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How Poetry Knows

Michael O'Neill writes that poetry is "a mode of knowing when the object of knowledge is literature itself" ("Poetry as Literary Criticism;" 1999, 123). This phrase, typically for O'Neill's critical writing, is best glossed by some lines of poetry:

> For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper, flows on south
> From ranches of isolation and busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth.

("In Memory of W. B. Yeats"; Auden 248)

For Auden, poetry makes its own place. It is a place isolated from the world of meddling businessmen but one that is accessible to people, from their isolated ranches to their "raw towns," towns in which "we," readers and writers, dwell. Poetry is a vital way in which knowing is experienced and expressed, and poetry walks a shadowy line between being the record of an event and the event itself. If poetry is unable to make a thing happen, it is how things happen and the way in which they do. But Auden's oblique stanza will not allow untried success. O'Neill's phrase shares Auden's stanza's openness to interpretation and its guardedness. Knowing, that often lamented state in Romantic poetry, may not be nearly as blissful as ignorance. But poetry is rarely after beauty or truth alone. It wants to know something, through expression or experience. Sometimes it would build a world within the work that communicates, if obliquely, with our own. Sometimes it would meditate about our world. It is a way of forging meaning or finding it, and sometimes both. Poetry renders

language a sort of living organism, aware of its own workings and alert to the world. O'Neill's phrase, "a mode of knowing," requires poetry to ascend to its highest state, facing down its own potential failure via its risk-taking bravura. Knowing that "poetry cannot afford to fail, nor can it afford to avoid taking risks that might result in failure" (O'Neill, 1999, 133), O'Neill exposes the fault lines coursing through even the most outwardly celebratory and accomplished works. Poems must fight "for their life" (O'Neill, 1999, 126). They risk their deaths in order to live.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* models such an ethic. Dante's epic parades mingled fear and duty as his poetry must find a means to deal in and express the world beyond our own. This poetry is a mode of knowing that is half in love with the peril of collapse. From the start of *Inferno*, Dante betrays his terror at the scale of his undertaking:

> I do not know, I cannot rightly say,
> how first I came to be here—so full of sleep,
> that moment, abandoning the true way on.

(*Inferno* 1. ll. 10-12; Dante 3)

Though the lines are dappled with panic, Dante continues, pushing onwards as the poem comes to know itself as a poem in which the poet must perform as hero and as scribe, living through and recording the dangers through which he passes. Language is conscripted into an almost impossible task; human words must become as adequate as possible to take in and relate the phenomena to which Dante is exposed. Knowledge will be hard-won. Dante, repeatedly berated by his guides, must learn to overcome his shortcomings throughout *The Divine Comedy*. One of which is his reluctance to observe the world beyond his own. Virgil reminds Dante of his lowered gaze:

> The heavens wheel around and summon you,
> displaying to your eyes eternal charms.

Yet your gaze fixes merely on the ground.

For that, He strikes you down who sees all clear.

(*Purgatorio* 14. ll. 148-51; Dante 225).

In learning how to see correctly, Dante's epic is an education in becoming a poet, which in the *Comedy* includes being a hero and a prophet, as he learns to lean towards eternity instead of earth. The threat of God striking down the struggling artist adds piquancy to Dante's quest; failure will spell death and eternal punishment, not mere aesthetic weakness. The poet does not play for the usual stakes of celebrity, success, and acknowledgement. This poetry must be a mode of knowing beyond "literature itself" (O'Neill, 1999, 123): poetry must record or at least conjure the nature of the mystery of afterlife and God's plan. Failure would mean that all is lost.

Dante will not let us forget the difficulty he faces:

And so, imagining this Paradise,

the sacred epic has to make a leap,

as when we find the road ahead cut off.

Yet no one if they've gauged that weighty theme—

and seen what mortal shoulders bear the load—

would criticize such trembling backing-out.

(*Paradiso* 23. ll. 61-66; Dante 429-30)

Steeling itself, the poem knows it must leap into the transcendent unknown and be capable of "imagining this Paradise." The epic is now "sacred," almost more than the mortal poet can manage. Dante allows himself a moment of profound doubt, pleading with us in advance to understand "trembling backing-out" despite him seeking and finding the inner reserves of strength to continue even as he utters the lines. We feel the pressure to persevere as Dante makes his lines alert to a barely sustainable vision that almost collapses under its own weight.

For poetry to be a mode of knowing in *The Divine Comedy*, poetry must also know the value and the terror of the language, refreshing the meaning of the Gospel of St. John's opening: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1: 1). Words and God are hard to pry apart; poetry becomes an enactment and an expression of the divine.

