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Shelley's Spiritual Atheism

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– If the Abyss
Could vomit forth its secrets: – but a voice
Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless.
(*Prometheus Unbound*. [2.4.114-16])¹

In England Shelley was derided as an infidel and an atheist for much of the nineteenth century, both during his lifetime and after it; in the twentieth century, prejudice against him lingered, especially among high Anglican, modernist critics, most famously T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. A few of the epithets levelled at Shelley were 'blasphemous,' 'impious,' 'immoral,' 'perverted,' 'degraded,' 'unteachable,' 'Atheist,' 'wicked,' 'raving,' 'depraved,' and 'mad.'² The English were openly hostile to atheism, and Diderot's visit to England concluded with the observation that 'an atheist and scoundrel are almost synonymous terms for them'.³ In response to this hostile climate, but with a great deal of self-irony and drama, Shelley accepted and fostered the public's Satanic image of him. In 1816 he famously signed the guest book in Chamonix in Greek letters spelling the words, 'Democrat, Philanthropist and Atheist,' and under the destination column wrote 'l'Enfer' – Hell. Shelley signed three registers at other places with similarly defiant gestures that embraced his reputation as an infidel with a mixture of irony and enthusiasm.⁴ Even Byron was induced to cross out one such entry in an attempt to protect Shelley, although, ironically, the Byronic hero's own symbolic stance as an infidel owes much to Shelleyan influence.⁵ Despite Byron's effort to destroy the evidence, the story of Shelley's comments in the registry became a major part of the newspaper attacks on him in 1818 and the news was greeted with 'astounding fury' (Holmes, 342).

For most of his life, Shelley was renowned in England for the self-declared atheism which he refused to recant when he was expelled from Oxford University for publishing the co-authored tract 'The Necessity of Atheism' in 1811. Declared atheism brought him expulsion, a broken engagement to his cousin, estrangement from his family, social infamy, derision of his literary accomplishments, and the loss of custody of his children, but he embraced the role and persona of the infidel consistently and willingly throughout his life. Although some critics reject the notion that Shelley was ever an atheist,⁶ in the early decades of the nineteenth century, in England all the various manifestations of belief and non-belief in Shelley qualified as 'atheism,' even those that expressed unorthodox and anti-doctrinal conceptions about the immortality of mind or of 'a pervading spirit co-eternal with the universe'.⁷ Deism, which Shelley rejected in 1811, was also publicly derided and disparaged during this period. One reason he eschews deism is his consistent rejection of this notion of a personified creator of the universe, a notion inconsistent with his scientific and philosophical reading. But as in deism, Shelley's specific opposition to religion, and in particular Christianity, is interwoven with and even based on a spiritual optimism that depends on the eventual eradication of institutional and anti-intellectual

forms of belief. We witness this project in early poems such as *Queen Mab* and *The Revolt of Islam* and in later ones, especially in *Prometheus Unbound*, a poetic attempt to redeem the sacred through atheistical dismantlings of godhead.

There have emerged two extremes in the discussion of Shelley's metaphysical belief or non-belief. As Karen Weisman shrewdly observes, 'Shelley's self-ironic gestures have sometimes been read as extreme assertions of belief, . . . , he has been taken both as doctrinaire Platonist, firmly committed to the tenets of a dualistic universe, and as radical atheist, unswerving in his devotion to a humanism entirely stripped bare of transcendental longings'.⁸ There is no doubt that Shelley was a self-proclaimed atheist, that to a large extent he gloried in his persona as infidel, and that his name was a byword for impiety both during and after his lifetime. Nonetheless, he was not an atheist in the same sense in which the word is frequently understood since the twentieth century when philosophers increasingly made distinctions between atheism and agnosticism.⁹ Atheism meant and still does mean a belief that there is no God. It comes from the Greek roots *a*, meaning 'without', and *theos* – 'god'. According to this definition, Shelley was always an atheist. Some atheist critics, however, also make the mistake of assuming that the word 'atheism' is understood and used now as it was in the early 1800s and they project on to Shelley an unwavering materialism which was not his.¹⁰ What we actually find in Shelley is an evolution in his atheism from an early interest in magic and the occult, followed by increasing materialism (inspired by Lucretius and d'Holbach among others) in his Eton and Oxford days,¹¹ succeeded by a growing awareness of non-physical but still not theistic understandings of 'spirit'. The best treatment of Shelley's place in a tradition of '“visionary” infidelism' is Martin Priestman's in *Romantic Atheism*, a discussion that emphasizes Shelley's distinctly esoteric and idealistic brand of atheism. Ultimately, Shelley's atheism is quite ethereal¹² and it moves toward a conception of the immortality of mind (Barnard, 206 - 20).

