

# **Creating “An Infinite World All Its Own”: The Poetics of Resentment in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Epipsychedion***

**Martin Fashbaugh**

**Department of English**  
**Black Hills State University**  
**Spearfish, SD 57799**  
[\*\*Martin.Fashbaugh@bhsu.edu\*\*](mailto:Martin.Fashbaugh@bhsu.edu)

I

In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, René Girard famously claims the reason for the scarcity of jealousy, envy, and hatred in romantic and symbolist poetry is that romantics and symbolists want to think of their desire as “completely spontaneous” and therefore “turn away from the dark side of desire, claiming it is unrelated to their lovely poetic dream and denying that it is its price” (39-40). From the vantage point of generative anthropology, we are likely to offer a similar assessment of the romantic and symbolist traditions, but if we find ourselves in agreement with the distinctions Eric Gans draws between romantic and postromantic esthetics, we are inclined to argue that there is a significant difference in the extent to which a romantic and a symbolist would attempt to sever the connection between this “lovely poetic dream” and the “dark side of desire.” Gans claims that what distinguishes the romantic from the postromantic is the greater degree to which the latter cuts himself off from empirical experience:

Whereas the romantics explored the scenic dimensions of their personal experience, the postromantic seeks to eliminate all vestiges of the empirical, to attain a universal, impersonal intuition of the scene. Instead of naively assuming that our membership in the human community makes us all capable of extrapolating back from present worldly experience to our common originary root, the postromantic sees worldly experience as a falling away from and forgetting of this root, and conceives the artist’s askesis as the exemplary return to it. The consequent bracketing of the worldly correlates of the imaginary and exploration of transcendental modes of experience makes the postromantic artist the creator of the first reasonably rigorous phenomenology of the scene of representation. (*Originary Thinking* 184)

Gans is arguing that romantics are much more likely than postromantics to show the relationship between the sign and their temporal, personal scenes. Despite their lyrical excursions, romantic authors still usually provide enough of a personal context for the reader to discover the relationship between poetic expression and empirical experience.

Consequently, the reader of a romantic lyrical poem can often discern the relationship between the esthetic vision and the poet's personal *resentment*, a term Gans defines as the "sentiment of exclusion from the center where significance is generated" ("The Market and Resentment"). By providing the reader with some indication of the scenic origin upon which esthetic significance is found, the romantic poet helps the reader discover the connection between the lyrical rendering of the sign and the resentment over his or her segregation from the scene's center. The postromantics, on the other hand, were inclined to attempt a complete separation of the lyric from personal and social contexts. In "bracketing" the imaginary from the empirical, the postromantic has thus far made the most focused attempt at conceiving, intuiting, and visualizing the *originary scene* of representation. This *originary scene* describes the first time that mimetic desire amongst members of a group for a particular object (most likely a hunted animal) rises to a crisis point, in which one or more members, fearing the violence which will ensue from the continued pursuit of the object, decide to abort the "gesture of appropriation." The aborted gesture of appropriation is "transformed into a gesture of representation out of fear of the mimetic rivalry of others" (*Signs of Paradox* 17). This *originary hypothesis* explains the sign's origin and the proliferation of language that will follow from future mimetic crises. The postromantic, however, tries to refrain from contemplating his or her personal mimetic crisis in order to "eliminate all vestiges of the empirical" and intuit the *originary scene*. In doing so, the postromantic can create "an authentic self different from the worldly, appetitive self" (*Originary Thinking* 182).

It is important to point out that Gans's conceptualization of the postromantic literary project appears to conflict with scholarship that suggests romantic poets were interested in creating such an unworldly, un-appetitive self. For example, in his book *Romantic Origins* (1978), Leslie Brisman argued that romantic poets were frequently interested in being "reborn," in creating a new identity consciously removed from temporal, mimetic scenes: "Returning to a second birth given both primary importance and something like temporal priority, the poets step outside the circle of imitation, repetition, and belatedness; they return to the sources of their power" (18). At first glance, Brisman seems to be describing Gans's understanding of the postromantic rather than the romantic. However, Brisman's assertion that this rebirth is given "temporal priority" helps us to distinguish postromanticism from romanticism. Brisman views the act of romantic renewal as being temporal because

of the fact that romantic poets, despite their privileging of lyric over narrative, almost always frame their attempts at lyrical transcendence as emerging from a narrative circumstance. As readers, romantic poetry allows us to at least catch a glimpse of “the circle of imitation, repetition, and belatedness” from which the lyric poet longs to escape, and we can therefore see this “reborn self” as evolving from temporal resentment rather than hatching from a sublime, disinterested mind or originary genius. Girard’s claim that romantics and symbolists want us to see their “lovely poetic dream” as being “completely spontaneous” is perhaps more true about the post-romantic symbolists than the romantics, who give us many hints that personal resentment generates their esthetic visions.