Milton was Dante's English heir. In Dante, Milton found an ally, despite Dante being immersed in the Catholicism that Milton rejected. With Dante as a sponsor of sorts, Milton records the zeal and the burden of transforming poetry into a mode of knowing the most sacred truths. Struggle remains the necessary caveat of vision in a later century and a foreign land. O'Neill credits Milton, along with Aeschylus, Spenser, and Wordsworth, with offering Shelley a model of "the imaginative struggle in which he often engages" (O'Neill, 2019, 45). Part of that imaginative struggle so important to Shelley and others owed to the scale of aspiration in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's epic rings with ambition from its beginning as the poet plunges into his epic in the first person. The invocations studded throughout the poem allow Milton to express the drama of his own investment where these personal moments embed lyric into the epic carapace. Milton speaks with a mingled bravery and nervousness when he begs help from the Muse:

> Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song,
> That with no middle flight intends to soar
> Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues
> Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

(1. ll. 13-16; Milton 121).

Sink or soar: Milton's risk-taking will brook no mediocrity. If there is some swagger, there is an also a tensed understanding of what is at stake. This near-boast smacks of a warning to the reader and to the poet himself; this is work yet to be done, and what Milton must achieve has

no parallel, no true precursor, and no safety net. Even by book three, Milton is not soothed. In his second invocation, he asks of light, "May I express thee unblamed?" (III. l. 3; Milton 171) The question is no mere rhetorical strategy. Milton begins his invocation with brilliantly refreshed versions of theological riddles, reminding us again of God's inaccessibility and authorship of all things, where Milton's attempts to express them in poetry are shot through with danger. Like Dante, Milton chooses a hazardous path. Grieving his blindness, "Thus with the Year / Seasons return, but not to me returns / Day" (III. ll. 40-42; Milton 172), Milton makes us intimate with his loss before finding recompense in his poetic gift where like Homer, "I may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight" (III. ll. 54-55; Milton 172). Milton transforms visionary power into the payoff for his sightlessness. This bright spot of lyric within the epic finds for Milton a means of knowing differently than, knowing in a superior way to, sighted poets. By book seven, Milton could proclaim that he soars "Above the flight of Pegasean wing" (VII. l. 4; Milton 268) and ask his heaven-born Muse to return him to his "native element" (VII. l. 16; Milton 268), despite the surrounding dangers. Visionary poetry affords Milton a stay against the loneliness of living through the Restoration. Affectingly, Milton feels "yet not alone, while thou / Visit'st my slumbers nightly" (VII. ll. 28-29; Milton 269), where poetry allows Milton to experience what is not within the quotidian world, to express a vision far beyond the world in which he lives. Poetry is not an escape, but it is a balm to one who would transcend the "evil days" (VII. l. 25; Milton 269) that befall him. Milton's risk achieves its reward.

The Romantic response to Milton sees their poetry crystallize into awareness of their predecessor's subtlety and ambiguities (Newlyn *passim*). "Milton himself, to Collins or to Gray or even to Blake, offers the opposing aspects of a being so unified, self-sufficient and given to quietude *as to need no successors*, and yet also of a being so diverse, self-transcendent and fecund *as to compel generous imitation*" writes Harold Bloom (Bloom,

1975, 87), and such generosity licensed exploration for Milton's heirs. Just as Milton had read Dante but gone on to forge a unique though indebted path, so would the Romantics try to do "things unattempted" (*Paradise Lost*, I. l. 16; Milton 121) by even their great original. Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats, amongst many others, responded directly to Milton, seeking to place themselves and displace one another as the anointed heir of this visionary master. Phillis Wheatley would experiment with *Lycidas* in "Maecenas" (Loscocco 51); Keats tries to slip the Miltonic yoke in *The Fall of Hyperion*; Byron attempts to conscript Milton as a fellow anti-Lake poet in *Don Juan*. But what each of the Romantics take, more than a shared manner or gift for an allusive turn of phrase, is Milton's poetry as an ethical and visionary force. Poetry cannot simply simper at kings or turn its face from difficulty in favor of pretty words. Struggle and visionary power are bound together as the route for poetry to know itself, to become the mode of knowing that it can be when it finds its highest expression.

