문학석사학위논문

The Problem of Violence
in Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin

퍼시 비시 셸리와 발터 벤야민의

저작에 나타나는 폭력의 문제

2017 년   2 월

서울대학교 대학원

협동과정 비교문학전공

조 성 경

The Problem of Violence
in Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin

퍼시 비시 셸리와 발터 벤야민의
저작에 나타나는 폭력의 문제

지도교수 한 서 린

이 논문을 석사학위논문으로 제출함

2016 년   12 월

서울대학교 대학원
협동과정 비교문학전공
조 성 경

조성경의 석사학위논문을 인준함

2017 년   1 월

위 원 장 _____ (인)

부위원장 _____ (인)

위   원 _____ (인)

Abstract

The Problem of Violence
in Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin

SungKyung Cho

Interdisciplinary Program in Comparative Literature

The Graduate School

Seoul National University

The organizing idea of the study is that both Shelley and Benjamin problematize an instrumental conception of language because it constitutes the basic workings of structural violence. Shelley's essay *A Philosophical View of Reform* is a classic statement in this vein, where he presents a schematic history of tyranny in Europe as one of imposture, a perversion of "names" that redounds to the advantage of oppressive powers. Against this linguistic scheme of violence Shelley advances a poetics of objective mimesis, a language that is "vitally metaphorical" in that it becomes the picture of "integral thoughts" rather than abstract "signs." This is remarkably similar to Benjamin's early critique of the instrumentalist view of language as a means, a "mere sign," as opposed to the immediate (i.e. not being a means), cognitively potent "name" of Adamic language. Benjamin develops the notion of immediacy further in his *Critique of Violence*, where the mediate legal violence is set against the immediate, law-destroying divine violence. The latter revolutionary violence is closely associated with the concept of *Darstellung*

(representation) that he puts forward in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," which, again, is comparable to Shelley's preoccupation with the revolutionary potential of the expressive faculty of language.

In the chapter on Shelley's *The Cenci*, I probe into the nature of violence that Cenci perpetrates against his family, which consists in a coercion to infamy, a deliberate perversion of the family name that comes to consummation with Beatrice's parricide. Cenci's curse is the figuration of his off-stage incestuous rape, injecting guilt into his daughter and thereby corrupting both her body and soul. The play ends with Beatrice's bitter acknowledgement that her "innocent name" has been ruined by the father's imprecation. Her parricide is essentially an act of casuistry, another name for mediate violence that is sufficient neither to exonerate her guilt nor to overthrow the oppressive patriarchal power-nexus. The next chapter on *The Mask of Anarchy* is organized around the idea that the two authors each draws from his philosophy of language in order to tackle the problem of violence. Shelley's envision of the role of the poet has many important parallels to Benjamin's conception of the task of philosophical writing as *Darstellung*, which is deeply tied to the concept of divine violence. *The Mask of Anarchy* dramatizes on the textual level the workings of poetic language which effectively combat against the semantic perversion of the state.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1. The Problem of Violence

Could violence ever find justification in the cause of freedom? A not insignificant portion, it seems, of the reputation of the English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley as a champion of nonviolence[1] rests on that fabled, if not notorious, answer of his to this question, so unflinchingly in the negative, in his 1819 poem *The Mask of Anarchy*. Written in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre of the same year, when the local yeomanry regiment charged into an unarmed gathering of some 60,000 demonstrators calling for electoral reform in St Peter's Field, Manchester, the poem reenacts a fantastical rendition of the confrontation scene in which the civilian crowd is addressed by a mysterious voice urging them to withstand, but *not* to retaliate, the assault.

> "And if then the tyrants dare
>
> Let them ride among you there,
>
> Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew,—
>
> What they like, that let them do.
>
> "With folded arms and steady eyes,

---

[1] "The poem [*The Mask of Anarchy*] inspired the nonviolent direct action advocated by Mohandas K. Gandhi, who quoted it during his work in South Africa. Gandhi's idea of nonviolence influenced Martin Luther King. The students in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, scene of a massacre in 1989, chanted *The Mask of Anarchy*." Timothy Morton, "Receptions." in *The Cambridge companion to Shelley*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 40.

And little fear, and less surprise,

Look upon them as they slay

Till their rage has died away. (340-7) [2]

The message, of course, is clear enough; in a noble manifestation of endurance and informed passivity, the voice exhorts the people to stand still while the tyrants have their way. Yet what belie the conciliatory tone of the content are its brisk, rousing tetrameter couplets marching—a rhythm deliberately chosen to match the popular broadside ballad form—and the irony that the forbearing gesture of the above passage is soon followed by a resounding note of appeal for collective action ("Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number—;" 368-9), for the mobilization of a large crowd only to facilitate its own destruction is a morbid notion. The passage meets further complication when we learn that, in a political treatise he wrote shortly after the poem, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, he presents a seemingly contrary argument for the necessity of insurrectionary violence against the tyranny of the state: "For so dear is power that the tyrants themselves neither then, nor now, nor ever, left or leave a path to freedom but through their own blood."[3] Perhaps this last view is more in keeping with the short verse he wrote in 1812, a more explicit endorsement of the need for bloodshed in nurturing the "tree of Liberty." [4] The

---

[2] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose.* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002). Henceforth abbreviated as *SPP*.

[3] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Philosophical View of Reform." In *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck. (London, UK: Ernest Been Limited, 1930), p. 6. Henceforth abbreviated as *CWS*.

[4] The poem is "To the Republicans of North America." Below is the text of the said stanza, lines 35-40. from *The Esdaile Notebook: a volume of early poems*, edited by Kenneth Neill Cameron. (New York: Knopf, 1964), p. 71.:

...
Blood may fertilize the tree
Of new bursting Liberty

question, then, seems still left with no definite answer on Shelley's part. Critics diverge on whether he made a gradual headway into nonviolence through such encounters as that with Godwin's more moderate ideas of reform[5], or that his development was a meandering trajectory of continued ambivalence between different ideas.[6]

There is something to be said, I think, about the question itself. In the first place, it is an artful elision of an important premise that is the agent of justification, without the knowledge of which all subsequent debate over the issue is doomed to futility. Who is it anyway that *justifies* our action? On what *basis*? How do we *ascertain* the universal *validity* of the *justification* conferred? The question only reproduces itself, in-and-in and redundant, ad infinitum. That there is only lacuna in the heart of the inquiry, that the question blinds us to the nonexistence of the answer that gives grounds for the former's being, and, as in a lesson to be learned from Kafka's "Before the Law," that the request for justification itself precludes our access to what it promises— acknowledging these seem to be the touchstone of the true philosophy of justice for Shelley when he writes in the 1819 Preface to *The Cenci* the

---

        Let the guiltiness then be
        On the slaves that ruin wreak
        On the unnatural tyrant-brood
        Slow to peace and swift to blood.

qtd. in Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*. (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 118. Henceforth abbreviated as *STP*.

[5] See Matthew C. Borushko, "Violence and Nonviolence in Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 59 (2010): 96-113.

[6] Seth T. Reno, "The Violence of Form in Shelley's Mask of Anarchy." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 62 (2013): 80-98.; Steven E. Jones writes that the poem's equivocal attitude toward insurrectionary violence reflects "a profound ambivalence in the reform movement itself," which, nevertheless, he argues is by no means "a program of 'nonviolence.'" He also argues that there is more to Shelley than his stated antipathy toward violence, and that "it is therefore necessary to confront from the start the aggression in his poetry." *Shelley's Satire: Violence, Exhortation, and Authority*. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994), pp. 16, 109-10

following: "It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge; that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists" (*SPP* 142). Therefore, at the end of *Prometheus Bound*, after the overthrow of the tyrannical Jove, Demogorgon encourages the eponymous hero "Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent" (4.575).

This "superstitious horror," this blind submission to the essentially groundless moral authority of law, instantiates what is for Shelley the problem of violence, namely, the murky web of guilt context which, while veiling its own violence, wields judging power and reins in freedom in its profoundest sense. The status quo, uncritically granted the status of normality, is actually a state of exceptional violence, and this illusion of normality, albeit inauthentic, is vastly effective in tangible ways. "Every epoch," contends Shelley, "under names more or less specious has deified its peculiar errors" (*SPP* 516), and upon this very trickery of language rests the historically "vast and successful scheme [of the church and the state] for the enslaving of the most civilized portion of mankind" (*CWS* 5).

It is the problematics of such legal and linguistic implication of violence in Shelley that becomes for this study the point of comparison with the early twentieth-century German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin. Like his predecessor, Benjamin grappled with the problem of violence in terms of its bearings on our inauthentic perception of the world veiled under false, paltering names, and his early writings on the philosophy of language became the theoretical underpinnings for his later more direct reflections on violence. In his 1922 essay *Critique of Violence*, he tackles the problem of violence in a way that is very similar to Shelley's, that is to say, questioning the very relation

of ends to means in which all legal systems place violence. As is the case with Shelley's "restless and anatomizing casuistry," within such frame of reference of law all inquiries into violence are bound to recede into a futile game of justification, viz., "bottomless casuistry" (*SW1*: 237).[7] Whether you take up the contractual perspective and let the judgment attend on your just ends, or follow the historicist view of violence and appeal to the legality of your action as a means, the system of law itself remains intact. Not only does this leave all individual action on a highly uncertain legal footing, but it also gives law free rein to wield its own "predatory violence" (*SW1*: 240) in order to preserve itself.

That there is "something rotten in the law" (*SW1*: 242), and that it is revealed in its predatory violence is Benjamin's way of phrasing the problem of violence. A new light is thrown on the relation of means to ends, previously conceived of as frame of reference for the justification of violence in the face of law, when we realize that violence also makes a new law which exonerates the law-making violence and, by doing so, erases its violent origin:

> For the function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. Lawmaking is powermaking, assumption of power, and to that extent an

---

[7] Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 1*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2000). Henceforth abbreviated as SW1.

immediate manifestation of violence (*SW1*: 248, emphasis in original).

Law *is* violence (or, as he would have said in the language essay of 1916, violence is the linguistic being of law) inasmuch as it places itself as its own end; the latter remains problematic so long as it is dependent on the said relation of means to ends. As Derrida noted in his lecture on *Critique*, the wholly self-referential, and therefore wholly arbitrary, character of legal judgment which comes down to the "ultimate insolubility [or, undecidability, *Unentscheidbarkeit*] of all legal problems" (*SW1*: 247) is prefigured in the 1916 discussion of mediacy, or the mean-ness [*Mittelbarkeit*] of language. [8] Agamben also touched upon the close tie between *pure* language and *pure* violence, where the term "pure" designates the opposite condition to mediacy, i.e. mediality.[9] Qua media, both pure language and violence are "not a means but a manifestation" [*Manifestation*] (*SW1*: 248). While my thesis owes much to these precursors with regard to the link between Benjamin's early reflections on language and the later *Critique*, of equal import to it is his concept of guilt as corollary to the abstraction of language and the arbitrariness of law in its judgment. One important objective of this study is thus to highlight Benjamin's phenomenological conception of guilt as a form of violence. This task will entail a survey of his early and mid-period works that deal with problems of language and its degeneration, ranging from the 1916 language essay to the 1919 "Fate and Character," and to the discussion of allegory in his habilitation thesis on *Trauerspiel*.

---

[8] Jacque Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.'" In *Acts of Religion*. (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 285-6.

[9] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 62-3.

1.2. The Problem-Historical Context

The organizing idea of this study is that, for both Shelley and Benjamin, violence constitutes a central problem in their poetry and philosophy. To say that violence posed a problem in their thinking is different from saying that they conceptualized violence as a self-sufficient entity, an independent concept to be analyzed and done away with. It is never given in the form of a concept *per se*, for, as such, it would require a definition. My contention is that it was precisely in their denial and refutation of any attempt to delimit violence that their critique thereof was based. As is the case with Benjamin in his *Critique of Violence*, his task as a critic necessarily entails an investigation into violence's relation to law, namely, the context which brings to existence the subject in question in the first place. Violence, for him, is essentially relational, owing its existence to the very supposed counterpart that punishes it. Such is the "immense irony" which he calls in the 1916 essay "the mythic origin of law" (*SW1*: 72). Violence is, true to its Greek etymology, a *problēma*, something thrown forward, an obstacle. It is therefore no coincidence that his essay on violence—an essay, or a *Traktat*, as he would later explain in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, being an *Übung* which conveys the sense of practice and attempt[10]—should end with a discussion of divine violence as the ultimate transcendence of its relationality, a pure, immediate kind of violence by virtue of its dethronement [de-establishment, *Ent-setzung*] of law (*SW1*: 251-2).

---

[10] Man-young Jo, translator's note to 『독일 비애극의 원천』 (Korean Translation of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), (Seoul: Saemulkyeol, 2008), pp. 319-20.

Critics have amassed a sizeable body of work on Shelley and Benjamin, especially with regard to the subject of violence in each author, but the philosophical affinity between the two has caught relatively little attention. This is surprising, considering Shelley's posthumous renown in the German-speaking world, especially among the socialist circle of the mid-nineteenth century. Eleanor Marx, for example, wrote in her essay "Shelley and Socialism" about her father Marx's enthusiasm for Shelley, and he is reported to have said that the poet was "essentially a revolutionist," and that "he would have always have been one of the advanced guard of Socialism."[11] The socialist interest in Shelley continued well over the early twentieth-century, most notably in Bertolt Brecht: this is mentioned in Robert Kaufman's essay "Aura, Still," which is still a principal source on the reception of Shelley among the Frankfurt School intellectuals and the artists alongside it.[12] According to Kaufman, Brecht translated several pieces by Shelley, which Benjamin read attentively together with Adorno. Benjamin also cited a few stanzas from *Peter Bell the Third* in his then ongoing *Arcade Project*. Jeffrey Cox brings in Benjamin's analysis of German *Trauerspiel* to position Shelley's dramatic works in the historical context of the break "between classical tragedy and modern 'sorrow plays.'"[13]

While the above precedents show that historical links do exist between Shelley and Benjamin, it is all but clear that these links are not substantial

---

[11] Eleanor Marx. "Shelley and Socialism." *Marxists Internet Archive.* https://www.marxists.org/archive/eleanor-marx/1888/04/shelley-socialism.htm.

[12] ed. Andrew Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Art*. (London, UK: Continuum, 2005), pp. 121-147. A large portion of the essay also appears in another paper of his, " Intervention & Commitment Forever! Shelley in 1819, Shelley in Brecht, Shelly in Adorno, Shelley in Benjamin."

[13] Jeffrey Cox, "The Dramatist." in *The Cambridge companion to Shelley*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 71.

enough to sustain influence study. For this reason, I suggest an alternative approach to their works, namely a problem-historical perspective.

As Eliand and Jennings point out, Benjamin's undertaking of a "problem-historical" [*problemgeschichtliche*] task in his doctoral dissertation, *On the Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism,* "represents a decisive step in the development of his own concept of criticism."[14] Drawing on the post-Kantian concept of "reflection," of which development he articulates in the first chapter of the book on Fichte, he goes on to trace the problem of knowledge and the structure of self-consciousness that is central to the inquiry into the formative principle in art qua "absolute medium of reflection" (*SW1*: 158) in Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel.

> The task for the criticism of art is knowledge in the medium of reflection that is art ... The subject of reflection is, at bottom, the artistic entity itself ... Insofar as criticism is knowledge of the work of art, it is its self-knowledge; insofar as it judges the artwork, this occurs in the latter's self-judgment. (*SW1*: 151)

In other words, criticism is both the making, or reflective function of a work of art, and also its completion. This establishes a both epistemological and ontological relation between art and criticism, as phrased in another fragment, "The Theory of Criticism" as thus: "works of art are ways in which the ideal of the philosophical problem makes itself manifest. ... [E]very great work [of art] has its sibling . . . in the realm of philosophy" (*SW1*: 218-9). At once, Benjamin's discussion of the Romantic concept of criticism delineates the very kind of criticism he is himself engaged with. As Eiland and Jennings suggest, the reader is, as Benjamin quotes Novalis, "the extended reader," and at "the

---

[14] Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: a critical life*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 108.

center of this theory of reception is the idea of the 'afterlife' of the work— an unfolding of artistic possibilities in which the work of criticism necessarily plays a part" (Eiland and Jennings 109).

Problem-history, as a method, provides the locus criticus for a comparison of two different works of art and criticism on an equal footing, inasmuch as they grapple with the same problem. Sebastian Luft refutes the accusation à la Rorty that the synchronic tendency of problem-history with regard to works of different time periods eventually renders it anachronistic by pointing to the nineteenth-century Neo-Kantian preoccupation with the question of what philosophy itself is vis-à-vis its historicity, which, since Hegel, has become essential to philosophy. [15] As such, problem-history is fundamentally a meta-discourse about the discipline itself as it is historically being formed, and this reflectivity has been an appeal for other disciplines in need of a theoretical approach to examine its own "theoreticity." [16] If a problem-historical reading is anachronistic at all, it is entirely in the sense of the word as used by J. H. Miller in his 2010 essay "Anachronistic Reading."[17] In this essay, Miller's reading of the Wallace Stevens poem "The Man on the Dump" traces the multi-layers of the poem as it is biographical, reflective of the time it was written, and at the same time reflective of itself on the textual level, and, after the exegesis, moves on to a "free," or "anachronistic" reading of the poem that focuses on what the text "prefigures." A mirror image of de

---

[15] Sebastian Luft, "Philosophical Historiography in Marburg Neo-Kantianism: The Example of Cassirer's Erkenntnisproblem." In *From Hegel to Windelband: Historiography of Philosophy in the 19th Century*, edited by Gerald Hartung and Valentin Pluder. (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 182.

[16] See, for example, Hans van Rappard, "In Praise of Problemgeschichte." *Recent Trends in Theoretical Psychology* 2 (1989): 317-26.: "Theoretical psychology as theory construction may also be seen as metapsychology ... [Problem-history] may be seen as forming part of theoretical psychology" (317).

[17] J. H. Miller, "Anachronistic Reading." *Derrida Today* 3 (2010): 75-91.

Man's repetitive allegory, Miller's prefiguration, or the biblical *Figura*, is a "prospective allegory" that finds its fulfilment in the future reader's performative interpretation. This is essentially a *problematic* reading of Stevens' poem, on the basis of which he, as the "extended reader" can speak in the poet's behalf.

A problem-historical criticism, then, entails a close reading of texts in terms of the problematics they exhibit. Accordingly, this study aims to represent how Shelley and Benjamin confronted and tackled the problem of violence in their works. Juxtaposing the two has the merit of finding in the former the dramatization—prefiguration—of what is performed on the theoretical level in the latter. The first chapter provides a theoretical review of Benjamin's early ideas on such issues as language, guilt, and fate. I will try to show that, as they underwent development, these ideas had clearer bearings on Benjamin's insight into law and violence. In the chapter on Shelley's *The Cenci*, I show how the name-depriving violence inherent in the workings of law as discussed in Benjamin's early essays on language is embodied in the character of the count Cenci. His rape of his daughter Beatrice both literally and dramatically deprives her of her "innocent name," which results in her entrapment under the judging power of law as fate within the drama and the later critics' bafflement in dealing with her moral character. All in all, the chapter is a delineation of the law-making violence that, in the manner of fate, condemns all its subjects to guilt. The next chapter on *The Mask of Anarchy* touches upon how the two authors each came up with ways to deal with the problem of violence. Shelley's envision of the role of the poet has many important parallels to Benjamin's concept of philosophical writing as *Darstellung* as outlined in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to the *Trauerspiel*

book. Such response to the degeneration of language finds its dramatic rendition in the symbolic battle in *The Mask of Anarchy*.

2. Name-Depriving Violence

> [B]ecause there is in this world no one thing
>
> to which the bramble of blackberry corresponds,
>
> a word is elegy to what it signifies.
>
> — Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas"[18]

2.1. The Fall of Human Language and the Mythic Origin of Law

Benjamin's reflections on violence inherent in the workings of law stem from as early as his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man."[19] An early exposition of his ideas about the theory of language, written at a decisive juncture in his twenties when he, after his break with the Jewish Youth Movement, sought to redefine his conception of the relation between writing and political action,[20] the essay characteristically engages with the politico-epistemological implication of a certain metaphysical understanding of language, a theme which laid the foundation for his subsequent writings on translation and mimetic theories, critique of violence, *Trauerspiel*, and even the late works based in dialectical materialism (Steiner 42). The understanding, which he calls "a true method" of linguistic theory, is that "all expression,

---

[18] Robert Hass. "Meditation at Lagunitas." *Praise*. (New York: Ecco Press, 1979), p. 4.

