CHAPTER 7

Hopeless Romanticism

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In an 1810 issue of *The Examiner*, Leigh Hunt defended himself and his fellow reformers from "the charge of being *romantic*, that is, of indulging in fanciful speculations inconsistent with the nature of politics and mankind […] he is said to be *romantic*, – a well-meaning man, but too lively in his imagination, – a man of good natural sense, but utterly unacquainted, poor fellow, with the world." Hunt counted himself among these romantics against whom *they*, wizened skeptics of change, offered only "affected ridicule" and disdain:

> [W]e differ […] in having reasonable expectations of political honesty, in thinking that it is *possible* for the present system of things to be considerably *purified*, and in endeavouring to bring about so desirable and so necessary an event. They may, if they please, think it romantic to hope for political virtue […] to look for a better state of affairs, to attempt the purity of elections and the responsibility of rulers, and to endeavour at freeing ourselves from the perpetual waste of treasure and blood.[1]

Though Hunt is keen to portray as "reasonable" the hopes some of his contemporaries mocked, this essay dwells upon this political attunement generically coded as "being *romantic*," articulated through a "we" that "differ[s]" from the status quo and "look[s]" forward to "a better state."

Heading into a decade of domestic activism in Britain, Hunt's lead article highlights the everyday, often pejorative use of the word "romantic," which predates and postdates its periodizing sense, derived etymologically from "romance," the genre that most caters to the "too lively […] imagination" memorably satirized by *Don Quixote* and many imitators since.[2] Scholars don't usually appreciate when their specialist vocabulary is promiscuously applied by the general public. As Raymond Williams put it in his account of modern tragedy, "it is very common" for those "trained in […] the academic tradition to be impatient and even contemptuous of what they regard as loose and vulgar uses of 'tragedy' in ordinary speech and in the newspapers."[3] But Williams goes on to argue for the relevance

of heartrending events commonly labeled "tragic" to the mechanics of theatrical tragedy. Likewise, I am drawn to the "loose" and popular understanding of romantics, though my focus here is on what this style reveals about their aestheticized stance toward political reality rather than the literary genre itself. The ubiquitous epithet of "romantic" betrays undeniable ambivalence as to the "hope for political virtue" that characterizes fervent reformers. Through the case of Shelley and the sometimes-dismissive reactions he has provoked, this chapter explores what it means – politically and aesthetically – when a genre (romance) becomes a personality type (the romantic).

As our period's scholars have long emphasized, one cannot disentangle Romanticism from its association with the "romantic" tropes of the medieval genre, from the "internalized quest" of the era's lyrics to the reworking of romance tropes by second-generation Romantics.[4] But this chapter is less interested in the conventions of romance than its generic tendency to leap imaginatively past probability's limitations. The genre's commonplaces certainly conform to this inclination: the impossible quest, the unconsummated, idealized love, the supernatural obstacles and miraculous escapes, the high-flown sentiments, all these features characterize romance enthusiasts as favoring a dreamscape of "fanciful speculations." As Hunt's words reveal, there are two vectors to this stigma. On the one hand, calling out a romantic amounts to "affected ridicule" on the "well-meaning" by those who claim to be better "acquainted" with "the nature of politics and mankind." On the other hand, the defiant embrace of romance by the political reformer telegraphs a willingness to appear a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain," as Matthew Arnold unforgettably damned Shelley.[5]

What this state of affairs for the romantic reveals is that everywhere realism prevails over romance as the social style of maturity. A sober Charlotte Lucas thus answers Elizabeth Bennet's shock at her marriage with Mr. Collins by saying, "I am not romantic you know."[6] This norm makes the historical emergence of Romanticism all the more surprising. How to account for an aesthetic movement whose very name rests on the embarrassing reality-avoidance of romance, rendered notorious by the enduring joke of that "poor fellow," Don Quixote? Romanticism certainly deepens the philosophical, aesthetic, and political gravitas of romance, moving beyond the genre's frivolous fabulation and toward the grandeur of faith and commitment.[7] In deifying the imagination, Romanticism erects a civic religion of the human spirit in which preferring the potential over the actual becomes program rather than pathology. Nonetheless, Romanticism's

generic lineage indelibly locates its roots in our lowly taste for visions often derided as escapist: as David Duff puts it, romance's "imaginative force was recognized, but its legitimacy not generally accepted."[8] The same may be said for Romanticism insofar as popular parlance, which opposes the "romantic" to the "realist," reveals ours to be a school for fantasists.

This common-sense take on romantic illegitimacy has been grounded less in the genre itself than in the deluded characters ensnared by it (from Don Quixote to Emma Bovary and on). A young David Hume thus rehearses his precocious skepticism by witheringly indicting the type of "human Mind [...] smit with any Idea of Merit or Perfection beyond what its Faculties can attain," which therefore "runs in a moment quite wide of Nature," "indulges its devout Fervors," and "raises up to itself a new set of Passions, Affections, Desires, and Objects, & in short a perfectly new World of its own, inhabited by different Beings, & regulated by different Laws, from this of ours."[9] Enlightened realism derives its identity from its temperate opposition to romantic excesses (perfectionism, emotivity, exciting visions unfettered from natural laws, the aesthetic equivalent to religious devotion). By contrast, Romanticism emerged in consonance with this generic inclination, in Hunt's words, for engineering "a better state of affairs" by "freeing ourselves" from "the present system of things." Political struggles for equality and justice have benefited greatly from a steady stream of such romantics "born for opposition" because they "pine for what is not" (87 [*SPP* 306]).[10]

