CHAPTER 9

Shelley in the Overgrowth

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The idea that climate change might be a good thing is nowadays espoused only by fossil fuel magnates, their propagandists, and dupes.[1] As if the supposed benefits of global heating were the very aim of industrial emissions, lobbyists for capital have sought to portray ballooning amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as the condition for the resurgence of nature, increased global food production, and the near-elimination of winter deaths. "Carbon dioxide: they call it pollution; we call it life."[2] Really, of course, gesturing to the advantageous side effects of greenhouse gas emissions, all of them spurious, serves as a weak excuse for the pollution that is the necessary corollary of capitalist accumulation: "capitalism, with its industrial body and crown of finance, is sovereign; […] carbon emissions are the sovereign breathing; […] there is no survival while the sovereign lives."[3] Our times, from James Hansen's testimony to the US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources in 1988 to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published in 2022, have been defined by the scientific certainty that industrial emissions cause global heating – and by capital's hucksters continuing to declare that they don't.[4]

It was not always thus with the idea that climate change might be a good thing. As Alan Bewell showed some years ago, Percy Shelley envisaged a "biosocial utopia […] centred in human beings," predicated in turn on a "republican environmentalism" and "global ecological revolution" that would make "the entire earth serve human needs."[5] I want to rehearse some aspects of Bewell's reading in a moment, not least because Shelley's anthropocentric climatological optimism may at first sight appear drastically unsuited to our times, although it is worth remarking here that there is more to Shelley's image of a fecund, productive earth than mere dismissal of it as hopelessly optimistic would allow. Yet the focus of this chapter is on the image of vegetal overgrowth that returns on a number of occasions in Shelley's later, darker poetry. In particular, as envisaged by Shelley, a

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resurgent, overgrowing nature often owes its shape to the human ruins it at once conceals and reveals. That concealment and revelation is at once literal – Shelley is interested in how we can see the shapes of the wrecks of past human civilizations beneath the plant life that has overgrown it – and figurative, in the sense that what nature's recolonization of the ruins of civilization suggests is that nature is not merely the basis for history but that history is the basis for nature.[6] I want to suggest that Shelley's fascination with the ways that plants grow over ruins and take their shape enables a set of insights into the relations between nature and civilization, especially when the latter is threatened or has been superseded. Shelley's numerous poetic reflections on the relation between nature and civilization in the wake of the latter's collapse are, of course, especially germane to our times. Reflecting on the changes to the relation between the human and the natural in the two centuries since Shelley beheld the glaciers of Mont Blanc, David Collings concludes his penetrating study of Romantic imaginings of disaster by remarking that "[t]oday, the 'works and ways of man' once threatened by the glaciers threaten them in turn, causing them, as it were, to fly far in dread. It does not follow, of course," Collings usefully reminds us, "that humanity is now the dominant force, that nature is now somehow subjected to human will; on the contrary, the climatological changes we have unleashed function in a complex dynamic well beyond human control."[7] Shelley's poetic responses to the growth of plants over the ruins of civilization also conceive of a dynamic well beyond human control. It is a dynamic in which humanity is by no means the dominant force, as well as one, however, in which nature does not simply exert its domination over humanity either. Rather than erase the traces of a fallen civilization, overgrowing nature perpetuates the remnants of human history in forms that humanity determined but did not, exactly, intend. Shelley's imagination of overgrown ruins is distinct both from the exuberant fantasy of a wholly rewilded nature and also from the sometimes more melancholy vision – deftly elaborated by a range of new materialist, speculative realist, and new pessimist thinkers – of a world without us in it. Shelley envisions a nexus of the human and nonhuman that at once bears the traces of the human in its very lineaments but is nevertheless beyond the reach of further human manipulation.

The image of overgrowth furnished one early biographer of Shelley with a description of Shelley's character and imagination in general. Thomas Jefferson Hogg wrote that Shelley "was a climber, a creeper, an elegant, beautiful, odoriferous parasitical plant; he could not support himself; he must be tied up fast to something of a firmer texture, harder and more

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rigid than his own, pliant, yielding structure; to some person of a less flexible formation: he always required a prop."[8] Hogg's description is not altogether flattering, to say the least. The first two epithets – "climber," "creeper" – establish Shelley as furtive and self-serving, before the effusion of "elegant, beautiful," and even "odoriferous" strikes a more positive note – only to be negatively qualified again by "parasitical." Hogg certainly viewed himself as having at one point served as the firmer, harder, more rigid structure that, so he alleged, Shelley always needed. I merely register here that I think such a view of Shelley is contestable; my real aim is to suggest, first of all, that we can relate Shelley's interest in and, indeed, affinity for overgrowing vegetation with recent conceptions of rewilding in environmental discourse and activism. Such conceptions have started to have an impact on readings of Romantic writers but they also, in some signal instances, begin from an engagement with Romanticism.[9] However, Shelley can hardly be accounted an advocate for or forerunner of rewilding, intimating instead a vision of a dark rewilding (so to speak) that does not so much restore a healthy balance between nature and humanity but rather overgrows, conceals, and yet perpetuates the wrecks of humanity's imperialistic folly. There are a number of vital – and timely – questions at issue here. Does the colonization of the ruins of one form of human civilization by a resurgent nature represent an improvement on the former? Either way, does human history always end up, insidiously, asserting itself, shaping even as it is covered by vegetal overgrowth? Can we even talk of "nature" in such a circumstance, since, however assertively plants recolonize the ruins of human artifice, they take their shape from and follow the course of just those ruins? Is the ruin of human civilization, in whatever form, the inevitable precondition of the renewal of nature?