[19] Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften II-I*. Edited by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 140-157. Translated by Edmund Jephcott in: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999) vol. 1. pp. 62-74.

[20] Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: an introduction to his work and thought*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 42ff.

insofar as it is a communication [or *imparting*: *Mitteilung*][21] of contents of the mind, is to be classed as language" (*SW1*: 62-3). This comprehensive definition of language *as such* is not limited to the expression of human mental life, which is human language, but is coextensive with "absolutely everything" (*SW1*: 62) for it is in the nature of each thing or event to impart its mental contents. But what of mental contents does language impart, and how and to whom does it do so? To answer these questions is the immediate concern of the essay, and at the heart of its investigation lies what is "the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, ... the immediacy magic" (*SW1*: 64). The concept of immediacy is central to Benjamin's thought and will appear in our subsequent discussion of law and violence, so it first merits close inspection.

"Immediacy" in the original German, *Unmittelbarkeit*, is a negation, by which Benjamin designates what language is *not*. The contention is that language is not a means [*Mittel*] of communication *through* which an entity is imparted, but rather "the direct [*unmittelbare*] expression of that which communicates *itself* in it" (*SW1:* 63, italics in original). The noun *Mittel* conveys both the senses of *method* and *means*, and in its negated form, affixed by "*un-*," along with the adjectival suffix "*-bar*" which roughly translates as "-i/able," it forms the word *unmittelbar*, often and rightly translated as

---

[21] Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2008), pp. 40-1. " The word that Benjamin employs to describe the linguisticity of language is ostensibly familiar, especially in its English translation, which however turns out to be extremely misleading precisely in this apparent familiarity. The word, in German, is *Mitteilung*, which in English would and generally is translated as *communication*. [...] The word *Mitteilung* is composed of two parts: the root, formed from the verb *teilen* (to separate or partition), and the adverbial prefix *mit-* ("with"). Literally, then, the word suggests "partitioning with," or also, "sharing." But to share, I must first divide, and it is precisely this double movement that is reflected in the English word, to *impart*." In this chapter, I use both Jephcott's and Weber's translations complementarily.

immediate, or, following Weber's literal rendition, "unmedia-ble."[22] But if we take an alternative sense of "-bar," which denotes the possession of the implied quality of the stem, as is the case with *fruchtbar* and *fruitful*, the word may also be translated as *the state of not being a means*[23], and it is important here to get the sense that, for Benjamin, neither *is* language meant to be a means, nor *should* it be one. This is in keeping with his own earlier usage of the word in his letter to Martin Buber, where he places hyphens in-between the elements, "un-*mittel*-bar" (italics in original),[24] to underline the inability of writing to be a means serving an end. In the letter, written four months before the essay on language, he addresses the question of whether writing can influence people's moral behavior and rejects the way of seeing language as a tool for affecting people's minds—an epitome of which he witnessed in the articles in Buber's periodical, *Der Jude*—in favor of the view that writing, in any case, may be useful only for its "magic," the un-*mittel*-bar quality of language (*BC* 79-80). It is not the task of the writer to influence the reader "through the transmission of content, but rather through the purest disclosure of [language's] dignity and its nature" (*BC* 80). Given the context of the letter, a declination of Buber's invitation to contribute to his journal in the face of a war in Europe, such rejection of "all politically engaged writing" (*BC* 79) and absorption, if not indulgence, in linguistic problems themselves may seem a retrogression. For

---

[22] ibid., p.41.

[23] In spite of Weber's knowledgeability in his wording, I have misgivings about "unmedia-bility" for fear that its verb stem "-media-" may cause needless confusion with other terms used in the essay, "das Medium" and "das Mediale," each translated in the popular Jephcott as "the medium" and "the mediation." Language in its purest state is a medium, or a mediation, but not a means —the visual distinction makes the difference more apparent. Benjamin himself depends on such a visual difference between the Germanized *Mittel* and the Latin *Medium*.

[24] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main, 1978) vol. 1. pp. 126-8. Translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson in: *Walter Benjamin Correspondence: 1910-1940*, pp. 79-81. Henceforth abbreviated as *BC*.

Benjamin, however, the opposite is the case. Notable in his denunciation of political writing is a firm distrust of "the expansive tendency to string words together" (*BC* 80), which he thinks exhibits not only a blind adherence to causality, but also an instrumental mindset with regard to men. What the adherents of instrumentalism envision as a "real action" precipitated by language is but a weak, forced one; only an intensive purification of language, which seeks to recuperate what is "denied to the word," can bring about a reconciliation—"the magic spark"—between language and action (*BC* 80). This "highly political style" he calls "objective writing" (*BC* 80).[25] Steiner directs us to an earlier example of his non-instrumental stance in a 1913 letter to a friend (Steiner 43):

> I believe that we must always be prepared for the fact that no one now or in the future will be influenced and vanquished in his soul, the place where he is free, by our will. We do not have any guarantee for this; we also should not want one—because good only issues from freedom. In the final analysis, every good deed is only the symbol of the freedom of the individual who accomplished it. (*BC* 52)[26]

---

[25] A specimen of objective writing, which defies "the expansive tendency to string words together," is to be found in the later "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to the *Trauerspiel* book: "The concept of philosophical style is free of paradox. It has its postulates. These are as follows: the art of the interruption in contrast to the chain of deduction; the tenacity of the essay in contrast to the single gesture of the fragment; the repetition of themes in contrast to shallow universalism; the fullness of concentrated positivity in contrast to the negation of polemic." Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. (London: Verso, 2003), p. 32. Henceforth abbreviated as *UDT*.

[26] Compare it briefly with this passage from Shelley's preface to *The Cenci*: "*There must be nothing attempted to make the exhibition subservient to what is vulgarly termed a moral purpose.* The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama, is *the teaching the human heart*, thorough its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself; in proportion of the possession of which knowledge, every human being is wise, just, sincere,

Writing cannot and should not be a means to influence others. It ought to be one which cultivates freedom in the individual mind, of which immediate manifestation is good deed. As it will be shown, this line of reasoning heralds the notion of divine violence. One can hardly fail to note there is already an inkling of wariness of all kinds of coercion, be it tyranny, propaganda, or even strike, in the early phases of his reflections on language and political action.[27]

The immediacy of language, which Benjamin calls magic, can then be summarized thus: "That which is impartable about a [mental] being, *is* its language. On this 'is' (equals 'is immediately') hangs everything. [...] Each language imparts itself *in* itself, it is in the purest sense the 'medium' of imparting."[28] The linguistic being of things, i.e. the impartable portion of their mental being, is their language, and in this sense is language a medium, one that is both the message and the messenger, to wit. He makes a point of stressing the difference between the two kinds of being, mental and linguistic, lest one should fall into the "great abyss into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall" (*SW1*: 63), *i.*e. the mystical view that the mental being of an entity consists precisely in its language. The former is identical with the latter only insofar as it is capable of imparting [*mitteilbar*]. The two, in fact, are never identical, as there is always residue in mental being incapable of imparting, with the sole exception of the language of man. This sets up a gradation of density, based on how fully each entity imparts its mental being—a biblical

---

tolerant and kind. If dogmas can do more, it is well: but *a drama is no fit place for the enforcement of them.*" (*SPP* 142, emphasis added)

[27] It becomes increasingly apparent as one traces the development of Benjamin's thought that he delimited the role of politics to the order of the profane, as is the case in the "Theological-political Fragment." cf. Steiner, p. 77.

[28] *Gesammelte Schriften* vol 2.1., p.142. The translation is Weber's. (41) Emphasis in original. The only modification I made is substituting Jephcott's "mental" for "spiritual."

fraternity of languages where that of man stands out among all others as the firstborn[29]. It is in this context that the concept of naming language is introduced. All things in nature impart themselves to man, who imparts his own mental being by naming them. Name is the language of man, and it is not *by* the names of the things that man imparts his mental being, as the advocate of the "bourgeois conception of language" (*SW1*: 65) would claim, but *in* the names. The advocate of the former view is labeled "bourgeois" for his instrumental outlook, who, like the contributors to *Der Jude*, believes that by means of name man imparts "factual subjects to other men" (*SW1*: 65). To this Benjamin opposes what is a characteristically non-instrumental conception of language, which "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It means *in the name, the mental being of man communicates himself to God*" (*SW1*: 65, emphasis in original).

Man is the namer, and in him all nature speaks; in the act of naming all the living creatures, man completes God's creation of them. Benjamin's conception of naming language seems to depend on this biblical framework of triangular relationship among creatures, man, and God, but it is not so much the exegesis of the first few chapters of Genesis that is the subject of his essay, he maintains. Yet it is not difficult to imagine that even the most secular treatment of a religious theme in this kind of reasoning, often diluted of its mysticism by resorting to metaphysical generalization of the divine, would fail to rid itself completely of its theological implication. He himself recognizes this when he reaches the corollary of his reflections on name vis-à-vis the

---

[29] Although, in the Bible, the creation of man was the last in order, man is nevertheless given all the privileges of the firstborn. It is rarely the case in Genesis that a father's blessing goes to his biologically eldest son. Such figures as Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are all spiritually ordained as the firstborn.

immediacy magic of language: name as revelation. This is the utmost condition of language which, as he later argues in his study of the German *Trauerspiel*, all the vulgar strains of symbolism strive but fall short of attaining.[30] Name is the quintessential language, "the language of language" (*SW1*: 65), wherein the mental being which imparts itself *is* language. Such is the intensive totality of human language, namely, the absolute impartability of man's mental being, and, by virtue of its universality in naming, it is also complete in its extensiveness. It is the most expressed of all languages, for it is purely immaterial and mental. Benjamin implies that it is only in the "highest mental region of religion" (*SW1*: 67), where all are addressed in the name and express themselves in revelation, that one is to find the vestiges of such pure linguistic manifestation today, while in art as a whole, including poetry, the closest one can get is the magic of things. This less prestigious magic refers to the abovementioned immediacy magic. The community [*Gemeinschaft*] of things, like every linguistic communication, is "immediate and infinite," but imperfect because things "can communicate to one another only through a more or less material community" (*SW1*: 67).[31] What sets man apart is that his language partakes in a magical community with things that is "immaterial and purely mental, and the symbol of this is sound" (*SW1*: 67). Again, this claim is

---

[30] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 159ff.

[31] This discussion of the magical community of things, as it will be shown, prefigures the nonviolent pure means in his later critique of violence: "unalloyed [pure] means are never those of direct solutions but always those of indirect solutions. They therefore never apply directly to the resolution of conflict between man and man, but apply only to matters concerning objects. The sphere of nonviolent means opens up in the realm of human conflicts relating to goods." (*SW1*: 244) The other two types of magic discussed in the language essay, name as revelation and the magic of judgment, of course, are related to divine violence and mythic violence, respectively.

set side by side with the biblical fact that God breathes his breath into man, which becomes in man "at once life and mind and language" (*SW1*: 67). [32]

The significance of the divine breath consists in the fact that it stands for the intimate relationship between God's spirit and man, a trope which also figures prominently in the Romantic tradition of poetry.[33] For Benjamin, this theological motif reveals an important continuity, or, quite literally, a mystical sort of consonance between God's word and naming language, on the basis of which the epistemological import of the latter is established:

> In God, name is creative because it is word, and God's word is cognizant because it is name ... The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God; only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge. This means that God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge ... God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge. Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator (*SW1*: 68).

The Adamic process of naming things is thus described as a cognitive act (Steiner 46). That the objectivity of man's knowledge of things in name is guaranteed by God testifies to the kinship between the languages of man and

---

[32] QUEEN. Be thou assured, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me. (*Hamlet*, III. iv. 198-200.)

[33] Wordsworth's *The Prelude* of 1805 famously opens with this invocation of inspiring wind: "Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze / That blows from the green fields and from the clouds / And from the sky." Examples also abound in Shelley, as will be discussed throughout this thesis, but most prominently in the wind imagery in his "Ode to the West Wind."

God. Name is warranted of its objectivity by virtue of its role in God's creation. The affiliation of the two languages stops short of a heretical belief in the identification of man with God. Qualification is made by Benjamin that, while the word in which creation took place constitutes the mental being of man, it is no more than God's linguistic being devoid of the divine actuality which is his creativity.[34] "All human language is only the reflection of the word in name. The name is no closer to the word than knowledge is to creation" (*SW1*: 68). There is, however, one point where human language reflects the divine word in the most profound way that it transcends knowledge, namely, the human name. Touching the frontier between finite and infinite language, the proper name which parents give to their child does not correspond with any existing knowledge, nor does it relate to the child by etymology. The link between the proper name and the person is not conventional in either metaphysical or etymological sense, but is wholly *creative*, "for the proper name is the word of God in human sounds" (*SW1*: 69). Hence, there is some truth in the mystical wisdom that "a man's name is his fate" (*SW1*: 69).[35]

Benjamin finds in man's naming language the consummation of God's creation in that the thing itself which is nameless is given name by man. He idiosyncratically refers to this process as *translation* in its original and unilingual context, where man receives "the unspoken nameless language of things and convert[s] it by name into sounds" (*SW1*: 70). In the prelapsarian

---

[34] At this point Benjamin departs from the orthodox interpretation of the *Logos*, of which incarnation is traditionally believed to be the Christ. At the least, his argument goes against the opening lines of the Gospel of John, which states that "the Word was God."

[35] Readers familiar with the usually negative connotation of fate in Benjamin's works may be bemused by the affirmative tone in this quote. It is, however, important to note that fate in this context is hardly one that is forcefully imposed on another person by the name-giver; it is neither arbitrary nor judging as the mythic breed of fate is. The sense is that, in the proper name, God's creative word resides in the person given the name.

state of man, all languages are essentially one because they all have their origins in God's word, and among them is only gradation on the basis of their varying densities. The transition from such an intralingual conception of translation into the presence of what we now know as interlingual translation among different languages marks for Benjamin an event of manifold significance, viz., the Fall. The existence of a language outside the Adamic language indicates an attempt by a fallen man, to put it proleptically, to stand outside the latter; by rejecting name, the fallen man is cut off from the divine source of knowledge, the *creative word of God*, and has to supply his own inferior travesty of the divine counterpart to make up for the void, hence the *human word*. Benjamin finds an illustration of this event in the biblical tale of the Tree of Knowledge.

> The knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is itself the only evil known to the paradisacal state. Knowledge of good and evil abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word. Name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become expressly, as it were externally, magic (*SW1*: 71, italics in original).

The irony is that even before the Tree, knowledge was already given to man universally and immediately in name. Man's transgression in having its fruits constitutes the very evil of which knowledge the tree purports to give, and this new knowledge is wholly self-fulfilling in that it arouses "in accordance with the immutable law by which this judging word punishes—and expects—its

own awakening as the sole and deepest *guilt*" (*SW1*: 71, italics added). The Fall [*Sündenfall*] qua usurpation of cognitive name by the judging human word ushers in the presence of guilt [*Sünde*] in the fabric of the human language. The "immutable law" is that of judgment [*Urteil*], literally, the primordial [*Ur-*] division [*Teil*][36] between man and knowledge, in lieu of which man is now ridden with the guilt of having coveted the faculty of judgment. The circular logic of what has just been said instantiates the immense self-referentiality of the judging word, in accordance with which language, debarred from knowledge and estranged from nature, is degraded to the status of "a *mere* sign" (*SW1*: 71, italics in original). No longer the locus of the "immanent magic" of name, the fallen language is now turned a means through which the "external," yet still immediate, magic of judgment takes place. The new magic, entirely different from the other kinds discussed above, is external in the sense that it imparts something other than itself; its immediacy consists of the faculty of abstraction in the spirit of language after the Fall. "Good and evil, being unnamable and nameless," and they are therefore "abstract elements ... rooted in the word of judgment" (*SW1*: 72). What is implied by this statement is that judgment is immediate by virtue of its being wholly arbitrary without any concrete reference to the object at hand. The irony of the Tree of Knowledge is completed by man's belated realization that the good which he sought to gain had always been around, but is now permanently lost to him. The guilt left to him is akin to the Romantic pathos of alienation from the self, nature, and God.[37]

---

[36] Man-young Jo, p. 357.

[37] See Fredric Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: the Concept of Early German Romanticism.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 31-2 and 102.

2.2. Melancholy of Nature and Guilt

"This immense irony," Benjamin adds, "marks the mythic origin of law" (*SW1*: 72). Here, again, we see a problematization of instrumentality with regard to its political implication and, added to it, its relation to the workings of law. Owing to its place outside name, the judging word, of which abstract elements of good and evil having been reified into pseudo-names that are "empty" yet equally effective, can wield an arbitrary power over not only the fallen man, but also over things: "The *enslavement* of language in prattle [*Geschwätz*] is joined by the enslavement of things in folly [*Narretei*] almost as its inevitable consequence" (*SW1*: 72, italics added). The link between the enslavement [*Verknechtung*] of language and that of things is sustained by the kinship between the words *Geschwätz* and *Narretei*, the latter of which is a borrowing from Kierkegaard[38], both suggesting foolery, or the lack of substance in speech.[39] Likewise, at the political level, an analogy can be drawn between the

---

[38] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 265.: "<u>Talkativeness gains in extensity</u>: it chatters about anything and everything and continues incessantly. <u>When individuals are not turned inward in quiet contentment, in inner satisfaction, in religious sensitiveness</u>, but in a relation of reflection are oriented to externalities and to each other, when no important event ties the loose threads together in the unanimity of a crucial change—then chattering begins. … But <u>chattering dreads the moment of silence</u>, which would reveal the <u>emptiness</u>" (emphasis added). The extensively expansive character of chatter in Kierkegaard's discussion resembles Benjamin's notion of the "expansive tendency" of political writing to "string words together." Chatter's connection to the individual's alienation from the self and God is evident. Once the noise ceases, the "emptiness" of language is unveiled.

[39] A similar association of man's lost communion with nature with the latter's enslavement can be found in Friedrich Schiller's *The Gods of Greece*:

> *Unconscious of the joys she dispenses*
> *Never enraptured by her own magnificence*
> *Never aware of the spirit which guides her*
> *Never more blessed through my blessedness*

impairment of linguistic faculty and the restriction of freedom of the people, and this is supported by his deliberate use of the historically resonant word *Ver*-Knecht-*ung*, meaning serfdom or bondage, instead of the more common *Versklavung*.[40] Consider, for example, the following passage from an article in the 1846 issue of *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* (*Annals for Scientific Criticism*) about the German historian Friedrich Schlosser's view on the condition in France which incurred the Revolution of 1789:

> Schlosser's view draws closer to that of the radical party: the Monarchy and the Church, as they have historically and traditionally formed themselves and so far maintained to be, are hateful to him in the same way. This Monarchy still smacks of the old despotism, while the Church of Jesuitism, and he believes that even today there are strong ties between the two under the same purpose: the stultification/silencing [*Verdummung*] and enslavement [*Verknechtung*] of the people who are struggling for freedom.[41]

A mute and stultified people cannot speak for themselves and are therefore vulnerable to the sway of despotism. It is to the advantage of those in the power,

---

Insensible of her maker's glory
Like the dead stroke of the pendulum
*She slavishly[*knechtisch*] obeys the law of gravity,*
A Nature shorn of the divine.

qtd. in Charles Taylor, *Hegel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 27.

[40] This analogy was not unexampled in Benjamin's previous writing. In his last letter to Gustav Wyneken, an influential teacher from his schooldays with whom he formally dissociated in 1915, he wrote the following: "This age does not have a single form that allows those of us who are silent to express ourselves. We, however, feel oppressed[*verknecht*] by this lack of expression. We reject facile, irresponsible writing." *Walter Benjamin Correspondence*, p. 76.

[41] A. Zimmermann, "Geschichte der französischen Revolution (Erster Artikel)", *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*(1846), pp. 282-3. My translation. <http://www.mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn/resolver.pl?urn=urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10501837-2> In *Deutsches Wörterbuch* by the Grimm Brothers, under the "Verchnutung" section, there is a shortened version of the quote.

the state and the church, that either the people remain silent or what they say do not reach any ears. What is at stake in both the *Jahrbücher* article and Benjamin's essay is the problematics of (mis)representation in both the realms of politics and language. We find an interesting parallel throughout Shelley's writings, most notably in *Queen Mab* and *A Philosophical View of Reform*, where he accused the Catholic Church of perverting names and symbols borrowed from the life and opinions of Jesus Christ and condemned several national governments for their corrupted representative systems. (*CWS* 5, 10) Our later discussion of *The Cenci* in the next chapter will focus on Shelley's analysis of the ways in which the power of the patriarchal power nexus rests on a faulty system of language. What differentiates Shelley and Benjamin from the *Jahrbücher* article is their philosophical approaches to such political matters.