The "hopeless" epithet not infrequently appended to "romantic" is of more recent vintage, particularly denoting an irrational attachment to "perfect" love, as seemingly unattainable today as in medieval romance. But whether the object with which it is "smit" is sexual or political, the romance mind is characterized by this errant yearning for what is admittedly distant and idealized. The sobriquet "hopeless" marks this romantic as lost to society, often self-confessedly, while also stressing that this terminal condition arises from a hopelessness about the real that gives rise to compensatory – and often illusory – hopes. What the mind cannot "attain," in Hume's words, in the present due to usual "Nature," provokes the romantic's characteristic turns between despair and desire for something "perfectly new." This chapter names as "hopeless romanticism" this generic style of willed maladjustment to reality, which I find exemplified in the life and poetry of Percy Shelley. This romantic disposition derives from the habitual mechanics of hope, which is intrinsically bifurcated, fluctuating between the pain of present dissatisfaction and the joy of future possibility. Characteristically, Shelley's writing often toggles between a dismal

account of how things are and optimism for a better tomorrow. Hope's alternating currents of negative and positive affect can be diagnosed psychologically as "maniac" bipolarity (the maid of *The Mask of Anarchy*), philosophically as "skeptical idealism," or formally in the figurative aporias of Shelley's signification.

Of the Romantics, Shelley is perhaps the one most consistently cast as hopelessly naïve for refusing to bound his expectations for world transformation. From his ill-fated foray to Ireland to distribute radical pamphlets to his ambition to publish politically impactful poetry, Shelley stayed recalcitrantly committed to hopes often frustrated, in his lifetime, by unkind reality. Everywhere in his poetry, we find Shelley acknowledging this clash through the play of light and dark, as in *The Revolt of Islam*, where Laon continually strains to promote a vision of future good against the engulfing evils of his age.[11] There is a hint of the hopeless romantic's typical masochism in Shelley's appreciation for "the glorious doom / Of those who sternly struggle to relume / The lamp of Hope o'er man's bewildered lot" (IV.vii.58–60 [*CP* III: 183]). To call the despondency induced by the often dismal "lot" of humanity "glorious" is to find transcendence in the beleaguered battle for reformation. Shelley's predilection for the Enlightenment dialectic of light and dark manifests affectively in his recurring exploration of what it means to dwell in "those dim labyrinths, where / Hope, near imagined chasms, is struggling with despair" (X.xlvi.4205–4206 [294]). Whereas many scholars have wished to find intellectual coherence or programmatic consistency in the antitheses of Shelley's imaginary,[12] I am more inclined to attribute this poetic "struggle" to the temperamental lot of the hopeless romantic, who finds both joy and terror in the "imagined chasms" of an uncertain future (the present being intolerable).

Biography is not irrelevant to Shelley's legacy because appreciation for his poetry has often hinged on opinions on his dogged and disappointed idealism. Political publics and counterpublics come into being not only in reaction to events, issues, and ideology but also in stylistic attunement to the outsized figures who(m they elect to) represent them. Shelley's reception is a case in point. The divisiveness generated by his characteristic drive toward the ideal has everything to do with the way personalities such as his have become partisan objects of avowal and disavowal in mass-mediated democracy. Shelley has thus provoked a number of traditional "critics complaining about [his] effeminacy, or immaturity, or political naivety," from T. S. Eliot's accusation of "adolescence" to F. R. Leavis's critique of his having "a weak grasp on the actual."[13] Both of these accusations (youth, anti-empiricism) are tied to Shelley's insistence that the existence of hope

is itself sufficient cause for hope. Shelley's defenders, for their part, work to counter the facile classification of him as a "mere escapist."[14]

From Shelley's time to the present, the sympathy with or antipathy to his hopes has revolved around the predisposition of critics to admit his style of wishful thinking. As one sonneteer wrote in response to the poorly received *The Revolt of Islam*, "The heart that could conceive so bright a day, / Is proof that it may come," concluding, "thou shalt smile and pity, giving thy youth / To glorious hopes, and all-defying Truth."[15] Shelley's hopes – evidenced here by the Spenser-inspired romance he had just published – become "proof" that "so desirable and so necessary an event" as progress may be at hand. Shelley's cultural resonance lies not only in the transmissibility of his verse's feelings (the poet's primary talent as Wordsworth argued) but also in the historical force he incarnates. The stress on Shelley's "youth" here or his fairy-like luminosity in other accounts hints at the way his person condenses an ideological program into a fixed image that can circulate as an icon of either inspiration or naïveté.

Then, as now, the possibility of identifying with Shelley is entwined with a parallel disidentification from the first-generation Romantics who turned their back on democracy, in particular Wordsworth and Southey, who vocally supported anti-revolutionary efforts as well as the Georgian status quo: "Mr. Wordsworth has become hopeless of this world, and therefore would make every body else so; – Mr. Shelley is superior to hopelessness itself; and does not see why all happiness and all strength is to be bounded by what he himself can feel or can effect."[16] This partisan reckoning endures not only for literary-historical reasons but also because it adumbrates the typical stages of political life, from youthful hope and faith in change to adult disappointment, resignation, and "sobriety."[17] Filiation results, as Hunt's words show, from choosing to embrace the personality of Shelley rather than that of Wordsworth. The publicly played-out rivalry of Shelley with the predecessor who inspired him amplifies this ideological rift into a generational dynamic, even as each writer in himself offers ample evidence that this divide between political hope and despair is not only individual and partisan but also internal to all feeling selves capable of evolution, apostasy, and inconsistency.