Let us work up to these questions by reviewing Shelley's revolutionary climatology, influentially elaborated by Bewell and others. As Michael Verderame has put it with respect to the same early poem that formed the focus of Bewell's discussion, "[t]he imagined paradise of *Queen Mab* is one in which the seasons, and indeed, climate itself, have been eradicated in favor of an evergreen, temperately warm earth."[10] But this "eradication" in fact serves to restore, for Shelley, an earlier, human world. As Bewell's account of the poet's climatological optimism made clear, for instance, Shelley strikingly claimed that, on "yon earth," "Thou canst not find one spot / Whereon no city stood" (II.223–224 [*CP* II: 180]). As Bewell puts it, in contrast to the conventional understanding of the relation between wilderness and cities, for Shelley "cities come first." The persistence of this conviction of the priority of urban civilization is confirmed, for example,

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by Panthea's visionary deep history of the earth midway through the final act of *Prometheus Unbound*:

> 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 grey annihilation, split,
> Jammed in the hard black deep; and over these
> The anatomies of unknown winged things,
> […] —and over these
> The jagged alligator and the might
> Of earth-convulsing behemoth, which once
> Were monarch beasts, and on the slimy shores
> And weed-overgrown continents of Earth
> Increased and multiplied like summer worms
> On an abandoned corpse, till the blue globe
> Wrapt Deluge round it like a cloak (IV.296–315 [*SPP* 278])

The presentation of the history of Earth as being many-layered is emphasized not only with the repetition of "and over these" but also, in the dense verbal sedimentation of these lines, by the largely subterranean repetition (breaking the surface into full appearance, as it were, only twice) of *on* in "*con*vulsing," "*on*ce," "m*on*arch," "on," "*con*tinents," "On," and "aband*on*ed," a repetition that registers the historical movement of the Earth's history on and on and on and on ….

But if all of the Earth, down, as Shelley had put it in *Queen Mab*, to "the minutest drop of rain," had once been human, why is it no longer (II.212 [*CP* II: 180])? What has happened to dehumanize nature? Panthea's answer – that "Earth grew over" the wrecks of "many of a city vast" – does not really explain how that came to happen or, indeed, how the cities were wrecked in the first place. But as *Prometheus Unbound* itself may be taken to suggest, and as an early work like *Queen Mab* surely did, Shelley conceived of the dehumanization of nature not as a natural process but rather as itself a human one, for which Shelley has a specific name: tyranny. "Tyranny," as Bewell puts it, "*is* ruin"; conversely, "[r]evolution is ecological reclamation, the recovery of nature produced by human labor and love that has been destroyed by social degradation."[11] Bewell shows how Shelley arrived at this vision through adapting the arguments of influential figures such as Montesquieu and Volney; on the particular matter of the ruination effected by tyranny and the restoration effected by revolution, a further parallel with another political writer suggests itself. In the second

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paragraph of Thomas Paine's 1776 pamphlet, *Common Sense*, Paine eulogizes society – "[s]ociety in every state is a blessing" – and criticizes government – "but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil."[12] He goes on: "Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise."[13] Paine's contention that "the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise" operates with a conventional sense of the relation between wilderness ("bowers of paradise") and cities (insofar as palaces belong in cities) and likewise of the fall from an egalitarian into a hierarchical society. Paine's terms, at least, are clearly recognizable in one of the many statements Shelley makes in *A Defence of Poetry* concerning the connections between politics and poetry. Here, specifically, he is describing the effect of the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women:

> It was as if the statues of Apollo and the Muses had been endowed with life and motion and had walked forth among their worshippers; so that earth became peopled by the inhabitants of a diviner world. The familiar appearance and proceedings of life became wonderful and heavenly; and a paradise was created as out of the wrecks of Eden. And as this creation is itself poetry, so its creators were poets. (*SPP* 525)

The close terminological similarity between Paine and Shelley, however, only serves to highlight a number of differences between them. First and most obvious, Paine's image illustrates the evil – however necessary – of government, while Shelley's illustrates the new, heavenly society that arose after the rectification of historic injustices. And while it is possible that (though he does not specify) wrecker of paradise and builder of palaces are one and the same for Paine, the wider context of the passage in Shelley makes it clear that the creator of the new paradise is only the inheritor of the ruins left by others.

Shelley's vision of a newly built paradise is one in which the earth, instead of being restored to nature, is "peopled." It is worth acknowledging again that Shelley's vision of an earth rendered not only "habitable" but in fact "peopled" and dedicated to serving human ends seems drastically out of step with contemporary environmental thinking. Defrosted poles, cornfields and pastures overspreading the earth, vegetarian predators: such are the features of Shelley's ecological vision and such a vision seems to intimate ecological disaster wrought by agri-industrial fantasy and a world populated by invasive species and the farm-bred lion, as much as it intimates reconciliation between nature and humanity.[14] As Bewell emphasizes, Shelley certainly criticized English society's self-presentation as a garden idyll – though not for any fault in that presentation but rather