It is noteworthy, in this regard, that Benjamin's 1916 discussion of the mediate condition [*Mittelbarkeit*] of fallen language, even at its most esoteric moment, already segues into an adumbration of a future social criticism. The terms that would reappear in subsequent essays on the critique of law, namely, guilt and fate, are here hinted at in terms of overnaming and the sadness of nature. The profusion of language notwithstanding, or rather because of its illegitimate proliferation, nature is deprived of name. Such adulteration of language impinges upon nature in the form of "overnaming," or excessive naming, which transforms the heretofore "blissful" muteness of nature—blissful because it used to be able to await its name giver in hope—into a hopeless, melancholy one. "Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute. In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or

disinclination to communicate" (*SW1*: 73). When this locution reappears nine years later[42] in a slightly modified form in his habilitation thesis on *Trauerspiel*, or play of mourning, the context of allegory is added to make more clear the relation between the "deliberate muteness" of nature and its guilt.

> The allegorically significant is prevented by guilt from finding fulfilment of its meaning in itself. Guilt is not confined to the allegorical observer, who betrays the world for the sake of knowledge, but it also attaches to the object of his contemplation. This view, rooted in the doctrine of the fall of the creature, which brought down nature with it, is responsible for the ferment which distinguishes the profundity of western allegory from the oriental rhetoric of this form of expression. Because it is mute, fallen nature mourns ... (*UDT* 224)

It is evident that the allegorist, "who betrays the world for the sake of knowledge," is a descendent of the fallen man. Allegory, in Benjamin's usage, is "the word which is intended to [bind with spell] a surviving remnant of [pagan] antique life" (*UDT* 223), and, as such, has its origin in the postlapsarian state of language.[43] The guilt it bears likewise stems from the fact that it has no referent: "Allegory goes away empty-handed. Evil as such, which it cherished as enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory, and means something different from what it is. It means

---

[42] Two preparatory essays for the *Trauerspiel* book, "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy" and "The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy" were already written in 1916. cf. Steiner, p. 65.

[43] I made some changes in Osborne's rendition of the phrase. I added "pagan" to make more obvious the sense in which Benjamin uses the word "antique," namely, the polytheistic time of the past. I also substituted "bind with spell" for "exorcize." The German word *bannen*, which is a contronym, conveys both the senses of "ward off " and "captivate." The context supports the latter interpretation. In this modification, I benefited from consultation with the Korean translation by Man-young Jo (299).

precisely the non-existence of what it presents" (*UDT* 233). The allegorist is essentially an "observer," who cannot give names but only "read" (*UDT* 225), and, moreover, under his contemplating gaze, nature itself is laden with guilt. But the question still remains: whence does the allegorist derive such Midas-like power which "turns [whatever he picks up] into something endowed with significance," and therefore make them guilty (*UDT* 229)?[44] The answer seems to lie in the fact that the unnamed nature is melancholy, and that melancholy itself is a sin. Benjamin gives us a hint when he elaborates on the muteness of nature that "the inversion of this proposition [that nature mourns because it is mute] leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute" (*SW1*: 73; *Origin*: 224). Not only is nature unable or reluctant to speak, but it is also "inclined" to remain silent. This "inclination to speechlessness" (*SW1*: 73) indicates a certain brand of saturnine temperament, a state of mental and spiritual fatigue that refers to "the genuinely theological conception of the melancholic, which is to be found in one of the seven deadly sins. This is *acedia*, dullness of the heart, or sloth" (*UDT* 155).[45] Lament itself is a lethargic action, "the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language" (*SW1*: 73) that leads nowhere than showing its own abject condition. Such is the theological ground of the guilt of nature, that its "deliberate

---

[44] Quoted in Pauline Ruberry-Blanc, *La vision tragi-comique de William Shakespeare et ses précédents dans le théâtre Tudor*. Doctoral thesis, (Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2000), p. 44.

[45] In arguing that nature's guilt resides in its *acedia*, I am juxtaposing the discussion of origins of melancholy in the last section of the second part of the book, "Trauerspiel and Tragedy" (*SW1*: 138-158), with the discussion of origins of allegory in the last section of the third part, "Allegory and Trauerspiel" (*SW1*: 215-235). More parallels can be drawn between the two sections, one of which is that while, in the former, the indecisiveness of the prince is designated as "nothing other than a saturnine *acedia*" (*SW1*: 156) of which another trait, *unfaithfulness*, is embodied in the figure of the courtier, in the latter the mournful silence of nature ultimately finds redemption in the contemplative gaze of the allegoric observer whose "melancholic intention keeps *faith* with its own quality as a thing in an incomparable way" (*SW1*: 225, italics added).

muteness" (*SW1*: 73) points to a blind, self-fulfilling apprehension about its alienation from God—"To be named—even when the namer is godlike and blissful—perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning" (*SW1*: 73)—and even skeptic resistance to hope, the "sickness unto death" in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term.[46]

2.3. Law as Fate

So long as nature remains nameless, and the rupture with God unhealed, it stays guilty. Such is the *mythic* origin of law, since the fallen language of man, which is a judging word, now stands outside the word of God and judges of its own accord. Noticeable in this phase of Benjamin's thought is the divergence that already occurs between the realms of law and religion, for the nature of guilt that each posits is fundamentally different from one another, according to which difference the distinction between the mythic and the divine, the metaphysical foundation of his *Critique of Violence*, is later established. In the *Critique*, the monotheistic God of the Hebraic religion is posed against the Greek gods of mythology for the unstated reason that the latter's plurality is inextricably related to the postlapsarian multiplicity of language, namely, the

---

[46] Søren Kierkegaard, trans. Alastair Hannay, *The Sickness unto Death: a Christian Psychological Exposition of Edification and Awakening.* (London: Penguin, 2004). Kierkegaard's despair, like Benjamin's melancholy which belongs to one deprived of his or her name, indicates sense of losing oneself (p. 43). See also p. 80ff. for discussion of what he calls the "feminine despair," which is "despair not wanting to be oneself. The despair of weakness." He then draws a contrast between the said despair with the "masculine (demonic) despair," which is the "despair of wanting in despair to be oneself—defiance" (p. 98ff). It may be interesting to compare the latter despair with *illa heroica*, the heroic despair in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, which, however, deviates too much from the course of this thesis and will not be pursued further.

"infinitely differentiated" (*SW1*: 71) state of knowledge which brought about the existence of evil in tandem with the epistemological crisis. These are "the numerous gods of yore" that Max Weber spoke of in his lecture of 1917, "Science as a Vocation," who are, as gods of the modern polytheism of values, now "divested of their magic and hence assuming the shape of impersonal forces, arise from their graves, strive for power over our lives, and resume their eternal struggle among themselves."[47] In Benjamin's symbolic chronology, the mythic age provides the missing link between the judgment that followed the Adamic Fall and the modern institutions of law and the state power that impose guilt on their subject, and it is as the concept of fate that the mythic prototype of law is introduced in his 1919 essay "Fate and Character."

The popular tendency to think of fate in the context of religion signifies for Benjamin the misconception that modernity has largely done away with the mystic in public arenas, all its remnants having retired into such private sectors as personal belief and conduct. Any one-to-one comparison between the concepts of fate and religion, however, is not tenable, for there is nothing in fate that corresponds with "the concept that necessarily accompanies that of guilt in the ethical sphere, namely that of innocence" (*SW1*: 203). One only has to recall how the Tree of Knowledge in the language essay had nothing to offer but the very evil of which knowledge it purported to give; that vain promise of knowledge has its parallel in the Greek idea of happiness, which is "not at all [a] confirmation of an innocent conduct of life but [a] temptation to the most grievous offense, hubris" (*SW1*: 203). Contrary to the comprehensiveness of religion, fate bespeaks a constraint to which the unhappy mortals of Greek mythology are bound, since happiness, not to mention innocence, lies beyond

---

[47] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), p. 24.

the confines of fate. As such, the concept of fate is to find its counterpart in another realm, viz. the concept of law.

> Another sphere must therefore be sought in which misfortune and guilt alone carry weight, a balance on which bliss and innocence are found too light and float upward. This balance is the scale of law. The laws of fate—misfortune and guilt—are elevated by law to measures of the person; it would be false to assume that only guilt is present in a legal context; it is demonstrable that all legal guilt is nothing other than misfortune. (*SW1:* 203)

Fate works like law because, like the latter, it can only offer misfortune and guilt. But there seems to be a leap of logic when Benjamin asserts on the mere spur of the presupposition that the reverse is also true, that is to say, that law also resembles fate in that it inflicts misfortune on the guilty. Of course, the assertion is soon followed by a more detailed explication of the relation between the two concepts, but there is no denying that the sudden veering in direction suggests where the emphasis lies. One is led to suspect whether it was the mythic dimension of law, rather than the demystified, "impersonal" aspects of fate, that Benjamin wanted to address in the first place. He thus remarks on the continuity of the order of law with that of the mythic world: "Mistakenly, through confusing itself with the realm of justice, the order of law—which is merely a residue of the demonic stage of human existence, when legal statutes determined not only men's relationships but also their relation to the gods— has preserved itself long past the time of the victory over the demons" (*SW1:* 203).

Though dissociated from religion, fate and law both have instilled in themselves a punitive theology that imposes guilt on their subjects, but

without the promise of redemption that their precursor offers. An allusion is again made to the Adamic Fall, as it was done in the language essay, but his narrative is now more elaborate due to the introduction of the concept of fate in the process: "Fate shows itself, therefore, in the view of life, as condemned, as having essentially first been condemned and then become guilty. ... Law condemns not to punishment but to guilt. Fate is the guilt context of living" (*SW1*: 204). Fate, in other words, signifies the guilt-giving mechanism of the judging word. That is to say, that in fate the judging word supersedes the divine word which resides in one's name. As the language essay dictates, "a man's name is his fate" (*SW1*: 69), thus affirming the creative faculty of naming language, but now the condemning praxis of the fallen language transplants a new fate on the subject. The subject of this new fate, however, is not exactly the man who bears it, for, as a mere travesty of the creative word of God, the judging word can only influence the nonessential part of the man's being: "It is never man but only the life in him that it strikes—the part involved in natural guilt and misfortune by virtue of semblance" (*SW1*: 204). The relation the man has to his imposed fate(s) is comparable to the relation between the signifed and the signifier, and, as such, it is wholly arbitrary: "In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages" (*SW1*: 71, emphasis in original). Law, then, is arbitrary for the same reason: "The judge can perceive fate wherever he pleases; with every judgment he must blindly dictate fate" (*SW1*: 204).

2.4. The Mediacy of Legal Violence

In this chapter we have traced the development of Benjamin's thought on language and its implications apropos of the problem of violence. We began by surveying his notion of the prelapsarian state of language, most importantly the immediacy and cognitive faculty of name, and also his narrative of its corruption that ensued from its departure from the divine word. From there we followed the evolving status of the bourgeois conception of language as a means, a mere sign whose relation with the referent has become wholly arbitrary, and how nature, and the natural life in man, unnamed and hence overnamed, becomes through the judging word subject to the guilt-context of fate which knows no redemption. Such is Benjamin's esoteric view of the status quo, a state of "mythic enslavement [*mythische Verknechtung*]" (*SW1*: 205)[48] under those whose forces are very much alive in the modern institutions of law and state power. These forces, attached to the speaking subject, are exercised in various forms of coercion that delimit the being and action of its counterpart and therefore leaves it melancholy and guilty. To break free from such a mediate relation is the object of the problem of violence, and it was time he now tackled the problem directly with reference to violence itself. These are the problems that come to the fore in his 1921 essay *Critique of Violence*.

Contrary to what one might expect from its title, the essay gives no straightforward definition of violence, but it is possible to infer its import in Benjamin's thought through a careful reading of the text. We might start from

---

[48] "mystical enslavement" in Jephcott's translation. As discussed above (2.3), Benjamin carefully manages his conceptual schema, making a point of opposing the divine and the monotheistic to the mythic and the polytheistic. So *mythische*, as is the case with "mythic violence [*mythshce Gewalt*]" and the mythic origin of law [*mythischen Ursprungs des Rechtes*]," should be translated as "mythic."

the beginning, the opening paragraph where he states that violence is a "cause," which by definition produces an effect, but he adds that a cause is violent only when it has "enter[ed] into moral relations" (*SW1*: 236). There are two such moral relations, with law and justice respectively, and it is the very fact that, in its first relation with law, violence is reduced to the status of a means that Benjamin seeks to problematize in his essay. As a cause, violence fits into the 1916 definition of language in its widest sense, that is the "expression of human mental life" (*SW1*: 62), but, as per its tie to the relation as a means [*Mittel*], it is an impaired linguistic praxis, subject to mediacy [*Mittelbarkeit*]. What prevents people from questioning the mediate condition of violence, Benjamin observes, is its relation to law, an end [*Zweck*] to which it is thought to serve as a means, which only gives rise to meaningless debates over whether the justness of the ends justify the means (the natural-law theory), or vice versa (positive law). Accordingly, the immediate concerns of the essay are to break the circular argument of the pair and to directly contemplate the very relation of means to ends.

More specifically, Benjamin is engaged in the question of the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned forms of violence. He opts to address the criteria for the justness of means rather than ends because then he is able to probe into the mechanisms by which law regulates violence while concealing its own: "Characteristic of these [contemporary European legal conditions], so far as the individual as legal subject is concerned, is the tendency to deny the natural ends of such individuals in all those cases in which such ends could, in a given situation, be usefully pursued by violence" (*SW1*: 238). From this sentence we may learn two things. First, an individual, in a given situation, might choose from a variety of means, some of which are violent while others are not. Second, there is no essential difference between

kinds of violence, but it only depends on "the presence or absence of a general historical acknowledgment of its ends" (*SW1*: 238). In other words, the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence is not based on any inherent principle, but is wholly historical in a way that fundamentally destabilizes the legitimacy of legal violence. Hence it is not in the interest of law that violence exists in the hands of individuals. Law has to preserve itself by maintaining "a monopoly of violence vis-à-vis individuals" (*SW1*: 239), and this results in the self-referentiality of law setting itself as an end of legal violence. This is called the "law-preserving function" (*SW1*: 241) of violence.

Out of hand it is easy to think of legal violence as the main target of Benjamin's critique, but let us stop for a moment and savor the rich ambiguity of his insight into the availability of violence in the hands of individuals which gives rise to law's "predatory violence" (*SW1*: 240) before going right for the obvious. Once a novelty, it is now a hackneyed statement that law harbors violence that it so hypocritically others, and the author himself makes a reproachful reference to those advocates of "a quite childish anarchism," which they think may be "achieved by refusing to acknowledge any constraint toward persons and by declaring, 'What pleases is permitted'" (*SW1*: 241). As implied in the above analysis of the distinction between "different" kinds of violence, his perception of its ubiquity is a double-edged sword, which, on the one hand, might debunk law's claim to justice, while, on the other hand, also revealing the potential injustice of any violent attempt to battle the legal system. Such is the gist of the age-long question of the justification of revolutionary violence, upon which is based yet another old debate concerning the two disparate dimensions—the "radical" and "conservative"—of Benjamin. Yet it is often a fruitless enterprise to take a dualistic approach to an author's stance, nor should we presume to think that he has suffered from a severe case of

theoretical diplopia, with his one critical eye directed to legal violence and the other to civilian violence. It is important to bear in mind the simple fact that the subject of his critique is violence as a *means* without reference to the ends—be it legal, illegal, or even subversive—it serves.

Mediacy as a universal condition in all human transactions is at stake, as well as an instrumental outlook of the world that it promotes. Qua speaking subjects, both the state and the individual engage in a non-Adamic linguistic praxis when their action "communicate[s] something other than itself" (*SW1*: 71), rather than being expressive of their own mental being. This "other" that is external to themselves that they communicate is judgment, and it is this delivering of judgment (and thereby guilt) regardless of their object's linguistic being—their *names*—that constitutes violence in Benjamin's mythology. Hence in the eyes of law, all citizens are potential perpetrators of violence and a possible threat to its vocal authority,[49] even though, in a constitutional state, it is normally the state—with few exceptions such as organized labor (*SW1*: 239)—which exercises violence as a legal subject: "In the great criminal this violence confronts the law with the threat of *declaring a new law*, a threat that even today, despite its impotence, in important instances horrifies the public as it did in primeval times" (*SW1*: 241, italics mine).

---

[49] "The linguistic importance of the word 'dictatorship'—which led to its extension to all those cases in which one could say that an order is 'dictated' (*dictator est qui dictat*, "dictator is the one who dictates") and to a use of language that undoubtedly contributed to the dissemination of the concept—was not evident then." Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship: From the Beginning of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to the Proletarian Class-Struggle*. Translated by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014), p.2.

3. "Innocent Name" and "Jealous Laws":

A Critique of Violence in *The Cenci*

> She fears that power is as a beast which grasps
>
> And loosens not: a snake whose look transmutes
>
> All things to guilt which is its nutriment. (4.4.179-181)

Commentators vary on the exact details in the genesis of *The Cenci*, which is in itself a confusing story.[50] But they generally agree that the play principally

---

[50] Already in Shelley's time the story of the Cenci family was an antique one with many variations—some of them described in Stuart Currant, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), chapter 2)—and James Bieri's 2005 biography suggests the possibility that PBS had more than one version of the "Relation" manuscript when he wrote the play—James Bieri, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography : Exile of Unfulfilled Reknown, 1816-1822*. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), p. 138. The Guido painting of Beatrice Cenci which Shelley saw at the Palazzo Colonna in Rome in April 1819 has been subject to much debate concerning the authorship of the painter (ed. Frederick L. Jones. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley vol. 2*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 504n.).

As to the "Manuscript" which Shelley cites at the beginning of the preface as the chief source of the play, researchers have different opinions concerning its translator. The 1964 research by Paul Smith ("Restless Casuistry: Shelley's Composition of 'The Cenci.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 13, pp. 77–85.) attributes the translation of the original Italian manuscript to PBS (Smith 79), rather than MWS. Curran's abovementioned 1970 monograph carefully looks into the translated "Relation" without taking notice of MWS's part in the work. There are, however, others who acknowledge MWS's partnership in the composition process. According to a 1908 dissertation (Bates, Ernest Sutherland. *A Study of Shelley's Drama* The Cenci. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1908. p. 3n.), PBS merely wrote in a 1819 letter to Peacock that "I send you a translation of the Italian manuscript on which my play is founded," without specifying who did the translation, and Robert Browning "thought he remembered having heard somewhere that the translation was by Mrs. Shelley (Browning, *Works*, Camberwell ed., ix. 305)." The 1887 biography by Edward Dowden (*The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley vol. 2,* p. 277) also contends that it was MWS who, at the least, copied the manuscript for future use, and the Holmes biography of 1974 (*Shelley the Pursuit*, see chapters 16, 20 and 21) delineates MWS's involvement in the work, including the procuring and copying of the manuscript and proofreading of Shelley's draft. According to *A Mary Shelley Encyclopedia* (ed. Lucy Morrison, Staci L. Stone., 2003, pp. 363-4.), the surviving copy of translation in the

drew from an Italian source the Shelleys obtained from the Gisborne family in May 1818, a year before the actual composition began. The manuscript, "Relazione della morte della Famiglia Cenci," was copied and possibly translated by Mary Shelley under the title "Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci." Literal as it seems, the translated title slightly modifies the original in a way that exhibits an important shift in focus from "the Cenci Family" [*Famiglia Cenci*] to "the Cenci," which suggests a particular member of the family, and Shelley himself named his play *The Cenci* and stated at various places in the preface that it deals with "the story of the Cenci." But *which* Cenci? The elliptical title invites a question that gets at the heart of the play. What is perhaps lost in translation is the feminine definite article extant in the Italian "*La Cenci*" (*SPP*, Preface, 141), by which name, according to the preface, Shelley's Roman servant recognized the figure in the famous portrait of Beatrice Cenci. While the custom in English also dictates that the definite article "the" can be used in front of a woman's surname, thus imitating Italian usage[51], not once is Beatrice referred to as "the Cenci" in the play, and it is rather the father, Francesco, who represents the name and is cast in the dramatis personae simply as "Cenci." There is, however, in the play one single appearance of the exact phrase complete with the definite article to denote "all our kin" (1.2.56), namely the House of Cenci, for all its unorthodox use of the singular form instead of what is more idiomatic, i.e. "the Cencis," which

---

Bodlean, though not the one PBS sent to Peacock, is in MWS's handwriting, which again suggests the likelihood that the translation was hers.