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Epipsychedion* (1821) provides us with an allegorical, meta-poetic depiction of the romantic poet’s earnest yet failed attempt at creating a new, postromantic consciousness—one that is not even slightly reliant on the “scenic dimensions” of his own experiences. With such a consciousness, the poet would be unbounded by the empirical, and it would allow for him to return imaginatively to the originary scene of language and cultural creation. However, the poem ultimately shows us how resentment, which is what created the originary scene in the first place, makes impossible the return to this scene. The poem therefore ends up foretelling the future lie of postromantic poetics, which is that de-personalized allusions to the originary scene are possible. Of course, the poem is *romantic* in that it does not refrain from exploring the “scenic dimensions” of the poet’s personal experience, but Shelley’s speaker is in the midst of what becomes a futile effort to evolve from a romantic to a postromantic condition—in which his poetic visions become purely originary and, therefore, separate from his everyday life.

Conceptualizing the speaker as attempting to transition from a romantic to a post-romantic esthetic consciousness helps explain why, for instance, he provides us with an account of his love history while also attempting to forget it. In doing so, he ends up drawing attention to the endeavor to turn away from personal resentment—“the dark side of desire.” The speaker’s inability to meet this objective essentially foreshadows the insurmountable problem of postromantic esthetics. Shelley’s poem anticipates the modernist-esthetic turn, which Gans describes as the movement away from recreating “the origin of the scene of representation” to exploring “the scenic operation of its esthetic itself” (*Originary Thinking* 193). The modernist esthetic is made not from ignoring the temporal scene but, rather, from estheticizing it.

For the remainder of this essay, I will be first arguing that *Epipsychedion* anticipates the evolution of the nineteenth-century esthetic as Gans describes it—from the romantic privatization of the originary scene, to the effort to preserve the scene from the empirical, and, finally, to the realization of this endeavor’s impossibility due to the fact that desire is derived from mimetic rivalry. By the end of the poem,

we are to conclude that intimations of the originary are accessible only through the intercessory of temporal desire. Secondly, I am arguing that *Epipsychedion*, while famously an allegory of Shelley's love history, also addresses what Shelley anticipates as the devaluation of poetry in the literary marketplace due to the proliferation of prosaic literature. Shelley not only shows how the idealization of love inevitably stems from resentment over a beloved's unobtainability, but he also reveals that the act of exploring this connection relates to his professional resentment, which arises from the awareness that the emerging literary market was beginning to devalue the poetic occupation and, consequently, exclude the poet from its center. In *Epipsychedion*, the idyllic world the speaker wants to create is one where the poet stands at the center of a mimetic scene, and the speaker's awareness of language's inability to realize his vision meta-poetically represents Shelley's sense of being overwhelmed by determinist social forces. Therefore, personal resentment creates the need to escape from his temporal mimetic scenes and to journey to the originary scene, but his inability to suppress his personal resentment prevents him from meeting this objective; his lyrical discourse can only be *romantic* rather than *postromantic* in nature, emerging from "the scenic dimensions of [his] personal experience." This failure, which Shelley makes obvious by situating the attempt of lyrical excursions within a narrative context, suggests that the postromantic symbolists' suppression of narrative helped to conceal the fact that their supposed return to the "originary root" was, in fact, a return to the temporal and empirical.

## II

One could say that my first claim, which is that *Epipsychedion* features the failed attempt to create a world apart from the empirical, has been made before. Paul de Man's "Rhetoric of Temporality," for example, famously argues that the symbol succumbs to allegory in Romantic poetry; even the most symbolic forms of lyric cannot escape the entrapment of temporal systems of signs.<sup>(1)</sup> The transcendent project of lyrical symbolism in a poem like *Epipsychedion* is both valorized and regarded as futile, making the poem a work of skeptical idealism rather than of Platonic idealism.<sup>(2)</sup> Poststructuralists like de Man therefore conclude that language has inherent contingencies that make it a continual deferral of Shelley's romantic dream of oneness. But Gans's generative anthropology and Girard's mimetic theory go a step beyond this insight, for while poststructuralists underscore language's inherent limitations as the reason for the poetic subject's failure, Gans claims that both language's capabilities and its limitations are rooted in originary resentment. The desire that the subject purports to be exclusively for the object at the center of the mimetic scene is, as Girard claims all forms of desire to be, "the mimetic crisis in itself"; and this crisis "always lacks the resources of catharsis and expulsion" (*Things Hidden* 288). Girard's assertion that the object of desire is

always a manifestation of the mimetic crisis and Gans's claim that lyrical expression is one of resentment provide us with a more humanistic than technical explanation for lyric succumbing to narrative allegory. The skeptical idealism that both features and doubts the success of language's transcendent capability is a consequence of language always alluding to the user's personal resentment, which is a very distant simulacrum of originary resentment. Through Gans's lens, we can see that resentment contributes to both the ambition that fuels the poetic discourse through much of *Epipsychedion* and the despair that occurs at the poem's end when the speaker realizes that the language he employs to transcend the temporal ultimately fails.

