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Peter Selawsky
Occidental College

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Peter Selawsky
Prof. Stocking
Senior Comprehensives

Absent Divinity: Pindaric Mode in the Odes of Percy Bysshe Shelley

The early nineteenth century saw the revival of the ode as a major subgenre within English lyric poetry. At the height of the Romantic movement (1798-1830), Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth and others experimented with the ode's usage to a degree unseen since its introduction into the English language. Critics have often assumed that the popularity of the ode among Romantic poets can be solely attributed to the laxity of structure and heightened emotion the form permits. Scholars who have attempted to define poetic modes solely through inflexible formal distinctions frequently propound this view; Robert Beum and Karl Shapiro's *Prosody Handbook* determines that "it is difficult to say what an ode is. One is tempted to describe it as a poem of some length which does not follow any of the other conventional forms." (Beum 128). More specifically regarding the Romantic period, they claim: "Ode forms are valued, not because of their classical origin, but because they can be employed with a certain looseness...and also felt to resemble the 'pulsations' of intense feeling." (162-163).

Despite this condescending dismissal of any possibility of formal poetic rigor in the genre, the Romantics did not create the ode in a poetic vacuum and were far more familiar with (and made better use of) their classical antecedents than this sort of scholarship admits. The Romantic ode grew out of an English lyric tradition that was deeply attuned to the classics. In particular, the odes of Percy Bysshe Shelley are deeply conscious of their Pindaric origins and may be simultaneously viewed as imitations,

interpretations, and innovations of the form and content of their predecessors. A cursory examination of Shelley's "Ode to Naples" is sufficient to determine that Shelley had Pindar in mind in at least one instance while writing his odes, as the form of the ode clearly resembles the strictly ordered Pindaric model of strophe, antistrophe, and epode. In his essay "Shelley's First Pythian," Michael Erkelenz demonstrates several clear formal and thematic connections between Pindar's "Pythian 1" and Shelley's "Ode To Naples." Shelley studied Greek extensively at Oxford—one of his best-known works, *Prometheus Unbound*, was inspired by Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, and he also produced a translation of Euripides' *Cyclops*. Shelley was already familiar with Pindar when he wrote his own odes, and his debt is readily apparent in "Ode To Naples."

Unlike virtually every other major Romantic ode, "Ode to Naples" calls clear attention to the structural influence of Pindar, and by extension, his thematic influence. However, as we will see later, Shelley's overt departure from the traditional Pindaric order of stanzas suggests that he may depart in some way from Pindaric thought as well. Since Shelley is not content to merely reproduce the form of his predecessor, his "Ode to Naples" may be seen less as an imitation of Pindar than a creative response to the context of his thought. Shelley did not employ Pindaric ode as license for unrestrained torrents of emotion. Rather, his odes and other short poems of address represent a disciplined study of and creative response to Pindar's work, a translation of Pindaric praxis into modern political, cultural, and intellectual circumstances.

Pindaric ode's occasional praise of the wealthy sponsors of the victorious athlete has often been interpreted as mere flattery, reducing the essence of Pindar's poetry to its function as a political or social stabilizer that ossifies the civic order: "that function, it has

been determined with almost universal consent, was the maintenance and stabilization of a certain socio-political order—more often than not an aristocratic one” (Stocking 1). William Fitzgerald acknowledges that this may be the first reaction of many readers who consider an initiation into Pindar problematic: “Before we commit ourselves to the task of reading Pindar, we may well ask, ‘Why should we care about this hired praiser of aristocratic athletes?’” (Fitzgerald ix). According to such readings, what is most significant about Pindaric ode is its inherently undemocratic nature. Ode serves as a mouthpiece for tyranny by associating the glory of the ancient Olympic victor with the sovereignty of the tyrant, and its emphasis on a heroic victor who transcends the limitations of lesser men is unegalitarian and destructive in the context of the larger community. Stocking, however, argues that despite the emphasis many scholars have placed on Pindaric ode as a vehicle for the gathering of political authority and legitimacy, when viewed from the perspective of Bataille’s “general economy” (the claim that while we pretend the purpose of our social behaviors is to accumulate energies, we only save up in order to squander and expend), Pindaric ode is revealed as an instrument for a sacred excess that maintains true community. The encomiastic¹ function of the Pindaric ode ultimately places the victor at the center of an intoxicating *ekstasis* that dissolves modern notions of individualism and autonomous subjectivity.

The excessive nature of Pindaric ode is most overtly demonstrated in Pindar’s form and style—his tendency to pile descriptions, lists of attributes, examples, and

¹ The Greek understanding of the encomiastic is connected to the social activity of *komos*, in which “a crowd of inebriated, wreath-crowned revelers would break forth from their private gathering to issue out onto the street, whence they would sing in noisy procession to the homes of friends and neighbors and look to gain admittance there...according to Pindar, *komos* ought to be a regular feature of victory celebration...more interestingly...Pindar also frequently describes victory ode *itself* as a *komos*... “(Stocking 2).

obscure mythological references upon each other overwhelms many readers in its exuberance, and his circular, strophic structure allows him to roll out torrents of ceaseless, self-renewing verse. Contextually, Pindar's victory odes celebrate and protect the expenditure of the victor who risks his self-possession by surrendering to the athletic event and the divine—he becomes a vessel for sacred forces that are far beyond his limited autonomy. Pindar's insistence that mortal glory is fleeting and wholly dependent on the goodwill of the divine is far removed from the glorification of a magnified subject who exploits Pindar's poetry for his own political ends. In defeat or failure, the athlete is confronted with his own calculable limitation, and the community is convinced that some risks are not worth taking: "there is something one must hold oneself back from" (Stocking 7). Out of loss, the universe is reduced to terms of loss and gain: "Money, money makes the man, said the man who lost all his possessions and friends!" (Pindar Isthmian 2). This attitude is antithetical to that of the athlete, who "places her existence upon grounds that one cannot finally calculate. We call this risk..." (Stocking 7), and according to Pindar, "great risk does not seize hold of the cowardly man" (Pindar Olympian 1 82).

But in the moment of victory, the community is confronted with an "incalculable other" (quoted by Stocking 7) whose achievements temporarily liberate it from the anxieties of finitude and temporality: "If I am no longer concerned about what will be, but about what is, what reason do I have to keep anything in reserve?" (*ibid*). In the moment of celebration, the victor becomes a bridge between the community and the sacred—we release whatever energies we have gathered, dissolving our subjectivity in the face of the limitless other just as the athlete has done in the face of the divine. If, as

Fitzgerald claims, “mortals participate in immortality by being its opposite pole” (Fitzgerald 3), the victorious athlete temporarily represents the middle ground. He represents an other that is too far beyond us to be incorporated into any one subject’s personal, homogenizing system.

With the restoration of infinite possibility, we squander our energies through our relation to the victor. Thus, Pindar’s odes preserve the possibility of something more than mere preservation through the ritualization of spontaneous overflow. Once time reasserts itself, the moment of ecstasy fades away, and the victor and audience feel an impulse towards conservation. By attempting to freeze the moment of pure squandering in a sort of temporal stasis, the audience attempts to hold on to the positive results of excess even while altering its inherent spontaneity. Yet the ode remains as something outside the bounds of temporality, encouraging a transmission of past glory from Pindar’s time to the present day and protecting the possibility of expenditure against satiety. In this reading, Pindar’s recurrent call for moral restraint is understood as a reminder to not let oneself become self-satisfied, bloated, and acquisitive: “as we receive our being from the Other, the sacredness of the Other, we must withhold ourselves from all temptation to technologize the Other—to take only what we can receive; because taking implies calculation, objectification: all those qualities by which we lose our being-in-relation” (Stocking 9). To strive for more than the gods have allotted you is to objectify yourself and others, extinguishing the possibility of joy. Friedrich Nietzsche offers an aphorism directly inspired by Pindar’s Second Pythian that is relevant in this context: “You should become who you are” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 152). Nietzsche’s autobiography,

Ecce Homo: How Becomes What One Is fulfills the promise of its title through further elaboration:

That one becomes what one is presupposes that one does not have the remotest idea what one is...the blunders of life...the seriousness squandered on tasks which lie outside the task...have their own meaning and value. They are an expression of a great sagacity, even the supreme sagacity: where *nosce te ipsum* [know thyself] would be the recipe for destruction; self-forgetfulness, self-misunderstanding, self-dimuntion, self-narrowing, mediocratizing becomes reason itself. (quoted by Bishop 57).