The centrality of hope to Shelley's biography and poetry manifests in what many critics have recognized as his future orientation. Andrew Franta thus argues that Shelley's poems are addressed to audiences to come while Forest Pyle suggests that "the critical redemption value of Shelley's poetry" lies "in its blank opening onto futurity."[18] Pyle comes to this verdict via the abrupt pivot at the end of "England in 1819." The imbalance between

the first twelve lines of evils afflicting Shelley's age and the final couplet's turn to a bright and "blank" future appears unabashedly incongruous. As James Chandler remarks, "when this sort of resolution occurs in comedy we call it 'deus ex machina' and label the work sentimental."[19] Though acutely described, contemporary facts "are" proleptically dispatched to "graves from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day" (13–14 [*SPP* 327]). Given their intractability, these realities can only be interred by conjuring a fantastic light show barely justified by the "glorious" revolutionary precedent 130 years prior. "May" certainly hedges the bet but the sonnet's volta remains scandalously divorced from the quatrains. Even as the poem's title avows historicity, then, it disregards temporal constraint through a supernatural "Phantom" whose nebulousness recalls the present's haunting by the future's shadows in Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*. That this political deliverance is engineered through the sonnet's form reinforces the sense that the aesthetic is in league with a taste for fantasy and repudiating reality.

No wonder then that this turn has produced robust responses from critics. Much of the interpretation has focused, as Susan Wolfson points out, on which of two meanings of "may" – uncertainty or capability – to privilege and whether the enjambing "burst" of the final line announces Shelley's revolutionary intentions, as Stuart Curran argues.[20] While I agree with Wolfson that this political "question" is "ultimately undecidable," I'm less intent on elaborating the historical and ideological contradictions the sonnet indexes through its formal ambiguity than in emphasizing Shelley's "sentimental" turn.[21] The logic at work here, as elsewhere in his poetry, is less formalist or Whiggish-historical than affective. Leavis forcefully calls out this motive force in decrying "the pathetic weakness" of the final couplet, which makes an "eloquent" contrast with the "unusual strength (for Shelley)" of the preceding lines.[22] Leavis's criticism is chiefly characterological as the parenthetical attack on Shelley's general "weakness" makes clear: "Contemplation of the actual world being unendurable, Shelley devotes himself to the glorious Phantom that may […] work a sudden miraculous change but is in any case as vague as Demogorgon and as unrelated to actuality."[23] Leavis finds the first twelve lines bracing and the wishful end feeble. This disjuncture typifies Shelley, given to "visionary drift" without "reference to any grasped reality."[24] The final couplet's "pathetic weakness," in the twinned senses of pitiable and pathos-filled, indexes the character of one who finds reality "unendurable" and turns toward the "miraculous agency" of fantasy.[25]

But this weakness also highlights the strength of pathos itself, as hope turns the inherent uncertainty of the future into imagined capability. The hesitation in Shelley's focalized "may" points to hope as the fulcrum feeling to a better "day"; the enjambment registers the way hope can "burst" affectively past present circumstances it wishfully transforms into "graves." If it is apt to classify this mix of struggle and scruple as symptomatic of Shelley's "skeptical idealism," at the same time, this paradoxical label would make into principle what I am arguing is a generic aspect of hope, "an inconstant joy" as Baruch Spinoza called it long ago:

> [T]here is neither hope without fear, nor fear without hope. For he who is suspended in hope and doubts a thing's outcome is supposed to imagine something which excludes the existence of the future thing. And so to that extent he is saddened, and consequently, while he is suspended in hope, he fears that the thing [he imagines] will happen.[26]

In other words, the equivocation that critics have long appreciated in Shelley's verse is not only an intellectual insight but also a result of his hopeless romanticism. Suspension or vacillation within the affective operations of hope at once enables its imaginative movement back and forth between despised present and desired future and gives it the kind of persistence that more univocal feelings rarely achieve. Hopes become socially structuring and saturating insofar as they are amplified in the symbolic oscillation between depressing and uplifting representations of what is and what could be. They thereby achieve an afterlife in the mimetic feelings and psychic investments they produce in publics, whose mass-mediated politics exist in a temporality beyond that of individual feelings.

Here it is apposite to turn to Shelley's depiction of Hope in *The Mask of Anarchy*, which points at once to its social promise, its origins in disappointment, and its unsure power. Hope often arises from a position of weakened agency, made overt in her gendered personification as a "maniac maid" whose "name was Hope, […] / But she looked more like Despair" (86–88 [*SPP* 319]).[27] As Morton Paley points out, her "maniac" energy echoes that of Martha Ray, from Wordsworth's "The Thorn," who shares Hope's lament, "Misery, oh Misery!"[28] Shelley casts Hope in this especially doleful image, tied to the frustration of love and the supposed loss of a baby, as the gossip in Wordsworth's poem has it. The intertextual echo reinforces Shelley's sociological sense of hope as the recourse of the disenfranchised (or disowned in his own case), those whose autonomy is compromised. The medically pathologizing term "maniac" captures the affective split that shapes the mental landscape of the hopeless romantic,

who wavers between an irrational exuberance founded on little more than tantalizing possibility and the depressive background always at the ready to puncture this imaginative effervescence. That the word "despair" etymologically contains hope – from the French negation *dés-espoir* – highlights how much the positive feeling itself is dependent on the misery that gives it occasion. These psychosocial factors give Hope that appearance of "pathetic weakness" common to those of limited sovereignty who yet reject submission to probability's chains.