There has been an ongoing debate about whether Shelley was or was not an 'actual atheist,' but the problem, as is usually the case in such controversies, is one of semantics revolving around changing expectations for the word 'atheist'. The word God too has substantially changed in its range of meanings since 1813 when Shelley famously asserted, 'there is no God' (*Queen Mab*. 7.13). Indeed Shelley is one of those who changed the potential meanings of the word God, by popularizing the scope of spiritual possibilities for future generations of readers and religious sceptics: by bringing sceptical philosophy into popular consciousness and the new age. This intellectually conscious and spiritual middle ground between religiosity and materialism, like his vegetarianism,¹⁴ is perhaps one of Shelley's biggest 'unacknowledged' legacies to the modern world. As James Rieger was among the first to note, Shelley 'did lard his first published works with the bourgeois occultisms of eighteenth-century Freemasonry, Zoroastrian and Manichean dualism,' monistic heresies and gnostic texts.¹⁵ He also incorporated elements of deism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Greek religion in a quest for the unknowable. And it was not until Barbara Gelpi's book *Shelley's Goddess* that overt recognition and concerted attention were given to the extraordinary fact that divinity is imagined far more often as feminine than masculine in Shelley when indeed it is given a human metaphorical form at all.¹⁶ Furthermore, a lot of attention has been paid to Shelley's interest in and dedication to Jesus' teachings as recorded in the New Testament gospels.¹⁷ None of these tendencies in Shelley's poetry strikes contemporary readers as particularly atheistical, and yet it is Shelley's very atheism that allows him to appropriate and re-imagine so many

religious symbols in his paradoxical quest for knowledge of the unknowable. In the presence of not just atheism but of anti-theism, these images are metaphors, or at the most, searchings, rather than religion or ideology. For Shelley, all language is metaphorical. Because atheism, in its current dominant expressions, especially in Marxist or Freudian readings, remains wedded to a materialist framework of the universe, Shelley's spiritual atheism is sometimes mistaken as a conversion to a doctrine or belief system, whether pantheistic, Manichean, Platonic, or Christian.¹⁸ Nonetheless, even at his most atheistical, from 1811 to 1816, Shelley remains committed to the spiritual as he struggles permanently to wrench it from the stronghold of religion.

In the *Necessity of Atheism* which had Shelley and Hogg expelled from Oxford University, his position resembles nothing more closely than contemporary agnosticism, since he does little more than assert 'there is no proof of the existence of a Deity'¹⁹ and that therefore he is unable to believe in one. Hence Neville Rogers suggests that Shelley is really more of an agnostic than an atheist: 'an attitude for which there was no name in 1810 – not till 1870 did T.H. Huxley coin the word 'agnostic'.'²⁰ This point is crucial: Shelley was indeed an atheist, however, because the word atheism included agnosticism, and the differentiation between the two kinds of non-belief has only evolved and been consolidated relatively recently.²¹ He names himself 'Thro' deficiency of proof, AN ATHEIST,' but requests any available proofs of the existence of a god be put before him. I agree with Ellsworth Barnard that this request is genuine, an opinion supported by the detailed, conflicted, and sometimes deistical argument outlined in his correspondence with Hogg leading up to the anonymous publication of their essay, 'The Necessity of Atheism,' as well as by the fact that Shelley directed his atheistical correspondence specifically to unsuspecting clergymen and he always requested responses. Although this activity was partly done in mockery, there was a serious searching too, as is evidenced by Shelley's voracious reading of metaphysics at the time and his abandonment of deism. For Shelley's England, such a haughty request for proof and his vehement denial of faith were enough to brand Shelley as an infidel. His intense dislike of Christianity was unequivocal enough that his 'Spirit of Goodness' which values 'goodness of heart and purity of life'²² was irrelevant information to the determinedly deaf ears of his compatriot public.