O'Neill's primary passion was for "[p]oetry that displays awareness of itself as poetry" (O'Neill, 1997, p. xiii). Knowledge and how it is won is at the heart of this idea. Poetry's mode of knowing includes "becoming" in a Schlegelian sense but it must also "be": "the longing for final artistic shape" (O'Neill, 1997, p. xvi) implicit in Romantic poetry cannot easily accept that poetry must be always in process in any bland fashion. Romantic poetry wants to be as well as aspire to become. The poetry often aims to enact this dual process where the drama of the poem comes from its attempt to discover, or to seize upon, the knowledge it wins or loses, line by line. This is not to say that Romantic poetry is formulaic, or that poetic knowledge is accretive or linear. Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (hereafter "Ode") deals in vision and revision. Its structure, for many tripartite (see Curran 78 and Duff 208), for others dual (Trilling 134), and for some, cumulative (Vendler, 1978, 86), allows the reader room to trace

and question the nature of Wordsworth's movement. The 'Ode' refuses unalloyed emotion in favor of shades of possibilities and interpretations as meanings shift, slide, and evaporate in the face of experience, both lived and poetic. Jared R. Curtis writes of how the "Ode" "conveys the semblance of reasoning in all its experiential variousness and richness and drama" (Curtis 138) but despite such "semblance of reasoning," which might suggest reasoning in order to discover or locate a particular position, as James Chandler notes, "the styles and forms attempted in what seem to be the poem's various false starts constitute not only the point of departure for a progress narrative but also its end point" (Chandler 150). The poem manages to provoke and contain all these interpretations by using poetic language to evade binaries, pointing to knowledge of a mystery that shimmers beyond the boundaries of reason alone. Poetry might be the closest we can come to knowing the mystery.

Wordsworth strips knowledge down, where "Fallings from us, vanishings; / Blank misgivings of a Creature" ("Ode," ll. 146-47; Wordsworth 301) create a vertiginous sense of what Shelley means when he writes of how, "We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down into the dark abyss of—how little we know" (Shelley 633). Wordsworth's haunted emphasis on those "Fallings from us, vanishings" ("Ode," l. 146; Wordsworth 301) unite his readers with the poet in our shared experience, where something intangible and spectral seems arrested at the moment of its vanishing. For all the "obstinate questionings" (144; Wordsworth 301) to which we are prone, answers are not given. But Wordsworth does not censure such questionings or attempt to convince his readers that "Whatever IS, is RIGHT" (*Essay on Man* IV. l. 145; Pope 303). Despite "how little we know" (Shelley 633), we are driven to wonder. Wordsworth valorizes our attempt to find in our "first affections" (l. 150; Wordsworth 301)

Those shadowy recollections,

Which, be they what they may

Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish us, and make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;

("Ode," ll. 151-58; Wordsworth 301)

Despite the spectral and indistinct quality of these recollections, recollections that refuse definition, they have that within them which illuminates human life. Within three lines, Wordsworth moves from "shadowy" to "fountain light" and "master light," where the poetry grows in confidence as it acknowledges that despite the obscurity of these recollections, they are the center of our human world. The poetry earns its power through its sense of building, word by word, the affirmation it seeks. The repeated "Are yet" insists in measured language upon the shadow transforming into the light. This Dantean light shines out; though Wordsworth writes from this world, not another, Wordsworth finds echoes or refractions of something beyond the human. Though incomplete, ghostly, and almost in defiance of the rational, Wordsworth builds toward affirmation through a knowledge of a sort. But affirmation never quite holds. Wordsworth's apparently triumphal "Nor all that is at enmity with joy, / Can utterly abolish or destroy!" (ll. 162-63; Wordsworth 301) is less than fulsome in its certainty: though not risking complete ruin, how much can these dangers "abolish or destroy"? There is much that might be destroyed, Wordsworth seems to say, even if not all would be lost. For this poem is elegiac, seemingly written from the vantage point of hopeless loss where the poet admits: "The things which I have seen I now can see no more" (l. 9; Wordsworth 297). Yet even here, the "now" whispers a hope that this loss might be reversible. What was once might yet be again.

The poem gropes towards resolution, never quite claiming it, but never giving up all hope. Wordsworth makes suffering have a purpose as it brings forth the "philosophic mind" (l. 189; Wordsworth 302) Despite the poem's avowed personal quality, Wordsworth, as he so often does, opens out his poem to his reader, linking us to him through shared suffering:

> We will grieve not, rather find
> Strength in what remains behind,
> In the primal sympathy
> Which having been must ever be,
> In the soothing thoughts that spring
> Out of human suffering,
> In the faith that looks through death,
> In years that bring the philosophic mind.