Hamilton interprets Nietzsche's vague comprehensibility, which turns out to be precisely the point: "the call to become what you are suggests a resistance to the forces of reason, a rejection of the expropriating forces that render you comprehensible (for another) and therefore robbed of life" (Hamilton 62-63). Ultimately, Pindar denies our tendency towards self-definition or objectification by holding "us in a state of indefinite suspension" (Stocking 10)—when mortals are simultaneously magnified and diminished, everything and nothing, they are no longer subject to the limitations that are inherent in definition:

"There is one race of men, one race of gods; and from a single mother we both draw our breath. But all allotted power divides us: man is nothing, but for the gods the bronze sky endures as a secure home forever. Nevertheless, we bear some resemblance to the immortals, either in greatness of mind or in nature, although we do not know, by day or by night, towards what goal fortune has written that we should run..." (Pindar *Nemean 6* 1-8).

Here and elsewhere, Pindar's dizzying notions of self refuse to allow humanity a comfortable knowledge that might lead to the feeling that we possess something stable to be preserved. However, Pindar's shifts in hierarchical perspective also imply that we would be equally mistaken to assume that we are too insignificant have any energies to offer up for expenditure. We are left knowing virtually nothing about ourselves, and may even be tempted to view the individual as nothing—except for the fact that higher forces

that do not belong to the self pass through it in occasional moments of inspiration, glory, or victory that connect us to the gods. As Pindar famously expresses the ostensible paradox in the final epode of Pythian 8: “Creatures of a day! What is someone? What is no one? A dream of a shadow/is man. But whenever Zeus-given brightness comes,/a shining light rests upon men, and a gentle life (95-97).” Among a series of short poems loosely connected to the long love poem *Epipsychidion*, Shelley offers a fragment dedicated to an anonymous lover that alludes to the profound content of this passage. Shelley begins by insisting upon diminishing his object of address: “I will not, as most dedicators do,/Assure myself and all the world and you,/That you are faultless (*Fragments Connected With “Epipsychidion”, 120-122*)”, and ultimately asks an overtly Pindaric question:

Alas! what are we? Clouds
 Driven by the wind in warring multitudes,
 Which rain into the bosom of the earth,
 And rise again, and in our death and birth,
 And through our restless life, take as from heaven
 Hues which are not our own, but which are given,
 And then withdrawn, and with inconstant glance
 Flash from the spirit to the countenance.
 There is a Power, a Love, a Joy, a God
 Which makes in mortal hearts its brief abode,
 A Pythian exhalation, which inspires
 Love, only love--a wind which o'er the wires
 Of the soul's giant harp
 There is a mood which language faints beneath;
 You feel it striding, as Almighty Death
 His bloodless steed... (126-141)

With this context in mind, we may begin to account for the “looseness” and “pulsations” Buem and Shapiro discover in the English Romantic ode—what they deem a limp and thoughtless excessiveness may be excessive by design if it has its roots in the Pindaric. In other words, since excess is a historical current that runs through the ode from Pindar to Shelley, what Buem and Shapiro seem to be objecting to is non-Horatian

ode. In fact, the modern notion that the Romantic ode can be characterized by lack of restraint due to its disregard of Classical antecedents derives from a common Classical perception of a single Classical model. The originator of the ode has historically been perceived as both “loose” and “pulsating” due almost entirely to Horace’s partial poetic account. The Roman poet’s assertions that “A poet aspiring to write Pindarically/Needs wings of wax such as Daedalus made” (Horace IV.2 1-2) and “Pindar, like a rapid mountain stream/ Bursting its banks after torrential rain,/Boiling, seething, rushes on full steam/ Ahead” (5-8) “did much to establish Pindar’s reputation for lawless, irrational impetuosity. At the same time, Horace’s more meditative and inward-looking odes offered an alternative model” (Erkelenz 407). Regarding the historical conception of Pindar, Fitzgerald writes: “Pindar has been seen as the inspired but wanton genius par excellence...As the ancient precedent for a poetry dictated by inspiration rather than rules, he has...provided the modern poet with a model and authority for breaking the ‘classical’ mold” (Fitzgerald ix).

Later, Fitzgerald calls attention to what he terms “a distinct paradox (139)” —“the Pindaric has traditionally been regarded as the appropriate form in which to celebrate formal occasions” yet “the Pindaric has been seen as the type of the irregular, lawless poem (*ibid*).” Despite this, Fitzgerald argues that “the metrical pattern and the formalized dance that traditionally accompanied it [Pindaric ode] celebrate the closed order [the Apollonian] to which Pindar appeals at the beginning of Pythian 1 (*ibid*).” Some historical literary figures emphasized Pindar’s rigorous formality—the Restoration playwright and poet William Congreve famously declared that “there is nothing more regular than the odes of Pindar”—but such opinions were the exception, not the rule. In

pre-Romantic England, the alleged distinction between the Pindaric and the Horatian was widely accepted by the educated classes. Because he wrote in Latin, Horace's odes were considered canonical and formally standard, but Abraham Cowley's imitations and loose translations of Pindaric ode provided the most direct access to Pindar for those who did not read Ancient Greek.

The institution of the ode as a major form in English lyric poetry came relatively late, but its contemporaneous innovators established a Pindaric and a Horatian model simultaneously. "In 1629 both the acknowledged reigning monarch of English poetry and his then obscure heir apparent—Ben Jonson and John Milton—composed masterpieces in the form" (Curran 64). While Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" reveals the influence of Horace, Jonson's "To the Immortal Memory and Friendship of That Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison" is explicitly Pindaric. By dedicating his ode to a pair of friends, one dead and one living, Jonson recalls the myth of the stellified Gemini twins Kastor and Polydeukes, a subject Pindar thoroughly explores in *Nemean 10*. Jonson's ode demonstrates a deep appreciation of and insight into Pindaric thought. For example, "in a remarkably dense wordplay, Johnson refers to Cary and Morison as 'these twi-/Lights, the Dioscuri'" (92-93); the separated prefix, twi-, makes the lights both bright (double, twin) and obscure (twilight), and the word twilight is played against the translingually parallel Di-oscuri (double-dark), once again linking light and dark" (Fitzgerald 5). To Fitzgerald, this implies that Jonson was conscious of Pindar's method in *Nemean 10* (and indeed all of his victory odes). For Pindar and Jonson, "the Dioscuri represent the divided status of agonistic man in the precarious moment when the human touches the divine" (4-5).

Ultimately, a tension in the English conception of the ode developed from the divergence between the ruminative, personal, and moralistic Horatian or Miltonic style and Cowley's vigorous but purposefully obscure adaptations of Pindaric ode. Unlike Jonson, Cowley decided against replicating Pindaric structure in his "Pindarique" imitations. Influenced by Horace's warnings that a poet who imitates the father of the ode is sure to resemble Icarus in flying too close to the sun, he declared that "If a man should undertake to translate Pindar word for word, it would be thought that one mad man had translated another" (quoted by Hamilton 177). John T. Hamilton associates the "threat of madness with the threat of losing one's authorial voice" and claims "Cowley's method is essentially a way of giving Pindar back his voice. Literalism... would have de-Pindarized Pindar" (*ibid*). Cowley's imitation of Horace's ode on Pindar, "The Praise of Pindar," provides a summary of the argument: "Pindar is imitable by none;/The Pheonix Pindar is a vast Species alone./Who e're but Daedalus with waxen wings could fly/And neither sink too low, nor soar too high?/What could he who follow'd claim,/But of vain boldness unhappy fame,/And by his fall a Sea to name?" (quoted by Hamilton 175).