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in England's failure to live up to it. Recent environmental commentators and activists, however, have become rather more circumspect with regard to Romantic conceptions of humanity's place in nature. While paying tribute to Wordsworth's role in the foundation of "the Western conservation movement," for instance, the campaigner and journalist George Monbiot has sought to question the category of "cultural landscape" on the basis of which UNESCO assesses applications for world heritage status. Monbiot cites Wordsworth's celebration of hill-sheep farming in the Lake District as an instance of how we have become acculturated to what is in fact an environmentally damaging practice.[15] Wordsworth stands accused, in Monbiot's account, of fostering "a strange bifurcation in our minds, which sees industrialism as malign and destructive and agriculture as benign and harmonious." It is not that Monbiot wishes to offer a defense of industrialism – far from it – but rather that he thinks we should see agriculture as equally, if not more, to blame for the environmental calamities usually associated with industry instead. "Farming has done more extensive damage to wildlife and habitats than all the factories ever built. Few kinds of farming," he goes on, with particular pertinence to the kind of farming cherished by Wordsworth, but which also affects Shelley's vision of a world covered with "pastures," "have done more harm in proportion to their output than the keeping of sheep in the hills." Monbiot concludes by asking why our aesthetic sensibility ought still to be determined by Wordsworth – a question with which Romanticists have long wrestled – and suggests that "sheepwrecked" landscapes, particularly given their agricultural underproductivity, ought to be restored to nature and rewilded.

There is no need to detain ourselves with the rights and wrongs of Monbiot's reading of Wordsworth, nor with how much Wordsworth's celebration of the Lake District may have in common with Shelley's biosocial utopianism; rather, I want to pause for a moment on the rights and wrongs of rewilding itself. It should be acknowledged straightaway that even in his critique of "cultural landscape," Monbiot allows that it is a potentially useful category, especially because it recognizes the involvement of humans in the natural world – indeed, in *Feral*, Monbiot conceives of rewilding as a process from which humans would benefit as much as anyone or anything else. And he has consistently and trenchantly criticized the tendency of those who might be called establishment environmentalists to blame our environmental crises on "the bogeyman of overpopulation" – a move that Shelley, as we have seen, would likewise have found disgraceful.[16] Yet still, as Irma Allen has suggested in a thorough inquisition of

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rewilding advocacy, some of that advocacy, including Monbiot's, harbors a series of troubling assumptions. Seizing on Monbiot's observation that in the European Union (EU) an area the size of Poland has come out of agricultural production in recent years and has thus been rendered ripe for rewilding, Allen shows that Poland itself has been the locus of considerable class conflict between small-scale, family farms and large, agri-industrial conglomerates.[17] The reason an area the size of Poland is available for rewilding is that a large number of small-scale farmers and agricultural workers have been sacrificed on the altar of global capital. And the food once grown in the EU continues to have to come from somewhere – often recently de-wilded ecological habitats.

It should be emphasized that Allen's intention is not to stop rewilding in its tracks, nor is it the case that advocates of rewilding like Monbiot, Isabella Tree, and others are content to leave the system of global agriculture, along with the unsustainable levels of Western consumption that it serves, as they are (advocating instead, for example, for plant-based diets, something, again, Shelley would have supported). Yet Allen does usefully bring into the open a number of underexamined assumptions behind rewilding, along with some of its unintended consequences. If there is an overall point to her argument, it is surely that the web of human involvement in nature is much more extensive and fraught than even some of the most sophisticated advocates of rewilding have appeared to allow. Ecological reclamation, whether humans like it or not, involves humans.

Yet however initially dependent upon human intervention the erasure of the marks of human intervention may be, the aim of rewilding is to reproduce a world that exists, so to speak, behind the back and out of the mind of human agents. Chris Washington expands on Shelley's deployment of Milton's Satan's consoling statement that "[t]he mind is its own place" by remarking that "[t]he mind is its own place; the world is another." Washington explains that "[d]espite that 'all things exist as they are perceived, at least to the percipient,' all things also, like Mont Blanc and the eternal power continually walled off from human thought, exist as they are whether or not they are perceived."[18] As Washington shows in his innovative reading of Shelley, a glimpse of that world is all we can manage thanks to the obliterating effect of familiarity (and we may here conceive of "familiarity" as closely akin to humanization). The recognition of the difficulty of achieving and perceiving a world that is not continually shaped by humanity is thus central to Shelley's poetic project – and central to his relevance for our times in which the unintended consequences of the total humanization of nature are rapidly becoming all too apparent.

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I alluded earlier in the chapter to Adorno's dismay at the "farm-bred lion." Adorno invoked this unhappy creature in the course of a prescient discussion of the prospects for the reconciliation of humanity with nature.[19] He reflects, as he does with perhaps surprising frequency, on zoos, remarking in particular their involvement with bourgeois class consciousness. Zoos are "laid out on the pattern of Noah's Ark, for since their inception the bourgeois class has been waiting for the flood."[20] Zoos, that is, "are allegories of the specimen or pair who defy the disaster that befalls the species *qua* species." What are undeniably real advances in the humane treatment of captive animals and in the preservation of nature have, Adorno points out, their dialectical underside: "The more purely nature is preserved and transplanted by civilization, the more implacably is it dominated. We can now afford to encompass ever larger natural units, and leave them apparently intact within our grasp, whereas previously the selecting and taming of particular items bore witness to the difficulty we still had in coping with nature." Adorno wishes as little to return to a situation in which humanity struggles to cope with nature as he does to the colonial imperialism of which zoos were an expression or, indeed, to the inhumane treatment of animals. But nor is the enclosure of nature, its division into "units," however large, a salutary prospect for humanity either. "Only in the irrationality of civilization itself," Adorno asserts, "in the nooks and crannies of the cities, to which the walls, towers, and bastions of the zoos wedged among them are merely an addition, can nature be conserved. The rationalization of culture, in opening its doors to nature, thereby completely absorbs it, and eliminates with difference the principle of culture, the possibility of reconciliation." "You'll see more wildlife in Birmingham," Monbiot scoffs at one point in his disparagement of the notion that the "cultural landscape" of the Lake District is a haven for nature. Perhaps he is right – but perhaps that is because it is in Birmingham, rather than the Lake District, that we should rest our hopes for the conservation of nature.[21]