[51] An interesting case is Countess Guiccioli, a lover of Byron's, whom Shelley refers to a couple of times in his letters as both "Contessa Guiccioli" (7 August 1821 letter to Mary Shelley) and "la Guiccioli" (8 August 1821 letter to Mary Shelley). In a 1846 magazine article titled "Lord Byron's Last Portrait," an unknown author recalls a meeting with the Byron couple and refers to the countess as "the Guiccioli" (qtd. in "the, adj., pron.2, and n.2." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press September 2016. Web. 29 November 2016.).

complicates the matter.[52] The confusion surrounding the title, resulting from its play on the ambiguity of the article *the* based on its gender and numeric neutrality, is emblematic of the play's main theme of hereditary name and its perversion.

In this chapter, I probe into the nature of violence that Cenci perpetrates against his family, which consists in a coercion to infamy, a deliberate perversion of the family name that comes to consummation with Beatrice's parricide. Two Cencis contend for the name, the father desiring it to be "an inheritance to strip / its wearer bare as infamy" (4.1.61-2), and the daughter defending "our ancient house, and stainless fame" (5.2.146). For the latter, her "innocent name" is "the life of life," without which her "poor life" is only a "mask" (4.4.143-6). Cenci's curse is the figuration of his off-stage incestuous rape, injecting guilt into his daughter and thereby corrupting both her body and soul. The play ends with Beatrice's bitter acknowledgement of the demise of the name to Bernardo, the sole surviving member of the family, that "our common name / [Is] as a mark stamped on thine innocent brow / For men to point at as they pass" (5.4.150-2). Such an end tells us that Beatrice's revolt has come to naught, since killing the person of Cenci was not the solution, only to fulfil his imprecation. Shelley directs the reader's attention to a larger systematic violence of which that of Cenci's is only a specimen.

---

[52] The fact that both the French and the Italian translations of the title employ plural articles, *les* and *i*, respectively, ostensibly supports the claim that Shelley indeed meant the House of Cenci by the title. Such deviation from the grammatical norm, however, is at odd with various other instances in his letters where, for example, he more conventionally refers to John and Maria Gisborne as "the Gisbornes" (29 May 1819 letter to Peacock).

3.1. Father, Tyrant, God: Religion and Law as a Guilt Context

Act 1 Scene 3 opens with a banquet thrown by Count Cenci, and its guests include some of the most powerful male authority figures in the country, both aristocratic and ecclesiastical. They represent a microcosm of Italian society as described by Shelley in his preface, one whose whole frame is deeply pervaded by religion enrooted in the mind of people as "a passion, a persuasion, an excuse, a refuge; never a check" (*SPP* 143). The last qualification in the phrase just quoted, which accounts for how in Italy "the most atrocious villain may be rigidly devout" (*SPP* 143), denotes what Shelley deems to be the peculiar status of Catholicism in this society, namely, that of a life context. Religion in this sense is "not a rule for moral conduct" (*SPP* 143) to rein in the wills of individuals, but rather offers grounds for them to act and justify their actions *ex post facto*. The result is a particular brand of religion-speak, a verbal protocol set up among the laity and the clergy alike who partake in the society. Cenci's welcoming speech is an exemplary piece of such religious parlance, so we may start our discussion from here.

> Welcome, my friends and kinsmen; welcome ye,
> Princes and Cardinals, pillars of the church,
> Whose presence honours our festivity.
> I have too long lived like an anchorite,
> And in my absence from your merry meetings
> An evil word is gone abroad of me;
> But I do hope that you, my noble friends,
> When you have shared the entertainment here,
> And heard the pious cause for which 'tis given,
> And we have pledged a health or two together,

Will think me flesh and blood as well as you;

Sinful indeed, for Adam made all so,

But tender-hearted, meek and pitiful.

.   .   .   .

It is indeed a most desired event.

If, when a parent from a parent's heart

Lifts from this earth to the great Father of all

A prayer, both when he lays him down to sleep,

And when he rises up from dreaming it;

One supplication, one desire, one hope,

That he would grant a wish for his two sons,

Even all that he demands in their regard—

And suddenly beyond his dearest hope

It is accomplished, he should then rejoice,

And call his friends and kinsmen to a feast,

And task their love to grace his merriment,—

Then honour me thus far—for I am he. (1.3.1-13, 21-33)

Cenci begins with a seemly message of greeting followed by an appeal to the pious cause of his invitation as befits an orthodox Catholic. If in the first part of his speech (1-13) Cenci refers to himself as a fellow sinner, one among the brethren, the second part (21-33) packages him as a parent, one among many, and linking himself with God, who is "the great father of all" (23). In front of an unsuspecting audience, he seems to even relish his verbal flair as he wraps his intent in seemingly innocuous equivoques; such paltering phrases as "lived like an Anchorite" (4) and "Sinful indeed, for Adam made all so" (12) belie what are really acts of crime being committed backstage. There is a build in the second part of his speech, where he, addressing himself in the third person,

deliberates over one's parental wishes in a string of multiple subordinate clauses dependent upon a single conjunction "If" (22), bridged by a *ritardando* with the anaphora of "One supplication, one desire, one hope" (26), kicking back into an inflated cadence of polysyndetic repetition of elaborating phrases, until he reaches a histrionic height of rhetorical intensity, hearing himself enunciate: "Then honour me thus far—for I am he" (33). The dexterity with which Cenci commands the language is met with a ready approval from the guests, who, despite rumors about his dubious low profile and probable household cruelty, acquits him on the basis of his "open cheer" (1.3.17) and "companionab[ility]" (1.3.15). Not only does this rapid establishment of companionship confirm the social functionality of religion, but it also discloses the kind of tenuous substantiality inhabited by such a delusion of fraternity, an ideologically constructed *Schein* liable to being shattered by one critical crack on the surface. And that appears to be precisely what is the dramatic function of Cenci's speech. It posits in a devotional phraseology a fraternity of reverent fathers modelled after the divine paternity, only to be thrown away by the following revelation of his real intent.

<p style="text-align:center">God!</p>

> I thank thee! In one night didst thou perform,
>
> By ways inscrutable, the thing I sought.
>
> My disobedient and rebellious sons
>
> Are dead!—Why, dead!—What means this change of cheer?
>
> You hear me not, I tell you they are dead; (1.3.40-5)

The theological weight of Cenci's proposition, heretofore met with approval, adds to the detonating impact of its shock. A parody of the biblical parable of

the prodigal son,[53] skewing the role of the loving father who rejoices in the return of his lost, wayward son, the speech is almost sacrilegiously provocative, and yet, at the same time, it subtly plays on another aspect of Christian theology, the divine retribution of evil.[54] Their cruel death, he insists, is only condign to their unfilial recalcitrance. Throughout the play, Cenci repeatedly has recourse to these two theological pillars, the doctrines of divine paternity and retributive justice, to construct an idiosyncratic belief system which, as suits his purposes, enlists him as "God's scourge for disobedient sons" (3.1.316). While such a belief deviates so wildly from what any ordinary Catholic, and indeed, what any of the guests present at the banquet would be willing to postulate, there lingers an unresolved feeling of anxiety on the part of the audience for his belief's unsettling compatibility with the current patriarchal structure of Catholicism.

Here, it is appropriate to recall that Cenci's Catholicism is actually an invention of Shelley's that is not to be found in the Italian source he consulted. Francesco Cenci of the above-mentioned "Relation" document is rather a staunch atheist who "never frequented any church."[55] As for the chapel dedicated by Cenci to St. Thomas in the court of his Palace, which, according to Shelley's preface, attests, at the very least, to his psychological reliance on the consolation of masses, the author of the source document rebuts its religiosity because "his intention in so doing was to bury there all his children whom he cruelly hated" (*SPP* 143n). Notwithstanding his blasphemous utterances, such as his evocation of the Eucharist in beholding a bowl of wine

---

[53] Luke 15:11-32. The whole chapter is a series of parables in the common theme of redemption and its celebration.

[54] Deuteronomy 32:35, for example: "To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste."

[55] *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, X, 172-75. Quoted in the editor's note in *SPP*, p. 143n.

which he likens to the "mingled blood" of his dead sons in a toast to the "mighty Devil in Hell" (1.3.81-83), Shelly's Cenci certainly fits into the category of Catholics as defined in the preface, viz. "the combination of an undoubting persuasion of the truth of the popular religion with a cool determined perseverance in enormous guilt" (*SPP* 143). In recasting Cenci as a Catholic, Shelley is reinterpreting a character originally considered an aberrant and an outcast—an atheist and a sodomite in a Catholic society—as one corollary to and symptomatic of the depravity of the larger system. A critique of the structural violence and tyranny both latent in and abetted by the nexus of power among the domestic and religious sectors of a patriarchal society is here underway.

The "change of cheer" (1.3.44) at the banquet, then, bespeaks a sense of unease among the guests facing the striking display of an anomaly that is undissolved, yet deeply present within their patriarchal religion. There ensues a sudden rift between Cenci and the confused assembly of male Catholics, followed by an immediate disownment of "the *abandoned villain*" from "this *noble company*" (1.3.91-2, italics added). Note, however, how the censure remains strictly ad hominem throughout, as their anger is directed against the individual alone who committed such acts, rather than the socio-theological grounds underlying these acts in the first place. By limiting the scope of their attack to the subject of immorality, they are able to single out the aberrant from the company and thus skirt around the question of collusion among the patriarchal apparatuses of power. While such disavowal may exonerate them from the charges they make against the red-handed Cenci, their claim to being morally superior bystanders, which means no more than being better believers and fathers than he, faces a serious challenge as none of them dare to come forward in Beatrice's defense.

In his character analysis of the play, Stuart Curran properly connects the impuissance of the nobles with their flatness as characters, not fully developed and caught between the marked polarity between Beatrice and Cenci, here represented by the figure of the Cardinal, Camillo: "Camillo's function in this play is to provide a link to the world beyond the walls of the Cenci domains, to the *measured*, *sensible* operation of human affairs, far removed from the inarticulate terrors of the Palazzo Cenci and, though *not oblivious* to them, looking upon them as a *disruption of the orderly process of life* that in the Italian Renaissance is maintained in a precarious enough balance" (italics added). [56] In other words, the noble guests constitute the everyday world of a Catholic, patriarchal society, more temperate yet not incognizant of its own corruption, a backdrop against which the more violent, dramatic action of incest and parricide within the Cenci household takes place. Their chief dramatic function appears to be a muddled hubbub amplifying the equally ineffectual voice of Camillo, himself an embodiment of the silent majority whose "intentions" may not be vicious but are nevertheless "implicated in the general guilt stemming from the miscarriage of justice" (Curran 63). It is, however, not just inaction which should characterize the guests, for they do make some deliberate choices that may even defy Curran's attribution to them of "good intentions." More than just "preference for self-deception" (Curran 64), their reception of the divulgence of Cenci's atrocity demonstrates the urgent need they feel of its effacement from their sight and the public ken. In what is possibly a borrowing from the biblical motif of the Pharisees, of which derivative, the word "pharisaical," has come to mean the quality of being self-righteous and hypocritical, they demand the "horror" be

---

[56] Stuart Currant, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 64.

cleared away from their conscience by either departing from the site (1.3.70) or silencing the speaker (1.3.94). Even the pleas of Beatrice they want out of their sight, so the frustrated Beatrice complains, "Dare no one look on me?" (1.3.132). Shelley makes a point of carefully configuring the brief exchange between Camillo and Prince Colonna so as to lay bare the tautology in their justification of their own impotence.

> CAMILLO: A bitter wish for one so young and gentle;
>
>   Can we do nothing?—
>
> COLONNA: Nothing that I see.
>
>   Count Cenci were a dangerous enemy;
>
>   (1.3.141-3)

Though in the form of a dialogue, their words are so tightly complementary in their relation to each other as to be monologic in effect. Colonna's response, "Nothing that I see," collocates with Camillo's "Can we do nothing?" in a way that suggests the former's words prepare an automatic response from its counterpart. Put together, "Can we do nothing?—Noting that I see" forms the mirror figuration of a chiasmus, which, when devoid of a larger context, is doomed to fall flat into a meaningless tautology. They equivocate their resolution to do nothing in a quasi-syllogism of "Beatrice is young and gentle, Cenci is a dangerous enemy; therefore, we can do nothing," the conclusion being a given exterior to the circular logic of their argument. Theirs is a permanent motion of receding from the responsibility,

> COLONNA: Yet I would second any one.
>
> A CARDINAL: And I. (1.3.144)

And the blame goes conveniently to Cenci. This process of self-exoneration illustrates how the system as a whole maintains its status quo without directly addressing its anomalies. Curran himself acknowledges this, though in a

different context, when he explains the role played by the impotent and the unassertive in a destruction as follows: "A Hitler does not rise to power without the acquiescence of a Hindenburg, nor extend his dominion without the consent of a Chamberlain; nor, indeed, does he instigate a great war without the complicity of a Stalin" (Curran 69). To put it differently, a Hitler is only possible in a world where there are Hindenburgs and Chamberlains, not to mention Stalins.

Examined in this light, Cenci's proclaiming himself to be "a fiend appointed to chastise / The offences of some unremembered world" (4.1.161-2) is not to be dismissed as a mere fancy of an isolated, deluded mind. In his conception of Cenci as a "criminal psychopath" (Curran 72) whose irrational yet domineering presence over all other characters in the play is a stark foil to the impotence of good men who are "defenseless when confronted by evil" (Curran 69), Curran highlights the play's pessimistic worldview and thereby makes a Beckett out of Shelley. The last chapter of his book entitled "The Structure of Non-Action" is partially dedicated to this interpretation, which can be summarized as the following statement: "The play is not only an indictment of a social system; it is an exploration in psychology and a study of the nature of good and evil and of the moral codes by which man attempts to distinguish them ... In all of these respects it is an individual and modern work" (Curran 257). While this reading has much to offer to our understanding of the play, especially its insight into Beatrice's internal progress in despair, its major weakness lies in its inability to account for the motive underlying Cenci's wild scheme against his own family, which does not seem to fit into the play's otherwise psychologically penetrating treatment of its characters. As a result, Curran has recourse to Cenci's "outlandish[ness]," which, by definition, defies any attempt at analysis: "If Cenci's program seems inflated

beyond what is psychologically probable, it carefully serves the somewhat different ends of Shelley's conception. Evil, after all, is not a psychologically valid term" (Curran 77). Had it been enough, however, to stress Cenci's mania as the major agent of evil in this play, one is tempted to ask, would it not have suited the purpose better to have closely followed the source document's take on the person of Francesco Cenci as an atheist and a sodomite, rather than a Catholic? Cenci's delusion cannot be isolated from his theological convictions and should be contemplated in the larger context of the play's engagement in an attack upon Christendom.

Earl R. Wasserman, commenting on *The Cenci*'s thematic similarity to the 1818 poem *The Revolt of Islam*, remarks that Shelley's critique of the institution of Christianity rests on the conviction that "theology [is] a fiction invented to authorize man's tyranny over man and to sanction punishment of those who violate its own decrees."[57] To arrive at this conclusion, Wasserman quotes a passage from the eighth canto of the poem where the speaker addresses the folly of attributing some mental "Form" to the cause of any kind of evil, be it of natural or human origin. Though essentially a projection of the onlooker's mind, the "Form,"

> Nursed by fear's dew of poison, grows thereon,
>
> And that men say, that Power has chosen Death
>
> On all who scorn its laws, to wreak immortal wrath. (ll. 3250-2)

Though "an innocent dream" (l. 3249) in its nascent stage, the belief in a punishing deity soon takes on an effectual form of power that operates on the level of the slavish mind as a self-fulfilling indictment of its own guilt. Such is the source of a punitive theology, upon which subsists that domineering

---

[57] Earl R. Wasserman. *Shelley: A Critical Reading.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 90.

"Power," which, as Wasserman notes, the earlier *Laon and Cythna* version of 1817 reads more explicitly, "God" (Wasserman 91n). Juxtaposing the two versions has the merit of tracing the ways in which Shelley coded his critical vocabulary as he revised his poem. While, as Richard Holmes points out, the revision was instigated by his publisher who was concerned about a possible government prosecution and, as a result, "much that had been politically explicit was now weakened and obscured,"[58] the above passage is special for its transposition of theologically explicit matters into political terms.

> Nursed by fear's dew of poison, grows thereon,
>
> And that men say, *God* has *appointed* Death
>
> On all who scorn *his will* to wreak immortal wrath. (ll. 3250-2)

In parallel to the change from "God" to "Power," "his will" becomes "its laws," and accordingly "appointed" with its biblical overtone is tempered into a more neutral "chosen." What is remarkable about these emendations is that they show Shelley's insight into the theological dimension of political power, as well as the arbitrariness and unfoundedness of law, albeit in its metaphorical, mythic phase. In this regard, *The Cenci*'s realism, of which the author repeatedly mentions in his dedicatory letter to Leigh Hunt and the preface, presents an interesting case where his more empirical language long developed in his political prose is transplanted to and integrated with the mythopoeic power of his poetry. That is to say, the mythic "Power" which became the target of his earlier works in a social critical vein—*Queen Mab* and *The Revolt of Islam*—alongside *Prometheus Unbound* which was near completion when he began on *The Cenci*, is now translated into a human term of paternity, of which

---

[58] Holmes, op. cit.*, p. 391.

manifestation in domestic tyranny, as Wasserman points out, is nevertheless fraught with religious and political implications (Wasserman 86).

The papacy as an institution is a religious and jurisdictional extension of Cenci's domestic tyranny. The Pope, in the words of Camillo, regards paternal power as "Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own" (2.2.56) and, after Cenci's death, consummates the father's curse by passing death sentence upon the family. The close complicity between paternal authorities in domestic and religious realms as personified by Cenci and the Pope weaves a captious net of moral obligations which becomes the guilt context of the Cenci family, whose revolt against their tyrannical father is duly interrogated and punished by the full force of papal jurisdiction. This powerful alliance, however, is remarkably free from any personal attachment. Often overlooked is the not altogether friendly relation, even "enmity" (2.1.134), between the two patriarchs. The Pope as a person, though sworn to celibacy, is no less a father than the Count, and an equally domineering one at that. As the latter jibes, this "Aldobrandino" (1.1.57), that is the Pope coarsely referred to by his mundane, family name, has many "nephews" (1.1.28), a euphemism for the illegitimate sons of clergy, and among them is Camillo (5.4.24) who, in his turn, once had a nephew that would have been the same age as Beatrice if he still lived (5.2.63-4). As seen in the opening of the play, the Pope's barely disguised nepotism, when necessary, contends without demur against Cenci's interest. He positions himself as a father over all fathers, wielding his influence in virtually all corners of society, and his constant and scrupulous meddling in others' affairs leads to some very important consequences in the play. On top of the demand for a third of Cenci's possessions in exchange for a condonation of "That matter of the murder" (1.1.1), the Pope orders him to make a fourfold provision for his sons, a financial pressure on the Count that has a direct bearing on his malediction

against his sons in Salamanca and the banquet afterwards. It was the Pope who married Beatrice's sister to some distant relation of his, the knowledge of which fact makes Orsino afraid lest the same measure be taken for Beatrice and spurs him on to come up with his "close designs" (2.2.107) that turn out to be the bane of all those involved in the plan, including himself.