However, the lack of restrictions Cowley placed upon English versions of Pindaric ode led to a widespread assumption that Horace was correct in his assessment: Pindaric odes lacked coherent form, and "whatever in matter and style Horace was not...the Cowleyan Pindarick came to be" (Curran 65). According to Curran, the English ode began to blend the "solitary voice" of the Horatian speaker with "the Pindaric reach for the infinite (*ibid*)." This amalgamation of sources and styles was developed by pre-Romantics like Thomas Gray and William Collins and inherited by the Romantic generation. One critic claims "the point in British literary history when the sense of the

traditional uses and conventions of the ode coalesces...is the late eighteenth century. The Romantic ode owes much of its greatness to its bearing the burden of that collective history.” (Curran 63). Nowhere is this demonstrated so clearly as in Shelley’s odes.

Like Pindaric ode, Shelley’s odes investigate the possibility that humanity can be opened up to expenditure in the face of the sacred. The fundamental experience for the reader of his odes is one of excess. Shelley consistently utilizes the Pindaric techniques of overwhelming the reader with obscure allusions, uncertain or constantly shifting significance, and poetic sentences or ideas that are so prolonged or complex the reader often loses track of the vertiginous progression of the thought. The obscurity and difficulty of Shelley’s verse recalls Voltaire’s comic apostrophe to Pindar: “You who skillfully modulate/Verses that no one understands/And that must always be admired” (quoted by Hamilton 2). For example, the first stanza of “Ode to the West Wind” (“O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being” (Shelley, Ode to the West Wind 1)) is composed of fourteen lines but only one sentence. While the sentence’s subject (the West Wind) is supplied immediately, the reader must hold Shelley’s stream of descriptive digressions in a sort of stasis until the conclusion of the stanza, which finally provides an imperative verb that relates back to the subject: “hear, O hear!” (14). Yet while “Ode to the West Wind” provides an excellent example of Shelley’s Pindaric excess and obscurity, Shelley’s “Ode to Naples” may demonstrate the most overt connection to Pindaric form, style, and content of any of his works.

In his essay “Shelley’s First Pythian,” Michael Erkelenz discovers a series of clear connections between “Ode to Naples” and Pindar’s Pythian 1 and comes to the conclusion that Shelley’s ode functions as a recalling of or creative response to Pindar. In

doing so, Erkelenz describes “Ode to Naples” as “a product of...Romantic Hellenism: an empirically based ‘rediscovery of Greece’...which since the Renaissance had been seen primarily through Roman eyes” (Erkelenz 407). Indeed, while many of Shelley’s Romantic contemporaries pursued a Horatian model when composing their odes, the “Ode to Naples” is written according to a Pindaric model: “it is public, politically topical, and encomiastic.” (Erkelenz 407-408). Due to these qualities, Shelley’s odes posit a relationship between humanity and the divine that is absent in many of the private and individual (Horatian) odes of his era.

Erkelenz argues that “‘Pythian 1’ stands out among Pindar’s odes for the special emphasis it places on celebrating a city. Although Hieron’s victory in the Pythian chariot race...is the immediate occasion of the ode, this victory has significance...only in relation to Hieron’s founding of Aitna six years earlier” (Erkelenz 395). In protecting Aitna from the tyranny of the Phoenicians and Etruscans, Hieron overcomes external threats to his people’s freedom;² in establishing “divinely fashioned freedom under the laws of Hyllos’ rule” (Pindar, Pythian 1 61-62) he ensures his city’s internal stability. Within this context, the victory of a chariot team sponsored by Hieron can be understood less as an athletic event and more as a favorable omen for Aitna, which requires the goodwill of the gods to endure at the base of the active volcano Mount Aetna. In Pindar’s ode, the infamous “Typhos the hundred-headed” (16) is imprisoned by the gods within Aetna, “from whose depths belch forth holiest springs of unapproachable fire; during the days rivers of lava pour forth a blazing stream of smoke, but in times of darkness a rolling red flame carries rocks into the deep expanse of the sea with a crash...” (21-24).

² Hieron “cast their [the enemy’s] youth from their swiftly sailing ships into the sea and delivered Hellas from grievous slavery”(Pindar 74-75).

Hieron may triumph over his external enemies in a political context, but his colony is helpless against such a monster without the blessing of the divine. The ultimate effect of “Pythian 1” is to remind its audience that mortal power is fleeting, and that whatever glory we may personally win is not truly our own: “For from the gods come all the means for human achievements” (41).

The great Hieron is ultimately compared to the famous archer Philoktetes, who was bitten by a poisonous snake and was abandoned to suffer on a remote island by the Greek armies attacking Troy due to the stench of his rotting wounds. When his comrades finally retrieved him because of a prophecy that claimed Troy would fall to his bow, he “destroyed Priam’s city and ended the Danaans’ toils; he walked with flesh infirm, but it was the work of destiny...” (54-55). Throughout his odes, Pindar insists that we confront the fact that there are forces far greater than the political—Hieron will temporarily overcome mortal contingencies, but only through the blessing of the insurmountable and the uncontrollable—even in his victory success does not belong to him alone. If Hieron recalls Philoktetes in his glory, he also recalls him in his mortality and relative weakness. The point more broadly concerns humanity as a whole—we all walk with flesh infirm, and our triumphs are the work of destiny. This understanding of mortal accomplishments is applied to both political and athletic achievements.

Just as Pindar treats the “terrible springs” (Pythian 1 25) of Aitna as a looming, potentially catastrophic presence throughout his ode, Shelley begins his celebration of Naples’ newfound political freedom³ with a somber recollection of standing alone in the ruins of volcanic Pompeii: “I stood within the city disinterred;/And heard the autumnal

³ Shelley wrote “Ode To Naples” after a popular uprising led to the temporary formation of a constitutional monarchy.

leaves like light footfalls/Of spirits passing through the streets; and heard/The Mountain's slumberous voice at intervals/Thrill through those roofless halls..." (Ode to Naples 1-5).

The sense of danger lurking dormant beneath the surface of things in both Shelley and Pindar serves as a warning to rulers or nations that might prove ungrateful and therefore unworthy of the blessings they have received: "The alternating sounds of the 'autumnal leaves' and the 'mountain's slumberous voice' bring to mind the great catastrophe of the past and portend the possibility of an equally great catastrophe to come" (Erkelenz 403). Yet while the uncontested force of a destructive natural world looms over Aitna and Naples, Shelley and Pindar do not ignore the prospect of foreign invasion. While Hieron's Aitna is in constant danger of barbarian invasion, Erkelenz notes that historically, "the viability of the new order at Naples was even more doubtful than that of the new order at Aitna." (402). In his reading, the monarchical Austrian "Anarchs of the North" (Ode to Naples 137) are equated to the northern barbarians who plagued ancient Greece. Unfortunately for Naples, these modern barbarians wield political influence and military power. Their potential devastation of Naples is illustrated with volcanic imagery, conflating blood with fire and political opposition with the potential hostility of the natural and the divine: "They come; the fields they tread look black and hoary/With fire—from their red feet the streams run gory" (147-148).

While Shelley is sometimes described as a purely political poet due to his controversial opinions, tumultuous personal life, and many shorter poems condemning tyranny, monarchy, and injustice, Shelley's odes, like Pindar's, do not treat political reform as an end in itself. "Ode To Naples" is clearly, among other things, a work of

propaganda targeting British public opinion. As Erkelenz notes, its most overt contextual connection to Pindar's Pythian 1 lies in the fact that:

“The ‘Ode to Naples’ follows Pindar in celebrating the achievements of a city under threat. Like the city...Hieron had founded on the slopes of Aetna, Naples had recently undergone a political reconstitution... Yet...Naples also remained subject to the very forces of chaos it had banished. As internal dissension and barbarian invasion threatened Aitna, Austria and absolutism threatened Naples. Typhos had been bound, not destroyed” (Erkelenz 394).

