; see, they lie,
Their monstrous works, and uncouth skeletons,
Their statues, homes and fanes; prodigious shapes
Huddled in gray annihilation, split,
Jammed in the hard, black deep; [...] (Act IV, 289-302)¹⁴⁵

Once the veil is removed, the pollution of despotism dissipates, and humanity begins to abandon their tyrannical structures. However, the scars of despotism remains as the ruins of these unsustainable civilisations, citing lasting environmental impact.

Throughout the lyrical drama, Shelley personifies various physical aspects of nature: one such instance is the personification of the Earth itself. The Earth acts as a mother figure to all living things. Here the themes of culture and nature once again coincide. That these elements have the ability to use language and communicate ascribed culture to natural phenomena. They are able to converse with sentient beings, and act as sentient beings themselves. Through the 'Earth' character, the lyrical drama ascribes consciousness to the entirety of the natural world. Nature is once again depicted as a cyclical system, not a bland backdrop of divine creation. Giving elements within nature consciousness emphasises the complexity of these systems, as well as the interaction between different elements to form a cohesive whole.

¹⁴⁴ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 205.

¹⁴⁵ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 210.

The rejuvenation of Prometheus' moral state mirrors the rejuvenation of nature. This restoration of harmony is symbolised when the Spirits representing the human mind and the elements dance together at the beginning of Act IV. If the autumnal West Wind sweeps away dead leaves in Shelley's "Ode", *Prometheus Unbound* marks the arrival of spring. There is great emphasis on the effect moral renewal has had on natural processes: after Prometheus' release, the Earth begins to regenerate at a rapid pace, and new plant life is seen sprouting immediately from the ground. This is metaphorical; Shelley believed 19th century Europe had already amassed the pre-existing conditions for renewal, simply waiting for a spark for the process of renewal to begin.¹⁴⁶ These pre-existing conditions are represented by seeds already covered by earth, much like the seeds the West Wind disperses in the "Ode". The lyrical drama focuses on the conditions of freedom, rather than the pre-conditions.¹⁴⁷

These conditions are the reuniting of knowledge and love. Once Prometheus is released, the change is immediately felt in the world. Panthea remarks that:

[...] they
 Yelled, gasped, and were abolished; or some God,
 Whose throne was in a comet, passed, and cried,
 Be not! and like my words they were no more. (Act IV, 315-318)¹⁴⁸

Prometheus Unbound is a drama primarily concerned with processes of change. His letting go of feelings of hatred sets into motion a series of events that lead to not only the fall of the tyrannical regime, but natural rejuvenation. While Prometheus is imprisoned, Asia is in exile. If Prometheus is the champion of man and nature, his imprisonment physically represents not only man's severed connection with nature, but the separation of love from mankind and the natural world, which has had catastrophic impact on all parties involved. In *On Love*, Shelley states that: "So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was."¹⁴⁹ Love is the operative emotion that guides all of Shelley's revolutionary thought. For Shelley, it is unavoidable, because there is something in man which "from the instant we live, more and more thirsts after its likeness"¹⁵⁰:

¹⁴⁶ Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, 157.

¹⁴⁷ Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, 157.

¹⁴⁸ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 211.

¹⁴⁹ Shelley, *On Love*, 428.

¹⁵⁰ Shelley, *On Love*, 427.

[...] [harmony] is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that, without the possession of which there is no rest nor respite to the heart over which it rules. Hence in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, and the waters, and the sky.¹⁵¹

Love is therefore a necessary, primary human emotion. Its inherent sympathies provide human beings with a moral compass. Because despotism has sentenced love to life in exile, humanity feels no connection to the outside world, nor one another, which allows the evils of the world to take control. Prometheus' unbinding releases the Spirit of the Earth, the product of the union between love (Asia) and knowledge (Prometheus). For the innocent spirit to be released, the allegorical representations of love and wisdom must reunite. The connection of love and wisdom is therefore the key to a healthy natural environment.