While a poststructural critique of *Epipsychedion* would be in agreement with the speaker's conclusion that the very words he uses to escape to an atemporal realm are the "chains of lead" (588) that ground him to the temporal, the speaker's overview of his love history in lines 190-383(3) suggests an emotional rather than linguistic cause of his enslavement. We discover that Emily is the culminating love object in a long lineage of females (both spiritual and physical), for he reveals that from early in his childhood

There was a Being whom my spirit oft  
Met on its visioned wanderings, far aloft,  
In the clear golden prime of my youth's dawn,  
Upon the fairy isles of sunny lawn. (190-93)

After this "Being" departed, his life became a singularly-purposed journey to become reacquainted with her: "In many mortal forms I rashly sought / The shadow of that idol of my thought" (267-68). These two passages reveal one of *Epipsychedion*'s two main plots: the one plot being referred to here is the speaker's attempt to find a beloved who is closest to his ideal, and the other plot, which extends from the first, involves the state of affairs surrounding the speaker's relationship with Emily, a character signifying Teresa Viviani, the woman to whom Shelley dedicates the poem.(4)

The inaccessibility of Emily and the chance that she will be married to someone else establish the mimetic scene of rivalry and provide the motive for the speaker to abandon pursuit of her in favor of the creative act of generating a sign for her. This sign, as Gans puts it, "arises as an *aborted gesture of appropriation* that comes to designate the object rather than attempting to capture it" and serves as "an economical substitute for the inaccessible referent" (*Originary Thinking* 9). The aborted gesture "expresses a tension between the conflicting forces of attraction and repulsion" (*The Origin of Language* 47), and as long as the speaker is gesturing toward the object of desire, the representative discourse of lyrical designation is

impossible. Only when the force of “repulsion” compels the subject to abort this gesture can the process of lyrical designation begin. Although jealous resentment does not apparently appear to be what the speaker suffers from, he is consciously re-sensitized to this longing for his original object of sexual desire because his temporal circumstances motivate him to, as the poem’s epigraph states, “create … in the infinite a world all its own.” (5) In the speaker’s case, Emily is in a location guarded by “sentinels,” metonyms for the institutional structures that make a sexual relationship impossible. His desire for Emily is therefore rooted in the mimetic crisis, for within the structural constraints of the poem’s narrative, it is Emily’s inaccessibility that provides the opportunity for him to pursue imaginatively “the shadow of that idol of my thought.” The sentinels make not only appropriating Emily impossible, but, more importantly, create the opportunity for a future rival (one whom Emily’s father would deem as a more appropriate suitor than the speaker) to become her lover. Because the barriers to becoming Emily’s lover are insurmountable, his only recourse in attempting to satisfy his mimetic desire is to engage in the resentful practice of imagining a romance with Emily. In his imaginings, the speaker transforms her into a signifier of the sisterly being who once accompanied him in “the clear golden prime of [his] youth’s dawn” (189). In doing so, he is attempting to make the rivalry over Emily serve as an intimation of a more elemental mimetic moment (in his “youth’s dawn”), one that alludes more directly to the originary scene. Furthermore, movement toward the originary scene brings him closer to completing the process of transformation from a romantic to a postromantic consciousness.

Of course Shelley’s speaker wants the reader to think that such a transformation has always been his objective, one that his earliest of amorous relationships were predicated upon; he overlooks the mimetic possibility—which is that previous resentments over failed relationships have led him to imagine esthetic paradises where ideal love can exist. And with Emily, the speaker is leading us to believe that the many barriers keeping him apart from her are only preventing him from fulfilling his sexual desire rather than serving as the mimetic source from which his desire for her originates. The lover sees true love as being restrained by institutional forces within “the world by no thin name”:

Emily  
I love thee; though the world by no thin name  
Will hide that love, from its unvalued shame.  
Would we two had been twins of the same mother!  
Or, that the name my heart lent to another  
Could be a sister’s bond for her and thee,  
Blending two beams of one eternity!  
Yet were one lawful and the other true,

These names, though dear, could paint not, as is due  
How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me!  
I am not thine: I am a part of THEE. (42-52)

Although this passage alludes to the narrative circumstance surrounding the speaker's love for Emily, resentment and mimetic desire do not appear to be a part of the equation. The lack of specifics allows the speaker to make it appear as if social forces merely get in the way of his pursuit of autonomous desire. The speaker's declaration that his love for Emily is independent from temporal experiences helps explain why in the above passage he wishes for an incestuous relationship—for them to be “two...twins of the same mother” (45). His wish that Emily would have been his sister is atemporal in that their love is imagined as being unconditional and permanent. Brothers and sisters are thought to be bound by inherent love, and sexual love, which is generally considered to be more vulnerable to changes in circumstance, can theoretically become permanent when fused with sibling love.