Yet the contemporary appeal of “Ode to Naples” lies in its artistic merit, not its value as a document expressing one reaction to a particular historical event. To read Shelley's ode as exclusively political because it celebrates an idealized *polis* seems to be a superficial interpretation that ignores the higher forces that make political freedom possible within the context of the ode. Like Pindar, Shelley makes clear distinctions (perhaps most notably in “Mont Blanc”⁴) between earthly, political power and inscrutable, transcendent Power, contrasting the tyrannical Italian city-states ruled “by power” (Shelley, Ode to Naples 121) with a silence that “weighed on their [leaves'] life; even as the Power divine/Which then lulled all things, brooded upon mine” (21-22). Even within the overtly political “Ode To Naples,” Shelley ultimately views political reform as a necessary step for approaching “man's high hope and unextinct desire,/The instrument to work thy [the Spirit of Beauty's] will divine!” (168-169). Both Shelley and Pindar believe that justice and political freedom are desirable, but ultimately only worthwhile insofar as they allow the possibility of joyous celebration or beauty—forces that justify the utility of the political through their existence as something beyond it. This is reminiscent of Georges

⁴ Compare “Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power/Have piled: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,/A city of death” (103-105) to the Ravine of Arve, an “awful scene/Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down/From the ice gulphs that gird his secret throne” (15-17). As in “Ode to Naples”, the capitalization or lack thereof renders Shelley's distinction relatively unambiguous.

Bataille's notion of equality and justice in *The Accursed Share*: "Without having anything against justice...one may be allowed to point out that here the word conceals the profound truth of its contrary, which is precisely freedom..." (Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 38). Bataille's freedom is not a freedom *from* negative forces like tyranny, but a freedom *to* celebration and expenditure. Justice fails as soon as it limits the potential for a joyous excess that may seem illogical from the perspective of the forces of conservation.

The theme of music (and by extension, lyric poetry) as a harmonizing force of justice is a further point of comparison between Shelley and Pindar's odes. Pindar begins his ode with a tribute to the melodies of Apollo's "Golden Lyre" (Pythian 1, 1), which have the power to "quench even the warring thunderbolt of ever flowing fire" (5-6). By letting the sacred energies given by Apollo issue back into the world through the medium of the lyre or the lyric, the musician and the poet fulfill their position within a divine circuitry so well that even the gods are sated: "powerful Ares puts aside his sharp-pointed spears and delights his heart in sleep" (10-12).

Shelley's treatment of music in "Ode to Naples" is extremely complex, as virtually every stanza of his ode investigates a different aspect of the relationship between music and dissonance, sound and silence. Sailing on the Bay of Naples, Shelley feels the unseen and unheard presence of "A spirit of deep emotion/From the unknown graves/Of the dead kings of Melody" (37-39). The enemies of Naples are portrayed through the menacing cacophony of their advance, as "Dissonant threats kill Silence far away" (134): "Hear ye the march as of the Earth-born Forms/Arrayed against the ever-living Gods?/The crash and darkness of a thousand storms/Bursting their inaccessible abodes/Of crags and thunder-clouds?" (127-131). Such dissonance is juxtaposed with the

infectious and democratizing music of political rebellion which inspired Naples: “Didst thou not start to hear Spain’s thrilling paean/From land to land re-echoed solemnly,/Till silence became music?” (102-104).

Yet even this positive portrayal of earthly music seems insignificant when compared to a toneless divine “voice” that goes as far beyond music in its capacity to express incommunicable emotion as music goes beyond language⁵: “The oracular thunder penetrating shook/The listening soul in my suspended blood;/I felt that Earth out of her deep heart spoke--/I felt, but heard not...” (6-9). Here, the “Mountain’s slumberous voice” (5) is reminiscent of the voice of the titular mountain in “Mont Blanc”: “Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal/Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood/By all, but which the wise, and great, and good/Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel” (Mont Blanc 80-83). One difference between these two passages is the “slumberous” nature of Vesuvius’ voice, which may be a reference to the sleeping Ares and dormant Typhos in Pindar. This suggests that, from a mortal perspective, the revelations of the “oracular thunder” may not impart purely benevolent knowledge—the “deep heart” of Earth is the home of Typhos, and the wisdom it reveals through its “oracular thunder” is the terrifying truth of man’s insignificance with the natural and supernatural order.

While Pindaric music springs from a single sacred source, the sounds of Shelley’s ode are so diverse in origin that their underlying cause appears to be absent or indefinable. In this way, the poet finds that his own voice is ecstatically overwhelmed by a prophetic force speaking through him that he can neither comprehend nor identify:

“Louder and louder, gathering round, there wandered/Over the oracular woods and divine

⁵ See one of Shelley’s many fragments entitled “To ----”: “Music, when soft voices die,/Vibrates in the memory.” (CITE)

sea/Prophesyings which grew articulate--/They seize me—I must speak them!—be they fate!” (Ode to Naples 47-50). This gesture seems to mark the end of the stagnation and personal focus of the ode’s two introductory epodes, allowing the poem to blossom into a distinctly Pindaric celebration of a city and its political victory.

However, a close reading of “Ode to Naples” also highlights clear differences between Pindar and Shelley. Although “Ode to Naples” can be understood as a modern imitation and interpretation of “Pythian 1” due to the poems’ similarities of theme and tone, Shelley’s formal imitations of and deviations from Pindar are also worth considering. While Shelley utilizes Pindaric form, he does not mindlessly reproduce it. Instead, Shelley borrows the traditional structure of the Pindaric ode—strophe followed by antistrophe followed by epode, or in Ben Jonson’s translation of the terms into English, turn, counter-turn, and stand—and reshapes it in peculiar ways. In a radical alteration of traditional structure, Shelley begins his ode with two epodes (typically the conclusion or “standing point” of the ode) that describe the motionless, stifling, and divinely inhuman silence of the ruins of Pompeii reanimated by an invigorating wind. From this rejuvenation of what seemed stagnant, Naples blossoms in two subsequent strophes: “Naples! thou Heart of men which ever pantest/Naked, beneath the lidless eye of Heaven!” (51-52). These strophes are immediately followed by four antistrophes that compare the unbound Naples to enemy nations that are still ruled by tyrants and urge the reader (or some greater unseen power) to “Strip every impious gawd, rend/Error veil by veil”(92-93). Shelley then concludes his ode with two more epodes. The first depicts Naples’ enemies on the march and seems to summarize the development of Shelley’s antistrophes, bringing them to a logical conclusion; the second serves as an even more

extravagant exaltation of the city than his strophes. Erkelenz suggests that the poem's final stanza, with its invocation of the "Spirit of Beauty" (155) and his "harmonizing ardours" (165) "addresses a hymn to Apollo, calling upon the god to bring his powers to the aid of the constitutionalists" (Erkelenz 405).

The use of such an elaborate form serves several purposes for Shelley. Its cyclical structure goes beyond the conventional repetition of rhyme and meter, both in terms of the reiteration of its tripartite pattern and its return to its original point through antistrophe, and is appropriate for a poem that takes the rebirth of a city (and the possibility that an antagonistic power will raze it once again) as its subject. Regarding the cyclical nature of Pindaric ode, Beum and Shapiro observe that "The Greek chorus chanted the strophe as they moved across the stage, the antistrophe as they returned to their original position, and the epode as they then stood in the original position" (Beum 129). As we will see, Shelley would experiment further with the significance of cyclical form by employing Dante's *terza rima* in his "Ode to the West Wind." Also, unlike virtually every other major Romantic ode, "Ode to Naples" calls clear attention to the structural influence of Pindar, and by extension, his thematic influence. Similarly, Shelley's departure from the traditional Pindaric order of stanzas suggests that he may partially depart from Pindaric thought as well. One obvious contrast between Pindar and Shelley is that Shelley's odes are not addressed to athletic victors. This may lead us to ask the difficult question of what, if anything, defines Shelley's objects of apostrophe.