But, of course, in *The Mask*, Hope's frailty becomes a strength as miraculous as the concluding lunge of "England in 1819." Though Hope cannot fight the overwhelming parade of atrocities riding toward her, she nonetheless manages to block their passage: "Then she lay down in the street, / Right before the horses' feet, / Expecting, with a patient eye, / Murder, Fraud, and Anarchy" (98–101 [*SPP* 319]). Hope's stoppage has often been taken as the earliest representation of nonviolent protest, the action of challenging the status quo by physically declining to let things proceed usually. More generally, though, we might say that hope is an affective version of passive resistance to stifling realities. The refusal to play one's assigned part in the "masque" of the actual is what makes hope agentive but also problematic, because Hope's focus on a distant prospect literally arrests the development in front of her. The invocation of "feet" points at once to the moving train of oppression's apocalyptic horses and to Hope giving up use of her own. Of course, the forward operations of the verse, with its mostly trochaic lines, continue but the poem's plot, in a sense, stops in its tracks here, as yet another ill-defined "Shape" appears climatologically to vanquish reality, succeeded by a spontaneous address describing England's ills and prophesying better times for its people (110).

In doing little but pausing traffic, Hope opens up a space for the force of futurity. This magical transmutation of oppressive reality is the poem's aesthetic legerdemain, a wish fulfillment given an amorphous Shape that reflects hope's capacity to take any form it imagines by jettisoning any facts it wishes.[29] Hope has no reason to believe she will not be crushed but then inexplicably "ankle-deep in blood, / Hope that maiden most serene / Was walking with a quiet mien" (127–129 [*SPP* 320]). Going from "maniac" to "serene," Hope moves past her psychic split as despair's conditions are routed by the Shape, even as the "ankle-deep […] blood" presents a chilling précis for an actual history of lived struggle. Hope is now "walking" in an echo of the Shape's movement, whose "presence" everyone senses but cannot see "all was empty air": "Thoughts sprung where'er that step did fall" (121, 125 [319]). While the repeated stress on the "footstep" of the

Shape picks up on the locomotion of the poem's personified characters, nonetheless no observable physical reality embodies this *élan vital* beyond Hope's im/mobility (122 [319]). The oppression-defeating "Shape" emerges only with a sequential "When," the same word that introduces Hope (102, 86 [319]). The causal mechanics here rely on a providential temporality or necessity assimilated to the natural cycle, with blustery echoes of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." The Shape grows like clouds do; its "steps" pass over human heads "as wind" provoking new "thoughts" (118 [319]). This emergence modeled on meteorological processes suggests that despair must seasonally give way to hope, for "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (70 [301]).

At the same time, the revolutions (or turns) of cyclical regeneration do not preclude revolutions of rupture and progress. Hope explains her own appearance by invoking her parent, "father Time," whom she describes as

> weak and gray
> With waiting for a better day;
> See how idiot-like he stands,
> Fumbling with his palsied hands!
>
> He has had child after child,
> And the dust of death is piled
> Over every one but me—
> Misery, oh Misery! (90–97 [*SPP* 319])

The characterization of aged Time again puts the stress on weakness, illness, and disability, echoing a feminized Hope's social alterity and physical vulnerability. But if hopes proverbially spring eternal and die as perpetually, Time is also "waiting" for one particular hope to survive, as of course happens when the maniac maid improbably outlasts the poem's tyrannical instruments. Progressive time is imagined in this awaited "better day" that grounds the concluding speech.

The poem's ending vision is more than just spring's seasonal "step" forward "after" winter darkness, as we see in the final address, "as if" spoken by mother nature: "Men of England, heirs of Glory, / Heroes of unwritten story, / Nurslings of one mighty Mother, / Hopes of her, and one another" (147–150 [*SPP* 320]). With this stanza, the only one in the poem entirely in feminine rhyme, Shelley again emphasizes the gendered (perhaps even feminist)[30] agency of hope, which represents, as I have argued, the feeling's endemicity in the experience of the dispossessed. The "weakness" of "waiting," "expecting," and being "patient" is one feature of hopeless romanticism that especially grates those attached to liberal-individualist models of

"strong" sovereignty. The "as if" qualification introducing Earth's oration at once emphasizes the speculative nature of these hopes and refuses to locate them in an actual agent, as though they awaited embodiment in the future offspring of the great Mother. If hopes are the individualized "nurslings" of both Time and "one mighty Mother," they are also what bind humans morally in a generational compact with "one another." The poem suggests that while hopes may be frequently buried under "the dust of death," some do produce effects, "unwritten" a "story" as though they may yet be at the time they appear. The introduction of narrative here tilts the procreative impulse away from seasonal hopes eternally born and dying toward the potential for writing a progressive history, in the "better day" that *tellingly* diverges from the story often told, "child after child."

Turning to the flip side of allegory, not abstraction but personage, Hope is also a young woman whose protest, as a number of critics have pointed out, approximates "an image transplanted from contemporary newspaper reports" of Peterloo.[31] Her pose enacts both negation of the present and orientation toward the future. Even if all she seems to be doing in this instance is "expecting, with a patient eye, Murder, Fraud, and Anarchy," the actual threat in front of her does not move her (affectively or physically) because she is eying and animated by another viewpoint (100–101 [*SPP* 319]). The poem's various terms for anticipation here point to the potential power of expectation. As the specific hopes of individuals become a shared structure of feeling, they take on the sort of horizon-resetting force (or "Shape") that can manifest with hindsight as historical inevitability. This temporal gap between the situational emergence of hopes and their possible fulfillment in a "better day" makes it particularly fitting that both Shelley's *The Mask* and "England in 1819" should have been belatedly published in the 1830s, when a number of reformist demands would ultimately, if only partly, be realized. This achievement, along with the eventual dissemination and impact of Shelley's popular radical poems, enacts at the biographical level just the sort of providential trajectory that hope promises.[32]

Looking at the matter historically, Shelley was not wrong to attribute so much power to a feeling rooted in powerlessness. Hope for political reform is what sparked the tens of thousands who demonstrated regularly in the years leading up to Peterloo and even after. How could these disenfranchised protesters conceive of changing things in "probably the most oppressive decade in British history since the Renaissance"?[33] Certainly, the French Revolution gave many the notion that inequitable structures were not fixed forever, but then the restoration of monarchy across Europe after 1814 would seem to have dealt a *coup de grâce* to these dawning ambitions.