Wherever we should ultimately rest our hopes for the conservation of nature, it is undeniable that the climatological optimism of Shelley's early verse, and the benevolently human (or humanly benevolent) interaction with nature that it betokens, gives way to a more complex, often darker understanding of the involvement of what is (or was) human in what is (or may be) nature.[22] Shelley also anticipates the insight that it is in the "nooks and crannies" – off the main thoroughfares and amongst the ruins (*Gemäuer*, Adorno's somewhat elevated term that Edmund Jephcott translates as "crannies," can also mean both walls and ruins) – of cities that nature's resurgence can be observed.[23] Nature's resurgence, however, need

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not entail the reconciliation of humanity with nature but rather the mute perpetuation of the traces of humanity in a context drastically beyond humanity's control.

A relatively neutral image of vegetal overgrowth is to be found in the justly celebrated passage of *Epipsychidion* in which the speaker is describing to the addressee, Emily, the home he has chosen for them – an island girded by the blue Aegean (430 [*SPP* 403]). On the island stands a solitary dwelling, "built by whom or how / None of the rustic island-people know," but the building of which the poem's speaker ascribes to "Some wise and tender Ocean-King" (484–485, 488 [404–405]). Notably, he puts the period of the tower's construction "ere crime / Had been invented, in the world's young prime" (488–489 [405]). Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, the editors of the Norton edition of Shelley's works, helpfully suggest that "[o]ne underlying myth may be that of Nereus, the eldest son of Oceanus," whom Hesiod describes in the *Theogony* as "always right and always gentle" (*SPP* 405, n. 3); whatever the specific mythological precedent, the period invoked is a prelapsarian one and crime is cast as an "invention" rather than (in Hobbesian fashion) as something like the state of nature itself. It is also a period in which ocean-kings (even if not necessarily people) *build*: again, Shelley's sense that cities precede wilderness is in evidence here. This, though, is how the lone dwelling has come to appear by the time of the speaker's description of it:

> It scarce seems now a wreck of human art,
> But, as it were Titanic; in the heart
> Of Earth having assumed its form, then grown
> Out of the mountains, from living stone,
> Lifting itself in caverns light and high:
> For all the antique and learned imagery
> Has been erased, and in the place of it
> The ivy and the wild-vine interknit
> The volumes of their many twining stems;
> Parasite flowers illume with dewy gems
> The lampless halls, and when they fade, the sky
> Peeps through their winter-woof of tracery
> With Moon-light patches, or star atoms keen,
> Or fragments of the day's intense serene;—
> Working mosaic on their Parian floors. (493–507 [405])

Far from consolingly attesting to the survival of the "secret spirit of humanity / […] 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies / Of nature, 'mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers, / And silent overgrowings" in the manner of Wordsworth's wanderer contemplating the devastation of Margaret's

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"poor Hut" at the conclusion of the first book of *The Excursion*,[24] the above passage from *Epipsychidion* instead presents erasure of the spirit of humanity's works as the precursor, if not precondition, of the artistry wrought by nature's silent overgrowings. The dwelling "*seems* […] *as it were* Titanic," a conjectural framing that lends a certain – admittedly, appropriate – tentativeness to the following flight of fancy according to which the dwelling emerged "having assumed its form" in the earth. The dwelling "scarce seems now a wreck of human art," but the forming of the dwelling in the earth and the deployment of a sculptural, architectural lexicon in the description of its growth in "living stone, / Lifting itself in caverns light and high" serves to suggest that human art is perhaps not the only kind. To be sure, the suggestion of a Titanic artificer indeed evokes divine – rather than either human or natural – creation, perhaps hinting in turn at a way out of an opposition between human civilization and natural production. But in addition to the fact (already noted) that this suggestion of Titanic construction is only an appearance, the Titans themselves, of course, are a superseded order of divinity, whose creations tend to turn out badly for them. The atmosphere of ambivalence that characterizes this consideration of the dwelling's making thus extends to its putative origins "in the heart / Of Earth" – where "Earth" is at once the material substrate of all nature but also, as a Titan, divine. If the dwelling's origins are not exactly to be found "in human art," that need not mean they are exclusively natural either. A natural artifice is at work elsewhere in these lines – in the volumes of ivy and wild-vine, the winter-woof of the vines that creep over the dwelling, and, above all, in the mosaic that the patches of moonlight form on the Parian floors of the dwelling's halls. Natural elements do not need the support of the wrecked dwelling for their artistry, however. The passage concludes by describing how Earth and Ocean "aloof, from the high towers / And terraces […] dream / Of waves, flowers, clouds, woods, rocks, and all that we / Read in their smiles, and call reality" (508–511 [405]). We may no longer read "the antique and learned imagery" erased from the dwelling but instead only the smiles of Earth and Ocean as they dream. It is the outward signs of their dreams that are our reality.