A close investigation of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" may help elucidate some of the central differences between Shelley and Pindar's modes of address. Although Shelley does not utilize Pindaric form in "Ode to the West Wind," he makes the unusual

decision to employ the *terza rima* rhyme scheme, a device he adopted from Dante. The *terza rima* separates the larger stanzas that serve as sections of the poem into smaller units of three lines. Within these tercets, only the first and third lines end in a connected rhyme, but the last sound of the second line is only temporarily forgotten, as it is reencountered as the dominant rhyme of the next group of lines. This introduces the concepts of fluidity and interconnectedness into the structure of the poem, since no tercet can be fully appreciated or understood on its own. Because everything in “Ode to the West Wind” is dependent upon what surrounds it, it is difficult to determine where a thought begins or ends, suspending the reader in a state of perpetual motion. Each new rhyme sound is established as something fallow, insignificant, singular, and interior in one tercet before emerging as the dominant sound of the subsequent tercet. In this way, the organization of the *terza rima* contains the idea of something becoming excessive through a rebirth—larger or more significant than it was before. Yet just as a rhyme sound seems to blossom, it withers away, never to return.

This formal quality of “Ode to the West Wind” could not be more appropriate, as it is precisely this sort of internal struggle that the speaker of the poem embodies in his attempts to achieve the transcendental freedom of the wind, his inevitable failures, and his determination to continue striving for an ideal he may never reach. Like the *terza rima*, the West Wind is a force of motion and resuscitation—an “unseen presence” (Ode to the West Wind 2) that nonetheless is indisputably the active agent in the poem, the “Destroyer and preserver” (14) that promotes natural rebirth by blowing away the dead and stimulating the new. Given that the wind is the embodiment of such power, it makes perfect sense that the speaker of “Ode to the West Wind” (who first refers to himself in

the fourth stanza, once the wind's powers are established) would strive towards a harmonious union with the wind, just as the Pindaric victor is temporarily united with the divine. Indeed, the temporal element of "Ode to the West Wind" is the ultimate source of the gap between the poem's subject and object, which are suspended in a strangely unstable equipoise that vacillates between equivalence and hierarchy.

Through the epic and exhausting experience of the first three stanzas, the wind is revealed as a force that transcends time. The accumulation of the wind's attributes in the first three stanzas of the ode renders the wind infinite and incalculable. The ode's speaker recognizes that he is nothing in comparison to the wind, and therefore seeks to imitate the natural objects the wind overwhelms, controls, and destroys: "If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;/If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;/A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share/The impulse of thy strength..." (43-46). By acknowledging his own insignificance, the speaker hopes he will become significant through sharing "the impulse of thy strength." In one of the ode's most striking images, the speaker ultimately demands that the wind "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:/What if my leaves are falling like its own!/The tumult of thy mighty harmonies/Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,/Sweet though in sadness..." (57-61). In other words, the speaker wants to serve as a instrument that can give voice to the wind's majesty—even if the process of being played breaks the instrument, shedding the leaves (life) of the subject, the music that is made possible by this breaking will be more divine, joyous, and beautiful than anything the subject could have composed on his own. In the moment of encounter with the incalculable other, the subject loses his anxiety for the future and allows himself to be consumed and squandered ("what if my leaves are falling?").

It is this feeling of ecstasy and dissolution that creates the “deep, autumnal tone” that renders the melody so “sweet” in its “sadness.” Mortal nothingness turns out to be as beautiful as anything eternal through the momentary gleam of its consumption; death is now understood as a Bataillean technology that opens up the waste of time. In the narrative present of “Ode to the West Wind,” the time when the subject could associate himself with the wind has passed, just as the glory of the athlete is proven to be fleeting with the reassertion of temporality: “If even/I were as in my boyhood, and could be/The comrade of thy wanderings/Over heaven, when to outstrip thy skiey speed/Scarce seemed a vision...” (47-51). There was once an idealized time when time seemed infinite and the speaker seemed lifted beyond his limitations and contingencies through his connection to the transcendent.

Yet the inevitable imposition of temporal horizontality wrecks the vertical reach towards a higher power. Writing on Pindaric ode, William Fitzgerald claims that “Like the poet’s, the victor’s moment of vertical glory is inscribed in a horizontal tradition that stretches back into the mythical past” (Fitzgerald 53). Something similar occurs in “Ode to the West Wind,” as Shelley maintains a recurring shift between a rising that strives to render the subject equivalent to the infinite and a falling that drops us back to a grounded mortality: “O! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!/I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!/A *heavy weight of hours* has chained and bowed/One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud...” (Ode to the West Wind 53-56, my emphasis). Here, the narrator desires nothing less than total freedom of motion—he begs to be lifted to the transcendental heights the wind represents, but is rendered earthbound by the material and temporal anxieties he cannot escape. This is reinforced by the fact that the lines regarding “the heavy weight of

hours” make up the closing couplet of the fourth stanza, formally closing off the potentiality promised by the *terza rima*. Thus, both the structure and the language of the couplet cast doubt on the possibility that the speaker will ever be able to achieve unity with the higher principle the wind represents. For humanity, time is the force that induces anxiety due to its myriad unpredictability, which necessitates calculations for the future that will shrink the individual in his or her attempt to shrink the world; and its singular predictability—it will inevitably kill the individual.

Yet from the overarching perspective of the West Wind, time is regenerative. A germinating seed may appear dead, “like a corpse within its grave” (8), but it carries “living hues and odors” (12) within it that merely await the passage of time, which brings the force (“Thine azure sister of the Spring” (9)) that can continue the cyclical process of rebirth. While seeds represent potentiality, (like the inactive line of the *terza rima*) they are incapable of voluntary motion and require the autumn wind to act for them, transporting them “to their dark wintry bed”. (6) Consequently, the wind becomes the impetus for the continuation of earthly life through its deathless activity. Unlike Pindar, the object of address in Shelley’s odes is not a human attaining a heightened status through *komos*, but a mysterious, heightened presence that the human voice of the speaker tries and ultimately fails to approach. For mortals, there can be no apotheosis—a strophic rise is always accompanied by a parallel antistrophic sinking. Ultimately, the experience of reading Shelley’s odes mirrors the struggle of the subject of “Ode to the West Wind,” who tries but fails to fully comprehend the transcendent object of address. From the reader’s perspective, the ode is an object of potential knowledge that promises to unveil its profound secrets. Yet while the ode lifts the reader through the elevated

language of its verse, the reader sinks after his or her inevitable failure to penetrate its obscurity.

The characterization of the wind as an unreachable ideal that can never be fully understood but indisputably exists is reminiscent of the Transcendental quest for the ultimate truth of the “thing in itself,” the abstract explanation for the idea that while human understanding can never be free of its own limited perspective, there is a “reality” inherent in each object that remains beyond our knowledge. However, the dizzying shifts between subject and object that characterize “Ode to the West Wind” ultimately follow a Pindaric model by extending the impossibility of knowledge to the self. Speaking specifically about English ode, Hamilton argues: “As the most intense expression of subjectivity, lyric effects a turn inward that not only renders objective knowledge questionable, but also comes to split apart the thinking subject” (Hamilton 173). In Pindar, the exploration of the nature of subjectivity through an exposure of its limitations is achieved from an external perspective, as Pindar’s narrative voice seems to have already internalized its lessons. But in Shelley’s odes, the speaker’s subjective, personal attempt to overcome the inherent difficulties of subjectivity becomes the tension that drives the movement of the poem. “Ode to the West Wind” strives to blend a unity with the sacred that transcends temporality with an all too human fear of time. The discrepancy between these two impulses engenders the poem’s cyclical structure, which may be characterized by an attempted rise, an unavoidable fall, and a new approach that re-initiates the process. In Shelley’s odes, it is the subject, not the object of address, which strives for a divinity he cannot embody. Therefore, the subject’s natural object of address is a divine, inscrutable, and incalculable other.

Unlike Pindar, whose odes promise that humanity in its diversity of aspect may channel various manifestations of the divine, Shelley has inherited a monotheistic world where the divine is singular and coincident with reality, rendering it an alienating and inescapable system. His project repudiates the philosophical foundations of Christianity that modified the classical conception of the universe. Although the ancient Greek gods embody particular known principles, the fact that they are indistinguishable from humans introduces an element of unpredictability to their actions. In contrast to this, Shelley views the Christian god—who is defined by set principles of law and order—as a major source of objectification in the world. The intricate hierarchical structure emanating from a heavenly form of forms that characterizes Neoplatonism is terrifying from Shelley’s perspective because it accounts for every variable, positing nothing beyond a knowable and rational reality. For Shelley, the predetermined result of traditional monotheistic notions of providence is that the joy that springs from a connection to incalculable external forces is lost in the modern world.