That a character who makes no direct appearance on the stage should have so considerable an influence over the course of the play may seem to be a dramatic flaw on Shelley's part, having, for the sake of economy, resorted to an external force whose action takes place outside the dramatic sphere and therefore requires neither explanation nor justification. The sudden dispatch of Cenci's death warrant via Legate Savella that arrives immediately after the death of the culprit, for instance, comes across as so abrupt and inconsistent with his earlier dealings with the Count that one gets the sense that the Pope dwells in a different (probably higher, and possibly even authorial) time-sequence, while the "charges of the gravest import" (4.2.12) on which the arrest is made remains unspecified. The gist of the problem is that the Pope, though not one of the dramatis personae and therefore not a character in the strict sense, nevertheless exerts a strong presence within the play, yet as one that appears to be wholly independent and aloof from the play's main course of action. This may be the reason why commentators generally regard him as one constituting the backdrop,[59] or, at most, as Cenci's "symbolic counterpart" (Curran 65). I see enough truth in this view, nor is it my intention to argue

---

[59] In the words of William Ulmer, the Pope "by no means the deliberate or self-conscious motive force of the private plot. He figures history as a vast field of impersonal relations motivated by various pressures. He also figures the injustice of social mandates." William Andrew Ulmer. *Shelleyan Eros: The Rhetoric of Romantic Love.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 121. Curran, in his chapter entitled "Spectrum of Characters," does not place the Pope in the spectrum, but merely stresses on his complicity with Cenci. Other critics, such as Hogle and Wasserman, barely mentions the Pope as an individual character.

against the symbolic status attributed to the Pope, yet I maintain that the unreconciled duality within him of the sub-character and the larger-than-life force is what makes him the embodiment of law that he is. The incongruity between Aldobrandino the covetous patriarch and Pope Clement VIII bespeaks not just the difference between the flesh and the symbol, but also the transition from the private to the public, and it is only as the public, disinterested figure that the Pope is truly the jurisdictional extension of Cenci. If it is "implacable hatred" (*SPP* 141) which, according to the Preface, characterizes Cenci's attitude towards his children, there is no personal feeling involved in the Pope's delivering his verdict on them. The same is true for his defense of Cenci, and I say this in spite of such instances that seem to express his emotion as this:

> I spoke with him, and urged him then to check
> Your father's cruel hand; he frowned and said,
> "Children are disobedient, and they sting
> Their fathers' hearts to madness and despair
> Requiting years of care with contumely.
> I pity the Count Cenci from my heart;
> His outraged love perhaps awakened hate,
> And thus he is exasperated to ill.
> In the great war between the old and young
> I, who have white hairs and a tottering body,
> Will keep at least blameless neutrality." (2.2.30-40)

Though he professes his heartfelt pity for Cenci, it is conspicuously lacking in earnestness, as it is impossible that someone who has profited over the years by covering up the crimes of a person cannot have known his household cruelty; to say that the father's "outraged love perhaps awakened hate" in his

children and thus led to his illness is to unabashedly reverse the cause and effect, and the speaker's consciousness of its being a tall tale betrays itself in the faltering "perhaps." The jocose mention of his "white hairs and a tottering body" also speaks to this effect. His stubborn "frown" at the outset now turns into the venerable smile of an elderly man who makes a gentle mockery of his own waning vitality, yet such is his device for creating the illusion that there are logic and progression in his argument, as there are in his emotional state, thereby showing that his "blameless neutrality" is indeed impartial and above reproach.

The impersonality of the Pope exemplifies Benjamin's notion of the introduction of institutional violence into private relations. As we saw in the previous section, the impunity of lying in the past is a sign for Benjamin that "there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent" (*SW1*: 245) because it stands between private persons. The penalty that was eventually placed on fraud resulted from the later law's increasing need to implement preventive measures against possible violence that might incur in the defrauded party, for the motivation of law-preserving violence is to forestall any natural violence that exists outside law: "the law's interest in a monopoly of violence vis-à-vis individuals is explained not by the intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by the intention of preserving the law itself" (*SW1*: 239). This accounts for the sudden arrest of Cenci that appears to be at odds with their ostensible tie: from the point of view of the Papal court, Cenci's domestic tyranny is yet another unwelcome violence outside his power, and therefore the papal support is limited to the extent that it is required of the defense of the principle of paternal authority against the challenge from the children.

The Pope is stern; not to be moved or bent.
He looked as calm and keen as is the engine

53

Which tortures and which kills, exempt itself

From aught that it inflicts; a marble form,

A rite, a law, a custom: not a man.

He frowned, as if to frown had been the trick

Of his machinery, on the advocates

Presenting the defences, which he tore

And threw behind, muttering with hoarse, harsh voice:"Which

among ye defended their old father

Killed in his sleep?" Then to another: "Thou

Dost this in virtue of thy place; 'tis well."

He turned to me then, looking deprecation,

And said these three words, coldly: "They must die." (5.4.1-14)

Shelley, through the mouthpiece of Camillo, is here depicting a rule of law, which operates solely on the principle of paternal authority, and all appeals to clemency are met with a disapproving "frown," echoing his previous dismissal of Camillo's petition to stop Cenci's household cruelty, whereupon he also "frowned" (2.2.31). The frown, the look of "deprecation" and "hoarse, harsh voice," by which means (or "trick") the Pope silences his vassals, embody the obdurate, prohibitive visage of law. The machine imagery ("engine" and "machinery") underscores the impersonal quality of his office, his person like "a marble form" standing for various institutions, but only human in appearance. He *is* truly "the jealous laws," ever watchful of forces standing outside themselves, punishing "with death and infamy / For that which it became themselves to do" (3.1.229-31). His concern is not to set any precedent for challenging paternity, as he "holds it of most dangerous *example* / In aught to weaken the paternal power" (2.2.54-5, italics mine), and therefore the accused "must die." This verdict is made for fear that

> Parricide grows so rife
>
> That soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young
>
> Will strangle us all, dozing in our chairs.
>
> Authority, and power, and hoary hair
>
> Are grown crimes capital. (5.4.20-2)

It is apparent that the Pope takes the case of the Cenci family to be more than a domestic strife, even before the parricide. Merely to petition against the father's brutality is, for him, to make "war between the old and young" (2.2.38). His share in the war is his unswerving championship of paternity, on the principle of which his own basis stands, and only this interest accounts for his advocation for Cenci. Indeed, it is naïve of Giacomo to assume that "that palace-walking devil Gold / Has whispered silence to his Holiness" (2.2.68-9), for, had it been the case, the warrant for arrest would not have been issued. Nor is Bernardo's intention to appeal to his human feelings likely to succeed, which is an allusion to the biblical parable of the unjust judge.[60]

> What think you if I seek him out, and bathe
>
> His feet and robe with hot and bitter tears?
>
> Importune him with prayers, vexing his brain
>
> With my perpetual cries, until in rage
>
> He strikes me with his pastoral cross, and trample
>
> Upon my prostrate head, so that my blood
>
> May stain the senseless dust on which he treads,
>
> And remorse waken mercy? (5.4.28-40)

In the Bible, the parable is sustained by a faith in a personal God who, unlike the unjust judge who honors the widow's request merely to put an end to her

---

[60] Luke 18:1-8.

importunities, has compassion and acts according to justice. The motif in Bernardo's words of the figure of the unjust judge is further developed by an additional allusion to the cross, which awakened remorse in the centurion who uttered, "Surely this was a righteous man."[61] What Bernardo is thereby missing is the fact that the Pope's decision is impersonal in that it is made according to set principles as opposed to arbitrary emotions; All in all, the impersonal, methodical process of the papal jurisdiction reflects the degree in which Cenci's highly idiosyncratic tyranny is transposed to the institutional and systematic level of legal power.

Shelley's critique of power is akin to Benjamin's in that both postulate its theological conception. Whether it is mythic law or paternity, both powers are sustained by a skewed punitive theology, which, in turn, depends on the doctrine of original sin as a buttress of the presupposition that man is fallen by nature. Accordingly, the two authors, in their respective works that trace the origin of law, all choose as their subject arch-patriarchs whose deeds mark the introduction of original sin and thus instigate an accursed lineage. In Benjamin, as discussed in the previous section, it is Adam whose will to knowledge brings about the Fall of man; in Shelley, it is Cenci who, in his belief in God as an avenging father, requests through imprecation for the ignominious destruction of his children.

> With what but with a father's curse doth God
> Panic-strike armed victory, and make pale
> Cities in their prosperity? The world's Father
> Must grant a parent's prayer against his child
> Be he who asks even what men call me.

---

[61] Luke 23:47.

> Will not the deaths of her rebellious brothers
>
> Awe her before I speak? For I on them
>
> Did imprecate quick ruin, and it came. (4.1.104-11)

From a functionalist perspective, Cenci's debasement of his own offspring, which Curran's psychological view treats as madness, makes sense in the larger context of Shelley's critique of tyranny. His function is to reveal the extent to which institutions of oppressive power are actually based on a sham theology. An advocate and beneficiary of the paternal power nexus, Cenci is ironically an anti-father by biblical standards, a negation of the overarching theme which binds the two Testaments together as a grand narrative, namely the fulfilment of the Abrahamic Covenant that passes on through generations by means of fatherly blessing. Cenci's madness is not just individual psychological disorder of the whole; it lays bare the circular logic within tyranny's punitive theology.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the introductory chapter of Shelley's later treatise, *A Philosophical View of Reform,* is a schematic history of tyranny in Europe that begins with the origin of the Catholic Church. The modern despotic systems of the state, its government and jurisdiction, along with its institutions of the military and finance, are secularized and sophisticated versions of what is, at its root, a scheme of imposture, a perversion of such innocent "names ... borrowed from the life and opinions of Jesus Christ ... and a system of liberty and equality ... to support oppression" (*CWS* 5). The legacy of the English Renaissance, which, as a poet, Shelley posits as a model, is its "exposition of a certain portion of religious imposture," which perceptively extended to "an enquiry into political imposture, and was attended with an extraordinary exertion of the energies of intellectual power" (*CWS* 7). The result was "the temporary abolition of aristocracy and episcopacy, and ... the mighty example which, 'in teaching nations how to *live,'*

England afforded to the world" [emphasis added], namely, the execution of Charles I (*CWS* 7). It is, again, characteristic of Shelley that he is here quoting a passage from John Milton's parliamentary address in his tract *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, that England should not forget "her precedence of teaching nations how to live," but in a different context. On the individual level, civic and religious liberty is an imperative for a person's realization of his or her self, so the abolition of larger systems of slavery, for Shelley, is ultimately an existential endeavor. Wasserman's comment aptly demonstrates this point.

> Shelley's normative model is always the autonomy and divinity of the self, and therefore man's fabrication of a tyrannic God in his own image is a parodic inversion of the relation of such figures as the Visionary of *Alastor* or the speaker of *Epipsychidion* to the visions of which they are in quest. Instead of projecting the ideal absolute form of the finite self and seeking union with it in love so that the self may attain its autonomy, the slave projects—and gives away—its innate power, as Prometheus first does, and allows it to tyrannize over him in fear. (Wasserman 89)

Of the detailed relation between the perversion of name and the enslavement of self will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. Here, it is necessary to stress once again that the tyranny of imposture works on the level of *fear* in the slavish mind. The "superstitious horror" (*SPP* 142) which marks those who contemplated Beatrice's case as described in Shelley's preface to *The Cenci*, in the same manner as Benjamin's characterization of law-preserving violence as a "threatening violence" (*SW1*: 242), indicates the role of fear in a despotic rule.

3.2. "Innocent Name": The Dialectic of Truth and Tyranny

> But I delight in nothing else. I love
>
> The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,
>
> When this shall be another's, and that mine.
>
> And I have no remorse and little fear,
>
> Which are, I think, the checks of other men.
>
> This mood has grown upon me, until now
>
> Any design my captious fancy makes
>
> The picture of its wish, and it forms none
>
> But such as men like you would start to know,
>
> Is as my natural food and rest debarred
>
> Until it be accomplished. (1.1.81-91)

This is Cenci's response to the belief of Camillo that he has "half reformed" (1.1.74) the crooked Count. If the first half (81-5) elaborates on Cenci's sadistic indulgence in the agony of others, the latter half (86-91) presents him as a willful plotter, a daring conquistador whose "captious fancy" has an unusually vivid visual capacity which turns "any design" into "the picture of its wish." The Romantic overtones in Cenci's vision of himself have not gone undetected by critics. Curran, for one, contends that "the Count is an artist, conscious of his every effect, careful of the placement of accents on this canvas over which he is master, relishing each bold and dramatic stroke" (Curran 73). His excessive solipsism, Curran continues, "embodies the disease of the Romantic spirit," which is "a life spent in self-analysis" that, pursued to its extreme, becomes "a search for the means ... by which he can exert his power over the social order, recreating the self at the expense of society" (Curran 75). To this observation, Suzanne Ferriss adds that, if he is an artist, he is "a *literary* creator," making

reference to Camillo's interjection that Cenci has had "shame and misery ... *written*" upon the looks of his family (1.1.41-2; italics added). [62] Indeed, the power to *impress* in the original sense of the word, the ability to imprint and project one's thought and personality upon others is not exclusively the artist's dream, as there are rooms in this cause for such megalomaniacs as Cenci as well. That it has potential to serve both ends is the subject of Shelley's 1817 sonnet "Ozymandias."

> ... Near them, on the sand,
>
> Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
>
> And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
>
> Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
>
> Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
>
> The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
>
> ("Ozymandias," 3-8)

The "shattered visage," which bears a strikingly proleptic resemblance to the frowning countenance of the Pope, still retains the passions "*stamped* on these lifeless things" (italics mine). This triumph over time belongs at once to the ancient monarch whose heart "fed" those passions and also to the sculptor whose hand "mocked them," and it is on the ambiguity of the word "mocked" that hinges the main theme of the poem, namely the contest for power between Ozymandias and the sculptor. To *mock* is both to imitate and ridicule, and these are functions that equally befit an artist; the sculptor, who is indeed a skilled "read[er]," has produced a faithful replica of the pharaoh's passions, but in doing so, in his triumphant act of creation, the artist has outdone his subject

---

[62] Suzanne Ferriss, "Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cenci.*" "Percy Bysshe Shelley's The Cenci." In *British Romantic Drama: Historical and Critical Essays*, edited by Terence Allan Hoagwood and Daniel P. Watkins. (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), p. 212.

and therefore feels superior. The same holds true with the words written on the pedestal:

> *My* name is *Ozymandias*, *King* of Kings:

> Look on *my* Works, ye Mighty, and despair! (10-11; italics mine)

The name of Ozymandias is stamped all over these words, as my italics show. Yet, the irony is that the "Works" which he boasts so much as his own are not present in the scene, since, "Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck" (12-3), nothing remains but the "lone and level sands" (14). What the reader actually get to "look on" is the accomplishment of the mocking sculptor, the fragmented statue, which alone gives life to the "lifeless things" and has presence in the void.

Not all kinds of eloquence are good. As Shelley advances at various points in his works, (and I am putting it only briefly here since this issue will surface again in my subsequent discussion of language in the next chapter), the dominance of the state over the populace stems from its power to make believe, to convince and take hold of people's imagination. Hence the verbal bravura of Cenci as seen in the banquet scene (1.3). Apart from their figuration of the stark violence involved in the source material of which direct rendition on stage would have been unthinkable, Cenci's histrionics carry the dramatic force which has an important bearing on the character's domineering presence in the play. To probe into the dynamics of Cenci's verbal dominance over other characters, and to reconfigure the spectrum of character, especially to place Cenci and Beatrice with regard to their approach to language will be the main objective of this section. If there are really "Manichean" elements in Shelley's poetry, they certainly do not simply take the form of the polar opposites of Good and Bad as Curran conceives the daughter and the father to be placed; rather—and by saying this I am subscribing to Shelley's own view in the

preface that Beatrice is not free of blame in the end—I see them as the opposite ends of a continuum, both deeply aware of the power of words and contending for the family name. On the other hand, the skepticism of Orsino for words brings these efforts by the two characters into relief, while he ultimately finds himself a "slave" to what he thought he could master, namely, word.

My point of reference is again the above response of Cenci, and I want to begin by considering the following comment by Jerrold E. Hogle.

> Theatrical mirroring, it turns out, is the key to Count Cenci's will to power ... He is so much a theatrical character that his very significance—and certainly his continued power over others—depends on the reaction of an auditor to his aggression, on a reflection that appears to recognize his self-assertion and so allows him to seem a figure who causes fear instead of one who might feel it himself. [63]

Cenci's dependence on an auditor to his deeds, while it does signify a weakness in his character that results in his paranoiac scopophobia ("It is a garish, broad, and peering day," 2.1.177), also indicates the source of his dominance, which resides in the look of recognition of his fear-striking power ("The dry fixed eye ball; the pale quivering lip," 1.1.111) that appears on their faces. As Hogle points out, and that I agree with, this principle holds true for Cenci's interaction with Camillo in that opening scene as well, though my reading of the passage differs from his in minor details. He writes,

> "Any design [his] captious fancy makes" projects a "picture of his wish" similar to their dreams of an ideal ego, and yet that wish "forms none," leads to no visible result or recognition of

---

[63] Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 150.

its existence, "But such as men [reacting to it] would start to know" (1.1.87-9). (Hogle 150)

That the statement can be read as Cenci's admittance to his *need* for the reaction of others is what I mean to cavil with. The syntax in the original is equivocal enough to produce several different readings, but throwing in words that are not actually there is a different matter. The three lines in question, as reproduced here,

> Any design my captious fancy makes
>
> The picture of its wish, and it forms none
>
> But such as men like you would start to know, (1.1.87-9)

show that the verb of the first clause is in fact "makes," rather than Hogle's "projects." His revision of "its wish" as "his wish" is likewise unaccountable. The intended sense is probably that Cenci's "captious fancy" is so visually active that it *makes* "any design ... the picture of *its* [fancy's] wish," which—again, my reading detects a slightly different nuance in the original compared to Hogle's—is no less than something so manifest that men like Camillo can hardly fail to notice. This is a confident proclamation of his might, comparable to the interjection— "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! "—in "Ozymandias," and the last thing he would admit at this stage is his vulnerable dependence on others.[64]

---

[64] Likewise, it is difficult to agree with Hogle's claim that Cenci's paranoia stems from his insecurities about the possibility that "the 'reader' on whom he so depends may have the freedom to deny him the response he wants" (151). On the several occasions that Cenci shows signs of fear of being seen, he is invariably by himself and is concerned about the indiscreetness of his actions, which ultimately motivates him to move to the Castle of Petrella because it is "safely walled, and moated round about: / Its dungeons underground, and its thick towers / Never told tales" (2.1.168-71). I raise these issues, however, without compromising his chief argument regarding Cenci's power.

Yet Cenci *is* dependent on his auditors, for all his taking glory in his power, and this is where Hogle's incisive comment on the significance of Beatrice's "apparent self-sufficiency" comes in (Hogle 151). It gives Cenci the fear that his oratory skills and verbal threats would not always strike home, and her unshrinking response to him at the banquet seems to confirm it. As Lucretia later tells her, "every one looked in his neighbour's face / To see if others were as white as he ... Whilst you alone stood up, and with strong words / Checked his unnatural pride: and I could see / The devil was rebuked that lives in him" (2.1.38-45). What makes her all the more difficult for Cenci is the fact that she not only resists his aggression but also sees through his theatrical trick.

> Father, never dream
>
> Though thou mayst overbear this company,
>
> But ill must come of ill.—Frown not on me!
>
> Haste, hide thyself, lest with avenging looks
>
> My brothers' ghosts should hunt thee from thy seat!
>
> Cover thy face from every living eye,
>
> And start if thou but hear a human step: (1.3.149-155)

Cenci's frown, which is also the "trick" of the Pope (see previous section), is his mechanism of establishing authority, a prototype of the stern visage of law. While his threats have "overborne" the guests, Beatrice rebukes and even returns them by referring to the even more threatening "avenging looks" of the dead sons. Moreover, she shows a good grasp of the subversive potential of Cenci's dependence on his auditors when she tells him to hide his face from "every living eye," as such a paranoia would be the consequence if he had completely lost confidence in his power.

Beatrice is the champion of truth in this play, and had it not been for her succumbing to "pernicious casuistry," she would have been as much a poetical character as Prometheus.[65] Her first words are "Pervert not truth" (1.2.1), and, as already shown in her above reaction to Cenci's speech, her dealings with others are characterized by a meticulous attentiveness to any discrepancy between their intention and words. It appears to be Shelley's design for the first act that each of the first two scenes introduces a main character with his or her foil: Cenci's flagrant disregard for common sense morality and aggressive will to power are thrown into stark relief by Camillo's more temperate and rather businesslike manner in the first scene, while Beatrice's highly developed sense of authenticity detects in Orsino "a sly, equivocating vein / That suits [her] not" (1.2.28-9). She is constantly alert to mendacity in the words of others and is quick to analyze them, often on the spot.

> ORSINO: You know
> My zeal for all you wish, sweet Beatrice;
> Doubt not but I will use my utmost skill
> So that the Pope attend to your complaint.
> BEATRICE: Your zeal for all I wish;—Ah me, you are cold!
> Your utmost skill ... speak but one word ...
> (*Aside.*) Alas!