The process of transformation that ensues following the revocation of the curse is cosmic; Asia is spurred into motion by Panthea's dream, that bids her to "follow, O, follow".¹⁵² As she divines the dream, unknown echoes tell her she is the only one that can carry out this task:

In the world unknown
Sleeps a voice unspoken;
By thy step alone
Can its rest be broken;
Child of Ocean! (Act II, Sc. 1, 190-194)¹⁵³

Asia is the embodiment of love; she therefore has the ability to make others see the truth of the world. This is Shelley's idea of love as a uniting force. Love is a "universal thirst for a communion not merely of the sense but of our whole nature, intellectual, imaginative, sensitive."¹⁵⁴ Love is inherent; the desire for connection is biologically ingrained in the human being. It is a force of good that has the power to transform all things into their purest forms.

Demogorgon is the immutable law of nature, embodying 'necessity'.¹⁵⁵ Necessity is impartial to the forces of good and evil; Asia (as a force of good) must argue and convince Demogorgon to depose Jupiter (a force of evil). In their argument, because of Demogorgon's

¹⁵¹ Shelley, *On Love*, 427.

¹⁵² Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 174.

¹⁵³ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 176.

¹⁵⁴ Shelley, "A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love", in O'Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Literary Life*, 67.

¹⁵⁵ O'Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Literary Life*, 83.

vague answers, Asia must resort to outlining the basic structure of reality. Her rhetoric divides the world into four primary universal forces: heaven, earth, light, and love. Each corresponds to one of the four basic elements in Greek mythology: air, earth, fire and water, respectively. In this, she identifies Prometheus and herself as light and love; in her exile and Prometheus' imprisonment, the world has been thrown out of balance. Jupiter presides over heaven, and the Earth is threatened by human dominion. The attribution of love to the element of water (Asia, daughter of the Ocean, as opposed to Prometheus, son of the Earth) points toward the life-sustaining qualities of both love and water. Just as the environment cannot survive without water, humanity becomes a shell of itself without love. Both love and water are shown to have healing properties. The desert in "Ozymandias" is therefore an embodiment of natural despotism not only because of its oppressive tendencies, but because it too, as a dry climate, is absent of any sort of love. The world under Jupiter's rule in *Prometheus Unbound* becomes a figurative desert wasteland.

Shelley's utopia is not merely a world without pollution, moral or physical, because pollution is only a symptom of the root issue: exploitation. Exploitation causes imbalance; exploitation of human labour, or exploitation of natural resources, upsets the natural equilibrium. If society were to rid itself of exploitation, pollution would become an impossibility.¹⁵⁶ Shelley argues to replace these negative factors with love and connection. Through sympathy extended to all, balance may be restored. His ideal world is not based on the control of evil, but the very eradication of it. Love stands as the bane of all evil, just as all evil is inherently false, because it is unnatural. There is no room for darkness (war, vice and misery) in Shelley's ideal world. For Shelley, balance is key to establishing sustainable, long-lasting systems. Systems where one part outweighs another, like the tyrannical rule of Jupiter, will lead to exploitation. The lyrical drama's focus on the natural world implies an ecological message: the root of all environmental exploitation is moral impurity. Sustainability can be achieved through moral renewal; ecological death is therefore a social issue.

In his "Promethean" utopia in Act IV, a "train of dark Forms and Shadows" is seen passing through the forest, mourning the death of the King of Hours:

Haste, oh, haste!
As shades are chased,
Trembling, by day, from heaven's blue waste,
We melt away,
Like dissolving spray,

¹⁵⁶ Morton, "Shelley's Green Desert," 416.

From the children of a diviner day,
With the lullaby
Of winds that die
On the bosom of their own harmony! (Act IV, 21-29)¹⁵⁷

The Hours had been Jupiter's primary tool to enslave mankind to his tyrannical whims. Moral renewal and the fall of Jupiter have freed humanity from the shackles of time; humanity will no longer suffer death and aging. In Shelley's philosophy, as in Godwin's, the 'natural' state is flux. Nature must constantly be changing, just like human being should constantly be improving, inching towards perfection.