Strangely, this seems to align Shelley’s metaphysical position with that of the father of Nominalism, the medieval thinker William of Ockham. Nominalism ruined the harmonious unity of Neoplatonism through its insistence that any system that seeks to define the sacred or limit its capacity for action even through divine laws is an insult to an infinite and unknowable God, who is “no longer seen as the craftsman who models the world on a rational plan, but as *an omnipotent poet whose mystically creative freedom foams forth* an endless variety of absolutely individual beings” (Gillespie 53, my emphasis). To Ockham, there are no hierarchical “forms” or “categories,” because God perceives the radical variety of everything beneath him. There are only discrete

individuals in a personal relationship with a dark power they cannot approach. Shelley's embrace of transcendence seems to preserve this particular personal relationship with the sacred, as well as maintaining the aspects "infinite" and "unknowable" even while removing the God they refer to. While Ockham proposes an absent center that cannot be comprehended, Shelley, as we will discover, proposes an absent center that is simply not there.

In the age of science, Rationalism, and Enlightenment, however, philosophers return to the notion that humanity has the capacity to fundamentally know and perfect the universe in its totality. Gillespie argues that Rene Descartes' famous "evil demon" who is able to reshape time and convince mortals of any deceit he imagines is none other than Ockham's God, who will not permit absolute truth to be known. Yet Descartes believes that while humanity cannot equal God in power and scope, each individual has the capacity to doubt through a refuting, negative will that is theoretically equal to God's—God may annihilate us, but he cannot compel obedience without our permission. For Descartes, this leads to a problem that Shelley may have embraced: "A purely negative will is independent, but it is also ignorant not merely of the world but of its own existence...The will's freedom through doubt is the freedom of the void" (45). In this way, Descartes' foundational epistemological principle—*Ego cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am—may be understood as a solution; "the basis for universal science with which he [Descartes] seeks to win back the earth for man by dethroning this arbitrary and irrational God and making man the master and possessor of nature" (36). For Shelley and the Romantics, the aim of such a philosophy is the final perversion of the sacred and the exact opposite of the divinity of Pindaric ode—a God "turned to human use" (57).

Shelley's position seems opposed to many of Descartes' intellectual contemporaries—perhaps most significantly, the system of Baruch Spinoza, who posits a wholly immanent God that can be approached through the close scientific study of nature and the objective world, since he is one with the “fixed and immutable order of things.”

While this background may provide much of the grounding for Shelley's thought, the radical political emphasis he clearly does not share with Pindar may be explained by many of the general social and historical developments of his time, which reflect Descartes' quest for the mastery of nature. The increasingly prevalent trend of industrialization removed the urban worker from a direct relationship from nature, creating better-organized systems of economic inequality. The transition from an agrarian economy determined by the movement of the sun to an urban economy where time could be commodified and sold in units had been underway for centuries, but the early nineteenth century accelerated this movement to an unprecedented degree. Following Descartes' model, the Age of Enlightenment valorized science as a tool for the discovery of pure, absolute, and universal knowledge. Also, as Michel Foucault claims in his study on the origins of the modern prison system, *Discipline and Punish*, new and less overtly coercive methods of discipline such as the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham's panopticon allowed each prisoner (and ultimately each member of society) to be surveyed as an individual. This led to an order in which newly autonomous individuals self-monitored their own behavior, rendering them “docile and knowable” (Foucault 172).

Shelley's perspective on such an oppressive social situation was not unique in its time. Reacting to the social, economic, and political conditions of industrial England, William Blake's “London” serves as a damning portrayal of an urban world that has been

ordered beyond repair. In the first lines of the poem, the narrator describes a journey taken through the city: “I wander thro’ each charter’d street,/Near where the charter’d Thames does flow/And mark in every face I meet/Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (1-4). The word “charter’d” contains several possible meanings. It might imply that the streets and river have been given liberty or independence by a political charter, but it also implies that they have been mapped and bound, or that they have been privatized by the crown. Taken together, these connotations suggest that the allegedly liberated objects of the poem have been ironically incorporated into a systemized order of things, and, to stretch the point, that it will be claimed by the forces of order that this subjugation is in fact a sort of freedom (perhaps the freedom of personal profit and the free market, or the illusion of free will). Predictably, such liberty only applies to those who remain within the strict confines of the system—streets may provide freedom of motion, but they are also clear limitations that define where the wandering narrator can and cannot go. Each face the narrator meets might believe that London is successfully operated through the actualization of each individual’s free will, but since their actions are predictable and limited, their “free will” renders them cogs in a machine. They are “marked” or defined as individuals through their collective “weakness” and “woe,” and (in Bataillean terms) their poverty provides them with an excellent reason for anxiety regarding the future.

However, the chartering of the Thames may be equally disturbing, since a river (throughout the development of both the classical ode and English Romanticism) is a natural force associated with an uncontrollable and generous excess that sustains life. To charter a river is to regulate its excess and therefore ensure that its “flow” does not spill over, containing it within its set demarcations as neatly as a system of chartered streets

contains its flow of chartered people. Interestingly, the incessant repetition found throughout this stanza calls attention to the poem itself as something ordered and bound through the highly formal restriction of language marked on a page. But the ambiguity introduced by these repetitions (which often highlight startling alternative definitions of words like “chartered” and “mark”) also serves to break these words out of the merely utilitarian order that the content of the poem subverts.

The rejection of the myth of a self-sustaining, perfectly ordered system maintained by an all-encompassing God becomes central to Shelley’s work and may be found in different forms throughout the poetry of his contemporaries. In the modern world, athletic victories can no longer instantiate joy or expenditure, because no victory can provide even a temporary ecstatic liberation from the objectified world. Only the absence of myth or a clearly present center (demonstrated by Shelley’s atheism) leaves room for true intimacy. In Bataille’s thought, “The absence of God is no longer a closure: it is the opening up to the infinite. The absence of God is greater, and more divine, than God (in the process I am no longer myself, but an absence of self; I await the sleight of hand that renders me immeasurably joyful)” (Bataille, *The Absence of Myth* 48). Bataille elaborates, positing a truly divine beauty in the death of myth just as Shelley’s speaker achieves a divine beauty (a “deep, autumnal tone”) through consumption: “today, because a myth is dead or dying, we see through it more easily than if it were alive: it is the need that perfects the transparency, the suffering which makes the suffering become joyful...the absence of myth is also a myth: the coldest, the purest, the only true myth” (*ibid*).

William Wordsworth's sonnet, "The world is too much with us," seems attuned to concern in characteristically Romantic terms, ultimately positing a nostalgic return to classicism as a pleasant but unrealistic solution to the fact that humanity no longer delights in the natural world:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn. (Wordsworth 1-16)

The rhetoric of Wordsworth's sonnet resembles the language of Bataille's general economy in its emphasis on getting and spending, giving and gathering. In "getting" (presumably money) and "spending" (not to squander for its own sake, but to acquire more material possessions), we paradoxically "lay waste our powers" and "give our hearts away"—the profits of what Bataille understands as the short-sighted, "restricted" economy are "a sordid boon".

The notion that a set of beliefs is rendered more appealing in its disappearance is adopted in the self-consciously Pindaric odes of Shelley's contemporary, the German Romantic Friedrich Holderlin, who descended into insanity while attempting to translate Pindar's verse into German.⁶ In his ode *Patmos*, which Hamilton connects to Pindar's "Olympian 3", Holderlin takes the crucified Christ as his object of address, merging

⁶ The fact that Holderlin's madness developed while he produced a direct translation of Pindar is eerily reminiscent of Cowley's insistence that "If a man should undertake to translate Pindar word for word, it would be thought that one mad man had translated another."