The speaker does, however, establish a mimetic, triangular structure in the above passage. While wishing that they were siblings, he realizes the best alternative would be to find another romantic partner who would become friends with Emily. The triangular relationship would therefore be between the speaker, Emily, and a third, undetermined female other. He reasons that if he cannot be with Emily directly, he could be with her indirectly through “another” woman, who could form “a sister’s bond for her and thee. / Blending two beams of one eternity!” (45-46). Instead of holding out for the impossible, he instead reasons that he could find another woman who would form a sisterly bond with her. His love for the other would be indirect and temporal, a replaceable sign of his love for Emily. This is, of course, another demonstration of Gans’s concept of the “aborted gesture of appropriation”: an “other” becomes the sign of his aborted attempt to appropriate Emily within the mimetic scene. The speaker’s logic helps explain the narrative account of his relationships with other women previous to Emily, all of whom serve as imperfect signs of a female presence that accompanied him early in his youth and whom he believes is embodied in Emily. She was a spirit whose voice “came to me through the whispering woods / And from the fountains, and the odours deep” (201-202). Previous women have proven to be, to his dissatisfaction, noticeably imperfect “shadows” of his original love object: “And some were fair—but beauty dies away” (267-69). He uses his understanding that “beauty dies away” to justify the fact that he kept changing lovers; his life has been about the search for a lover who would essentially be the reincarnation of the original female presence. In what is commonly referred to as the work’s “free love” passage, the speaker argues that sexual relationships are not meant to be monogamous, that they serve only as temporal representations of ideal love:

I never was attached to that great sect,  
Whose doctrine is, that each should select  
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,  
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend  
To cold oblivion, though it is the code  
Of modern mortals, and the beaten road...

... and so  
With one chained friend, perhaps a *jealous* foe,  
The dreariest and the longest journey go.  
(emphasis mine; 149-54, 157-59)

For the narrator, monogamous marriage leads to psychological enslavement in which couples are figuratively “chained” to each other by their marital commitment. Here, jealousy—“a jealous foe”—is suggested to be a product of the monogamous marital economy, which the speaker believes is part of an overall system of psychological oppression.[\(6\)](#)

Of course, the narrator excludes himself from being vulnerable to resentment, jealousy and mimetic desire; he pretends his desire for Emily is exclusively his, not mimetically derived from a potential rival. As Girard points out, an adult, unlike a child, “likes to assert his independence” from the mimetic paradigm by becoming “a model to others; he invariably falls back on the formula, ‘Imitate me!’ in order to conceal his own lack of originality” (*Violence and the Sacred* 146). That the Romantic subject would attempt to make himself the model who determines the objects for others to desire rather than acknowledge his desire as a derivative of another’s helps explain the speaker’s motivation for placing so much attention on the object rather than on potential rivals. However, we can view the speaker’s very attempt to avoid mimetic conflict as evidence of mimetic desire’s influence, as exemplified in the several epithets he gives Emily: “Sweet Spirit!” (1), “Poor captive bird!” (5), “High, spirit-wingèd Heart!” (13), “Seraph of Heaven!” (21), Moon beyond the clouds! (27), and “Star above the Storm!” (28). The symbolic identities for Emily function as aborted gestures of appropriating her; since he cannot possess her he is relegated to creating signs that stand in her absence. Another way the speaker asserts possession of Emily is by determining the conditions upon which she will be revered. The speaker wishes to sail with her across the Aegean Sea to

An isle under Ionian skies,  
Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise,  
And, for the harbours are not safe and good,  
This land would have remained a solitude  
But for some pastoral people native there,

Who from Elysian, clear, and golden air  
Draw the last spirit of the age of gold. (422-28)

What he finds idyllic about the isle is that it is isolated, populated only by the native “pastoral people” who appear to be present in his imaginary paradise merely for esthetic reasons, materialized as products of Elysium’s “clear, and golden air.” Within such a place, there is no rival for Emily’s affection, and yet he thinks he would be able to sustain his desire for her.