In the passage following the one I have just been discussing, the speaker of the poem declares to Emily that he owns the house of which he has been speaking and that Emily will be "lady of the solitude" (he does not ask if she wants to be) (514 [*SPP* 405]). He goes on to say that he has restored human art to it, sending "books and music there, and all / Those instruments with which high spirits call / The future from its cradle, and the past / Out of its grave" – an important restoration of faith in what "high

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spirits" may be able to evoke (519–522 [405]). In the curtailed sonnet (one of the poem's "Weak Verses," perhaps, lacking the strength to fulfill its length) that concludes *Epipsychidion*, it is just such an ability to evoke the past that the poet ascribes to what he himself has written: "Then call your sisters from Oblivion's cave" (595 [407]). Elsewhere in Shelley's work, the artistry of nature as it grows over the ruins of one formation of humanity is cast as conducive to renewed human artistry. For instance, Shelley gives the following information about the composition of *Prometheus Unbound* in the preface to that poem:

> This Poem was chiefly written upon the mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, among the flowery glades, and thickets of odoriferous blossoming trees which are extended in ever winding labyrinths upon its immense platforms and dizzy arches suspended in the air. (*SPP* 207)

The site of the poem's composition serves not only as general inspiration for *Prometheus Unbound* but seems to have a specific echo, for example, in the conclusion to Asia's celebrated "enchanted boat" revery at the end of Act II, where she envisages the souls of her and her sister, Panthea, coming "Through Death and Birth, to a diviner day":

> A Paradise of vaulted bowers
> Lit by downward-gazing flowers,
> And watery paths that wind between
> Wildernesses calm and green,
> Peopled by shapes too bright to see (II.v.104–108 [255])

The proximity of "paradise" and "bowers" also echoes Paine's assertion, discussed earlier, that "the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise," and the "watery paths" winding "between / Wildernesses calm and green" – anticipated earlier in Asia's speech, in fact, by the description of her soul floating "ever—forever— / Upon that many winding River, / Between mountains, woods, abysses, / A Paradise of wildernesses!" – evoke the "ever winding labyrinths" of the Baths of Caracalla (II.v.78–81 [254]).

The setting that Shelley describes here gave rise not only to the work of art that is *Prometheus Unbound* itself but also to surely the most widely known image of Shelley, Joseph Severn's *Shelley Composing "Prometheus Unbound" Amidst the Ruins of Rome*, completed in 1845 at the instigation of Shelley's son, Percy Florence Shelley, and some twenty-three years after the poet's death.[25] However well-known it is, it remains a beguiling painting, on which there has been relatively little commentary – apart from Mary's complaint that Severn had got Shelley's nose and mouth all wrong.[26]

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Severn's painting bears a resemblance to Joseph Wright of Derby's celebrated 1781 portrait of Sir Brooke Boothby, which shows the landed (and fashionably dressed) gentleman reposing in a pleasingly wooded corner of his estate, addressing the viewer from the canvas and pointing to the name "Rousseau" on the spine of a book on the ground.[27] But where Boothby's romantically unkempt, twilit estate is distinctly in the background of the central figure – except where he props his elbow on a conveniently situated tree – perhaps the most striking feature of the composition of Severn's painting is its stark bifurcation by a twisting tree trunk – a tree that, while it is in leaf, is hardly profuse, and in which it is tempting to see the distorted root for which the visionary of *The Triumph of Life* mistook what was once Rousseau. The tree in Severn's painting, which draws attention up and away from Shelley's gaze (another contrast with the Wright portrait), is the dominating feature of the composition. The tree's roots seem perilously inadequate to its size and habit, giving the impression that it is dizzyingly unsupported by any remnant structure. Something similar is a feature of Shelley's own description of the Baths of Caracalla in the earlier passage: the "dizzy arches" are at once the ruined arches of the baths (on which Severn also dwells) but also the shape of the plants that have subsequently grown over them, which are thus not suspended in the air but rooted, albeit imperceptibly, on the ruins. Moreover, the fact that Shelley's "its" in the final sentence seems to lack a grammatical referent – apart, perhaps, from the poem itself – adds to the sense of finally indeterminable interaction between ruin, thicket, and poem. Add to this the passage's prepositional precocity – "upon," "among," "in," "upon" again – and the relations between what we might envisage as a shaping base and a shaped superstructure are complicated still further. Where Wright of Derby's portrait of Boothby leaning on the helpfully placed tree is meant to celebrate the vision and fortune of its socially elevated subject, Severn's picture of Shelley and the tree that divides the canvas, extending dizzily out into the ether, serve as something like an allegory for the ultimately undecidable relation between historical civilization and vegetal overgrowth, between artifice and nature, authorship and inspiration.