Pindaric thought, Christian doctrine, and a Romanticism reminiscent of Shelley's odes in the declaration that the Son of God most fully achieves divinity in his absence. Fitzgerald observes that "Holderlin's '*Patmos*' centers on the death of Christ, which introduces the era of the gods' absence in which it is the poet's task to prepare the conditions for their return; Christ's death is described as the extinguishing of the sun..." (Fitzgerald 48). The "fragment of a revised version of '*Patmos*'" (49) recalls Shelley's treatment of the ruins of Pompeii in "Ode to Naples," as the "'Island of light' is described as 'More athletic/In ruin'... when 'kingdoms, the youthful land of eyes, are perished'...Here...the Athletic is a stage of development in the relation between god and human marked by the loss of immediate experience..." (*ibid*).

For similar reasons, Shelley's subjects of address in his odes (and other poems that center on apostrophe) are defined by their absence, emptiness, ruination, invisibility, or abstraction—the West Wind, liberty, a monument ravaged by time, a heaven without a god, the ravine of Mont Blanc, intellectual beauty, the ruins of Pompeii, a skylark that is a spirit, not a bird. With the advent of an immanent God, the absent becomes the sacred, granting us an oblivious dissolution of self. In the words of one of Shelley's many short poems ("To ----") addressed to an anonymous, wholly indefinite lover, our striving becomes understood as "The desire of the moth for the star,/Of the night for the morrow,/The devotion to something afar/From the sphere of our sorrow" (To ---- 13-16). Shelley's choice of the specific words "desire" and "afar" imply an absence and a separation—desire cannot survive its own fulfillment, and the likelihood of ever achieving a removal from "the sphere of our sorrow" is highly uncertain.

Yet even while acknowledging this (often explicitly, as in “Ode to the West Wind”), the subject of Shelley’s odes and poems of address consistently posits an absent object as the means of liberation from “the sphere of our sorrow.” By sacrificing our narrow sense of self to something far greater than ourselves, we are released from the burden of self-knowledge; the means by which the subject objectifies itself. Significantly, the beginning of this poem—“One word is too often profaned/For me to profane it” (1-2)—suggests a current situation which is defined by the common frequency (“often”) of its objectifying profanation and is therefore doubly removed from the sacred. If the solution Shelley moves towards by the end of the poem is liberation from the everyday order of things, this implies a necessary motion towards the opposite of the standardized profane: the sacred, or that which makes us without being made by us. The logic of Shelley’s odes seems to insist that although it is both inevitable and commendable for us to strive towards a thing that is greater than we are, only a thing that does not exist permits us to believe there could be something outside (greater than) an order that seeks to define us as yet another thing. Understanding these distinctions may help us explicate the apparent contradiction between Shelley’s atheism and categorization as a “transcendental” poet.

Shelley’s most explicit treatment of such ideas is developed in his self-consciously Pindaric “Ode to Heaven,” which reveals its influence most overtly in its application of one of Pindar’s most famous phrases (“the shadow of a dream”) to the notion of heaven, which is described as: “But the portal of the grave,/Where a world of new delights/Will make thy best glories seem/But a dim and noonday gleam/From the shadow of a dream!”(Ode to Heaven 32-36). This ode’s tripartite structure is not as

formal as the structure of “Ode to Naples,” but its chorus of spirits seems to be modeled after the Greek chorus that recited Pindaric ode. In “Ode to Heaven,” the first spirit (strophe) portrays an idealized conception of heaven that corresponds to Christian doctrine much more closely than almost all of Shelley’s works; the second spirit (antistrophe) refutes such exalted notions, bringing heaven down to the level of earth and the human mind which invented it; and the third spirit (epode) concludes and summarizes the ode.

The first spirit maintains that heaven is defined not only by its holiness (“Palace-roof of cloudless nights!/Paradise of golden lights!” (1-2)) but by its timeless presence (“Which art now, and which wert then/Of the Present and the Past,/Of the eternal Where and When,/Presence-chamber, temple, home,/Ever-canopying dome,/Of acts and ages yet to come!” (4-9)), concluding his section of the poem with the assertion that “Thou remainest such—always!”(27). However, while the first spirit believes that heaven is “the abode/Of that Power which is the glass/Wherein man his nature sees” (20-22), the second spirit determines that “Thou art but the mind’s first chamber,/Round which its young fancies clamber,/Like weak insects in a cave...” (28-30). The suggestion that heaven is not the lofty and illuminating abode of the most high but rather the murky refuge of immature forms inverts the Neoplatonic conception of the Christian god as the form of forms, associating heaven with Plato’s cave and Shelley with the enlightened man who escapes it.

Even in the section of the poem that is given to the first spirit, individual gods are described as “unremaining” (25), implying that the heaven that “remainest such always” remains without a stable center. Ultimately, heaven is also defined by its absence—it is

not only “the shadow of a dream,” it is an insubstantial “globe of dew” (46) where “Constellated suns unshaken,/Orbits measureless, are furled/In that frail and fading sphere,/With ten millions gathered there,/To tremble, gleam, and disappear” (50-54). Here, the infinity of existence is consumed by an unreal heaven at the moment of death or dissolution, extending its absence to the objects that disappear into it. Still, we are given the sense that even this disappearance cannot grant an escape from the systemized universe that binds the subject—the “frail and fading sphere” of heaven may be synonymous with “the sphere of our sorrow.” In other poems, Shelley posits the absence of the object as a means for unveiling an external or transcendent space where humanity can enjoy some indefinite experience that does not merely objectify. In “Ode to Heaven,” however, absence seems to function as a negative negative, not a positive one—heaven is presented as a fiction or abstraction not because it provides a release from the material order of things but because the notion that it exists is a deceit; a construction of or foundation for the totalized system Shelley rejects. This may explain why “Ode to Heaven” lacks the excessive, outpouring quality of “Ode to Naples” and “Ode to the West Wind”: this is the repudiation of a force that obstructs any potential for a truly divine joy, not an expression of the joy itself.

Many of Shelley’s shorter poems also seem to follow the general pattern of Shelley’s odes—their main object of address is conspicuously absent. Shelley’s confrontation with the sublime Power of the titular mountain in “Mont Blanc” is characterized most notably by two negative spaces. The reader is first compelled to confront the “Dizzy Ravine” (Mont Blanc 34) of Arve: “when I gaze on thee/I seem as in a trance sublime and strange/To muse on my own separate fantasy,/My own, my human

mind, which passively/Now renders and receives fast influencings,/Holding an unremitting interchange/With the clear universe of things around” (34-40). This passage is often interpreted as a profound allegory: the river running through the Ravine represents the narrator’s fluid, effectual mind and the Ravine represents the external, objective world, which shapes and is shaped by (“renders and receives”) the mind. However, I would like to suggest something close to the opposite of this reading—after all, it is the Ravine, not the river, which leads the narrator to “muse” on his “human mind,” which is characterized here by its passivity in its “interchange” with the powerful torrents that flow through it. The fact that both readings may seem plausible highlights the ambiguity of the passage, which has several effects. The river could represent the mind, the objective world, or a divine stream of energy that (like the gods in Pindar) makes the mind (or Ravine) more than nothing when the river passes through it. This ambiguity also renders both the human mind and the sacred power that shapes it undefined and therefore unknowable. All we can ultimately know is that “Power dwells apart in its tranquility,/Remote, serene, and inaccessible” (96-97).

The second negative space of Mont Blanc is “the still cave of the witch Poesy” (44) where this Ravine seeks “among the shadows that pass by/Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,/Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast/From which they fled recalls them, thou art there!” (45-48). Here, Shelley gives us a series of indefinite and explicit absences (“some phantom, some faint image”) and one ostensible presence (“thou art there”) that is left indefinite, inscrutable, and wholly inaccessible. This mystery obliges the curious reader to look back fifteen lines to determine that “thou” refers to the Ravine, but the discovery does not exactly clarify matters. The speaker

jumps from this passage to the suggestion that there is something privileged about an absence from the physical world: “Some say that dreams of a remoter world/Visit the soul in sleep, that death is slumber,/And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber/Of those who wake and live” (49-52). If we cannot glean any overarching meaning from “Mont Blanc,” it may be by design. The poem presents its audience with the uncertain significance of an underlying force that we can only conclude is important but incalculable. Such refusal to be fully understood instills the poem with the forbidding quality of its object of address, and challenges its readers to question how we are supposed to analyze the material world if we cannot approach the informing principle; the “secret strength of things/Which governs thought”(139-140).