Timothy Morton demonstrates that even after 1816, sometimes noted as a year of conversion because of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,' written in praise of the 'unseen Power', Shelley thought of himself as an atheist with, as he said in a letter to Mr. Waller 'an entire unbelief in religion of any sort'.²³ However, the nature of his atheism does not remain static or rigid despite continuity of opinion between the early and the late Shelley on this issue. For instance, in 'The Necessity of Atheism', Shelley does not go so far as to deny a spiritual dimension to reality, only to suggest that non-belief in a deity is the only empirical and reasonable conclusion given the total lack of proof that there is or ever was such a being. 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,' with its praise of something clearly 'divine' – a word which Shelley liked and used a lot – overtly sounds like a prayer and yet there is nothing doctrinal about its content. Christopher R. Miller has written about how Shelley mediates between 'metaphysical and physical inflections of the word', 'heaven,' which is also one of his 'favourite words'.²⁴ Shelley replaces those angry sky gods with a 'Heaven' much more mysterious, much less narrowly human, and not just an unknowable, but ultimately an unnameable one too:

The awful shadow of some unseen Power

Floats though unseen amongst us, – visiting
 This various world with as inconstant wing
 As summer winds that creep from flower to flower. –
 It visits with inconstant glance
 Each human heart and countenance;
 Like hues and harmonies of evening, –
 Like clouds in starlight widely spread, –
 Like memory of music fled, –
 Like aught that for its grace may be
 Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery. (1.1-12)

Neither deistic, pantheistic, Spinozan or scientific, the 'unseen Power' visits the natural world of the human body (heart and face), starlight, and flowers only intermittently, almost haphazardly, in a poem which is a hymn to its influence. Shelley did not here capitulate his materialism to a vague and woolly new religion. His expression of devotion and his prayer to this 'SPIRIT' are rather facets of his ongoing religious scepticism. Shelley, consistently and obsessively preoccupied by visions of spirits, ghosts, magic and alchemy in all his writing, and yet intellectually unable to pin down the meaning of these forms of thought, always sought, even in his radical Oxford days, the 'soul of the universe, the intelligent and necessarily beneficent, actuating principle. This is impossible not to believe in' (*Letters*, 1.35). That this sentence was written at the same time as 'The Necessity of Atheism' was being prepared for publication argues that Shelley's sense of a First Cause or actuating intelligent principle was not, as many critics suggest, a function of incoherence but was rather a feature of his atheism, an atheism which denied Christianity, religion, doctrine, and anthropomorphic gods generally, but which accepted a 'spirit' or 'soul of the universe'. The crucial point to consider is that because this spirit was in no way a god and Shelley could never convince himself that it had a human form, he considered himself, according to the then accepted designation of the term, an atheist.

Moreover, Shelley was unswervingly committed to not pinning down the meaning of such a belief. Materialist atheists may think this differentiation between spirituality and religion ludicrous, but it was not absurd to Shelley. For Shelley there was all the difference in the world between acknowledging unseen powers and espousing religious doctrine. In fact, the two means of perceiving ultimate reality, the first a kind of intellectual freedom and the second a tyrannical set of laws, could not have been more opposite in his mind. As has been well documented, the associations of atheism with revolutionary and republican aspirations were part of the fuel for his advocacy of the adversary, the Promethean or Satanic figure of human rebellion against tyrannical and absolutist political and religious tyranny (Schock, 113-14).