The apparent mystery of the relation of vegetal overgrowth to the ruins of a formation of human civilization underneath it notwithstanding, the inspirational atmosphere of the Baths of Caracalla appears, however, a wholesome air. But overgrowth is often far less than wholesome in Shelley's verse – as in, for instance, the fragment of 1818, "Flourishing vine, whose kindling clusters glow," given the suitably sepulchral title "The Vine Shroud" when it was first published by William Rossetti in 1870:

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Flourishing vine, whose kindling clusters glow
Beneath the autumnal sun—none taste of thee—
For thou dost shroud a ruin, and below
The rotting bones of dead antiquity. (1–4 [*Poems* II: 422])

The Romantic topos of overgrown ruins draws, of course, on a considerable literature dedicated to the wrecks of empire. Felicia Hemans's "The Widow of Crescentius," published in her 1819 volume *Tales, and Historic Scenes, in Verse*, for example, displays its debts to Chateaubriand and Sismondi in its notes and opens "Midst Tivoli's luxuriant glades," where "nature hath resumed her throne / O'er the vast works of ages flown."[28] These are scenes, in Hemans's poem, "where verdure's rich array / Still sheds young beauty o'er decay," but in Shelley's lines, the redemption of decay by youth and beauty appears, to say the least, less assured.[29] The description of the grapes, and of the vine itself, in the opening line is admittedly rather lush, a fact that has caused problems for interpreters of the poem. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, the Longman editors, hit a conundrum when trying to date and to place the composition of this short fragment: "The draft is among material dating from autumn 1818 to spring 1819. Lines 3–4 ["For thou dost shroud a ruin, and below / The rotting bones of dead antiquity"] might suggest Herculaneum or Pompeii, but leaves of the vines were already in decay when S. travelled south from Este on 5 November" (*Poems* II: 422). On the one hand, the fact of the leaves of the vines being (in the editors' resonant phrase) "in decay" would seem to contradict the idea in the poem that the vine itself is flourishing; but on the other hand, that the vine has yielded what initially appears to be a voluptuous, tempting harvest ("kindling clusters") might indeed betoken its flourishing or, at least, evidence that it has flourished. But there is further support in the sole manuscript source of this poem for Everest's and Matthews' implicit sense that the timing and placing of "Flourishing vine, whose kindling clusters glow" is perplexing. Where Shelley eventually writes "none taste of thee" he had initially, incongruously written "sweet violet" – incongruously, both because it is difficult to see how he envisaged "sweet violet" fitting the syntax and meter of the poem, however inchoate they may have been at this stage of drafting, and, moreover, because sweet violet is neither a vine nor does it flower in the autumn. A plausible source for "sweet violet," especially given its natural incongruity in the context of the fragment, may have been Francis Fawkes's translation of Theocritus's tenth *Idyll*: "The letter'd hyacinth's of darksome hue, / And the sweet violet a sable blue."[30] Shelley's rejected – and unseasonal – "sweet Violet" may then have had its roots not in the Italian countryside

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but in ancient literature. Similarly, the flourishing vine is sustained not by a wholesome, natural hummus but instead by "The rotting bones of dead antiquity." This image of the "bones of antiquity" is familiar from the sequence in *Adonais* where the poet is exhorting the "Fond wretch" who would mourn for Adonais to "go to Rome":

> Go thou to Rome,—at once the Paradise,
> The grave, the city, and the wilderness;
> And where its wrecks like shattered mountains rise,
> And flowering weeds, and fragrant copses dress
> The bones of Desolation's nakedness
> Pass, till the Spirit of the spot shall lead
> Thy footsteps to a slope of green access
> Where, like an infant's smile, over the dead,
> A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread. (433–441 [*SPP* 425])

The Norton editors offer a consoling gloss to these lines, remarking that Severn, asked by Keats before his death to examine the non-Catholic cemetery in Rome, had expressed pleasure in the violets and daisies amongst the grass there – a circumstance, indeed, that Shelley himself notices in his preface: "The cemetery is an open space among the ruins covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place" (409–410). The echo of Keats's "I have been half in love with easeful Death" is plain enough, though in the context of the several ambivalences of the above passage from *Adonais*, it may be well to recall that the speaker of "Ode to a Nightingale" was only ever "half in love" and that there may be deaths other than the easeful kind. The "light of laughing flowers," likened to "an infant's smile," is perhaps a conventional enough attempt to counterpose the gloom of death, but the fact that this laughter and smile occur "over the dead" surely introduces a hint of unseemly levity. Though the "flowering weeds" earlier in the stanza may or may not pun on "weeds" as the clothes of mourners, "fragrant copses," in a stanza describing a graveyard, is grimly close to the at once mordant and repulsive image of "fragrant corpses." We are far, here, from the "odoriferous blossoming arches" of the Baths of Caracalla.

In "Flourishing vine," a formation of human civilization frequently credited with having overcome death – namely, antiquity – is shown to have succumbed to death, after all, and is thus drastically opposed to the cycles of natural flourishing and decay that feed upon it (as in the stanza of *Adonais* following the one discussed above: "And grey walls moulder round, on which dull Time / Feeds, like slow fire upon a hoary brand"