Through this idealized vision, the speaker is attempting to return not to his own scene of self-origination, but to a time prior, to the originary scene, therefore making his quest *postromantic* rather than *romantic*. It is in later passages of the speaker’s description of the Ionian paradise that we understand the speaker to be rendering a scene that is as foreign to his own experiences as is possible. For example, he describes “a lone dwelling, built by whom or how” which “[h]ad been invented, in the world’s young prime” (484, 489). The dwelling is “Titanic”—which refers to the mythic period when Ancient Greece was ruled by the Titans, who were primitive compared to their Olympian usurpers—and void of “all the antique and learned imagery” (498) associated with Greek civilization. In place of the “learned imagery” of Greek culture is an exotic, natural scene: “The ivy and the wild-vine interknit / The volumes of their many twining stems” (498-501). He is therefore longing for a place within the cradle of Western civilization before this civilization came into being. The speaker, though, is unable to conceive fully this scene due to the limitations imposed by his self-consciousness. When he proclaims the house and Ionian isle to be “mine” and Emily “to be the lady of solitude” (512, 513), he projects his own identity and experience onto the scene, making impossible the transition from a romantic to a postromantic esthetic mentality. The interference, here, of the personal helps explain the speaker’s frustration at the end of the poem over his failure to imagine fully the originary scene.

With the speaker’s realization of his inability to use his poetic imagination to visualize fully an atemporal world, Shelley helps illustrate the problem with this postromantic turn: that his language cannot take him on a mental journey to the originary scene because his lyrical discourse can never separate itself from personal resentment. The originary scene can only be alluded to, or hinted at, through the lyrical expression of an individual’s resentment.

The speaker’s proclamation of his disdain for the institution of marriage earlier in the poem appears to foreshadow what occurs at the end, when he realizes that he cannot imaginatively sustain a vision of unification with Emily. His explanation for his failure is that the language he uses to “pierce / Into the height of Love’s rare universe” turns out to be “chains of lead around its flight of fire” (588-89, 90). The

“chain” image that earlier alludes metaphorically to the psychological enslavement created by Judeo-Christian marriage laws and the institutionally-generated jealousies and other problems emerging from them reappears to refer more generally to a human being’s conditional enslavement to temporality; as quoted earlier, he describes marriage as being “chained” to a “friend, perhaps a jealous foe.” Although the speaker certainly is not suggesting directly that his imaginative failure makes him susceptible to resentment, that is an inference we can draw based on the reappearance of the chain imagery and our understanding of the nature of mimetic desire as a structure that keeps the subject dependent on the desire of the rival. Language’s “chains of lead” signifies the enslavement of the individual to cultural, institutional desires, all of which emanate from the originary scene. Furthermore, we can view the speaker’s admittance of his failure to use language to transcend human temporality as an indicator that complete transformation from a *romantic* to a *postromantic* esthetic is not possible. The postromantic project of removing “all vestiges of the empirical, to attain a universal, impersonal intuition of the scene” (as quoted in Gans on this essay’s first page), which will allow for an unimpeded flight to the originary scene, is a futile endeavor because the individual is always entrapped within the snare of mimetic desire.

### III

While we can determine the scenes of resentment to be responsible for Shelley’s lyrical vision, we can also reasonably argue that the speaker is alluding not just to Shelley’s love life, but also indirectly to the author’s profession during a time when the emerging middle-class readership and writers such as Thomas Love Peacock and Jeremy Bentham were questioning poetry’s efficacy. It is important to keep in mind, for instance, that Shelley’s idealization of poetry in “A Defence of Poetry” was in response to Thomas Love Peacock’s essay “The Four Ages of Poetry,” which questioned the relevancy of the genre in modern life. Peacock forecasts poetry’s marginalization and conceptualizes it as “the subordinacy of the ornamental to the useful.” He boldly predicts that poetry’s audience “will not only continually diminish in the proportion of its number to that of the rest of the reading public, but will also sink lower and lower in comparison of intellectual acquirement” (328). We can view Shelley’s reply to Peacock in “A Defence of Poetry” as a resentful response to what the poet perceives as being a polemical attempt to marginalize his stature in the literary marketplace. In “A Defence,” his resentment over Peacock’s suggestion that poetry is outdated causes Shelley to draw for the poet lofty comparisons, likening him, for example, to a “nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude” (516). This comparison, in fact, epitomizes how the lyrical subject avoids his own resentment, for it shows him idealizing his solitude without suggesting that there is a temporal explanation for it; the implication, of course, is that there is no temporal explanation, that he is an inherently isolated character who harbors no

resentment toward outside rivals. Another work of Shelley's that glamorizes the poet as an isolated, delicate genius is, of course, his elegy to John Keats, *Adonais*. In the poem's Preface, Shelley claims Keats's death was hastened by harsh criticism of *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review*, which "produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind" (410). In this poem, the nightingale is again referred to, but this time as a kindred spirit of the poet rather than a direct metaphor for him: "Thy spirit's sister, the lorn nightingale / Mourns not her mate with such melodious pain" (145-46).