But despair itself clears the stage for hope, as shown by the tacit affective logic that drives the "glorious" turns of "England in 1819" and *The Mask*. This is the paradox of hope: it appears unmoored from "the heavy weight of hours" and yet this unmooring is at the same time what – perhaps, eventually – enables alternate realities to emerge, to "quicken a new birth" (55, 64 [*SPP* 300]).[34] Hopes may have no effect in the moment on the way the world works or the unfolding of our personal lives but theirs is "a sense awakening," the verdict of our misery, and attachment to their visions becomes "at once a prophesy and a cause," as Shelley put it in a letter to Hunt (136 [320]).[35]

Because hopes just as often, if not more frequently, die "piled" high, our attachment to them can also be understood as injurious, as Lee Edelman has recently argued in relation to Shelley. Suspension in what Edelman ruefully calls "the romance of temporality" can appear as avoidant of reality, in particular the actual joys available.[36] Hope can sustain the individualizing fantasy that good things will come even as all evidence around us suggests that political and economic structures are made to deny happiness to the mass of humanity. This is a problem more generally with romance, as Lauren Berlant has argued: our optimism about what is around the corner – paradigmatically in the love plot – keeps us attached to systems that do not, on the whole, work for our flourishing.[37] These queer critics insist on the structure of deferral built into this expectant turn to the future, the illusory "promise of happiness" always over the horizon, but their hard-earned wisdom cannot (or has yet to) lessen hope's appeal.[38]

Moreover, this queer scholarship, in its various ways, problematizes the cathecting of political energies onto the figural repository of the child.[39] If critiques of hope as jejune, ineffectual, and self-defeating abound, the feeling appears inevitable because it is tied to the renewal of humanity in "child after child" (94 [*SPP* 319]). It makes sense that the youngest would be associated with hope, for time's passage accumulates "the dust of death" that is "piled" on our dreams. Without the weight of that experience, the young more easily inhabit the perspective of hope. Or, as Shelley puts it in *The Revolt of Islam*, "Hope will make thee young, for Hope and Youth / Are children of one mother" (VIII.xxvii.236–237 [*CP* III: 262]). But the birth of progressive history has also made the hopeless romantic into a subject position available past the years of youth. Indeed, the epithet itself indicates a perverse will to indulge what might be considered infantile wishes well beyond the time of our inexperience. They are "hopeless" not because without hopes – after all, their defining feature is a preference for unrealized futures – but rather because, from the perspective of society, they

refuse the only "real" satisfactions to be had. Their attachment to unrealized hopes can thus be taken as an immature refusal to participate in the actually existing. No wonder then that Shelley, whose early death spared us the reactionary later years characteristic of Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge, should so often be depicted as naïve and childlike.

At the same time, even as hope may be complicit with passivity and suffering, Berlant acknowledges it as "a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable."[40] In this regard, then, hope allows one to feel better than one ought to, that is, to live affectively beyond one's means. In Shelley's words, hope "can borrow / For poor to-day, from rich tomorrow."[41] The financial language acknowledges that hope's fancy (imagination's lesser, materialist sibling) gilds meager reality but also the fact that hopes often revolve around yearnings for economic access. Hence, *The Mask*'s emphasis on the precarity of the working classes, whose exploitation is the main evil to be rectified when they "rise like Lions after slumber" (368 [*SPP* 326]). A series of parodic banknotes from the 1810s broadcast this point more explicitly by playing on the controversial replacement of metal currencies by what *The Mask* calls the "forgery" of "paper coin" (180 [321]). Each "promissory" note is framed by paper money's "promise to pay" a sum upon a certain date. But instead of an actual deadline, the banknotes invoke the execution of some political and economic change: sometimes the alteration is wished for and other times it is rebuffed.[42] One note, for instance, attacks the legal system by promising to pay "when the glorious uncertainty of the Law shall have ceased and […] Attornies […] shall have gained integrity," signed for "Self, Simple & Pennyless, Simon Lostall." One striking aspect is that this note's grievance (the unfairness of the courts and the law) endures to this day. The dashing of hopes, their failure to come true, does not destroy the ambitions they register, which is part of the reason that "father Time" is incessantly siring them.

The ironic tone of the banknote only heightens the pathos of the "simple" self that has "lost all" except the hope onto which he hangs. The "when" of hope's promise represents the limit point between an impoverished now and a richer, potential future. While these notes rehearse radicals' assorted hopes for progress, they simultaneously pulse with doubts and fears of failure. In parodying the promissory note's legal guarantee, these bills invoke the questionable security of a financial instrument to show the insecurity of hope itself. The only guarantor is the feeling self who imaginatively bridges the divide between an unbearable present and a "better day." This is signaled by another banknote that hopes never to pay its "two pence" because the trifecta of Magna Carta, trial by jury,

and Francis Burdett "shall" never "have ceased." The constitutional document is pictured in the corner, "although mutilated, still in existence." This representation points self-referentially to the nature of inscribed paper as a repository of the hopes it records. Founded on an affective compact, partly trust and partly hope, paper promises, much like hopes, cannot be safeguarded by more than affective adherence, as suggested by the mutilated Magna Carta, whose guarantee of habeas corpus, for instance, was suspended twice in the period. These notes' skepticism rehearses the widespread contemporary view of paper currency as the ruse of a government offering "[s]mall slips of thin, silky paper, on which are engraven solemn promises never to be fulfilled."[43] Such "slips" of value symbolized the British state's failure to fulfill its constitutional obligations, calling into question the very future-oriented hopes that reformers communicated in their political messaging.