His atheism notwithstanding, Shelley did believe in something which might now but could not then be called God, a belief which was always sceptically expressed (and usually negatively defined), unknowable, ineffable and 'beyond and above consciousness' (Reiman, 516). Paradoxical though it may seem, 'his radical scepticism, by which he is unable simply to affirm the simple existence of the entity he praises, still does not seek to undermine faith in its being' (Weisman, 48). Hence we find the shifting rhetoric that refers to the spirit in which he believes but which he cannot grasp or understand: 'Power,' 'Beauty,' 'Love,' 'Nature,' 'soul,' 'Spirit' and the thousands of Protean metaphors and similes which through their mutability refuse to embody the conception of 'the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends'

(Reiman, 474). Such is Shelley's abhorrence of the reification of dead metaphors that enshrine tyrannies of belief. Consequently, he favours simile over metaphor, because of the dangers of literalism, and he cannot but stop short of finding a name. In 1811, he wrote, 'the word 'God,' a vague word, has been, and will continue to be, the source of numberless errors, until it is erased from the nomenclature of philosophy' (*Letters* 1.35). Shelley's scepticism about the reach and power of language is intensive: 'How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being' (Reiman, 475). In this essay 'On Life,' he asserts his Socratic commitment to an awareness of our huge ignorance and proceeds to write something undeniably mystical: that there is no real separation between humans, that we are like the cooperating thoughts of one mind, that he himself is a portion of the one mind, and that 'we are on the verge where words abandon us and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of – how little we know' (Reiman, 478). Some have concluded that the 'One Mind' sounds a lot like God, but it did not to Shelley or to his contemporaries. This fact, not mental confusion, is what explains the discrepancy between Shelley's lifelong self-avowal as an atheist and his enthusiasm for the One. Shelley's concept of the One is altogether more numinous and less comprehensible than a god as conceived in the nineteenth century. The one mind is not so much a creator of the universe as the invisible mental undercurrent of the phenomenological world. After all, Plotnitsky's 'quantum Shelley' had read and was influenced by the work of Royal Society member Thomas Young whose work, although hostilely discredited in his day, opened the debate about light waves and whom legendary quantum physicist Richard Feynman credits with the possibility of Planck's quantum theory and Einstein's photon theory.²⁵ From the science of wave theory then, Shelley derived something of his idea of the One or One Mind and a seemingly mystical assertion that love is 'the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything which exists' (Reiman, 473).

The evolution of Shelley's atheism never precludes the possibility of a spiritualism vindicated by honest reason and scientific inquiry – it simply recasts it. The development of the Promethean archetype is a good gauge of the shifting landscape of Shelley's atheism. Shelley's two early and most explicitly atheistical poems, *Laon and Cythna* and *Queen Mab* unequivocally cast the atheist as a Promethean, a political revolutionary whose honesty of perception is opposed by tyrants and bigots. There is a simple almost Manichean contrast between the good atheist and the evil government officials which slaughter her (in *Laon and Cythna*) or him (in *Queen Mab*). These early expressions of Shelley's atheism are polarizing, doctrinaire and unsubtle, and hence they are the texts most often cited by modern critics and scholars who are atheists seeking a lineage in British thought (Berman, Sloan).

Shelley's sufferings at the hands of a religiously intolerant society are symbolically re-enacted in *Queen Mab*, in exaggerated and symbolic form, at the same time as the parameters of his 1814 atheism are elucidated:

Spirit

'I was an infant when my mother went
To see an atheist burned. She took me there:
The dark-robed priests were met around the pile;
The multitude was gazing silently;
And as the culprit passed with dauntless mien,,
Tempered disdain in his unaltered eye,

Mixed with a quiet smile, shone calmly forth:
 The thirsty fire crept round his manly limbs;
 His resolute eyes were scorched to blindness soon;
 His death-pang rent my heart! the insensate mob
 Uttered a cry of triumph, and I wept.
 'Weep not, child!' cried my mother,
 'for that man

Has said, There is no God.' (7.1-13)