(ll. 182-89; Wordsworth 302)

As if ascending a ladder, Wordsworth moves from line to line in precarious hope of discovering strength, using precedents of the past to guarantee a future better than the present. "Suffering" finds its partner in "soothing," as faith shadows death, where Wordsworth's balancing act finds for every cloud its attendant silver lining. Though aspiring, the lines are not reckless. They do not leap into untried bromides. The "Ode" earns its moment of respite, where the "philosophical mind" achieves a knowledge of how to function despite loss, zooming out of the suffering into detached though impassioned affirmation. But the "Ode" does not end here. The poem glimmers with the dark counter knowledge that suffering is not easily effaced by philosophy. Even the most affirming flames are balanced with the heart-smitten allowance that pain, as well as hope, endures:

> Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
> Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,

To me the meanest flower that blows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

(ll. 203-06; Wordsworth 302)

These thanks are fraught with pain, but suffering does not cancel out gratitude. The human heart cannot find unmitigated happiness. Its tenderness includes joy as well as fears. The first person plural pronoun "we" in "by which we live" shifts to a singular pronoun, "me," after Wordsworth accepts the universal nature of the heart. For "to me," of the penultimate line, returns us to the beginning of "Ode," where "every common sight" is indivuated by "To me did seem" (l. 2 and l. 3; Wordsworth 297) Wordsworth made heightened sensitivity ("Preface to Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth 603) the hallmark of the poet, and the final lines of "Ode" make good on that promise.

O'Neill and Paige Tovey note that Wordsworth might have been influenced by Thomas Gray in "[Ode on the Pleasure Arising from Vicissitude]":

The meanest flowret of the vale,

The simplest note that swells the gale,

The common sun, the air and skies,

To him are opening Paradise.

(ll. 45-48; Lonsdale 206).[1]

Wordsworth might not find paradise, but he finds thoughts that "often lie too deep for tears" ("Ode," l. 206; Wordsworth 302). Though O'Neill and Tovey suggest "perhaps such thoughts *are* paradise" (O'Neill and Tovey 506), perhaps paradise is not the point. Gordon Thomas notes the "insistent ordinariness" (Thomas 311) of Wordsworth's vision, and though this might be a half-truth, given Wordsworth's emphasis upon his subjectivity, paradise is replaced by thoughts because of their human quality. Wordsworth eschews transcendence and purity in favor of the mixed quality of such thoughts. "Ode" thinks through, in, and with

verse. It makes progress even as it loops back to its beginning, revealing the poem's drama or representation of thought through criss-crossing movement. "Ode" refuses to be reduced to plot. It comes to know itself and the contours of the self behind it though its own procedures.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, one of Wordsworth's most responsive readers, borrows Wordsworth's "too deep for tears" ("Ode," l. 206; Wordsworth 302) to conclude *Alastor*, making his allusion prominent and pointed. Where Wordsworth could stop, Shelley cannot. Shelley's "On Life" darkly posits that "we are on that verge where words abandon us', suffused by the dizziness of "look[ing] down into the dark abyss of—how little we know" (Shelley 633). Poetry seems a means of expressing and feeling one's way through this impasse or to bear witness to that terminus. Though words abandon us, and we know but little, poetry, in Shelley's hands, becomes a means of trying to wrest something out of that darkness. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley makes an important observation about the nature of drama: "In a drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred; it teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect. Neither the eye nor the mind can see itself unless reflected upon that which it resembles" (Shelley 684). This can be extended to include poetry: poetry might provide a model that the human mind resembles. This is not to cry, "Hypocrite lecteur—mon semblable—mon frère!" ["Hypocrite reader—my likeness—my brother!"] (Eliot 55), to the reader, but to reflect to the reader a shadow-self upon which the reader can reflect. Judith Chernaik detects "a large element of self-dramatization" (Chernaik 9) in Shelley's poetry even as she acknowledges that "the figure of the poet is literary and traditional as well as autobiographical" (Chernaik 10). Shelley would go further. Shelley used himself as a testcase. Writing to William Godwin, Shelley takes a quasi-scientific view of the self as grist for his poetic mill: "If any man would determine sincerely and cautiously at every period of his life to publish books which should contain the real state of his feelings and opinions, I am willing to suppose that this portraiture of his mind would be worth many