Shelley's view of Keats or the ideal poet as an imaginative genius who is too sensitive to be engaged directly in the crudities of the quotidian life is indirectly expressed in *Epipsychedion*, for the poem's narrator casts himself as too idealistic for quotidian life. *Epipsychedion* can be read as an allegory that depicts a speaker's attempt to use poetic discourse to invoke a Platonic, hermetically-sealed, ahistorical world. Shelley essentially admits in a 16 February 1821 letter to his publisher Charles Ollier that this is his intention for the poem; he provides justification for *Epipsychedion*'s obscure references by claiming that the poem was intended for "the esoteric few" in order "to avoid the malignity of those who turn sweet food into poison, transforming all they touch into the corruption of their own natures" (*Letters* 2: 606). According to Shelley, only "the esoteric," learned few will be able to appreciate the beauty of his poetic language and understand the obscure references to ancient history and mythology. To use Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, Shelley was writing for those encamped within the *autonomous field* of cultural production, rather than the *heteronomous field* of the literary market.[\(7\)](#)

In a 1 May 1820 letter to Leigh Hunt, which even more clearly demonstrates the antagonism Shelley felt toward the market, Shelley expresses displeasure over the level of control his publisher, Charles Ollier, has over his career and "the system in which [the bookseller] is placed" (*Letters* 2: 563). He is conveying a common frustration of many Romantic poets, that they were being victimized by the economics and politics of literary reviews, booksellers, and editors.[\(8\)](#) Romantic poets were placed in the precarious position of having to appease the interests of the literary-market establishment while still pursuing their own esthetic interests, interests that emerged as a counterweight to contemporary culture. John Keats perceived in Shelley's poetry a lack of concern for the demands of the marketplace, which he both respected and cautioned against. He shows a sensitivity to the readership's changing literary tastes when he advises Shelley to write with the specific purpose of earning a prosperous living—to "serve Mammon." Keats reminds Shelley that contemporary poetry "must have a purpose" and that the poet "must have 'self concentration' selfishness perhaps" (*Letters* 2: 323). Keats's assertion that an artist should be motivated more by the prospect of profit than by a "magnanimous" desire comes from his awareness that the changes within the new

and growing literary market are beginning to have an effect on how poetry is to be written.

*Epipsychedion* demonstrates a stubborn determination on the speaker's part not to "curb" one's "magnanimity." The poetic speaker shares Shelley's disdain for the current institutional arrangements of modern society, suggesting that they are to blame for suppressing artistic and expressive freedom. Much as Shelley portrays himself in his letters as having talents suppressed by the superstructure of institutions, the speaker sees Emily as having expressive talents societal law suppresses:

Poor captive bird! who, from thy narrow cage,  
Pourest such music, that it might assuage  
The rugged hearts of those who prisoned thee,  
Were they not deaf to all sweet melody. (5-8)

Like the common reader, who Shelley claims "turns sweet food into poison," "rugged hearts" have no appreciation for her talents and affections. Again, Gans would argue that the speaker is casting Emily as a "lyric subject," a "possessor of value that has gone unrecognized" (*The End of Culture* 271). In Emily, the speaker sees someone who, like him, needs to escape the oppressive confines of daily life and those who have no respect for her esthetic sensibilities and imagination. From the speaker's narcissistic perspective, Emily is a projection of himself—an "epipsyche," a "soul out of my soul" (238) whose spirit exudes a psychological freedom he longs to have. The speaker regards Emily in a fashion similar to the aforementioned nightingale in "A Defence of Poetry," which Shelley idealizes as the epitome of the independent artist, one who creates art that transcends the temporal, institutional constraints of modernity. The English translation for *Epipsychedion*'s epigraph, which Shelley writes in Italian, typifies the high value Romantic poets placed on lyric transcendence and enhances the image of a poet as an autonomous artist, which is referred to as the "loving soul": "The soul launches beyond creation, and creates for itself in the infinite a world all its own, far different from this dark and terrifying gulf" (392). This ideal view of love is similar to his conceptualization of poetry as an art form that "participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one [and] as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not" (512).

This notion of art and love as taking part in the "eternal" by dissolving barriers between subject and object, different places, and different periods of time is best exemplified near the poem's climactic moment, when the Romantic hero envisions a scenario on an imagined Ionian isle where he and Emily will be

One hope within two wills, one will beneath  
Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,  
One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,  
And one annihilation. (584-87)

Through sexual and spiritual love for Emily, he wishes for all differences to dissolve so he and she may become everything and nothing. We may want to say that this vision is the antithesis of resentment, for he is supposedly expressing the need to obliterate the self for the altruistic purpose of a universal peace embodied in the amalgamation of time, place, and matter. Love for Shelley is the force that eradicates all of these divisions, which “overleaps” the “fence” that separates him from Emily. Moreover, the passage reflects metafictionally on Shelley as a poet, alluding to his futile ambition for artistic autonomy, free from the constraints of mimetic desire.