The biographical significance of the long disquisition by Ahasuerus on the hypocrisy of God's 'slaves' is poignant given the repercussions on Shelley of choosing freedom over bondage to Christianity, which he considered an 'upstart and sanguinary superstition': 'and that they now / Babble of love and mercy, while their deeds / Are marked with all the narrowness and Crime / That Freedom's young arm dare not yet chastise' (241-44). In an article on 'Shelley's Atheism' by Gary Sloan, as in Berman's chapter on 'Shelley's Deicide', the additional but crucial information in Shelley's note to the reiteration of this line, 'There is no God,' is unmentioned: 'This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit coeternal with the universe remains unshaken' ('Notes on Queen Mab.' (7.13-812). We must emphatically conclude, on the basis of this comment and of others like it, that a belief in 'a pervading Spirit coeternal with the universe' was not a belief in a god, despite what critics such as Ellsworth Barnard (18) and Andrew Welburn have argued. It is manifestly clear that Shelley adhered to both atheism and spiritual belief simultaneously and, in his mind, as compatible ideas.

Note that the mother in this passage, an unthinking automaton, justifies the cruelty enacted on the atheist in the rote language she has heard conventionally spoken. Soon after this, Queen Mab, a supernatural sprite, arrives with the truth:

Fairy

'There is no God!

Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed:
 Let heaven and earth, let man's revolving race,
 His ceaseless generations tell their tale;
 Let every part depending on the chain
 That links it to the whole, point to the hand
 That grasps its term! Let every seed that falls
 In silent eloquence unfold its store
 Of argument; infinity within,
 Infinity without, belie creation;
 The inexterminable spirit it contains
 Is nature's only God; but human pride
 Is skilful to invent most serious names
 To hide its ignorance. (7.13-26)

At this early and most vocally atheistic stage in Shelley's career, Queen Mab presents atheism as entirely compatible with an 'inexterminable spirit' which is not a creator of the universe, but nature's underlying power or essence. The problem is specifically with deistical corruptions of this spirit, and anthropomorphic projections on to it, through the egotism of human pride:

The name of God
 Has fenced about all crime with holiness,
 Himself the creature of His worshippers,
 Whose names and attributes and passions change,
 Seeva, Buddh, Foh, Jehovah, God, or Lord,
 Even with the human dupes who build His shrines,
 Still serving o'er the war-polluted world
 For desolation's watchword; . . . (7.26-33)

Atheism, then, is a 'necessity' for Shelley because of motivations deriving from both reason and morality. On the one hand, it is 'necessary' to recognize and value the discoveries of science. But more importantly, it is necessary to detach from this name associated with historical intolerance and cruelty, the name of God. Nor does Shelley conceive of the theistical debate as impotently theoretical, but rather as of crucial importance for the advancement of human rights. In *Queen Mab* he reveals the idealistic motivations behind his atheism, by denying the existence of 'God' in a theistical sense and by blaming his very name for the woes of humanity:

. . . or, last and worst,
 Earth groans beneath religion's iron age,
 And priests dare babble of a God of peace,
 Even whilst their hands are red with guiltless blood,
 Murdering the while, uprooting every germ
 Of truth, exterminating, spoiling all,
 Making the earth a slaughter-house! (7.41-48)

Although it has become commonplace to blame religions for wars and cruelty, Shelley was one of the earliest and most influential English writers to do so.²⁶ Shelley's violent and bloody images in *Queen Mab* are later picked up in his imagery of Christ hanging tortured by this same tyrannical Jupiterean God on a cross in *Prometheus Unbound*.