metaphysical disquisitions" (Shelley, *Letters* 1. 242). Glossing this point, Timothy Clark notes that, "the poet, for Shelley, becomes a pioneer spirit, his mind a kind of barometer to ever more subtle distinctions of thought and feeling which are then transmitted to society in general as an enlightening influence" (Clark 8). Even self can be treated with detachment; Shelley's "cunning doubles" (O'Neill 1996, 119) allow for self to say, "I am not I; pity the tale of me" (*Astrophel and Stella* 45, l. 14; Sidney 188). For Shelley is never content to resolve the tension implicit in the "I" and "me" demarcations, even going so far as to question all pronouns when he writes in *On Life*: "The words *I*, and *you* and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attributed to them" (Shelley 636). Shelley reveals a suspicion of individuation that permeates his work, even as self becomes the lightning rod through which we experience the "dark abyss" (Shelley 633) and the "enlightening influence" (Clark 8) possible in and through poetry. Poetry is more than a mode of knowing. It is our only means of knowing certain truths.

Longing for knowledge permeates Shelley's poetry and self is a means of discovery. "Mont Blanc" traces a path through perception, with the poem functioning as a laboratory for Shelley to experiment with ways of seeing. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," with its myth of the poet's development, beseeches and yearns for knowledge, aiming to do justice to Intellectual Beauty rather than add to the "frail spells" (3. l. 29) mouthed by "sage or poet" (3. l. 26). For all the mysteries Shelley encounters, he never seems capable of smugly giving himself over to uncertainty. Struggle as well as swoon recurs in the work. But the precise proportions of this equation differ from poem to poem, and Shelley frequently suggests poetry as a method of imparting knowledge to his audience rather than the way knowledge is generated. *Julian and Maddalo* has Maddalo claim: "Most wretched men / Are cradled into poetry by wrong; / They learn in suffering what they teach in song" (*Julian and Maddalo*, ll.

544-46; Shelley 227). Though "insistent on the origin of poetry in suffering" (Wilson 96), Shelley's belief in the poet as a teacher also makes itself unobtrusively felt. Through this lens, poets know something that they put into language for the benefit of their readers, be that through suffering, experience, or thought. Cythna's performance in *Laon and Cythna*, when she anatomizes God for the benefit of her audience, stands as a major example. *Queen Mab* also sees Shelley occasionally take to his soapbox, educating his reader, just as he would write to Elizabeth Hitchener to enlighten her about his theological thought. But Shelley was equally given to demonstrating poetry to be the place where knowledge is created or won. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley uses form to embody the movement from the "sublime style" (Betz 166) of blank verse in Act 1 to the substantive freedom of Act 4. In a similar metapoetic vein, *Epipsychidion* tests the limits of the connection between self and other via form where Shelley rhymes "Emily" and "me" together just once in his complex and swirling poem of soar and collapse (ll. 343-44; Shelley 521). But in "Two Spirits: An Allegory," Shelley suggests how knowledge is shaped by poetry itself.

In "Two Spirits: An Allegory," the poetry is borne along by the currents of its own aesthetic achievement where knowledge is won via poetic language. The titular two spirits create a natural and unstrained musicality, their opposing ideas harmonized in and by Shelley's melodious poetry. The First Spirit warns the Second Spirit of the dangerous ruin that it courts by its 'strong desire':

> O Thou who plumed with strong desire
> Would float above the earth—beware!
> A shadow tracks thy flight of fire—
> Night is coming.
> Bright are the regions of the air
> And when winds and beams [ ]

It were delight to wander there—

Night is coming!

(“Two Spirits,” ll. 1-8; Shelley 208)

Shelley wrote “The good die first—”, quoting Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* above the poem’s title (see *BSM* XVIII, 14-15), then below, he wrote the cancelled line “Two genii stood before me in a dream.” O’Neill notes “Wordsworth was clearly in his thoughts” (O’Neill, 2019, 96) and it is tempting to read the poem as Shelley casting the First Spirit as his older peer, and the Second Spirit, the more impetuous voice, as Shelley himself. Charles Robinson views Byron as Shelley’s target in the poem (Robinson 111). But such a clean separation does not work. Despite the apparent didacticism voiced by the first spirit, the accents of high excitement pervade the stanza, as Shelley builds the dizzying exhilaration of the Second Spirit’s flight of fire into the language of the First Spirit. O’Neill sees “Two Spirits” as a poem that “reprises the Shelleyan sense of a covert bond with as well as difference from the older poet” (O’Neill, 2019, 96), and Shelley does not allow his reader to form definitive judgements about the identities of his Spirits given the similarity of their voices. In this stanza, the iambic tetrameter is almost exaggeratedly present, as the rhythms of the meter bear the stanza along. The stanza plays upon the intrinsic musicality of poetry. The shadow that “tracks thy flight of fire” threatens but does not dissipate the ecstatic promise of the flight. “Night is coming,” with its four-syllable line is a staccato burst of energy that relishes its ambiguity, combining warning and excitement. The First Spirit acknowledges the “delight” of the Second Spirit’s aspirational flight. The words thrill even as they warn.