Although aspiring to escape the temporal narrative circumstance, *Epipsychedion* inevitably becomes a psychological and allegorical narrative that enacts the resisting and succumbing to the interests of the literary market—where fiction and nonfiction prose were seemingly gaining in popularity at poetry’s expense. By the end of the poem, the poetic speaker directs our attention to the limitations of poetic discourse, and these limitations draw our sympathetic attention not only to the frustrations of poetic invention, but also to the frustrations of being a poet in an age when poets were beginning to feel marginalized and underappreciated. In *Epipsychedion*, Shelley provides us with an alienated speaker who foreshadows what Lee Erickson has observed is a common theme of the Victorian dramatic monologue: “the poet’s alienation from the publishing market” (44). Similarly, in *Adonais* Shelley casts Keats as an idyllic outsider, someone who very much fits the image of both *Epipsychedion*’s Romantic hero and Emily. He refers to Keats, for example, as a “Lost Angel of a ruined Paradise!” (107), which reminds us of his many epithets for Emily earlier in the poem.

As most Keats scholars attest, it is highly unlikely that the poet’s death was caused or quickened by negative reviews.<sup>(9)</sup> Shelley is undoubtedly projecting his own sense of being unfairly treated by the literary establishment, which he frequently viewed with contempt. For example, in a letter to Hunt he calls all booksellers “rogues” and asserts that “The system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms before we shall find anything but disappointment in our intercourse with any but a few select spirits” (*Letters* 2: 190). This frustration of being caught in such a system manifests itself through cathartic, lyrical excursions in his work, as we see in *Epipsychedion*. The text features the image of a poet who is critical of the institutions constructing contemporary society. The speaker’s visualization of an

alternative, atemporal life likely derives in large part from Shelley's own perceived alienation from the marketplace; the poet's underscoring of modern problems and proposing of atemporal solutions, in other words, is not a disinterested enterprise.

Both "A Defence of Poetry" and *Epipsychedion* end up revealing the ironic fact that Romantic poets such as Shelley, Keats, Byron, Coleridge, and Wordsworth profited from their image as writers outside the marketplace. By casting themselves as outsiders who are free from the pettiness and jealousies constituting modern-day commerce, they could attract the attention that provides them with a certain amount of cultural capital that they desire. The fact that Shelley conceptualizes the relationship between reason and imagination as being unequal, with the former being subordinate to the latter, shows that he cannot (or chooses not to) conceptualize freedom without placing it within the context of a master-slave relationship. Of course, the famous statement at the end of the essay—"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (535)—both displays this need to be empowered and expresses the "resentment" of the lyrical subject, someone who believes his true worth is undervalued and unappreciated. Like a jealous subject, Shelley's essay is attempting to guard something that he fears will be lost to the rival, which is in this case his identity as an important literary figure. One of his techniques in guarding this status is to pretend that such a competition with the rival does not exist, that his possession of autonomous desire for the object is unquestionable. "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" is to be read as a statement of fact rather than as Shelley's achievable objective.

Like Shelley, his surrogate-speaker in *Epipsychedion* also attempts to deny the threat of the rival by casting himself as an outsider who cannot physically enter the "vacant prison" where Emily is entrapped because "The walls are high" and "thick set" are the sentinels. He pretends that the walls and guards are not rivals to his imagination and to "true Love," which "overleaps all fence." Elaborating on this declaration, he asserts that love is

Like lightning, with invisible violence  
Piercing its continents like Heaven's free breath,  
... more strength has Love than he or they;  
For it can burst his charnel, and make free  
The limbs in chains, the heart in agony,  
The soul in dust and chaos. (399-400, 404-407)

The speaker is claiming that "Love" has the imaginative power to transcend the constraints of time and space. Moreover, like Shelley's "A Defence," this passage cannot describe the concept of freedom from institutional barriers without submitting them to his will; his freedom is inexplicably connected to his usurpation

of the place of the rival, and he is therefore reproducing the very power structures against which he claims he is rebelling. The speaker is illustrating how poetic language cannot completely detach itself from the empirical, that the presence of the mediating rival always forces the subject back into the paradigm of mimetic desire. In the end, the hero of Shelley's poem has become skeptical of his own ability to use language to construct an atemporal vision, which puts him in the same skeptical position as Shelley.