The innocent and questioning Spirit of *Queen Mab* conjures Ahasuerus with, 'Is there a God?' Ahasuerus, like Demogorgon in *Prometheus Unbound*, affirms the reality of the Judeo-Christian God, describing him as a bloodthirsty tyrant who sends and exploits Jesus by perverting his loving message to destructive and cruel ends.²⁷ Ahasuerus claims superiority to this god in whom he believes and he defies him in Promethean language which echoes Milton's Satan:

Therefore I rose, and dauntlessly began
 My lonely and unending pilgrimage,
 Resolved to wage unweariable war
 With my almighty Tyrant, and to hurl
 Defiance at his impotence to harm
 Beyond the curse I bore. (7.196-201)

The parallels between the sufferings of Ahasuerus and Prometheus are numerous. Both are rhetorically defiant and choose suffering over obedience to God. They are punished for their defiance with endless torments. The major difference between them is that Prometheus actually follows the teachings of Christ, ultimately forgiving his enemy instead of fighting him.⁰ Also, most crucially, Prometheus becomes converted to atheism as part of his deliverance, whereas Ahasuerus continues to believe in the god who oppresses him. Fundamentally, Prometheus manages to be released from his suffering through the adoption of atheism. Whereas Ahasuerus

opposes the deity, Prometheus dissolves him. Once the unreality of Jupiter, a thin disguise for the Judeo-Christian God, is recognized, his phantasm merely a projection of Prometheus' own mind, reciting Prometheus' own words back to him, Prometheus is finally freed. Atheism, then, is the efficient cause of Prometheus unbinding, a moment symbolic of the spiritual liberation of humanity.

By comparing the atheism expressed through the Promethean figure in *Queen Mab* and Prometheus in *Prometheus Unbound*, we can see the gradations and variations in Shelley's shifting landscape of atheism as well as its continuities. In *Prometheus Unbound*, rather than separating the 'spirit co-eternal with the universe' from the poem in notes, as he did in *Queen Mab*, he integrates spiritualism with atheism to create a spiritual atheism which expresses most fittingly the sophistication and subtlety of Shelley's beliefs, as well as his optimism about the spiritual rejuvenation of humanity. Timothy Webb has shown connections between Shelley's atheistical thought and *Prometheus Unbound* through an unprinted prose passage which Webb entitles *Defence of Atheism* on the same manuscript pages as a draft of *Prometheus Unbound* 2.3.28-42, and also through a reference to the *Quarterly Review*'s attacks on Shelley's atheism at the top of manuscript page with Asia's speech about the avalanche. By inverting the symbolism of the avalanche in the *Quarterly Review* attack from God's providence to, in *Prometheus Unbound*, free (and presumably atheistical) thought, Asia's speech is read by Webb as a response to the oppressiveness of Christianity. Contrary to traditional dichotomizing between early atheistical and later more Christian works, *Prometheus Unbound* reinforces and extends Shelley's earlier atheistically spiritual contentions.

A possible response to Asia's question 'Whom calledst thou God?' is given in Demogorgon's discussion of God, in which Shelley makes the point that what the world calls God (the patriarchal, punitive and tyrannical Jehovah) is not God at all. In Act 2 Demogorgon tells Asia that God made 'the living world' and 'all that it contains—thought, passion, reason, will, / Imagination,' but that evil was made by this phantasm of a God which Shelley calls Jupiter, but in which we can recognize the Judeo-Christian conception of God that Shelley despised. Still, Demogorgon refuses to name Jupiter, despite Asia's apparent desire to reinstitute the curse uttered by Prometheus at the beginning of his torments, when she pleads 'Utter his name: a world pining in pain / Asks but his name: curses shall drag him down' (2.4.29-30). Asia unwittingly and wrongheadedly desires vengeance on this false god and she maintains the false dichotomy of God and subject in the question: 'Who is the master of the slave?' Demogorgon determinedly denies her and the world the curses she requests. She repeats her question and then says, 'I feel, I know it: who?' (2.4.31). She says she knows the answer, but she needs, for some reason, to hear Demogorgon say it. She requires a name. Asia then notes that Jupiter trembled like a slave when Prometheus cursed him and she uses a strong imperative to urge Demogorgon to say that Jupiter is really the slave and, implicitly, one might think, someone or something greater than Jupiter is his master: 'Declare / Who is his master? Is he too a slave?' (2.4.108-9). Demogorgon's answer to this reframing of Asia's first wording of her master/slave question is an indictment of evil: 'All spirits are enslaved who serve things evil: / Thou knowest if Jupiter be such or no' (2.4.110-11). But Asia is not satisfied and wants to know that if the God people worship and bow down to is not God, whom Jupiter means by this word, 'God'. She asks 'Whom calledst thou God?' Demogorgon's frustrating non-answer, 'I spoke but as ye speak, — / For Jove is the supreme of living things,' takes us to the verge of where words abandon us and