Shelley ends the poem with an appropriately ambiguous and unresolved question on the relationship between the mind, the external world, and absence: “And what were thou [presumably Mont Blanc], and earth, and stars, and sea,/If to the human mind’s imaginings/Silence and solitude were vacancy?” (142-144). The tone of this remarkable ending seems impossible to discern, as it reads like a rhetorical question without supplying a clear judgment. The absolute meaning of Mont Blanc is absent, but this will not stop humanity from ascribing symbolic significance in an attempt at mastery; the incorporation of the inaccessible into the order of things. Perhaps the main conclusion we can draw is that the transcendent Power of Mont Blanc inspires awe in the speaker and the reader precisely because it will not permit conclusions to be drawn. As with Pindar, Shelley’s obscurity serves a deeper purpose, reminding us that not only do we not know everything, our lack of access to absolute truth is not necessarily a bad thing.

Unlike “Mont Blanc,” the theme of vacancy is employed as an indisputably liberating force in Shelley’s dramatic epic, *Prometheus Unbound*, as the mysterious, abyssal Demogorgon ultimately consumes the tyrannical Zeus and speaks the last lines of the poem—“To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;/To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;/To defy Power which seems omnipotent;/To love and bear; to hope when Hope creates/From its own wreck the things it contemplates;/... This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be/Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;/This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory” (*Prometheus Unbound* 4.570-4.578). Stuart M. Sperry finds a more direct connection, however, between the last line of Act 3 and original ending of the poem—“Pinnacled dim in the intense inane” (3.4.204)—and “Mont Blanc”: “inane” is a “substantive which, with its suggestive negative prefix, Shelley seems to have deliberately given the climactic place at the original ending of his drama, like ‘vacancy’ at the end of ‘Mont Blanc.’ By the word ‘inane’ Shelley sought, of course, to signify the formless void of infinite space—a vacancy full, however, of unlimited potentiality” (Sperry 116). In other words, it is only the negativity of the abyss that offers an alternative to the chartered world the Romantics loathed. The void has the capacity to break the chains of despotic, universal law and make anything truly possible.

In Shelley’s well-known short poem “Ozymandias,” it is the void of time that lays waste to the monument of a despotic lawgiver (Ozymandias was the Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses) who considers his legacy to be universal and eternal. Interestingly, the body of the poem’s narration is not supplied by the speaker—after the first line, the narrator merely reports what he was told about Ozymandias’ monument by a traveler he met in “an antique land” (Ozymandias 1). The effect is a strange telescoping

of absence—not only is the narrator absent to the reader, the mysterious traveler is absent to the narrator as he writes his account, leaving the reader to sift through layers of symbolic signifiers that are missing their original referents. This complex treatment of textuality aptly mirrors the traveler’s tale. While “on the pedestal these words appear:/ ‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;/Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’” (9-11), the promised object of eternal cosmic significance has been utterly ruined: “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away” (12-14). From a Pindaric perspective, this might be considered the inevitable fate of any mortal who would arrogantly declare his own autonomy, rendering himself equivalent to the immortal gods. Yet what is most striking about this poem is the complete absence of everything except the written word—the poem itself and the words carved into the pedestal. Shelley subtly implies that even “timeless” works of artifice (such as his poem) are subject to temporality, since the “lifeless” (7) statue of Ozymandias lies “Half sunk, a shattered visage” (4). In the context of “Ozymandias,” this absence is beneficial, as it marks not the absence of life but the absence of tyranny.

“Ode to Naples” presents one of Shelley’s most complex and ambivalent articulations of his theme of an absent object of apostrophe. The opening stanza of “Ode to Naples” finds the speaker standing among the ruins of Pompeii, connecting the potential fate of the apotheosized Naples, which represents a living version of Pompeii, to ruination by means of the temporality that defines the speaker of “Ode to the West Wind” and the situation of “Ozymandias”. Appropriately, the speaking subject is associated solely with Pompeii—never with Naples—in the poem, allowing Pompeii’s implied

relation to the immortalized Naples to create the connection between the speaker and Naples. The dead city becomes the intermediary between the living city and the living subject, perhaps hinting through its absent presence that both are equally subject to temporality. In this way, Pompeii may be just as much of an object of address in “Ode to Naples” as Naples itself. The syntactical ambiguity of the ode’s opening line—“I stood within the city disinterred”—leaves the reader unable to judge whether the excavated city has been exhumed from its ruins or the subject has been temporarily unearthed from his obscurity through a connection to something ancient and sacred.

Both interpretations are highly plausible—if the speaker has been freed from the ties that ground him to the objectified world, the verticality that follows ensures that he has better access to the “oracular thunder” (Ode to Naples 6) that “thrills through those *roofless* halls” (5, my emphasis) until it “penetrates”(6) his “*suspended* blood”(7, my emphasis). In this heightened state, the subject can intuitively feel the voice of the deep heart of Earth in all its menace and awe-inspiring Power. The splendor that the speaker discovers among the wastes of time raises the moment to the level of the sublime and undoes time: “Around me gleamed many a bright sepulchere/Of whose pure beauty, Time, as if his pleasure/Were to spare Death, had never made erasure...” (12-14). The ode’s second opening epode continues the theme of absence and invisibility, recalling the “unseen presence” of “Ode to the West Wind” as “gentle winds”(23) lift the speaker above the “horizontal aether” (41) and “the invisible water white as snow” (43). From this point of elevation, mysterious “prophesyings” (49) “seize” the speaker, making him a vessel or instrument for their expression. These prophecies become the main body (the

strophes and antistrophes) of “Ode to Naples”—from a ruin, the highest validation of life is born.

Ultimately, the absence of the object of address in Shelley’s odes may be connected to the absence of the speaker created by the intrinsic nature of writing. Jacques Derrida’s claim that speech has been historically valorized over writing in western culture is highly relevant here—Derrida explains this phenomenon through the observation that while speech is a present absence (its objects of reference may only be concepts that exist elsewhere, if at all, but its speaker is indisputably present), writing is a double absence (its subject and object are inherently unavailable to the reader and are therefore represented through symbols). Traditionally, presence is considered the “good” half of the dialectic. This distinction is crucial to any discussion of the differences between Pindaric ode and Shelley’s odes. Pindar intended his odes to be performed orally by a chorus that served an encomiastic function for the present victor, and may be understood at least in this respect as doubly present. Conversely, Shelley’s poetry is literary rather than oral, and as such seems to anticipate Derrida by calling attention to its own absence. If the performances of Pindar’s odes can be described as “living,” Shelley seems to regard his own poetry as a sort of seed that has the power to germinate in the mind of each living reader. In “Ode to the West Wind,” the West Wind is depicted as “Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead/Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing” (Ode to the West Wind 2-3). The dead leaves of nature may be equivalent to the dead leaves of a book of Shelley’s poetry, which are driven into meaning by the enchantment of Shelley’s verse. Like the “unseen presence” of the West Wind, literature is something of a paradox—an absent presence.

Another way to interpret Shelley's consistent use of vacancy is through the lens of the Romantic interest in the sublime through the vast, immeasurable expanse of nature, which may be understood as an attempt to find a place that exists beyond the totalization of an all-encompassing deity and a perfectly regimented society. Understanding the logic of Shelley's absent objects of address may help us understand his era's obsession with the sublime, as well as the forces it developed in reaction to. If humanity could still live under the ontological perspective of Pindaric ode, we might possess some form of community that does not objectify its members, and we might not require some abstract place of removal or retreat from the ordered world. Unfortunately for Shelley's time (and ours), circumstances have changed. If Romantic poetry still appeals to us, it may be because we have similar anxieties regarding our updated version of modernity.

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