---

[65] Casuistry, as will be shown in the next section, is a defining trait which accounts for Beatrice's ultimate moral downfall. In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley exalts the moral character of Prometheus for lack of such trait. "Prometheus is, in my judgment, a more poetical character than Satan, because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement, which, in the hero of Paradise Lost, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs, and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure" (Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, *SPP* 206-7).

> Weak and deserted creature that I am,
>
> Here I stand bickering with my only friend!
>
> <div align="right">(1.2.39-46)</div>

Beatrice's investment in truth nevertheless goes hand in hand with an almost literal adherence to the surface meaning of words. Once spoken, though liable to falsity, words still carry the weight of meaning that they purport to have, a burden to her highly developed sense of veracity. Her reliance on Orsino, as seen above, has much to do with his being a "friend," who *by definition* is supposed to have the intention to work for her good. (To complete the irony, Orsino calls her a "friendless girl"; 1.2.87). Even as she detects his "false smiles," her taunt is negatively framed around his acting as if "[he] were not my friend," rather than his being a willful equivocator (1.2.31-2). Likewise, even as she accuses Cenci of "bold hypocrisy," her complaint is directed at his being "*such* a father," but ultimately a father, rather than the abuser that he actually is (1.2.51-4, italics added). It is not difficult to deduct from these instances the following pattern in Beatrice's behavior: her rebuke is always made for one's failure to live up to their title or name, but never once does she question the meaning and signification attached to these titles and names. (It will be shown in the next section that this results in her fatal casuistry.) Her doubt comes only near the end of the play, when, hearing from Camillo of the Pope's final sentence, she gives vent to her faltered faith.

> If there should be
>
> No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world;
>
> The wide, gray, lampless, deep, unpeopled world!
>
> If all things then should be . . . my father's spirit,
>
> His eye, his voice, his touch surrounding me;
>
> The atmosphere and breath of my dead life!

If sometimes, as a shape more like himself,

Even the form which tortured me on earth,

Masked in gray hairs and wrinkles, he should come

And wind me in his hellish arms, and fix

His eyes on mine, and drag me down, down, down! (5.4.57-67)

The shock is all the greater for Beatrice because in just the previous scene she tried to reassure her family that God only "*seems* to have abandoned us" (5.3.115, emphasis added), whereby she is again seen to be basing her case on the general tenor of the word "God," i.e. a benevolent deity, putting aside as temporary any aberration from the definition. Her sudden angst over the universe that is godless and hence void of meaning is therefore as religious as it is hermeneutic. What ensues is a quasi-biblical nightmare: in a hollow world, all concrete distinctions between things crumble as it is revealed that they are her father's spirit, essentially his uncreating "breath." For the first time, she separates the person of the Count ("a shape more like himself") from his fatherly trappings ("gray hairs and wrinkles"). It is the appalling realization that words themselves can be a "mask" that finally quenches her faith in God and all things: "How tedious, false, and cold seem all things" (5.4.80). What she thought to be intrinsic to words—their meaning—turn out to be just as empty and untrue as "Cruel, cold, formal man [who is] righteous in words, / In deeds a Cain" (5.4.108-9).

Beatrice's disillusionment that words themselves can be "false" and "formal" belatedly approximates to Orsino's own nominalist approach to language. To Orsino "the bare word / Is hollow mockery" (3.1.340-3). This is best illustrated by his interaction with Giacomo who is much like his sister as far as the matter of dealing with words are concerned.

GIACOMO: For he who is our murderous persecutor

Is shielded by a father's holy name,

Or I would—

ORSINO: What? Fear not to speak your thought.

Words are but holy as the deeds they cover:

A priest who has forsworn the God he serves;

A judge who makes Truth weep at his decree;

A friend who should weave counsel, as I now,

But as the mantle of some selfish guile;

A father who is all a tyrant seems,

Were the prophaner for his sacred name.

(2.2.72-81)

Orsino's serpentine effort to dispel Giacomo's burden of filiality is here organized around deconstructing the semantic authority, or the "holiness," of words. His critique is based on the idea that words can be instrumental in the consolidation of the Establishment, and the examples he gives are accordingly taken from each social sector that constitutes the paternal power nexus: priest, judge, and father. As he reiterates in his final appearance in the play, it is words "which those of this false world / Employ against each other, not themselves" (5.2.99-100). Roughly put, his view posits that the meaning of a word is a socially constructed structure of semantic elements and associations of which structural logic expresses the governing ideology of a society. In such a semantic scheme the word "father," on top of its biological definition, is charged with other senses and connotations that allow for more authoritarian behavior as to "cover" the deeds that are in actuality appropriate to a "tyrant."

As a skeptic, Orsino stands at the one end of the spectrum where the Cencis are at the other.

That 'tis a trick of this same family

> To analyse their own and other minds.
>
> Such self-anatomy shall teach the will
>
> Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers,
>
> Knowing what must be thought, and may be done,
>
> Into the depth of darkest purpose:
>
> So Cenci fell into the pit; even I,
>
> Since Beatrice unveiled me to myself,
>
> And made me shrink from what I cannot shun,
>
> Shew a poor figure to my own esteem,
>
> To which I grow half reconciled. (2.2.108-118)

The trait runs in the family that they are mindful of the intention behind not only people's words but their own as well. To someone who thinks words are merely "masks," their "self-anatomy" comes across as excessive semantic hygiene, though Orsino acknowledges that, deep inside, his "conscience" also works to reveal the disparity within himself (2.2.120). However, it is only in his final soliloquy that he admits the defeat of his scheme to "fly / My own reproaches" (5.2.97-8). His initial aplomb is replaced by a bitter recognition of the fact that he shall be "the slave / Of ... A *word*" (5.2.98-9, italics added). That word, of course, is "friend," which he first thought to be a mask he can wear and dispose at any time; his guilty conscience, however, suggests that he has never quite broken free from its semantic authority.

Returning to Cenci, we now see that his verbal artifice is of an altogether different nature than Orsino's skeptical brand. The skeptic feigns because he thinks words are themselves empty signs; Cenci is a religious fanatic who believes in the symbolic power of his performative utterances. The "Dangerous secrets" that are the end product of the family's self-anatomy designate the very possibility of utilizing the loose relation that already exists

between people's action and thought to his advantage ("Knowing what must be thought, and may be done"), and the secrets have corrupted Cenci. What Orsino does not yet see, however, is Cenci's belief that he can take the possibility to the next level. As discussed in the previous section, Cenci's punitive theology dictates that he is entitled to a Father's curse, an ultimate verbal, *impressive* authority, by means of which he is able to permanently warp the name and *therefore* the fate of his children.

> I will drag her, step by step,
>
> Through infamies unheard of among men:
>
> She shall stand shelterless in the broad noon
>
> Of public scorn, for acts blazoned abroad,
>
> One among which shall be ... What? Canst thou guess?
>
> She shall become (for what she most abhors
>
> Shall have a fascination to entrap
>
> Her loathing will), to her own conscious self
>
> All she appears to others; and when dead,
>
> As she shall die unshrived and unforgiven,
>
> A rebel to her father and her God,
>
> Her corpse shall be abandoned to the hounds;
>
> Her name shall be the terror of the earth;
>
> Her spirit shall approach the throne of God
>
> Plague-spotted with my curses. (4.1.80-94)

The "infamies" through which Beatrice will be dragged and eventually be transformed refer to none other than "[his] *name*; / Which shall be an inheritance to strip / Its wearer bare as infamy" (4.1.60-2, italics mine). Shameful acts, though not her own, will be "blazoned abroad" under her name, widening the gap between her true innocent person and her ill fame, so that

her name, like her father's, "shall be the terror of the earth." If these are effects that still lie in the domain of false incrimination, what follows are remarkable for their claim to instill that which "she most abhors" into her person and "entrap / Her loathing will," thereby transforming her into "All she appears to others," even so to her conscious, self-anatomizing self. Afflicted by the sense of loss of innocence and "Plague-spotted with [her father's] curses," she will eventually find herself unforgivable to God.

Shelley's own conception of incest, as it happens, is such an act of *impressing*, a phallic injection through the covering of social mores that debar its occurrence in order to leave the perpetrator's imprint in the victim. On November 16, 1819, some months after the completion of *The Cenci*, he writes to Maria Gisborne, the very Gisborne who first showed him the "Relation" manuscript, that he has read several plays by Calderón, among them *Los cabellos de Absalón*. Based on the biblical story of Tamar and Amnon, the play revolves around the latter's incestuous rape of his stepsister. What especially captures Shelley's interest is the fiery spirit of Amnon, who, right before the incest scene, cries: "but as the saying goes: / 'Blood boils without fire.' / Now what will blood do with fire?"[66] That such powerful outburst is possible is the ground for Shelley to argue that incest can serve as a subject for poetry, as an occasion when an individual is led to express whatever is within him in spite of obstacles.

> Incest is like many other incorrect things a very poetical
> circumstance. It may be the excess of love or of hate. It may be
> that defiance of every thing for the sake of another which

---

[66] Translation from Calderón, *The Crown of Absalom* in *Six Plays*, trans. E. Honig. Quoted in Michael Rossington, "Beyond Nation: Shelley's European Dramas." In *The Languages of Performance in British Romanticism*, edited by Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Cecilia Pietropol. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 92.

clothes itself in the glory of the highest heroism, or it may be
that cynical rage which confounding the good & bad in existing
opinions breaks through them for the purpose of rioting in
selfishness & antipathy.[67]

Cenci's incestuous passion, according to the preface, stems from his
"implacable hatred towards [Beatrice]" (*SPP* 141). It is, then, with "cynical
rage" that he sets out to "confound," or, true to its etymology, mixes up and
confuses the distinction between good and bad as opposed to public opinions,
so that he can indulge in his celebration of self. On the other hand, Beatrice's
conviction in her blamelessness is now replaced by a lingering physical
sensation of her father's bodily fluids upon and within her body.

> There creeps
>
> A clinging, black, contaminating mist
>
> About me ... 'tis substantial, heavy, thick,
>
> I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
>
> My fingers and my limbs to one another,
>
> And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
>
> My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
>
> The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!
>
> .   .   .   .
>
> Oh blood, which art my father's blood,
>
> Circling through these contaminated veins,
>
> If thou, poured forth on the polluted earth,
>
> Could wash away the crime, and punishment
>
> By which I suffer .... no, that cannot be! (3.1.16-23, 95-9)

---

[67] Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Frederick L. Jones. *The letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Vol. 2.
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 154.

Though indirectly called "mist," its viscous movement suggests human semen, which corrupts not only her body but also her "pure, inmost spirit of life," that is her innocence. She feels herself doubly contaminated by her father's blood, first by birth and the second time by the rape. This is the first time she acknowledges Cenci's "original sin," which is, once poured into her "contaminated veins," impossible to rinse out. A terrible sense of loss strikes her as she sees herself permanently separated from her former, innocent self, "a woman weeping there, / And standing calm and motionless" (3.1.10-1).

Yet this is still an inadequate account of Beatrice's sense of guilt. As Shelley writes in the preface, "Undoubtedly no person can be truly dishonored by the act of another" (*SPP* 142), suggesting that neither Cenci's curse nor rape should be sufficient reason for the transference of guilt, unless Beatrice herself is involved in the process. The transformation of an undeserved stigma into self-inflicted guilt, then, is only made possible by Beatrice's own injured sense of self-sufficiency. She has to rely on an external source of justice instead of her own:

> And yet, if you arrest me,
> You are the judge and executioner
> Of that which is the life of life: the breath
> Of accusation kills an innocent name,
> And leaves for lame acquittal the poor life
> Which is a mask without it. (4.4.141-6)

This is an ironic moment, as her plead to another person to protect her "innocent name" ends up becoming an invitation to hold sway over her innocence. This state of dependence is effectively called by Shelley as "restless and anatomizing casuistry" (*SPP* 142). It is truly "restless" in the sense that it bespeaks her insecurities about her innocence, and "anatomizing" because her

gaze, which once anatomized Orsino "nerve by nerve" (1.3.85), is now directed at herself.

3.3. Casuistry and the Entrapment in history

Wasserman has taught us to consider *The Cenci* in the light of its claim to present "a sad reality," as Shelley wrote to Leigh Hunt in his dedicatory letter, as opposed to his previous poems that are "dreams of what ought to be, or may be" (*SPP* 140). [68] Twice he interrupted the composition of *Prometheus Unbound* to write *Julian and Maddalo* and *The Cenci*, labeled by Wasserman as works of skepticism, in order to counterbalance the work's idealistic optimism with the dark possibilities of human weakness that still plagued him. Our tragedy deals with a failure, the "pernicious mistake" of Beatrice, her ultimate defeat against the accusing power of law.

Beatrice's failure to defend herself is repeated by her sympathizers centuries later, Shelley points out in the preface, but in the process they are bound to struggle with the plain fact that their casuistry evinces the need to justify her action. What Shelley here seems to be arguing is that true justice is wholly self-sufficient, and as such it needs no exterior justification. In fact, it is the very act of casuistry, that is the act of appealing to a set of established moral principles in order to take into consideration the particular circumstances of one's action for justification, that blinds Beatrice and the cohort of her sympathizers to this fact. [69]

---

[68] Wasserman, op. cit., pp. 84-128.
[69] A biographical note on Shelley's aversion to casuistic self-defense: Shelley's Oxford pamphlet, "The Necessity of Atheism," got him through a friction with the university

Philosophically speaking, casuistry stands for the advocation of the particular over the universal. The British philosopher of ethics Stephen Toulmin traces the origin of casuistry up to largely three sources, one of which is the Aristotelian *phronesis*, a form of practical wisdom that attends to specific cases, as opposed to the more axiomatic *episteme*, theoretical knowledge of universals. [70] The brief hiatus of interest in case morality within Greek philosophy after Aristotle was due to the rising importance of the search for "universal principles" in different phenomena, namely, the "saving of appearances," which is exemplified in the planet model of Eudoxus of Cnidus, another pupil of Plato. It is therefore of no wonder that Benjamin, himself more sympathetic toward Plato than Aristotle and whose epistemological argument in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" can be summarized as the "salvation of phenomena" (*Trauerspiel* 33), he should also be critical of casuistry in his "Critique of Violence."

Casuistry cannot be a sufficient means to a critique of violence, Benjamin argues, for its very workings rely on the means-ends nexus of law. His aim is to launch a general attack on the entirety of law, and any small-scale bickering with aspects of law would not stand: "And they are most impotent of all when, instead of attacking the legal system root and branch, they impugn

---

authorities which eventually led to his expulsion. His biographer Richard Holmes, however, suggests that the drastic measure would hardly have been necessary, had Shelley only been more compliant as to take the trouble of defending himself during the questioning: "If, then, Shelley had freely admitted that he (with Hogg) was the author, and that he had never claimed to make an outright statement of atheism, but merely demanded a proper intellectual inquiry into the matter on the logical principles of Hume and Locke (both academically respectable), his position would have been very strong indeed." But, instead, Shelley characteristically "refused to acknowledge the authorship of the pamphlet on the grounds that it had been published anonymously, *and the assembled authority therefore had no legal right to ask him a leading question*" (italics added).

[70] Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

particular laws or legal practices that the law, of course, takes under the protection of its power, which resides in the fact that there is only one fate and that what exists, and in particular what threatens, belongs inviolably to its order" (*SW1*: 242). This extends to his criticism of political strike, as opposed to the proletarian general strike, because the former leaves the idea of law itself intact, while its own violence ends up being yet another law-making violence.

Beatrice's casuistry, likewise, leads her to commit her own violent act of murdering her own father. The act of killing does not give her back her innocent name, as was her wish, and thus ironically fulfils her father's curse against her reputation. When she tries to justify her action by appealing to a punishing God, she is seeking to defend herself according to the very logic which is the source of her guilt. There is no essential difference between her and Cenci who justifies himself as God's "scourge." Her casuistry does not exonerate her of her guilt, but rather confirms it.

In characterizing casuistry in this way, my argument is moving in the opposite direction to that of Chandler's more positive and historicist take of the term. Here I lean on Jeffrey Cox's comparison of the play with Benjamin's conception of German *Trauerspiel* in that they share a sense of entrapment in history. [71] In Benjamin's terminology in his 1916 essay "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy," the tragic hero's death is an "ironic immortality" (*SW1*: 56), which means that at the moment of his death the tragic hero has risen above his guilt and therefore transcended history. Death in *Trauerspiel*, on the other hand, entails no such transcendence, but is the mere "*metabasis* of all life *eis allo* [transformation into another type or sort]" (*SW1*: 56-7). This helpless sense of

---

[71] Cox, op. cit., p. 88ff.

entrapment in history, of serfdom under the sway of guilt-imposing fate is what constitutes the melancholy in the *Trauerspiel* book.

4. Poetic Language and Revolutionary Violence

4.1. Oppressive Fiction and Poetics of Mimesis

In a 1819 letter, a couple of months before the Peterloo Massacre, Shelley expressed delight in what he called a "comic" proposal put forward a year ago by William Cobbett to "overthrow bank notes by forgery."[72] What was here referred to as so "comic" a design had been, admittedly, prompted by a great deal of anxiety among the radicals of his time with regard to the paper money system which took control of the British state finance and currency since the passing of the Bank Restriction Act of 1797.[73] The inordinate expenses incurred by the war with France which began in 1793 had presented themselves as a *raison d'état* on the part of the Parliament to discharge the Bank of England from the responsibility to convert banknotes into gold, resulting in the former's gaining an ever increasing currency. What purported to be a temporary measure, however, continued even after the war ended in 1815, corroborating the suspicion of radical commentators such as Cobbett, who, according to Robert Mitchell, saw that "the real goal of the Act was to give corrupt government and bank officials the ability to add as much as they liked to the national debt."[74] To Cobbett, the whole borough system of the

---

[72] Thomas Love Peacock. *Peacocks' Memoir of Shelley: With Shelley's Letters to Peacock*. 1909. Reprint. (London: Forgotten Books, 2013), p. 190.
[73] For a detailed account into the radical commentator's reaction to the bill, consult Robert Mitchell's chapter on Shelley and the British finance of his time. Robert Mitchell. "The Ghost of Gold: National Debt, Imagery, and the Politics of Sympathy in P. B. Shelley." *Sympathy and the State in the Romantic Era: Systems, State Finance, and the Shadows of Futurity*. New York: Routledge, 2014. pp. 163-204.
[74] Mitchell, ibid., p. 174

British government was being sustained by a nationwide swindle by the name of the public institution of credit, continually luring holders of banknotes into believing in the substantiality of their assets when, in fact, there were not as much gold holdings in the bank. That the entire system of public credit depended on the belief of people, however, also gave hints as for him to wryly suggest corrupting what he considered was already a corrupted system of communication, aping the very method by which his target had multiplied itself: the uttering of forged notes.

> It is the uttering of the forged paper that causes all the detections and all the hangings. Men utter it, because they want food, raiment, and drink, in exchange. But, if the nation, goaded into deep enterprize, should, one of these fine mornings, find itself amidst abundance of Bank Notes, picked up in the streets, or taken out of post-letters, who, from that day forth, would ever take a Bank Note? Hard money alone would pass. Wheat would be three shillings a bushel. The bubble and the Borough-mongers would drop dead as a clod.[75]

What is remarkable in this passage, as it would presumably have been for Shelley, is Cobbett's apparent recognition that banknotes are themselves a "bubble," a forgery parading as the real thing. As he mentioned elsewhere in the article, "the Bank could never pay in *real money*, without the blowing up of the Debt, and of the infernal Fund system" (italics mine).[76] The forged notes would work only because there is no significant distinction between the authentic and the counterfeit; there was no way of telling their difference

---

[75] Cobbett, William. August 22, 1818, *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 16. <https://books.google.co.kr/books?id=9S4FAAAAQAAJ>
[76] Cobbett, p. 13.

unless one detects the utterer, someone who had not been authorized to issue paper money. "Hard money alone would pass," Cobbett continues, as their authenticity was directly evinced in their materiality, and one cannot but wonder what is so special about this authorization that turns a sheet of paper into an equivalent of "hard money." This line of thought feeds suspicions against the purported link between banknotes and their assigned value, namely, that their relation as referrer and referent is arbitrary if not entirely fictional. It is in this context necessary to consider the more literal sense of the word "utter" which connotes the semantic side of the paper money system. In an act comparable to a deliberate perversion of reference, the forged notes were to debunk their counterpart's ability to represent value. Once their hollowness was revealed, Cobett argued, the bad representation system "would drop dead as a clod."