we are confronted by how little we know. Here on the verge of the 'void circumference,' (*Adonais* 47.420) 'the intense inane,' (3.4.204) the 'void abysm,' (2.3.72), the 'dark abyss of how little we know' (Reiman, 474), Asia is offered only the knowledge of her own ignorance of ultimate reality. The word 'God,' then, is understood as a metaphor by which some people mean their own alienating ego in the form of an avenging Jehovah and by which others mean the power underlying creation, and it is a metaphor by which Demogorgon clearly means something above and beyond religion, something ineffable, undefinable, imageless: 'a voice / is wanting, the deep truth is imageless' (2.4.115-16). It is a startlingly mystical assertion for an atheist to make, but it in no way repudiates the atheism; rather it is an attempt to translate Shelley's sense of an eternal and ineffable source or truth into language his reader will comprehend, but language which also cannot be enshrined in a dead metaphor, at the same time as it reinforces and explains his atheism.

In conclusion, then, the debate over whether or not Shelley was an 'actual' atheist or a permanent atheist, has been misleading. Shelley was aware of the possibilities inherent in spirit, immortality and divine power consistently throughout his career. In a Romantic context, these beliefs and searchings might justly be considered features of his consistent atheism rather than as repudiations of it. Far from retrieving or recuperating a deity or theism in his late works, Shelley reconfirms atheism as a necessary means of opening to human progress and to a scientifically viable sort of spiritual awareness. The debate which traditionally dichotomized atheism and spirituality in Shelley is inadequate to explain the interplay of these two strong commitments. What appeared to be paradox or inconsistency reveals itself as surprisingly consistent, although Shelley's spiritual atheism did evolve and change shape and emphasis. In *Queen Mab* the statements of atheism and spirituality are separated into two texts. In *Prometheus Unbound* the two work together seamlessly and in mutual support. Words themselves, as Shelley self-consciously realized, are a large part of the hermeneutical problem, with the words 'God' and 'atheism' both carrying big freights of cultural baggage and sometimes treated narrowly by adherents, leading the way in confounding matters. Ever the poet, Shelley transfuses the spiritual into imagery and proposes no determinate answers to the major metaphysical questions, since awareness can only become knowledge at death, not before:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity.
Until Death tramples it to fragments. – Die,
If thou would be with that which thou dost seek!
Follow where all is fled! Rome's azure sky,
Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak
The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak.
(*Adonais*. 462-68)

Endnotes

2. Sloan, Gary. 'Shelley's Atheism' in *American Atheist Magazine*. 41.4 (Autumn 2003): 7-9.
3. Robertson, J.M. *A History of Freethought*. 4th edn (London, 1936) 780.
4. Holmes, Richard. *Shelley: The Pursuit*. (Penguin, 1987) 342.
5. Schock, Peter A. *Romantic Satanism: Myth and Historical Moment in Blake, Shelley, and Byron*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 8.
6. Barnard, Ellsworth. *Shelley's Religion*. (Russell, 1964) 18; Grabo, Carl. *A Newton Among Poets*. (Chapel Hill, 1930) 18. Edward Trelawny writes, 'The principal fault I have to find with the Shelleyan writers, being Christians themselves, seem to think that a man of genius cannot be an Atheist, and so they strain their faculties to disprove what Shelley asserted from the earliest stage of his career to the last day of his life'. *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* (London, 1887) 62.
7. Shelley, P.B. 'Notes On Queen Mab' in *Shelley: Poetical Works*. (800-38), London: Oxford UP, 1967. (7.13:-) 812.
8. Weisman, Karen. 'The Lyricist', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*. Ed. Timothy Morton. (Cambridge, 2006) 45-64, 50.
9. Bertrand Russell's essay, 'Am I An Atheist Or An Agnostic: A Plea for Tolerance in the Face of New Dogmas,' first given as a speech in 1947, in *Collected Papers: Last Philosophical Testament, 1947-1968*, Vol. 11, Eds. John Slater and Peter Köllner (Routledge, 1997). Russell draws a thin line between forms of non-belief and says he does not know on which side of this line he belongs.
10. Berman, David. *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*. (London: Croom Helm) 1988; Sloan, Gary. 'Shelley's Atheism' in *American Atheist Magazine*. 41.4 (Autumn 2003): 3-7. Ruston, Sharon. *Shelley and Vitality*. New York: Palgrave, 2005.
11. See Kenneth Neill Cameron's *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical*. (New York: Collier 1950) for a detailed description of the opinions and activities of this phase in Shelley's career.
12. Priestman, Martin. *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and freethought, 1780-1830*. (Cambridge, 1999) 221.