4.2 Shelley's Technotopia

In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, the figure of Prometheus is representative of human progress, despite nature. In Greek Mythology, Prometheus provides humanity with fire (technology, civilisation, and knowledge). Prometheus' separation from humanity, in his role as "knowledge" has taken away their ability to use the knowledge that they have been given, and they have become destructive as a result. They lose the ability to use technology, and establish civilisations, the way that was originally meant to. They attempt to control the environment through unsustainable means; they wage war and decimate the landscape; they build cities and infrastructure that begins to cover more and more land. Shelley therefore argues for the humane treatment (based on "love") of the environment. Humanity's progress comes from liberating the natural world, not dominating it, and living in sustainable harmony with it.

However, that is not to say that Shelley's utopia is dominated by nature; the ideal world in *Prometheus Unbound* is still very much anthropocentric.¹⁵⁸ While it is a sustainable sort of co-dependency, man still has dominion over nature. The chorus of spirits in Act IV represents the human mind. These spirits rejoice as the veil has been lifted and love and reason flood their hearts. They celebrate their new-found freedom, declaring that:

We'll pass the eyes
Of the starry skies
Into the hoar deep to colonize;
Death, Chaos and Night,
From the sound of our flight,
Shall flee, like mist from a tempest's might.

¹⁵⁷ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 202.

¹⁵⁸ Kate Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Ecopoetics of Decolonization*. (Bloomsbury Academic: 2002). <https://openresearchlibrary.org/viewer/7529e580-d3a2-46db-87a9-486eeea6e351>. 119.

And Earth, Air and Light,
And the Spirit of Might,
Which drives round the stars in their fiery flight;
And Love, Thought and Breath,
The powers that quell Death,
Wherever we soar shall assemble beneath. (Act IV, 147-152)¹⁵⁹

They claim that, with their newfound clarity, borne of wisdom, and with the help of nature, they can learn to control “Death, Chaos and Night”, as symptoms of despotism. The lyrical drama depicts what Morton dubs the “good machine”. That is, a machine that does not exploit nor pollute; it is clean, as opposed to the “dirty” despotic past.¹⁶⁰

And from a star upon its forehead shoot,
Like swords of azure fire or golden spears
With tyrant-quelling myrtle overtwin'd,
Embleming heaven and earth united now,
Vast beams like spokes of some invisible wheel
Which whirl as the orb whirls, swifter than thought,
Filling the abyss with sun-like lightnings,
And perpendicular now, and now transverse,
Pierce the dark soil, and as they pierce and pass
Make bare the secrets of the earth's deep heart;
Infinite mine of adamant and gold,
Valueless stones, and unimagined gems,
And caverns on crystalline columns poised
With vegetable silver overspread; (Act IV, 270-283)¹⁶¹

Prometheus Unbound therefore suggests that technology itself is not inherently bad but has been corrupted by those putting it to use, because they have lost knowledge that would guide them in its use, and they have lost the sympathy to understand that their ways are destructive. Technological processes can be used to enhance nature rather than exploit it in yet another of Shelley's far-sighted ecologically centred ideas that tend towards possible sustainable development of human civilisation

¹⁵⁹ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 206.

¹⁶⁰ Morton, “Shelley's Green Desert”, 418-19.