Shelley often looks to awaken the power of language, to bring into being ‘the electric life which burns within [the] words’ (*A Defence of Poetry*; Shelley 701), as if to winkle out knowledge only expressible via poetry. Such fidelity to the word itself, and to ‘that peculiar

order' (*A Defence*; Shelley 678) that poetry consists of, fires the poem's faith in words. This sense of the life inherent in language creates for Shelley's poetry a momentum of its own, as if words themselves create rather than witness reality:

> The deathless stars are bright above
> If I would cross the shade of night.—
> Within my heart is the lamp of love
> And that is day—

("Two Spirits," ll. 9-12; Shelley 208)

The Second Spirit seems not to respond to the First Spirit as it fixes its gaze above them both. The affirmation that "within my heart is the lamp of love" offers the possibility that the Second Spirit will not merely cross the night but actively transform it into day. "And that is day" sees the Second Spirit intoxicated by the power of its own words to shape an affirmation of the possibilities of language.

"And that is day" smacks of proclamation, not hope, as the Second Spirit's imaginative victory is over the fixed temporal world by means of poetry. Shelley writes in *A Defence of Poetry* that poetic language frees us from the constraints of the universe where "Poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions." (Shelley 698). "Two Spirits" reshapes "surrounding impressions" by the perceiving eye of the Second Spirit. The "lamp of love" is the "being within our being" (*A Defence*, Shelley 698) that allows the Second Spirit, in its exercise of creative freedom, to become a poet. Thereafter the tone of the stanza shifts; the newly minted poet can create "an order out of the blood and dust of this fierce chaos" (*A Defence*, Shelley 689) and impose its own perspective:

> And the moon will smile with gentle light
> On my golden plumes where'er they move;

The meteors will linger round my flight

And make night day.

("Two Spirits," ll. 13-16)

The Second Spirit confidently describes futurity, luxuriating in his power of utterance. Like the power Shelley perceives in Prometheus's "high language" ("Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*"; Shelley 229), the Second Spirit may predict and even control the behavior of the elements. The first three lines of the quoted lines show Shelley using soft consonants to create a caressing music with internal rhymes. For the Second Spirit's power is not based on command; rather, poetry allows it a mild form of authority, based on imaginative love more than linguistic decree. The words "And make night day" enact their certainty via their weighted power. Shelley imbues words with an "electric life" (*A Defence of Poetry*; Shelley 701) that goes beyond their semantic content.

The final two stanzas, spoken by neither spirit, are distanced from the individualized Two Spirits of the first four stanzas. The poem, by its distancing from the high pitch of the earlier stanzas, seems to steady itself. This withdrawal from the first-person voices of the Spirits sponsors an air of mysterious detachment, and suggests, while teasingly refusing, an air of closure. We do not learn the fate of the Two Spirits, nor that of the traveler:

Some say when nights are dry and clear

And the death-dews sleep on the morass,

Sweet whispers are heard by the traveller,

Which make night day—

And a shape like his early love doth pass

Upborne by her wild and glittering hair,

And when he awakes on the fragrant grass,

He finds night day.

("Two Spirits," ll. 41-48; Shelley 209)

The final stanza, for all its otherworldly beauty, anticipates *The Triumph of Life* as it sees Shelley weave into the lines a disconcerting quality that Shelley's unfinished final poem turns into "bitter eloquence" (Bloom, 2001, 134). Beginning with the qualifying "Some say" that opened the previous stanza, Shelley distances the reader from the impassioned first-person lyricism of the First and Second Spirits. The "s" sounds whisperingly promise an intimacy between reader and poet, as the softly spoken tone requires the reader to lean in metaphorically to catch the lines. "The traveller," watching the "shape" "upborne" by "her wild and glittering hair", is passive but not altogether ensnared by the shape's power. The "shape" is only "*like* his early love" [emphasis added] with Shelley's simile refusing to identify the two with any certainty. While Shelley's simile suggests an illusory quality, the vivid description of the shape's hair creates a reality of its own. The words offer an alternate world where the shape exists as a textual entity. When the traveler awakes and "He finds night day," the reality of the poem has become so sharp as to make his new perception plausible. F. R. Leavis's pronouncement of Shelley's "weak grasp upon the actual" (Leavis 172) suggests, even as it attacks, the dream-like quality of some of Shelley's finest poetry. Shelley's "weak grasp of the actual" allows him a firm grasp on the inner world of his poetry. The language of the poem creates its own proof of the truth of his vision. For Shelley, what poetry knows is only possible in and through poetry. This is poetry's strength, not its weakness.