This return to temporality reflects on Shelley's realization that he is incapable of conceiving an atemporal, originary scene. Rather than accepting the GA explanation that this incapability results from the succumbing to his personal resentment (which is what to various degrees all humans succumb to) he blames it on the inherent problem of language. Shelley arguably suffered from two main types of resentment—the romantic and the professional. Romantically, he was resentful over Teresa Viviani's inaccessibility, and professionally he was resentful over the real and perceived restraints the publishing industry placed on him. Furthermore, Shelley feared that because of the possibility of poetry's obsolescence (as Peacock so warned) in the literary marketplace, his work would become marginalized in his own time. Like the speaker, who has to come to terms with the fact that his imagination is not strong enough to make him consciously forget the fact that an actual sexual relationship with Emily is an impossibility, Shelley the writer knows that his ideal views toward poetry cannot transcend his concern for his own position within the literary marketplace. In the end, both are, like all humans, victims of resentment and mimetic rivalry, which enable and place limitations on lyrical expression.

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## Notes

1. De Man asserts in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” that the supposed “superiority of the symbol over allegory” is a result of the “self mystification” which takes place in the midst of “the dialectical relationship between subject and object,” and that this dialectical relationship is not “the central statement of romantic thought,” but is instead “located entirely in the temporal relationship that exists within a system of allegorical signs” (208). [\(back\)](#)
2. Since C. E. Pulos’s *The Deep Truth* (1954), the notion of Shelley as a skeptical idealist rather than a Platonist has been the prevailing view in Shelley scholarship. For more critical scholarship on Shelley’s skeptical idealism, see Earl R. Wasserman’s *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (1971), Lloyd Abbey’s *Destroyer and Preserver* (1979), Michael Henry Scrivener’s *Radical Shelley* (1982), Jarrold E. Hogle’s *Shelley’s Process* (1988), Terence Allan Hoagwood’s *Skepticism and Ideology* (1988), William A. Ulmer’s *Shelleyan Eros* (1990), and Hugh Roberts’s *Shelley and the Chaos of History* (1997). For comprehensive treatment of skepticism in Romantic poetry, including Shelley’s poetry, consult Andrew Cooper’s *Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry* (1987). [\(back\)](#)
3. Kenneth Neill Cameron’s “The Planet-Tempest Passage in *Epipsychedion*” (1948) and Stuart Sperry’s *Shelley’s Major Verse* (1988) make note of the fact that his section of the poem loosely allegorize Shelley’s love history, with the “One” untrue “Planet” signifying his first wife Harriet Westbrook, the “Moon” representing Mary, the “Comet” serving as metaphor for Clare Claremont, and the “Sun” signifying Teresa Viviani, who in the poem is Emily. [\(back\)](#)
4. Like Emily for the speaker, Teresa was inaccessible to Shelley as a sexual partner due to the fact that Teresa’s father had secluded her to a convent while searching for suitable husband. [\(back\)](#)
5. Shelley attributes the quote to Teresa Viviani, and in footnote 1 on page 392 of the Norton critical edition, editor Donald H. Reiman translates from Italian this epigraph in its entirety: “The loving soul launches beyond creation, and creates for itself in the infinite a world all its own, far different from this dark and terrifying gulf.” [\(back\)](#)
6. In William Blake’s “Visions of the Daughters of Albion,” Oothoon makes a similar point, that her sexual desire, which “burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot, is bound / In spells of law to one she loathes” (8.21-22). In one of the

Romantic literary traditions, Blake and Shelley are attacking marriage as a resentment-generating institution due to the constraints it puts on sexual desire. [\(back\)](#)

7. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of how the market changed the way literary texts were produced explains how tensions between popular and esthetic interests escalated as a result of the growth of the middle-class readership and spread of capitalism. Bourdieu conceptualizes the literary market as a "field of cultural production," a dialectical abstraction of two opposing principles—the "heteronomous principle" for "those who dominate the field economically and politically" and the "autonomous principle," otherwise known as "art for art's sake" (40). [\(back\)](#)
8. Lord Byron, for example, was notorious for his criticism of the greed within the literary market. In a letter to his publisher John Murray, for instance, he expresses his anger over the fact that his works were being "pirated" out, and in the course of voicing his outrage, he criticizes the established literary booksellers and managers: "It is hard that I should have all the buffoons in Britain to deal with—*pirates* who *will* publish, and *players* who *will* act—when there are thousands of worthy and able men who can get neither bookseller nor manager for love nor money" (117). In a letter to Samuel Rogers, William Wordsworth also voices his lack of respect for the bookseller: "I do not look for much advantage either to Mr. M., or any other bookseller with whom I may treat, and for still less to myself, but I assure you that I would a thousand times rather that not a verse of mine should ever enter the press again, than to allow any of them to say that I was, to the amount of the strength of a hair, dependent upon their countenance, consideration, or patronage" (327). [\(back\)](#)
9. Andrew Motion argues in his 1997 biography—Keats—that the portrait that Shelley's *Adonis* paints is "an archetype—not someone who had suffered uniquely, but someone who represented all artists oppressed by reactionary regimes" (571). [\(back\)](#)