¹⁶¹ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 210.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Shelley's literary and philosophical work presents a significant number of ideas and discourse that indicates a deep involvement with ecological thought. His engagement with major political themes of the Romantic era and sustained interest in conceptualising thought-provoking natural imagery opens his work up to ecocritical interpretation. Shelley was greatly influenced by Godwin's ideas of perfectibility. He believed that humanity could reach an ideal of society that might approach perfection, if human beings were to live in harmony with the natural world and learned to evolve their socio-political as well as technological systems sustainably. This utopia may only be reached through the individual feeling of empathy extended to all living things, and, crucially, involves capacity for projected further change – according to Shelley, nothing inherently static will last, as shown in *Prometheus Unbound* and elsewhere. For this reason, Shelley condemns revolutions and violent uprisings, as well as British colonial policy. Violence and despotism are unsustainable; they thrive on systems of exploitation that do not allow for self-sustained renewal. Shelley has most often been read on a purely political basis, but the natural relevance of his condemnation of violent and exploitative political systems is often overlooked. Throughout time, nature has been a system of sustained renewal, precisely because its processes of change are slow and indiscriminatory. There is equality within natural systems, where each facet has its own function which coheres with the whole in meaningful ways. Shelley sought to imagine this system applied to the human sphere; looking toward nature is Shelley's solution for issues like violence, exploitation and restriction that govern human societies, especially in Britain and its empire, but also revolutionary France. Shelley understood nature as vital to human life, both in terms of nutrition and the rejuvenation of human spirit. Just as natural systems are flexible, human beings are inherently in flux, and suffer under rigid laws and restrictions.

Shelley's grasp of ecology is incredibly modern. Morton notes that much of Shelley's thought contains "the kinds of ideological blurring that we notice about contemporary attacks on pollution, which seem poised between older criticisms of the inadequacies of civil society and newer arguments about the 'extended circle' of humans and nature."¹⁶² The tyrannical rulers of Shelley's poetry reflect modern exploitative systems such as present-day global monopoly capitalism.¹⁶³ His emphasis on social empathy and compassion resembles modern day ecological thought, with its focus on ethics and moral responsibility. Shelley's ecological rhetoric is especially relevant in today's period of global human dominion, and the

¹⁶² Morton, "Shelley's Green Desert", 411.

¹⁶³ Morton, "Shelley's Green Desert", 411.

environmental impacts of exploitation, rooted in the Industrial Revolution. Compassion, and the decentralisation of the human perspective, as seen in Shelley's philosophy and poetry, are therefore more than relevant to modern ecological discourse.

Over his short life, Shelley made great contributions to both the radical politics of the time as well as Romantic literature. His work is extensive, and therefore cannot be explored fully within the scope of this thesis. To truly understand Shelley's engagement with ecocritical themes and their development across his career, further analysis of works such as *Queen Mab*, *Alastor*, and much more of his prose work, is necessary.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Prometheus Unbound*, in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Vol. II, Plays, translations and longer poems*, ed. A. H. Koshul, (London and New York: J.M. Dent & Company 1925). 1-143.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "The Revolt of Islam," in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Vol II, Plays, Translations & Longer Poems*, ed. A. H. Koshul, (London and New York: J.M. Dent & Company 1925). 144-219.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ode to the West Wind" in *Selected Works: Percy Bysshe Shelley*. London: Alma Classics, 2022. 105-107.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ozymandias" in *Selected Works: Percy Bysshe Shelley*. London: Alma Classics, 2022. 59.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "The Cloud" in *Selected Works: Percy Bysshe Shelley*. London: Alma Classics, 2022. 144-146.

Secondary Sources:

- Auden, W. H. *The Enchafèd Flood*. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.
- Batra, Nandita. "Dominion, Empathy, and Symbiosis: Gender and Anthropocentrism in Romanticism." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 3, no. 2 (1996): 101–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44085433>.
- Brown, James. "'Ozymandias': The Riddle of the Sands." *The Keats-Shelley Review*, (1998) 12:1. DOI: 10.1179/ksr.1998.12.1.51
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful*. London: printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1757.
- Curran, Stuart. *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision*, (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1975).
- Furet, François. "The French Revolution Revisited." *Government and Opposition* 16, no. 2 (1981): 200–218. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44483389>.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 31.
- Hogg, Thomas Jefferson *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, vol. II*. London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1858.
- Graham Hough, *The Romantic Poets*. London: Arrow Books, 1953.
- Isomaki, Richard. "Love as Cause in Prometheus Unbound." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 29, no. 4 (1989): 655–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/450605>.
- Jones, Michael Owen. "In Pursuit of Percy Shelley, 'The First Celebrity Vegan': An Essay on Meat, Sex, and Broccoli." *Journal of Folklore Research* 53, no. 2 (2016): 1. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.53.2.01>.
- Kapstein, I. J. "The Symbolism of the Wind and the Leaves in Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind.'" *PMLA* 51, no. 4 (1936): 1070. <https://doi.org/10.2307/458084>.
- Makdisi, Saree. "Introduction: Worldly Romanticism." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65, no. 4 (2011): 429–32. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2011.65.4.429>.
- Malthus, Thomas. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (London: J. Johnson, 1798), 183.
- Malthus, Thomas *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, in Timothy Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 211.
- Morton, Timothy. "Nature and Culture", in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 185-207.
- Morton, Timothy. "Shelley's Green Desert." *Studies in Romanticism* 35, no. 3 (1996): 409-430. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25601182>.
- Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge:

- Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- Morton, Timothy “Joseph Ritson, Percy Shelley and the Making of Romantic Vegetarianism”, *Romanticism* 12, no.1 (2006), 52-61. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rom.2006.0006>
- O’Neill, Michael. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Literary Life*, (London: The Macmillan Press, 1989).
- O’Neill, Michael “Sonnets and Odes”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Michael O’Neill and Anthony Howe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- Pancoast, Henry S. “Shelley’s Ode to the West Wind.” *Modern Language Notes* 35, no. 2 (1920): 97–100. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2915394>.
- Parr, Johnstone. “Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias.’” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 6 (1957). 31-35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30210020>.
- Pite, Ralph. “How Green Were the Romantics?” *Studies in Romanticism* 35, no. 3 (1996). 357-373. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25601179>.
- Rigby, Kate. “Romanticism and Ecocriticism”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 60-79.
- Rigby, Kate. *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Eco-poetics of Decolonization*. (Bloomsbury Academic: 2002). <https://openresearchlibrary.org/viewer/7529e580-d3a2-46db-87a9-486e6e6e351>.
- Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Notes to the Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. [Waiheke Island]: The Floating Press. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=350514&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe, “On Love” in in *Shelley’s Prose Works, vol. I*, ed. Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906).
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe “A Defence of Poetry,” in *Shelley’s Prose Works, vol. II*, ed. Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906).
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Proposals for an Association*, in *Shelley’s Prose Works, vol I*. ed. Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Chatto and Windus, 1906).
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe “Note to the Ode to the West Wind”, in *Selected Poetry: Percy Bysshe Shelley*, (London: Alma Classics, 2022).
- Shelley, Percy Byshe. “A Vindication of Natural Diet”, *Project Gutenberg*, accessed 24th June 2024. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/38727/pg38727-images.html>
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Philosophical View of Reform* (Oxford University Press, 1920)
- Scrivener, Michael H. “Godwin’s Philosophy: A Revaluation,” (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no. 4, 1978) 615. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709445>.
- Scrivener, Michael H. *Radical Shelley: the philosophical anarchism and utopian thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400856879>.
- Swinden, Patrick. “Shelley: ‘Ode to the West Wind.’” *Critical Survey* 6, no. 1/2 (1973): 53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41553911>.
- Tynan, Aidan. *The Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy: Wasteland Aesthetics*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) Accessed May 29, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Williams, J. E. “The British Standard of Living, 1750-1850.” *The Economic History Review* 19, no. 3 (1966). <https://doi.org/10.2307/2593165>. 581-606.
- Young, Art. *Shelley and Nonviolence*, Studies in English Literature. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=1466667&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.
- Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “tyrant (*n.*), sense 3,” March 2024,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2931361751>
Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “anthropocentrism (*n.*),” July 2023,
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1858374228>.