But twentieth century poetry seems less buoyant or generous about poetry as a way of knowing. Edward Larrissy notes that "Romanticism remains the parent modern writers in Britain are most anxious to disavow, whether they be modernists or not" (Larrissy 4), and that anxiety manifests itself in the way that certain elements of Romanticism bubbled under Modernism's surface. Prophecy, that major Romantic mode, returns in a modern guise.

William Blake wrote in his supremely inspired style, “Hear the voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past, & Future sees” (“Introduction,” ll. 1-2; Blake 18), and T. S. Eliot, despite some apparent uneasiness about the word “prophet,” seems to adopt at least some of that stance in *The Waste Land*. But where Blake aims to regale his audience with his prophecy, Eliot’s speaker brandishes his prophetic knowledge as a weapon:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
> There is shadow under this red rock,
> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
> And I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow at morning striding behind you
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

(“The Burial of the Dead,” ll. 19-30; Eliot 61)

This sinister swagger borrows its authority from the Hebrew prophets (Jones, 285). But Eliot’s speaker taunts his audience, demanding that we say what we know about the roots and the “stony rubbish.” We are not to be saved. We exposed as only guessing, standing amidst “A heap of broken images” as bequeathed to us by the wreckage of the era. The threat and the relish with which it is delivered lends a cruel glamour to the lines. Provoked, perhaps, by lines such as this, Vidyan Ravinthiran refers to Eliot as an “edgelord,” one who “provokes with opinions of algorithm-exploiting vehemence. He harbinges, hyperbolises.”

(Ravinthiran). Ravinthiran rightly points to the cruelty and self-aggrandizement implicit in the writing. But Eliot seems to pre-empt even well-founded criticism by the poem's knowledge of its own conduct. Luring us in via that tempting parenthetical phrase "(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)," Eliot promises us something new, that siren song of modernist poetry, and he offers us something we have not seen before in poetry. Something might *happen* should the reader avail themselves of this opportunity. If "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," the reader must elect to see it before it will be shown. There is a contract; we are led to believe that we might accept or reject the terms. But the prophecy itself is never revealed and poetry's knowledge remains concentrated in the poet's hands. *The Waste Land* moves on to another voice and a new perspective, leaving the reader with a tease, a taunt, and a threat, but nothing more. Anthony L. Johnson writes that "the reader is called upon to be actively involved in bridging the gaps" and "devising morpho-syntactic, semantic or paradigmatic by-passes to reconstitute textual continuity" (Johnson 400). Though this suggests, in a generous fashion, that readers become co-makers of meaning and discover ways to read this text as a continuous performance, this might be illusory. Filling in the blanks is prone to wish-fulfilment, left as we are with that "heap of broken images," from which it is tempting to fashion a monument to our own desires. Ravinthiran writes of *The Waste Land*, "it isn't prophecy, it's a poem" (Ravinthiran). But this comment harbors its own ambiguity: it might be a matter-of-fact statement or take on the tone of a parent promising a child that there are no modernist monsters under the bed. What rankles is that the prophecy, despite all the tantalizing hints, is never delivered. Eliot claims that even when a poet believes that he expresses "only his private experience," his readers detect "the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation" (Eliot, 1953, 3). A generation's "exultation or despair" is mirrored back in the poetry of *The Waste Land*,

yet we see nothing but ourselves. What poetry knows is withheld from our view, or, worse, Eliot shows us that the nothing that we receive might be all that there is.

W. B. Yeats cannot make himself content with that nothing. Nor does he refuse to show his hand to his audience. Whatever is unknown finds its way into the tension of the poem's fabric, where the poet at least knows what it is that he must ask despite not having the answer. Questions tend to proliferate in Yeats's poetry. Brian Arkins counts forty-two poems that close with questions across Yeats's poetry, and he notes that "the lyrical section of the poems contains 337 questions in its 374 poems" (Arkins, 13). Questions, not answers, are Yeats's mode of knowing, and even questions must be worked towards rather than parachuted into the poems. In "The Second Coming," observation comes under strain as the speaker struggles to understand what he sees:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

(ll. 1-8; Yeats 401-02).