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[442–443 (*SPP* 425)]). This vegetal growth is starkly not amenable to human uses and pleasures: "none taste of thee." Flourishing, fructifying life turns out to be a perpetuation in life of the death of human civilization itself. In a fragment composed perhaps five months after "Flourishing vine," Shelley does appear to oppose a finally obliterated civilization to an enduring nature: "Rome has fallen, ye see it lying / Heaped in undistinguished ruin / Nature is alone undying" (1–3 [*Poems* II: 453]). As well as the strong verbal echo, the fact that it is Rome – the blame for whose decline and fall Gibbon famously laid at the door of Christianity – that is thus described anticipates the striking assertion in "Ode to Liberty" that "The Galilean serpent forth did creep, / And made thy world an undistinguished heap" (VIII.119–120 [*SPP* 310]). Despite the fact that the assertion that nature is "alone undying" hardly constitutes a celebration of nature's vitality (especially given Shelley's attempts to consider the distinctions between mere perpetuation and actual life), the crucial point to take from both the "Rome has fallen" fragment and the lines from "Ode to Liberty" is that Shelley is willing, at times, to posit a clear distinction between fallen, heaped, undistinguished civilization and the immortality of nature.[31] That this is so, however, makes his insistent return to a more complex, involved relation between civilization and nature all the more compelling. As I have been arguing, the continuity between history and a nature inevitably informed by the historical formations that it succeeds is much more characteristic of Shelley's conception of the relationship between civilization and nature. And as I have suggested, this is a conception that is strikingly apt to our times, in which the human presence in nature is both effectively total and drastically imperiled. Shelley's conception of a world without us that is also a world structured by the traces we leave behind is aimed at mortifying the consolation harbored in the self-annihilating but thereby also self-exculpating fantasy of a world after humans that would somehow be a world wholly without any trace of them. The world without us is also a world without any trace of the damage we have done to it – a world, in other words, that cannot be.

The contrast between a text like "Rome has fallen" and "Flourishing vine" also extends, incidentally, to their different textual statuses. Everest and Matthews describe both "Flourishing vine" and "Rome has fallen" alike as fragments. Yet the grounds for considering the latter as a fragment are much less compelling than in the former case. Both texts are short, to be sure, but in the case of "Rome has fallen," there is no evidence of unresolved – or, indeed, any – attempts at revision; each of the poem's three lines conforms to a standard pattern of eight or (if each syllable of the first

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line is fully enunciated) nine syllables, and, by means of its starkly stated opposition of civilization and nature, it achieves a certain epigrammatic unity. None of this is the case in "Flourishing vine," which is, so to speak, emphatically fragmentary. The gothic "rotting bones" of the final line are cancelled in the manuscript and, as noted, "none taste of thee" is an acerbic alternative for the initial, literary "sweet violet." "Flourishing vine" is not only a description of the ruin of human civilization and the repulsing of human taste by the fruits of cultivation turned wild but, in its own fragmentary condition, an unflinching enactment of just those processes: as we are starting to roll the sound pattern of the opening line, rung on the Shelleyan keynotes of "kindling clusters glow," the poet reaches for the spittoon: "none taste of them." In their dependence upon the ruins that they colonize, the vines break emphatically free from human needs and purposes. Rather than "The vine, the corn, the olive mild," which prior to the advent of agriculture, the "Ode to Liberty" tells us, "Grew savage yet, to human use unreconciled" (53 [*SPP* 308]) or rather even than the "wild-vine" of the passage from *Epipsychidion* discussed earlier, which interknits the volumes of its stems with those of the ivy where once had been antique and learned imagery, the "flourishing vine" of this fragment has instead turned feral. The wild will return not in accord with human ends and purposes but once those ends and purposes lie in ruins. It is a future that, as numerous fantasies of life after humans and of the world without us in it have entertained, may not be our time but could well be the one that we are preparing. "Go thou to Rome,—" the poet of *Adonais* counselled, "at once the Paradise, / The grave, the city, and the wilderness": the eternal city is Paradise, grave, city, and wilderness neither in sequence nor in carefully demarcated and administered units but all at once (433–434 [425]). It is in the recognition of the irrationality of culture, even as instantiated in its most venerated monuments and achievements, that nature may be conserved and reconciliation with it fulfilled.

Notes

1 Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the Fifteenth International Conference of the British Association for Romantic Studies, hosted by the University of York, and the conference on Late Romanticism: Past and Present, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. I express my gratitude to the organizers and audiences of those conferences.

2 The quotation is the last line of the voiceover to a short film produced by the Competitive Enterprise Institute in 2006, accessible at: https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2016/11/18/donald-trump-myron-ebell-cei-climate-change/.

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For a catalogue of the supposed benefits of global heating, see Matt Ridley, "Why Climate Change Is Good for the World," *The Spectator*, October 19, 2013, www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-climate-change-is-good-for-the-world.

3 Joshua Clover, "The Rise and Fall of Biopolitics: A Response to Bruno Latour," March 29, 2020, *In the Moment*, https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/29/the-rise-and-fall-of-biopolitics-a-response-to-bruno-latour/.

4 A transcript of Hansen's testimony is available at: https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/june_23_1988_senate_hearing_1.pdf; the technical summary of the 3,000-page, 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report is available at: www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_TechnicalSummary.pdf. For a recent instance of climate denialism, published after the release of the latest IPCC report, see Melanie Phillips, "Sri Lanka shows the danger of green dogma," *The Times*, July 11, 2022, www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sri-lanka-shows-the-danger-of-green-dogma-sf69m752q.

5 Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 211, 216. Compare also the more recent discussions of Shelley that have engaged his conceptions of the relation between humanity and the world, the climate, sustainability, and comparable concerns: Adam R. Rosenthal, "Shelley and the Limits of Sustainability," in Ben R. Robertson, ed. *Romantic Sustainability: Endurance and the Natural World, 1780–1830* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 233–244; Chris Washington, *Romantic Revelations: Visions of Post-Apocalyptic Life and Hope in the Anthropocene* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), especially 28–65; David Collings, *Disastrous Subjectivities: Romanticism, Modernity, and the Real* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 139–69 and 171–180 (on Romanticism and climate change generally); and Michael Verderame, "'We Are As Clouds': Climate and Social Transformation in Shelley," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 28 (2021), 271–290.