14. Timothy Morton writes 'it is ironic that one of the often overlooked aspects of Shelley's life [vegetarianism] may prove among his most lasting legacies' (41) 'Receptions' 35-41 *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*. Ed. Timothy Morton (Cambridge, 2006).
15. Rieger, James. *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. (New York: George Brazillier, 1967) 14.
16. Gelpi Barbara. *Shelley's Goddess*. (Oxford, 1992). Gelpi writes, 'Shelley's goddess manifests constantly in his poetry' (42).
17. Welburn, Andrew. 'The Christian Spirit' in *Power and Self-Consciousness in Shelley's Poetry*. (St. Martin's, 1986) 186-97. Barnard, Ellsworth. *Shelley's Religion*. New York: Russell, 1964). David Lee Clark. *Shelley's Prose: The Trumpet of a Prophecy*. (Albuquerque, 1954) 11-16.
18. Ross Woodman interprets Shelley as Orphic and occultist in *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto, 1964). James Rieger draws attention to his Manicheanism and Ahrimanic traits in *The Mutiny Within*. James A. Notopoulos and Earl Wasserman focus on his Platonism in *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind*. (Duke, 1949) and *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. (Johns Hopkins, 1971) respectively. Andrew Welburn identifies Shelley's poetry with Christian belief.
19. Shelley, P.B. 'The Necessity of Atheism' in *Shelley's Prose: The Trumpet of a Prophecy* (37-39), 39.
20. Rogers, Neville. Ed. *Complete Poetical Works of Shelley*. (Oxford, 1972) Vol. 1. 387.
21. Bertrand Russell was influential on the twentieth century's differentiation between two modes of religious non-belief.
22. Shelley, P.B. 'An Address to the Irish People' (39-59) in *Shelley's Prose*. 45.
23. Shelley, P.B. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. Frederick L. Jones. 2 Vols. (Oxford, 1964) 1.566.
24. Miller, Christopher R. 'Shelley's Uncertain Heaven' in *English Literary History*. 72. (2005): 577-603; 577.
25. Lussier, Mark. 'Wave Dynamics as Primary Ecology in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.' *Romanticism on the Net*. 16 (November 1999). Lussier demonstrates that Shelley read and was influenced by the pre-quantum thinking of Thomas Young (5). www.erudit.org/revue/ron/1999/v/n16/005885ar.html.
26. David Hume and Voltaire are two others.

27. Joseph C. McLelland argues the ironies of the atheism represented here, an atheism of a particularly Promethean kind, defined in opposition to a god it seems to accept in *Prometheus Rebound: The Irony of Atheism*. (Waterloo, 1988).

28. Webb, Timothy. ‘‘The Avalanche of Ages’: Shelley’s Defence of Atheism and *Prometheus Unbound*.’ in *The Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*. No. 35. York: University of York, 1984: 1- Webb advances the view that Shelley is conscious of the irony of his own turning of the other cheek to his ostensibly Christian attackers.

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