The question of representation emerged as a matter of utmost importance in the political and poetical discourses in the wake of the French Revolution, and there is little doubt Shelley kept abreast of their developments. Consider this passage from James Chandler's discussion of the topic in Shelley's time:

> As Catherine Gallagher's work has recently brought into sharp focus, discussions of literary representation or representativeness in the Victorian period often intersect with the dominant political topic of the day: the issue of reform in political representation. No one, as far as I know, certainly not the Victorians whom Gallagher persuasively analyzes in these terms, makes the relation between these two aspects of

representation so explicit a subject for reflection as early as does Shelley in *A Philosophical View of Reform*.[77]

Wordsworth also described the times in his *Prelude* of 1799 as the babel of misnomers, where selfishness was "disguised in gentle names / Of peace, and quiet, and domestic love," all for the mugwumps to cover their disinvestment from the revolutionary cause.[78] Chandler adds to the list of concerned poets Emerson and Hazlitt, who were, though less conspicuously than Shelley, aware of "an aspect of the question of representation […] representation of peoples in such legislative institutions as the English Parliament and the still-young American Congress" (Chandler 119). And we behold in Shelley these concerns intersect in linguistic terms, according to which the British parliament and finance of his time were machineries that served to perpetuate a fraudulent system of representation. In his prose essays Shelley launched a full-scale critique of the semantic authority abused by political powers to validate themselves, to which he presented poetry as an antidote.

That Shelley was aware of the enormous semantic power wielded by the state is evident in his 1819 essay *A Philosophical View of Reform*. Its first two chapters are devoted to an examination of the history of England and Europe since "the dissolution of the Roman Empire … to the epoch of the French Revolution," which Shelley saw as a chain of successful schemes on the part of the state powers to gain semantic control "for the enslaving of the most

---

[77] James K. Chandler, "Representative Men, Spirits of the Age, and Other Romantic Types." In *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, edited by Kenneth R. Johnston. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. pp. 119-20.

[78] Myung Sook Ryu, "Romantic Discourse as Victorian Construct: A Critical Investigation", 『안과밖』 20 (2006), 90-117. The Wordsworth quotation is from *The Two-Book Prelude of 1799*. 2.488-9.

civilized portion of mankind". [79] It is therefore a poetic task to fight the enslavement by the renewal of metaphorical language through imagination, which is strongly implied in the argument of chapter one. By way of highlighting the relation between poetic vitality and political progress, a claim which prefigures the better-known essay composed three years later, *A Defence of Poetry*, the chapter sets the poet and the state in opposition to one another, each striving to gain ascendancy in a state of perpetual semantic warfare. The origin of the Catholic Church in Europe, for instance, was in collusion with the several dynasties then rising to power and supported their hegemony by way of perverting the names of the teachings of the Christ. Such perversion of language, Shelley argued, allowed "the cunning and selfish few" to employ "the fears and hopes of the ignorant many to the establishment of their own power and the destruction of the real interests of all" (*CWS* 5). If, on the other hand, the republics and municipal governments in Italy remained for a long time in defiance of the all-surrounding tyranny, that was due to the "undisputed superiority of Italy in literature and the arts" (*CWS* 5), of which Italians availed themselves to resist the corrupted system of meaning then in currency around the continent.

This theme of state-led perversion of language is tackled again in the second chapter of the essay, this time dealing with two disparate systems of "signs" of labor, coins and banknotes. Narrating the economic history of England since 1641, the chapter traces the historical development of public credit which was in tandem with the *de facto* reinstatement of aristocratic oligarchy in England following the accession of William III in 1688. "A

---

[79] Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Philosophical View of Reform. The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley.* Vol. 7. Eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck. 10 Vols. London: Ernest Been Limited, 1930. 1-55.

compromise between liberty and despotism" in the reign of William III, Shelley contended, marked an end for the parliament to "be, in an emphatic sense, a representation of the people" (*CWS* 22). The monopoly on political representation in the hands of the rich few left a vast majority in the nation unrepresented, effectually forfeiting their "constitutional presence in the state" (*CWS* 23). The result, according to Shelley, was a forgery of public opinion to the advantage of those in power:

> Though less contumelious and abhorrent from the dignity of human nature than an absolute monarchy, an oligarchy of this nature exacts more of suffering from the people because it reigns both by the opinion generated by *imposture*, and the force which that opinion places within its grasp (*CWS* 25, italics mine).

Given the nature of such a falsified system of representation, it is not surprising that Shelley emphasized its dependence on the ability to engender belief in a growing sector of the people (the rising middle class), who were not only its political subjects, but also buyers of public funds. The epoch in question was the first one in the history of England to witness "the devise of public credit … systematically applied as an instrument of government" (*CWS* 25). As was the case with the Bank Restriction Act of 1797, the formal institution of public credit in the reign of William III was employed "less as a resource for meeting the financial exigencies of the state than as a bond to connect those in the possession of property with those who had, by taking advantage of an accident of party, acceded to power" (*CWS* 25). Such close partnership between capital and state power called into being an unprecedented authority to which even the tyrants of antiquity were strangers; the right to issue banknotes in lieu of metal coins entitled them to command

"the labour and property of others" (*CWS* 26). Shelley's description of the contemporary monetary system of bank notes is thus punctuated by a cognizance of their verbal power to persuade:

> All great transactions of personal property in England are managed by signs and that is by the authority of the possessor expressed upon paper, thus representing in a compendious form his right to so much gold, which represents his right to so much labor. A man may write on a piece of paper what he pleases; he may say he is worth a thousand when he is not worth a hundred pounds. If he can make others believe this, he has credit for the sum to which his name is attached (*CWS* 26).

The crux of the problem with the current system lay in the fact that, unlike coins that were "the signs of labor and the titles to an unequal distribution of its produce" (*CWS* 25), bank notes did not, nor sought to, indicate the proper amount of labor put into earning the said value; often, they bluffed their own value. For Shelley, who identified with Cobbett in this matter, bank notes were nothing short of an even more deleterious—and perhaps more sophisticated—version of counterfeit coin, in that both with their groundless claim to property produced "public confusion and misery" (*CWS* 26). Worse still, the English subjects qua buyers and users of bank notes unwittingly perpetuated the monetary system to which they were bound as victims.[80] In *The Mask of Anarchy*, Shelley therefore linked the use of paper money with the inner condition of slavery in soul:

> Paper coin—that forgery

---

[80] Shelley once wrote to his friends the Gisbornes "about their status as 'public creditors of the English government,' and noted that he 'wish[ed] [their] money was out of the funds'" (quoted from Mitchell 231-2n).

Of the title-deeds, which ye

Hold to something of the worth

Of the inheritance of Earth.

'Tis to be a slave in soul

And to hold no strong controul

Over your own wills, but be

All that others make of ye. (180-7)

Above quote is part of an enumeration by the unidentified voice in the poem of what it is to suffer from slavery. The parallel structure of the enumeration suggests that each item is of equal value to one another, but there is also a gradation of similarity among them on the basis of proximity. This is because the transition from one item to the adjacent one is governed by metonymy, forming a chain of associations. The first item of the list, for example, which describes the abject condition of a human being rendered instrumental to the advantage of others—a reverse of the Kantian imperative of means to an end—ends with the words "defence and nourishment" (167), which the said individual so miserably lacks, and this gives rise to the next two stanzas each dealing with weak health ("'Tis to see your children weak / With their mothers pine and peak,") and hunger ("'Tis to hunger for such diet") (172). Also, the penultimate item on the list ("it is to feel revenge / Fiercely thirsting to exchange / Blood for blood") is an associational corollary to its immediate predecessor ("'Tis to see the Tyrant's crew / Ride over your wives and you— / Blood is on the grass like dew.") (190-195). The juxtaposition of the two stanzas quoted above, therefore, implies a strong connection in the mind of the speaker, who associates the naïve belief in the value of paper coin to slavery in soul. In accepting paper money, without questioning the sign system which

lent the bankers an authority to arbitrarily assign values to paper, one virtually invited others to make decisions on his behalf. Mitchell's phenomenological take on Shelley's thought is here helpful:

> Paper money was tied to the state, in the sense that it formed a working system of 'communication' only if the state persisted, and thus its use encouraged possessors to limit their sense of the future to structures of 'likelihood' and 'probability' that took the continued existence of the state for granted. (Mitchell 178)

Paper money as a system of communication, according to Mitchell, entailed the establishment of the national debt as a "tertiary memory" in the consciousness of the people. What had initially been implemented as a temporary measure for the state's financial exigencies was thus now taken for granted in the people's mind, thereby concealing its actual historical origin. This, again, recalls to us Shelley's argument that, throughout history, tyrannical oppressors have exploited "the *ignorant* many to the establishment of their own power" (*CWS* 5, italics mine).

Having written a schematic history of tyranny and its sham language in *Reform*, Shelley returns to the subject a couple of years later in his *A Defence of Poetry* and looks into an alternative genealogy of language apropos to the title of the essay, the language of poets.

> Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets

should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. These similitudes or relations are finely said by Lord Bacon to be "the same footsteps of nature impressed upon the various subjects of the world" 1— and he considers the faculty which perceives them as the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge. In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression. (*SPP* 512)

It is not difficult to find some similarities in this passage to Benjamin's 1916 essay on language, with their interest in the original state of language and its cognitive faculty. While such overlaps may not be surprising due to their common base in what can be called the Romantic philosophy(-ies) of language which can be traced back to Rousseau or, more contemporaneously, Wordsworth, I agree with William Keach's incisive comment on Shelley's distinctively "cognitive emphasis in his account of metaphor."[81] However, what may set Shelley apart from Benjamin is the former's interest in the social aspect of language: while, in Benjamin, even the relation between the language of man and things is defined by man's relation with God, wherefrom the cognitive strength of naming language stems, Shelley has one more relatum, that is, between man and man. The former relation, in Shelley's terminology, is "between existence and perception," whereas the latter is phrased as

---

[81] William Keach, *Shelley's Style*. (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 7.

"between perception and expression." Hence "In the infancy of *society* every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry" (italics mine). In its original state, language manifests exactly the relation between people and things, and people and people.

What Shelley calls the "vitally metaphorical" language of poets is essentially a recuperation of the original state of language, which is "mimetic representation": "In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order" (*SPP* 511-2). Unlike Benjamin's account of the prelapsarian state of the world, however, Shelley's incipient society is already populated by people of varying degrees of "the sense of approximation" to certain orders that give the most pleasure, and it is from these gaps between people that the idea of taste and exceptional artists arise (*SPP* 512). But Shelley repeatedly reinforces his initial thesis that poetry in fact stands for all that is desirable and worth recovering in the original condition of language. That is the moral foundation of poetry, and his poetics of mimesis translates into a moral of "Love":

> The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. (*SPP* 517)

Poetry acts upon the imagination to achieve what is morally good. What lies in the middle of the process is sympathy, the act of identification with the "pains and pleasure of his species." Such moral themes trace back to his 1815

essay "On Love," where love is explained in terms of an intrinsic part in humans that "thirsts after its likeness" (*SPP* 504).

Given its moral implication, Shelley's conception of poetry is an overall antithesis to the instrumental view, one akin to those deployed and fostered by the state power.

> We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life; our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave. (*SPP* 530)

The sciences, though boasting their ferocious appetite for knowledge which has contributed to the boundary-pushing of "the empire of man," have also objectified human beings for lack of "the poetical faculty," i.e. the genuine desire to know and sympathize with others. This is the ground upon which Shelley puts forth the timely importance of poetry in what is one of the most declarative parts of the essay: "But poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. ... It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. ... It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration" (*SPP* 533). Poetry, in other words, is a cure to one's anesthesia in an age when seeing in its truest sense seems impossible. Poetry defies the condition of enslavement under which many are set, and for that reason, it is poets who are going to open a new era.

Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy* is a dramatization of poetry as a cure. But we first have to return to Benjamin's discussion of divine violence and its linguistic implications.

4.2. Pure Means, *Darstellung*, and the Possibility of Divine Violence

Midway in *Critique of Violence*, Benjamin's argument appears to have come full circle. Having exposed the pervasiveness of violence in law and other various precincts of human transactions and surveyed the possibility of nonviolent resolution of conflict in an array of areas ranging from the civil conference and the peaceful negotiation between diplomats to the proletariat general strike, what more does he have to say? Yet the earlier antinomy of the justification of means and ends is brought up again, of which circular argument is still unbroken,[82] and there are undertones of frustration in his rephrasing of the question:

> Among all the forms of violence permitted by both natural law and positive law, not one is free of the gravely problematic nature, already indicated, of all legal violence. Since, however, every conceivable solution to human problems, not to speak of deliverance from the confines of all the world-historical conditions of existence obtaining hitherto, remains impossible if violence is totally excluded in principle, the question necessarily arises as to what kinds of violence exist other than all those envisaged by legal theory. It is at the same time a

---

[82] See 2.4. for a detailed account of the circular argument.

question of the truth of the basic dogma common to both theories: just ends can be attained by justified means, justified means used for just ends. (*SW1*: 247)

Admittedly, the "gravely problematic nature ... of all legal violence" refers to mediacy, the state of being a means to legal ends. But note that such a nature is shared by "*all* forms of violence" that are permitted by the existing theories of law: one of the few examples of external-legal forms of violence that are condoned by law is the worker's strike, which, as Benjamin demonstrates earlier in the essay, exhibits the use of "force in attaining certain ends" (*SW1*: 239) on the part of organized labor and is therefore not essentially different from legal violence, not to mention that of a great criminal that "confronts the law with the threat of declaring of a new law" (*SW1*: 241). For all the aforementioned instances of nonviolent pure means that are available in private sectors of life, his concern is pragmatic enough to take into account the indispensable need for violence in every human endeavor to transcend the human condition. That these concerns are laid out right after the discussion of nonviolent means makes one wonder whether he is retracting his faith in them.

The passage in question marks the transition in Benjamin's focus from the negative, *non*-violent pure means to the positive, "law-destroying" force of divine violence, but there seems to be an insurmountable boundary between the two concepts: while the former as a means [*reine Mittel*] is still subject to the condition of mediacy, the latter is a "pure immediate violence" [*reine unmittelbare Gewalt*] (*SW1*: 249). However, Benjamin is not excluding the possibility of the former's relating to its end in a different way that results in an ultimate transcendence of the relation: "How would it be, therefore, if all the violence imposed by fate, using justified means, were of itself in

irreconcilable conflict with just ends, and if at the same time a different kind of violence arose that certainly could be either the justified or the unjustified means to those ends but was not related to them as means at all but in some different way?" (*SW1*: 247). A foil to that possibility is fate-imposed violence, i.e. all violence that is a means and hence either lawmaking or law-preserving (*SW1*: 243).[83] His discussion of mythic violence illustrates how the immediate manifestation of the anger of the gods against Niobe ends up establishing law.

> If this immediate violence in mythic manifestations proves closely related, indeed identical, to lawmaking violence, it reflects a problematic light on lawmaking violence, insofar as the latter was characterized above, in the account of military violence, as merely a mediate violence. At the same time this connection promises to provide further illumination of fate, which in all cases underlies legal violence, and to conclude in broad outline the critique of the latter. For the function of violence in lawmaking [*Rechtsetzung*] is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement [*Einsetzung*] does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically [and immediately (*und zwar unmittelbar*)] establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power [*Macht*]. (*SW1*: 248)[84]

How is it possible that an immediate violence becomes mediate? This is a question already posed in the language essay, where the abstract elements of

---

[83] See chapter 2 for the link between fate and mediacy.
[84] "und zwar unmittelbar" is omitted in Jephcott's translation, hence my fill-in.

postlapsarian human language are said to have been endowed with immediacy which resides in judgment. As opposed to the concrete magic of naming language, the magic of judgment "no longer rests blissfully in itself" because what it imparts, viz. good and evil, are "unnameable and nameless" (*SW1*: 72). The "immense irony" that marks the mythic origin of law (*SW1*: 72) resembles fate, which, as Benjamin quotes the words of Hermann Cohen, "cause[s] and bring[s] about this infringement, this offense" (*SW1*: 249) that is punished by law. It is upon this theoretical basis that Benjamin lays out the fundamental identity between mythic violence and legal violence. Legal violence, though mediate in each component (lawmaking and law-preserving), finds its immediate manifestation in the making of law: first, lawmaking deploys violence as a means to pursue "as its end ... *what* is to be established as law," but at the moment of *Einsetzung*, that is the enthronment of law, what becomes the law is something that is closely related to violence, namely power. In the end, lawmaking sets as law the power to make laws, and such immediate violence which perpetuates violence is the nature of mythic violence.

"Far from inaugurating a purer sphere, the mythic manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence" (*SW1*: 249). To this Benjamin opposes the pair of pure means and divine violence, where, as Weber points out, violence as a means paradoxically becomes without end. [85] As a pure means divested of mediacy, Weber continues, violence would attain mediality [*Mediale*] comparable to that of pure language. He quotes the following passage from Agamben to support this point:

---

[85] Weber, op. cit., p. 196.

> Just as, in his essay on language, language is pure when it is not an instrument serving the end of communication but rather communicates itself immediately, i.e. communicates a communicability pure and simple; so too violence is pure when it does not find itself in a relation of means to end but rather maintains itself in relation to its very mediality.[86]

Both Weber and Agamben are here dealing with "violence as 'pure means,'"[87] and indeed my contention is also that divine violence, unlike the ultimate mediateness of mythic violence, is an immediate manifestation of itself, a name. As always, the 1916 language essay is an indispensable source of reference for an insight into Benjamin's ideal vision for language. But to say that the reverse is true—since Benjamin's argument proceeds in the opposite direction, i.e. a pure means, though nonviolent, can exercise a pure, immediate kind of violence—we need to direct our attention to another work of his where he puts forward ways in which we may retrieve the experience of the cognitive language of name, his "Epistemo-Critical Prologue."

The "Prologue" prepares the main body of the *Trauerspiel* book not just theoretically but also with its pathos, as the author faces the insurmountable difficulty of achieving a Kantian doctrine [*Lehre*],[88] as well as a cohort of skeptics whose "boundless scepticism" threatens to engulf "every inductive methodology [and also every deductive scheme for the philosophy of art], however subtle" (*UDT* 40-1). Instead, the prologue centers around what Benjamin calls a "fruitful skepticism" [*fruchtbare Skepsis*], a recognition of the inadequacy of language for philosophical investigation accompanied by the

---

[86] Giorgio Agamben, *État d'exception*, p. 106. Quoted and translated by Weber, p. 197.
[87] Agamben, p. 105. Quoted in Weber, p. 196.
[88] For Benjamin's early aspiration for Kantian doctrines, see Steiner, p. 35 ff.

striving after the "representation [*Darstellung*] of ideas" in good faith (*UDT* 44-5). Such a purpose bespeaks a highly unassertive approach to truth on the author's part, who, true to the spirit of naming language, opts to let truth speak for itself *in* his writing.

> If representation is to stake its claim as the real methodology of the philosophical treatise, then it must be the representation [*Darstellung*] of ideas. Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession [*Erkenntnis ist ein Haben*]. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of—even if in a transcendental sense—the consciousness. The character of possession remains in the thing possessed [*Ihm bleibt der Besitzcharakter*]. For the thing possessed [*Besitzum*], representation is secondary; it does not have prior existence as something representing itself [*Sich-Darstellendes*]. But the opposite holds good of truth. For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object—even by creating it in the consciousness; for truth it is self-representation [*Darstellung ihrer selbst*], and is therefore immanent in it as form. (*UDT* 44-5. translation modified)

Here "knowledge," or cognition [*Erkenntnis*] is used as a foil to *Darstellung*. Possessive in nature, knowledge tries to project its own "character of possession *Besitzchakter*" onto the thing possessed; my earlier discussion in chapter 2 showed how the judging, arbitrary word of fallen language imposes a new fate on the thing, leaving it nameless. That knowledge even resorts to creating new objects in the consciousness speaks to its abstractness as well.

As evinced in the ideal of truth's self-representation expressed above, Benjamin seeks to restore the prelapsarian relation between language and things. His idea of the proper approach to truth is deeply mimetic in character, which is not "one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it" (*UDT* 36). In his epistemology, truth is something so wildly beyond the grasp of human perception that no artificial relation is able to pinpoint its position; it is a "intentionless being" [*intentionloses Sein*], and, as such, it is truly a pure means, Agamben's "a means without end." Or, to put it in the vocabulary of *Critique of Violence*, truth is a pure, immediate violence.