These "engraven" promises recall the "graves" of "England in 1819," which as Chandler points out may slyly allude to the print technology in which Shelley and his fellow reformers placed so much faith (hence, Shelley published a number of political pamphlets in his lifetime alongside his poetry). When hope inchoate becomes hope articulate, it leaves the domain of an unformed interiority potentially to become the world-shaping words that would lead Shelley to call poets "unacknowledged legislators." In this way, hope's blockade in *The Mask of Anarchy* prompts a speech that would later proliferate in print as a rallying cry for nineteenth-century reformers and beyond. In a similar direction, *Prometheus Unbound* concludes by offering up the "strong words" of Demogorgon, "spells by which to reassume / An empire o'er the disentangled doom" (IV.553 [*SPP* 285]; IV.568–569 [285]). The rhetoric of "spells" in Shelley connects the power of language to magical incantation, arranged in that linguistic form known only to sorcerer-poets. Given the dubious status of witchcraft, though, Shelley's identification of poetic grammar with its etymological cousin, supernatural "glamour," further calls attention to his wishful hopes for language to alter reality through fantastical causation. Can our doom be conquered through this techno-utopian belief in language that "may never pass away" (IV.553 [285])? Perhaps not, but as Berlant points out, "[p]reaching to the choir is always undervalued."[44]

Moreover, whether language will or will not make change happen is beside the point. For this style of hopeless romanticism, as we have seen, does not require empirical support to persist. Rather, hope is an ethical stance, especially when least warranted, as in reactionary times such as those Shelley lived through. The final stanza of *Prometheus Unbound* thus

places hope first and last in its "to do" list "to be / Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free" (IV.576–577 [*SPP* 286]):

> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
> To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
> To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
> From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
> Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent; (IV.570–575 [286])

In these closing lines, Hope is offered as the personified counterweight to the similarly capitalized "Power," first tied to the suffering the latter inflicts and second to its defiance. In the first instance, "Hope" arises from the accumulating scale of anguish, much as in *The Mask* Misery presents to us as ever expandingly "infinite" (a word subtly reinforced by the infinitive grammar of the whole stanza), but this perception springs from hope's despairing fancy ("thinks") much as Power "seems" unvanquishable. These "woes" are met with forgiveness, love, and patience, in the same way the maid calmly confronts her ordeal.

In the second instance, the unattributed act – "to hope" – leads to a personification of "Hope," which then "creates" the "thing" it imagined "from its own wreck," a *telos* guaranteed only by the temporally uncertain "till." The couplet rhyme of "creates" and "contemplates" equates the feeling of yearning for some "thing" with the very deed itself, in line with hope's promise. But what exactly is being wrecked by hoping? Shelley is far from clear. One reading is that a hope dies (wrecks itself) once it becomes a real, if undefined, "thing" and no longer just counterfactual feeling. Another possibility is that hope wrecks not itself but the realities it despairs of, turning them into "graves" from which spring forth (à la "Ode to the West Wind") the seeds of what "it contemplates." In this vein, there may be a pun with "recks," whereby the reckoning of hope grounds the emergence of a better day, as the depressing realities it counts up provoke its flight in visionary ideation. The language also suggests the metaphorical slippage by which individuals may be called wrecks, that is, shells of their former selves, hinting yet again at the "pathetic weakness" identified with the self that has lost all but hope.

As we have seen, Shelley repeatedly links hope to a natural cycle of creation and destruction. The wreck thus serves as a fitting, if ambivalent, metaphorical vehicle for hope, especially in its nautical sense as mover of valued goods as well as its failure to attain its intended port.[45] Shelley invokes the well-trodden trope of wrecked hopes in the preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, which aims to rewrite revolutionary disappointments in a more optimistic strain: "There is a reflux in the tide of human things which bears the

shipwrecked hopes of men into a secure haven after the storms are past. Methinks, those who now live have survived an age of despair" (*CP* III: 114). The wrecking of hopes does not annihilate them since they find a "secure haven," which can only be their psychological survival within the hearts of "those who now live." Hope's relation to the ship clearly plays upon the uncertainty of ocean travel in an age known for its nautical calamities, returning us to the "may" that does so much work in "England in 1819." These ships filled with hope are clearly sailing toward a terminus of great promise ("may" as capability), but their eventual arrival at their destination always seems in doubt ("may" as perhaps not).[46] Significantly, the ocean here functions as a topos of both promise and peril.

Seascapes are interwoven with hope throughout *The Revolt of Islam*. Indeed, the persistence of hope is modeled on the natural world whose "tides" have yet to stop:

> when Hope's deep source in fullest flow,
> Like earthquake did uplift the stagnant ocean
> Of human thoughts—mine shook beneath the wide emotion.
>
> When first the living blood through all these veins
> Kindled a thought in sense, great France sprang forth,
> And seized, as if to break, the ponderous chains
> Which bind in woe the nations of the earth.
> (I.xxxviii–xxxix.340–346 [*CP* III: 144])

The linkage of hope with swelling water allows Shelley to connect nature's lifeblood to that which courses through "these veins" of ours. The ocean's "uplifting" motion replicates the "wide emotion" whose "flow" results in a tectonic shift in consciousness. If hope rises like water, the human vessels atop this ocean are at once enabled to move beyond their usual "stagnant" course and possibly endangered by this great commotion. Shelley here connects the historical rupture of the French Revolution to a natural cycle whose flows sometimes "break" with the past.