6 In the background here is Theodor W. Adorno's early conception of the idea of natural-history. See "The Idea of Natural-History," trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, in *Things beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 252–269 and, for commentary, see for instance Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 15–31.

7 Collings, *Disastrous Subjectivities*, 176 (the quotation is from "Mont Blanc" l. 92).

8 Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 volumes (London: Edward Moxon, 1858), II, 46.

9 An instance of the former is Lisa Vargo's "The Rewilding of Dorothy Wordsworth," *The Wordsworth Circle* 52 (2021), 358–367; of the latter, George Monbiot, "Obstinate Questionings," www.monbiot.com/2013/09/02/obstinate-questionings/, first published in *The Guardian*, September 3, 2013. I return briefly to Monbiot, a major popular theorist of and advocate for rewilding, later in the chapter.

10 Verderame, "Climate and Social Transformation in Shelley," 275.

11 Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, 218.

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12 Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, in Bruce Kuklick, ed. *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1–45, 3. Though there is evidence that Shelley read *The Rights of Man* (see "Shelley's Reading," in Frederick L. Jones, ed. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), I: 481), there is no positive evidence he read *Common Sense*; hence what I am discussing above is (as I say) a parallel, rather than a source for Shelley in Paine.

13 Paine, *Common Sense*, 3.

14 "The farm-bred lion is as fully tamed as the horse long since subjected to birth control." Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1999), 116.

15 Monbiot, "Obstinate Questionings" (from which the ensuing quotations here are also drawn). Monbiot transfers many of these arguments to his book, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea, and Human Life* (London: Penguin, 2014), 153–166, though he excises the critique of Wordsworth in the process.

16 Monbiot, "Population Panic Lets Rich People Off the Hook for the Climate Crisis They Are Fuelling," *The Guardian*, August 26, 2020, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/26/panic-overpopulation-climate-crisis-consumption-environment. The "bogeyman of overpopulation" is from Robert Fletcher and others, "Barbarian Hordes: The Overpopulation Scapegoat in International Development Discourse," *Third World Quarterly* 35 (2014), 1195–1215, 1196.

17 Irma Allen, "The Trouble with Rewilding," *Undisciplined Environments*, December 14, 2016, https://undisciplinedenvironments.org/2016/12/14/the-trouble-with-rewilding/. Compare Isabella Tree's account of the reasons she and her husband decided to rewild their Knepp Estate in West Sussex: "Small farmers, especially those on marginal land like ours, were increasingly finding it impossible to compete with the new, big industrialized farms," *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm* (London: Picador, 2018), 32–39 (the quotation is on 33). For a discussion of the rather more complex class politics implicit in the Knepp project itself, see Alex Lee, "Making Rewilding Part of a Socialist Future," *Socialist Resistance*, November 17, 2020, https://socialistresistance.org/making-rewilding-part-of-a-socialist-future/21186.

18 Washington, *Romantic Revelations*, 61, 62.

19 For illuminating commentary on Adorno's conception of reconciliation with nature, a motif central to his thinking, see Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 55–57, 90.

20 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 116. Subsequent quotations from Adorno in this paragraph all appear on the same page.

21 Monbiot, "Obstinate Questionings."

22 Compare Verderame's characterization of the "decisive shift away from the essentially Whiggish narrative of climatic progress in the major work of Shelley's early period, *Queen Mab*" toward an increasingly "negative" portrayal of the relationship between humanity and nature, 274, 275.

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23 Compare here Ashton Nichols's conception of "urbanature" developed in his *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

24 William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, eds. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 75, Book I, ll. 962–965. For a searching account of this passage, see James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 128–130.

25 See Joseph Severn, letter to William E. Gladstone, November 19, 1844, in *Joseph Severn: Letters and Memoirs*, ed. Grant F. Scott (London: Routledge, 2005), 425 and n. 6, for details of Severn's work on the painting. A copy of the picture hangs in the Keats-Shelley Memorial House in Rome, where it is titled *Shelley in the Baths of Caracalla* (the title by which, Scott remarks, it is now more commonly known; the original is in the possession of James Harry Scarlett, 9th Baron Abinger).

26 See Mary Shelley's comments in a letter to Marianne Hunt, quoted by Scott, *Joseph Severn*, 425, n. 6.

27 Oil on canvas, Tate Britain. I was first alerted to this painting by Vargo, 358–359.

28 *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. Gary Kelly (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002), 145–172, 146, ll. 1, 17–18.

29 Hemans, *Selected Poems*, ll. 39–40.

30 For Fawkes's translation, see Robert Anderson, ed. *The Works of the British Poets, with Prefaces*, 14 volumes (London: printed for John and Arthur Arch, 1792–1807), 109, Book XIII (1795), ll. 33–34. Compare Jacques Derrida's tracing of the paradigmatically "wild" tulip of Kant's third *Critique* to a textual source: see *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 85.

31 On this distinction in Shelley's work, see Ross Wilson, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), especially 1–20 and 46–65, but compare also Washington, *Romantic Revelations*, 199, n.8.

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