> Truth is not an intent which realizes itself in empirical reality; it is *the force which impresses* [*prägende Gewalt*] the essence of this empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power belongs, is that of the *name*. This determines the manner in which ideas are given. But they are not so much given in a primordial language [or, "speech," *Sprache*] as in a *primordial form of perception* [or, "hearing,' *Vernehmen*], in which words possess their own nobility as *names*, unimpaired by cognitive meaning. (*UDT* 36. translation modified; italics added)[89]

The task of *Darstellung* is thus spelled out in term of ushering in the immediate manifestation of truth in the full force of a pure violence. Once again, however, Benjamin brings in the Adamic myth of his language essay, and the context is made anew by its conversion with the "impressive force *prägende Gewalt*," which belongs to name. For him, the highest achievement in philosophical writing is the retrieval of the primordial form of hearing [*Urvernehmen*],

---

[89] The German word for language, *Sprache*, also carries the connotation of "speech."

wherein one may re-experience the "magical community with things" that human language once had, of which symbol is "sound" (*SW1*: 67).

4.3. Volcanic Eruption of Language: *The Mask of Anarchy*

> "Overwhelmingly, imagination is a delusive enemy to be
> reduced or managed, if not humiliated; the laughter that
> results from this action, like the laughter of Rabelais, has
> frequently a harsh, metallic sound."
> —Robert M. Adams, "On the Bulk of Ben"[90]

Poets, with their "vitally metaphorical" language, were to break the spell of the "Ghost of Gold," that is, to debunk their system of signs and "create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized" (*SPP* 512). Shelley as a poet took such an action in *The Mask of Anarchy*, where he engaged in a combat against the false signs of his time that bespoke not what they actually were, and not only that, but also to expose the hollowness of the semantic system which had called those specters into being. Mitchell, I believe, is therefore right in saying that "even as Shelley's poem depended upon the unveiling characteristic of the form of the masque, it also interrogated the phenomenological conditions that made 'unmasking' possible" (Mitchell 183). Shelley's interest in deploying the masquerade imagery lay not so much in alluding to political figures in an indirect manner, as in pointing to the fact

---

[90] Robert M. Adams. "On the Bulk of Ben." In Johnson, Ben. *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques.* Edited by Richard L. Harp. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001. p. 488.

that these figures (or names) *themselves* were masques to cover the essence of the current government, namely, anarchy.[91]

> Last came Anarchy: he rode
>
> On a white horse, splashed with blood;
>
> He was pale even to the lips,
>
> Like Death in the Apocalypse.
>
>
> And he wore a kingly crown,
>
> And in his grasp a scepter shone;
>
> On his brow this mark I saw—
>
> "*I am God, and King, and Law*!" (30-37)

Just as the other figures in the opening of the poem are attired in ways that suggest their "likeness" to such recognizable names and occupations as Castlereigh and lawyers, and just as these names and titles run counter to designations given by the poem (Hypocrisy "clothed with the Bible" is a case in point), Anarchy is here dressed in a manner that asserts himself as a supreme ruler in full regalia, but his claim to being "God, and King, and Law" is all the more apparently at odds with the name given in this poem, meaning "without ruler" in the original Greek. It is interesting to see that, in the passage, many of the predicates assigned to these figures, such as the verbs "had on" and "wore," refer to what they purport to be, whereas variants of the verb "to be" reveal what they actually are: Anarchy, for example, "wore a kingly crown," but he "was pale even to the lips, / Like Death in the Apocalypse" (32-3). All these instances of disagreement corroborate the conviction that their human names and attire were themselves masques.

---

[91] Chandler's comment on William Hazlitt's penchant for catachresis for being anarchic may present an interesting twist on this subject. Chandler, op. cit., p. 115.

That Shelley had in mind banknotes as yet another specimen of false sign when he wrote this poem is evident in the passage already discussed earlier in this paper, and even without venturing the risk of attributing fluidity to them as currency by virtue of its Latin etymology, i.e. to run, or to flow, I can still safely direct the reader's attention to the dominant watery imagery which governs the movement of such figures. The Pageant's movement, for example, sweeps the country in torrents, "swift and free / Tearing up, and trampling down" (51-2); "Blood is on the grass like dew" (192); in hopes of quenching the flame of the French Revolution, tyrants waste lives so that toil and blood "poured forth, even as a flood" (243); the tyrants "pour around / With a quick and startling sound, / Like the loosening of a sea" (303-5). Fighting against these watery images are the airy images given by the poet:

> When between her and her foes
>
> A mist, a light, an image rose,
>
> Small at first, and weak, and frail
>
> Like the vapour of a vale:
>
> Till as clouds grow on the blast,
>
> Like tower-crowned giants striding fast
>
> And glare with lightnings as they fly,
>
> And speak in thunder to the sky, (102-109)

"A mist," or "a light," the ethereality of these words suits the image's intangibility, one that characterizes both its elusiveness and its free expandability. Though "[s]mall at first [...] / Like the vapour of a vale," the image soon grows "as clouds [...] on the blast," rapidly turning into a giant figure whose gesture and voice seem to reach all four corners of the world. That this image grows "on the blast" to be seen and heard by many is hardly a

coincidence, as the wind as breath has the power to communicate the image as words. The air imagery proves to be vastly superior to its counterpart under the symbolical hierarchy within the poem in the order of earth, water, and air, as evinced in the tropism of the airy substance to ascend—the image "rose." As such, the airy image checks the cascade progress of the troop, who, as if fulfilling Cobbett's prophecy, "drop as clod."

> And the prostrate multitude
>
> Looked—and ankle-deep in blood,
>
> Hope that maiden most serene
>
> Was walking with a quiet mien:
>
> And Anarchy, the ghastly birth,
>
> Lay dead earth upon the earth—
>
> the Horse of Death tameless as wind
>
> Fled, and with his hoofs did grind
>
> To dust, the murderer's thronged behind. (126-134)

In striking contrast to the prostrate multitude submerged in blood, Hope's gait gives impressions of light gracefulness and elegance as to suggest airiness. In a more tempestuous manner the Horse of Death gets "tameless as wind," fleeing and "with his hoofs,"—the sound of the word implies a puff of breath— grinding the murderers "to dust." Anarchy likewise turns into "earth upon the earth," possibly alluding to the fifteenth-century medieval poem "Erthe upon Erthe," of which the second stanza goes: "Erthe upon erthe wolde be a king / Bot how erthe to erthe sall, thinkes he no thinge."[92] This is indeed a sudden turning of circumstances, the watery images becoming desiccated into dusty

---

[92] <http://aclerkofoxford.blogspot.com/2011/05/on-transience-ii-earth-upon-earth-and.html>

particles, as the breath of death—since these figures were born of "ghastly birth"—flee from them, marking the expiry of their pretense as language. It is then when "[t]hese words of joy and fear arose," turning "every drop of blood […] / To an accent unwithstood" (138, 143-5). Here, again, the movement is characterized by upward motions, as words "arise" and every "drop" of blood sublimates into an accent, a sound vibrating through the air. The voice then calls to "[s]hake your chains to Earth like dew" (153), once more shattering the enemy's spells—spells that bind the people like chains—into dust(earth). This power to nullify is not to be found in the hands of the enemy; "even as a flood," they cannot "extinguish" Liberty's flame (243-5).

Another such instance is seen in the latter part of the poem, where the ostentatious display of the opposing army is confronted by the poet's linguistic consciousness:

"Let a vast assembly be,
And with great solemnity
Declare with measured words that ye
Are, as God has made ye, free—

"Be your strong and simple words
Keen to wound as sharpened swords,
And wide as targe let them be
With their shade to cover ye.

"Let the tyrants pour around
With a quick and startling sound
Like the loosening of a sea
Troops of armed emblazonry.

"Let the charged artillery drive

Till the dead air seems alive

With the clash of clanging wheels,

And the tramp of horses heels. (295-311)

Mitchell has pointed out that, in *A Philosophical View of Reform,* written not long after the poem, Shelley wrote the following words with regard to "the role of publicly circulated images" (Mitchell 180) to perpetuate the state hegemony: "War is a kind of superstition; the pageantry of arms and badges corrupts the imagination of men" (*CWS* 53). Just as banknotes, "the pageantry" is a rhetorical machinery of the tyrants to daze and bind the multitude. As befits Shelley's interest in devising "measures which might terminate in civil war" (*CWS* 53), the measure put forward in the poem is literally "measured words," which, as later elaborated in *A Defence of Poetry*, refer to Poetry "in a more restricted sense […] metrical language which are created by that imperial faculty" (*SPP* 513). The alternate alliterations of the "s" and "w" sounds in the first two lines of the second stanza above contribute to the integration between words and swords, strengthening the rhyme and letting in the swoosh of inspiration. The next two lines, with the internal eye rhyme of "targe" and "shade," intimate "dirge," again recalling another measure put forward by Shelley to supplant the pageantry of war: "the symbols of an inconsolable grief—muffled drums, and melancholy music, and arms reversed, and the livery of sorrow rather than of blood" (*CWS* 53).

The tyrants, on the other hand, are portrayed as an inundating force to quench the revolutionary flame of the people's assembly, with such watery movements as "pour[ing] around," "loosening of a sea," "wet[ting] / Its bright point in English blood," (312-3), and "Thirsting to eclipse their burning / In a

sea of death and mourning" (317-8). To saturate and horizontally expand is their proclivity, as opposed to the upward motion of the airy imagery, and they make "a quick and startling sound" to parade their rhetorical might. Yet theirs is only "dead air [which] *seems* alive" (italics mine), and passes the assembly as "a disregarded shade" (325). What is more, their very desire to "eclipse their burning / In a sea of death and mourning" only facilitates the "symbols of an inconsolable grief" to resound in the battlefield: the true essence of war, not the flamboyant display of valor and might but death and waste, is thus revealed. The voice's call to patience, then, seen by some as non-resistance, or even passive obedience, is actually what is necessary to make possible this sudden overturn of phrase, a semantic subversion of signs. The very blood shed by the tyrants will "speak / In hot blushes on their cheek" (351-2), against them. Whoever takes the last words, in this semantic warfare, soars victorious:

> "And that slaughter to the Nation
>
> Shall steam up like inspiration,
>
> Eloquent, oracular;
>
> A volcano heard afar.

> "And these words shall then become
>
> Like oppression's thundered doom
>
> Ringing through each heart and brain,
>
> Heard again—again—again— (360-7)

Thus even the blood "[s]hall steam up like inspiration," fully inhaled as to let out a voice so "[e]loquent, oracular; / A volcano heard afar." This certainly prefigures the wind-inspired speaker of the later *Ode*, but, for now, suffice it to say that the poet's vitally metaphorical language has won the battle.

5. Conclusion

In Shelley and Benjamin, the problem of violence signifies the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of transcending the state of things where the individual is reduced to the status of a mere life, or enslavement. The individual experiences the state as a guilt context which, according to Benjamin, works like fate and punishes its subjects; in Shelley's *The Cenci*, the context is dramatized by the paternal power nexus, of which mythical embodiment is Count Cenci whose paternal imprecation implants guilt in Beatrice, while the Pope, the impersonal, institutional embodiment of the power, convicts her of the guilt and punishes her by death. One's effort to escape this predicament, however, is usually liable to result in casuistry, which only shows the person's blindness to the engulfing context of guilt.

In Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, as well as Shelley's *A Philosophical View of Reform*, the guilt context is said to have transformed into its modern institutions of law and the state, but both authors are aware of their mythic origin, i.e. the perversion of language. Benjamin accounts for the perversion in his mythology of Adamic name, while in Shelley Count Cenci takes the role of the mythic father. In both author's mythology, the abuse of name invariably brings forth guilt and violence.

Shelley and Benjamin both seek to solve the problem of violence, and they find solution in the recovery of abused language. In Benjamin, the purpose of philosophers and artists alike is to achieve *Darstellung*, which, like the prelapsarian language of Adam, lets truth speak for itself. To Benjamin, such an immediate self-manifestation of truth has the force of divine violence. In Shelley, it is up to poets who, as "unacknowledged legislators," can combat

the false symbols of the state as dramatized by the masked figures in *The Mask of Anarchy*.

Bibliography

1. Primary Sources

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002.

—. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, edited by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck. London, UK: Ernest Been Limited, 1930.

—. *The Esdaile Notebook: A Volume of EarlyPpoems*, edited by Kenneth Neill Cameron. New York: Knopf, 1964.

—. ed. Frederick L. Jones. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.

Benjamin, Walter W. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 1*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2000.

—. *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften II-I*. Edited by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991.

—. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*. Edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

—. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: Verso, 2003.

—. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels.* Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963.

2. Secondary Sources

Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Beiser, Frederick C. *The Romantic Imperative: the Concept of Early German Romanticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Benjamin, Andrew E., ed. *Walter Benjamin and Art*. London, UK: Continuum, 2005.

Bieri, James. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography : Exile of Unfulfilled Reknown, 1816-1822*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005.

Bloom, Harold, *Shelley's Mythmaking*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

Borushko, Matthew C.. "Violence and Nonviolence in Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 59 (2010): 96-113.

Chandler, James K. "Representative Men, Spirits of the Age, and Other Romantic Types." In *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, edited by Kenneth R. Johnston. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. pp. 104-132.

Cox, Jeffrey, "The Dramatist." in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 65-84.

Currant, Stuart. *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.

Derrida, Jacque. "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.'" In *Acts of Religion*. London: Routledge, 2002. pp. 230-98.

Dowden, Edward. *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Vol. 2. London: K. Paul, Trench, Truebner & Co., 1886.

Eiland, Howard, and Michael William. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.

Ernest, Bates Sutherland. *A study of Shelley's drama The Cenci*. PhD diss., Columbia university, 1908.

Ferriss, Suzanne. "Percy Bysshe Shelley's The Cenci." In *British Romantic Drama: Historical and Critical Essays*, edited by Terence Allan Hoagwood and Daniel P. Watkins. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998.

Hass, Robert. "Meditation at Lagunitas." *Praise*. New York: Ecco Press, 1979. p. 4-5.

Hogle, Jerrold E. *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Holmes, Richard. *Shelley: The Pursuit*. London: Harper Perennial, 2005.

Jones, Steven E. *Shelley's Satire: Violence, Exhortation, and Authority*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994.

Jonsen, Albert R., and Stephen Toulmin. *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Keach, William. *Shelley's Style*. New York: Methuen, 1984.

—. *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

—. *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition of Edification and Awakening*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin, 2004.

Luft, Sebastian. "Philosophical Historiography in Marburg Neo-Kantianism: The Example of Cassirer's Erkenntnisproblem." In *From Hegel to*

Windelband: Historiography of Philosophy in the 19th Century, edited by Gerald Hartung and Valentin Pluder. Boston: De Gruyter, 2015.

Man-young Jo, "Translator's Note" to 『독일 비애극의 원천』(*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), (Seoul: Saemulkyeol, 2008), pp. 319-20.

Marx, Eleanor. "Shelley and Socialism." *Marxists Internet Archive*. https://www.marxists.org/archive/eleanor-marx/1888/04/shelley-socialism.htm.

Miller, J. H. "Anachronistic Reading." *Derrida Today* 3 (2010): 75-91.

Mitchell, Robert. "The Ghost of Gold: National Debt, Imagery, and the Politics of Sympathy in P. B. Shelley." *Sympathy and the State in the Romantic Era: Systems, State Finance, and the Shadows of Futurity*. New York: Routledge, 2014. pp. 163-204.

Morrison, Lucy, Staci L. Stone, and Paula R. Feldman, eds. *A Mary Shelley encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003.

Morton, Timothy. *The Cambridge companion to Shelley*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Peacock, Thomas Love. *Peacock's Memoir of Shelley, With Shelley's Letters to Peacock*. London: Forgotten Books, 2013.

Rappard, Hans Van. "In Praise of Problemgeschichte." *Recent Trends in Theoretical Psychology* 2 (1989): 317-26.

Reno, Seth T.. "The Violence of Form in Shelley's Mask of Anarchy." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 62 (2013): 80-98.

Rossington, Michael. "Beyond Nation: Shelley's European Dramas." In *The Languages of Performance in British Romanticism*, edited by Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Cecilia Pietropol. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008.

Ruberry-Blanc, Pauline, *La vision tragi-comique de William Shakespeare et ses*

précédents dans le théâtre Tudor. Doctoral thesis, Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2000.

Ryu, Myung Sook, "Romantic Discourse as Victorian Construct: A Critical Investigation." 『안과밖』 20 (2006), 90-117.

Schmitt, Carl . *Dictatorship: From the Beginning of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to the Proletarian Class-Struggle*. Translated by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*. Edited by Sylvan Barnet. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

Smith, Paul. "Restless Casuistry: Shelley's Composition of 'The Cenci.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 13 (1964): 77-85.

Steiner, Uwe. *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to His Work and Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Taylor, Charles. *Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Ulmer, William Andrew. *Shelleyan Eros: The Rhetoric of Romantic Love*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Wasserman, Earl R.. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.

Weber, Max, "Science as a Vocation," *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004.

Weber, Samuel. *Benjamin's -abilities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Wordsworth, William. *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*. Edited by Stephen Gill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

국문초록

이 논문은 19 세기 초 영국의 낭만주의 시인 퍼시 비시 셸리(Percy Bysshe Shelley)와 20 세기 초 독일의 사상가 발터 벤야민(Walter Benjamin)의 저작에 공통적으로 나타나는 "폭력"에 대한 문제의식을 비교하여 낭만주의적 예술관이 20 세기 전반의 사회 비평과 어떻게 연결되는지 살펴보는 작업이다. 단순히 물리적인 상해나 제약을 넘어서는, 보다 근본적으로 도덕적이고 실존적인 차원에서 자유를 가로막는 국가와 법의 권력은 셸리와 벤야민의 저작에서 모두 "폭력"이라는 용어로 표상되며, 이러한 폭력의 작동방식에 대한 두 작가의 분석이 모두 낭만주의적 언어관에 뿌리를 두고 있다는 게 이 논문의 골자이다.

셸리는 『개혁을 위한 철학적 고찰』(*A Philosophical View of Reform*)이라는 산문에서 그동안 유럽을 지배해 온 폭정(tyranny)의 역사를 기술하며, 그 중심에는 "이름"(name)의 의도적인 혼란과 오용이 있었다고 분석한다. 처음에는 "예수의 가르침의 이름"에 대한 카톨릭 교회의 잘못된 사용으로 시작된 것이 나중에는 국가의 주도 아래 대대적으로 이뤄지는 화폐제도와 같은 잘못된 이름의 체계가 있었다는 것이다. 이는 벤야민이 초기 언어론에서 아담의 "이름 짓는 언어"의 상실로 인해 수단으로 전락한 언어를 분석한 것과, 이러한 수단이 법의 맥락에서 법정립적, 보존적 폭력으로 나타난다고 논지를 이어간 것과 상당한 유사점을 보인다고 할 수 있다. 이러한 맥락에서 셸리의 『첸치』 (*The Cenci*)를 읽는데, 첸치 백작의 강간은 극 중에서 상징적으로 "이름을 빼앗는

폭력"이 된다. 자신의 "무결한 이름"("innocent name")을 지켜내려는 베아트리체의 노력은 "아버지"의 이름으로 온갖 구조적 폭력이 자행되는 가부장 사회에서 죄연관(guilt-context)에 걸려 힘을 발휘하지 못한다. 이는 결국 부친 살해로 이어지는데, 자신의 특수한 상황에 기대어 자신의 행동을 변호하려는 베아트리체의 결의법(casuistry)적인 행동은 실패로 돌아가고 만다.

벤야민이 『폭력비판』(*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*)에서 주장하듯, 모든 수단으로서의 폭력은 법을 정립하려는 성질을 가지고, 결국 법 자체를 폐지할 수 없다. 관건은 "목적 없는 수단," 즉 자신의 직접적인 "발현"(Manifestation)으로 특징지어지는 순수하고 비매개적인 폭력, 혹은 "신적 폭력"에 있는데, 이는 그가 초기 언어론에서, 그리고 「인식비판적 서설」("Erkenntniskritische Vorrede")에서 "제시"(Darstellung)라는 철학적 방법론으로 내세웠던 개념과 호환된다. 셸리 역시 폭력을 타개할 방법을 언어론적이고 인식론적인 맥락에서 찾는데, 이는 그가 『시의 옹호』(*A Defence of Poetry*)에서 개진하는 미메시스적 시론이다. 그의 『무질서의 가면』(*Mask of Anarchy*)는 바로 시인의 언어가 텍스트 상에서 "폭군"들의 거짓 이름들과 어떻게 싸우는지 극적으로 보여준다.