As is typical in Shelley and *The Revolt of Islam* in particular, natural forces are the model for poetic power:

> as whirlpools draw
> All wrecks of Ocean to their chasm, the sway
> Of thy strong genius, Laon, which foresaw
> This hope, compels all spirits to obey,
> Which round thy secret strength now throng in wide array
> (IV.xv.131–135 [*CP* III: 186])

The simile here makes "wrecks" into "spirits," suggesting then that the shipwreck ultimately figures not the destruction of hopes but rather the

feeling's fundamental division in the "chasm" of psychological depth where darkness struggles with light. In any case, this metaphor shows hope belongs neither entirely to the individual (the wreck) nor to the social (the ocean) but rather to their interplay. Because hope, like all affects, is partly interpersonal and mimetic, it falls and rises like the tides of the sea.

The "throng" and "array" of Laon's contemporaries respond to the "sway" of his "strong genius," the same type of whirlpool personality that "draws" the reader past the verse's turns and "round" the perpetual enjambments of *The Revolt*. For Laon can channel the "secret strength" present within nature, a phrase Shelley later applies to the sublime Mont Blanc. The old man who speaks these truths admits to being a "passive instrument" of Laon, who has "lent, / To me, to all, the power to advance" (IV.xvi.136–139 [*CP* III: 186–187]). If "hope" is also a "lamp" that "time nor chance / Nor change may not extinguish," it requires someone to "rear" it "on high" for all "its gathered beams to bear" (IV.xvi.142–144 [187]). A substance, like water or light, that naturally abounds, hope is guided by the activist poet who "foresaw" its potential course, that is, anticipated and visualized a future that others could only themselves term an "unforeseen deliverance" (IV.xvi.140 [187]).

In their iconic steadfastness, Shelley's hopes are not unlike that giant mountain in the Alps, animated with a "secret strength" that still leaves many of us in awe. Turning back to the end of *Prometheus Unbound*, the final piece in Shelley's ethical catalogue is a refusal to "change," stressed by the further rejection of faltering and repenting. This reiteration performs obstinacy, which is after all the defining trait of the hopeless romantic. For Shelley, this intransigence relies on inscribing his hopes in writing. As Shelley says in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1817):

> never joy illumed my brow
> Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free
> This world from its dark slavery,
> That thou—O awful Loveliness,
> Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express. (68–72 [*CP* III: 77])

Political liberation and aesthetic potency are syntactically parallel: joy arrives simultaneously linked to the lack "that" both hopes disclose. The striving here is typical of Shelley's hope, as beatific illumination pulls the poet from an inadequate present. The otherworldly force "given" to language takes as its endpoint the indeterminate "whate'er" that marks a potentiality not to be delimited. As with hope's speculative effects, language's onward trajectory in the minds of future readers cannot be plotted with certainty.

Of course, such unpredictable futures do not stop Shelley from prophesying, as he does in the final moments of *The Mask*. He anticipates at once

a terrible bloodletting (perhaps a vision more realist than romantic) and the counterforce of a popular awakening, anchored by his famous mantra, "Rise like Lions after slumber." As he writes in his penultimate stanza just before these oft-cited lines: "'And these words shall then become / Like Oppression's thundered doom / Ringing through each heart and brain, / Heard again—again—again—" (364–367 [*SPP* 326]). The "unvanquishable number" refers to the people but also alludes to the verse's numbers, whose metrical effects are tied to the linguistic repetition and patterning that beat the drum of hope "again" in an open-ended concatenation onto the future.

In his time, there was certainly more justification in foreseeing dreadful state violence than the democratic rule of the "many" over the "few." And yet, Shelley clung to a hope that his cherished Wordsworth had abandoned, in a year (1819) when doubts were most reasonable. This hopeless romanticism can be parsed in a number of ways. Biographically, it certainly may result from Shelley's early death, which forestalled a later fatalism and conservatism. It may also reflect Shelley's commitment to the sublime power of language to produce effects beyond the intentions of an author and the possibilities of one moment. But I am particularly struck by the fulfilment of Shelley's prophecy in the readership he has accrued since his death. The posthumous vindication of his literary and political ambitions proves the power of hope to run past the limitations of time and place, even as the ongoing scorn of Shelley's detractors enacts at the literary-critical level that political dynamic that all radicals must brave in order to hold on to their visions of as-yet unrealized futures. Hopeless romantics often have a very real understanding of the social obstacles they face, but they nonetheless continue to "rear / That lamp of hope on high […] the world its gathered beams to bear" (IV.xvi.141–144 [*CP* III: 187]). The many who have found inspiration in Shelley – such as the Chartists, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King – certainly felt kinship with him in that exquisite balance between hope and despair that he so powerfully described. Likewise, to read Shelley in these times is to feel ourselves like them all on the threshold of a future that some among us have foreseen, to hope that a "better day" will arrive while also fearing that what we imagine may never come to pass.

Notes

1 [Leigh Hunt], "On the Charges Brought against the Reformists," *The Examiner* (July 29, 1810). Italics, here as elsewhere, in the original.

2 On the endurance of romance as realism gained traction, see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). On the legacies of Quixote, see Aaron Hanlon, *A World of Disorderly Notions: Quixote and the Logic of Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

3 Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 14.