Yeats's speaker begins with aphoristic heft, wielding images as implied similes to comprehend the situation. The speaker is no hero, and not even clearly defined. He seems not to participate in but only witness this dissolution via the passive verb constructions. Potential terror is held carefully at bay even as the lines prophesy despair. The lines "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" are a paraphrase of Shelley's

Prometheus Unbound (*Prometheus Unbound* I. 625-28; Shelley 252). Where Shelley embeds some comfort through the distance of myth, with Jupiter later overthrown in his lyrical drama, Yeats offers no consolation, only a jaded certainty of no escape from what is coming. But at this stage, Yeats tells us nothing of what that is. When the sonnet starts afresh after eight abortive lines, Yeats moves into in the first person. This, as Helen Vendler points out (Vendler, 2007, 170), is the essential element of the poem, where Yeats individuates his vision. As the second stanza develops, O'Neill views "the poet as intruder on or aghast witness to his own poem" (O'Neill, 2009) and a Cassandra-like figure who sings the chaos, almost welcoming the torrent to be unleashed. A controlled hysteria, with "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand. / The Second Coming!" ("The Second Coming," ll. 9-10; Yeats 402), reaches its pinnacle before "a vast image" with its "blank and pitiless" gaze (l. 12 and l. 15; Yeats 402) stuns the speaker out of his excitement. This sphinx, moving slowly through the desert, seems as real as the "indignant desert birds" (ll. 17; Yeats 402), as myth and reality form an uneasy compound. Vision does not uplift the speaker. Knowledge, as it was for Byron's Manfred, is a heavy burden:

> The darkness drops again; but now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

(ll. 18–22; Yeats 402)

Michael O'Neill writes that poetry is "a mode of knowing when the object of knowledge is literature itself" (O'Neill, 1999, 123), and Yeats, as if anticipating this idea, shows us its dangerous circularity. Yeats's speaker aims to push beyond this, using poetry to process and articulate a vision of what is to come in a world outside of its parameters. Though not

knowing “what rough beast” is coming, Yeats’s prophecy finds its force through its vulnerable sensing of the advent of a coming nightmare. “The Second Coming” uses the terminal question to intensify what Lee Zimmerman refers “compelling closural force” (Zimmerman 42). Though the poem ends, the reader is poised at the beginning, forced, like Yeats’s speaker, to process a new world in which this looming threat exists and comes inexorably towards them. The boundary line between poem and world is dangerously opaque. Jonathan Culler shows that “lyric utterance is about this world rather than a fictional world. And a correlate of this is that with lyrics, unlike novels, where the discourse is attributed to a narrator, the reader can occupy the position of the speaker, ritualistically performing these lines” (Culler 162). Within this ritual, we mouth the words along with Yeats’s speaker, seeing what he sees and feeling with him, even as we know him to be elevated into a prophet, showing us things that we have not seen. “The Second Coming” behaves as though testimony, prophecy, and performance are entwined, where fiction and fact, knowledge and imagination, myth and reality come together within a single space. Poetry knows something beyond philosophy as Yeats seems to demonstrate the power of Friedrich Schlegel’s claim that “Where philosophy stops, poetry has to begin” (Schlegel 245). But what poetry can do with that knowledge remains unknown.

Knowledge, in poetry, is laced with an awareness of what remains unknown. The bravery of poetry, and its risk, is to reveal its high stakes, to show its reader the darkness that lurks beneath or even within the knowledge it might win from ignorance. Literary criticism might make a parallel claim. Alert to the limits of its own proclamations, critics must perform the “going out of our own nature” (*A Defence of Poetry*; Shelley 682) necessary to sympathetic reading as a means of understanding. But self is so often “that burr that will stick to one” (Shelley *Letters* II. 109) and Michael O’Neill knew it. He was wary of the narcissism possible in literary criticism, making us aware that “Too often, however, the interpretative

lust of literary criticism breeds a language in which there is a worrying gap between the poem and the critical performance" (O'Neill, 1999, 120-21). But he also shows us that at its best, literary criticism allows us to see a poem, a world, through the lens of an expert interpreter, one generous and open with their readings, their learning, and themselves. Poetry is a mode of knowing, but what O'Neill's critical work models is a parallel insight: the best literary criticism is a mode of knowing. With O'Neill as a guide, readers change, re-position themselves, and are inspired to find in poetry more than they had ever sought.

NOTES

[1] Quoted in *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longman 1969), 206. Lonsdale notes (206n) the appearance of "meanest flowret" in Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742), 6. 197, and that work is also a possible influence on both Wordsworth's and Shelley's phrasing.

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