4 Harold Bloom, "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," in Harold Bloom, ed. *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1970), 3–24; David Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press University, 1991).

5 Cited, and roundly rebutted, in Alan Weinberg, "'The Ineffectual Angel': Arnold's Misrepresentation of Shelley," *The Keats-Shelley Review* 23.1 (2009), 82–96, 83.

6 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), in *Jane Austen, The Complete Novels* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 280.

7 Of course, romance did formerly have serious political implications (witness Spenser) but nonetheless its allegorical import never quite eclipsed the pleasure-seeking at the heart of its imaginative thrills.

8 Duff, *Romance and Revolution*, 12.

9 David Hume, quoted from Ernest Campbell Mossner, "David Hume's 'An Historical Essay on Chivalry and Modern Honours,'" *Modern Philology* 45.1 (August 1947), 54–60, and cited by Duff, *Romance and Revolution*, 10. The date of composition is of some dispute, ranging from 1725 to 1734. On the question, see John Wright, "Hume on the Origin of 'Modern Honour': A Study in Hume's Philosophical Development," in Ruth Savage, ed. *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain: New Case Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 187–209.

10 *Don Juan* (XV.xxii) in Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, Volume 5, ed. Jerome McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

11 Throughout this chapter, I use Shelley's revised title of *The Revolt of Islam* rather than the original *Laon and Cythna*, because, as I argue in my book, it best captures a widespread strain of rhetorical and imaginative writing in which the Muslim world served as a setting to argue about political rights in Britain. Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud, *Radical Orientalism: Rights, Reform, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

12 Many scholars have examined the Manichean motif of light and dark, often in the context of critically appraising Shelley's "skeptical idealism," including Lloyd Abbey, *Destroyer and Preserver: Shelley's Poetic Skepticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1975); and C. E. Pulos, *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Skepticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1954).

13 Karen Weisman, "The Lyricist," in Timothy Morton, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 45–46.

14 Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 108.
15 H., "Sonnet. To the Author of 'The Revolt of Islam,'" *The Examiner* (February 8, 1818).
16 [Leigh Hunt], Review of "*Rosalind and Helen, a Modern Eclogue; With Other Poems, by Percy Bysshe Shelley*," *The Examiner* (May 9, 1819).
17 Orrin N. C. Wang, *Romantic Sobriety: Sensation, Revolution, Commodification, History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).
18 Andrew Franta, "Shelley and the Poetics of Political Indirection," *Poetics Today* 22.4 (Winter 2001), 765–793; Forest Pyle, "'Frail Spells': Shelley and the Ironies of Exile," in Deborah White, ed. *Irony and Clerisy*, *Romantic Circles* Praxis Series (August 1999), para. 15.
19 James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 25.
20 Susan Wolfson, "'Romantic Ideology' and the Values of Aesthetic Form," in George Levine, ed. *Aesthetics and Ideology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 188–218, 209–210; Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 55.
21 Wolfson, "Romantic Ideology," 210.
22 F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (New York: Stewart, 1947), 228.
23 Leavis, *Revaluation*, 228.
24 Leavis, *Revaluation*, 231.
25 Wolfson, "Romantic Ideology," 209.
26 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (New York: Penguin, 1996), 106.
27 Female personifications do not have to connote social alterity or powerlessness, of course, as contemporary images of Britannia or French Liberty prove, but Shelley clearly stresses Hope's vulnerability in his poem.
28 Morton Paley, "Apocapolitics: Allusion and Structure in Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 54.2 (1991), 91–109, 102.
29 As pragmatic critiques of hope tend to point out, this reality-denial can have deleterious effects on agency if those who hope substitute the pleasures of an illusory imagination for the pursuit of happiness through effort and labor.
30 Anne Janowitz, "'A Voice from across the Sea': Communitarianism at the Limits of Romanticism," in Mary Favret and Nicola Watson, eds. *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 83–100.
31 Franta, "Shelley and the Poetics of Political Indirection," 780.
32 On Shelley's influence among working-class activists, see, among many others, Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
33 William Keach, "Radical Shelley?" *Raritan* 5.2 (Fall 1985), 120–129, 121.
34 These quotations are taken from "Ode to the West Wind." This is the liberatory kernel in feeling that has so often motivated the field of affect theory,

which is inspired by the "potentiality" in affect's "virtual" reality and its deployment for utopian ends: Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) and José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). On the disconnect between affect theory and Romanticist scholarship, see my own, Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud, "Love Actually: On Affect Theory and Romantic Studies," *The Wordsworth Circle* 51.3 (2020), 300–321.

35 Shelley was referring most specifically to political "faith," but I take this to be part and parcel of hope. Cited in Norman Thurston, "Shelley and the Duty of Hope," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 26 (1977), 22–28, 23.

36 Lee Edelman, "The Pathology of the Future, or the Endless Triumphs of Life," in Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle, eds. *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 35–46, 35.

37 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

38 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

39 Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

40 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 14.

41 Shelley, "Love, Hope, Desire, and Fear," in Shelley, *Poetical*, 647–648, 37–38.

42 [*A series of twenty-six political squibs under the form of fictitious bank notes*.] (London: S. W. Fores, 1818–1819) 13, 18. Digital images of these banknotes are freely available on the British Library website.

43 [John Wade], *A Political Dictionary* (London: Dolby, 1821), 67.

44 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 238.

45 For more on the nautical implications of Shelley's use of the ocean, see Mandy Swann, "Shelley's Utopian Seascapes," *Studies in Romanticism* 52.3 (Fall 2013), 389–414.

46 This metaphorical strain also bears some relation to the imperial and capitalist history of a mercantile Britain.