

*A Harmony of Visions:
The Moon and Earth Figures in
"Prometheus Unbound," Act IV*

JOHN F. SCHELL

I^N SHELLEY'S *Prometheus Unbound*, the Age of Humanism finds its ultimate expression. In this relatively brief lyrical drama, Shelley seeks to justify the ways of man to nineteenth-century men by examining the origin of evil, the fallen state of man, the means for his regeneration, and the perfectibility of the universe. Shelley's ontological speculation culminates in an apocalyptic vision as radical as that of the New Testament, but without the Scriptural faith in a supernatural agent. Unlike Christian metaphysics, Shelley's system is humanistic: man is a thinking creature who creates his own enslavement to a God whom he invented. Also contrary to Christian dogma, Shelley's man has the ability to free himself from this servitude by the exercise of his own will and love. And having freed himself from subjugation, regenerate man will realize a regenerate universe. The human dimension of Shelley's doctrine controls even Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*, the act which is usually characterized as depicting "the ideal, the superhuman, the unrealizable."²¹ However, in this final act both the moon and earth are rejuvenated by the human spirit, and the human dimension of Shelley's doctrine closes the drama. In the final speech of the play, Demogorgon enumerates those "spells" man may invoke to retain his freedom, and each is a uniquely human quality: "To suffer . . . forgive . . . defy . . . love . . . hope."²²

Prometheus Unbound reveals Shelley to be an exemplar of the secular humanist, but the drama is neither sentimental nor naive. To the contrary, *Prometheus Unbound* is the product of an esoteric philosophical system whose premise is the special nature of humankind, a nature which is derived from man's instinctual

perception of harmony. For Shelley, it is man's unique sense of harmony, rhythm, and order which sets him apart from the rest of nature. For Shelley, harmony is all, and both the form and content of *Prometheus Unbound* reflect this harmonic essentiality. Before looking at the product of Shelley's theory of harmony — his lyrical drama — it would be helpful to examine briefly the theory itself. It is in *A Defence of Poetry* that Shelley discusses his views about the primacy of harmony for man.

Shelley's *Defence* assumes that the natural world is a chaos upon which man superimposes a *human* structure of order and harmony. To express this abstraction, Shelley turns, appropriately enough, to figurative language:

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody, alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. (p. 481)

Man, Shelley claims, is not simply a lyre, nor is the order he creates the product of mimesis. Rather, the harmony man creates is the reflection of his own being. Later in the *Defence*, Shelley reiterates this point and concludes: "Men, even in the infancy of society, observe a certain order in their words and actions, distinct from that of the objects and the impressions represented by them, all expression being subject to the laws of that from which it proceeds" (p. 481). Man's expression "proceeds" from his own being and derives from nothing other than his own self.

Having established the human origin of order and harmony, Shelley explains how harmony produces society. He traces the beginnings of language, civilization, the arts, and government to man's sense of harmony. Each is the creation of "poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order . . ." (p. 482). After the establishment of these institutions, Shelley's analysis continues, harmony is restricted to the most plastic medium, language. Today, language ("most especially metrical language") encodes man's sense of harmony while also communicating that

harmony. Poetry not only expresses harmony, but it is the means to create harmony, and men who are unable to feel this humanizing and human force called harmony for themselves may learn to experience it from poets, "those in whom [harmony] exists in excess" (p. 482). Poetry teaches men the harmony of life who can not feel it themselves. Poetry, therefore, becomes the moral force in life since it teaches the "unapprehended relation of things." This leads to the ethical because "the great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (p. 487). *The Defence of Poetry* leaves no doubt about the importance of harmony. It is the cause of laws, arts, and literature, as well as the arbiter of man's ethical conduct. The poet, in short, is the conduit for the expression of that harmony instinctive to his species, and he also creates an awareness of that harmony in people who lack the ability to sense it. Harmony is responsible for man's social and moral life, and poetry is the modern day expression of that harmony.

The importance of harmony in Shelley's theory is reflected in his imaginative works, and especially in *Prometheus Unbound*. In this drama a variety of complementary verses and a profusion of musical figures³ combine with a pervasive and controlling mythic syncretism,⁴ and all bear witness to Shelley's preoccupation with harmony on the formal level. The theme of the play reflects this harmony too. At times, in fact, the play seems little more than the portrayal of a universal synchronization: first of Prometheus with himself and then with woman, next of generic man with nature, and finally of the earth with the cosmos. A voice in the play commands, "Unite!" Man, nature, earth, and the universe obey. Although the entire play furthers this coming together, nowhere is the importance of harmony greater than in Act IV, the act described by Felix Rabbe as "the most sublime hymn ever uttered to the glory of the eternal harmony of Nature, as apprehended by the human soul in communion with her."⁵

This final act of *Prometheus Unbound* presents the reunion of the moon and the earth, their symbolic mating, and their subsequent regeneration. At the beginning of the act, however, this union has yet to occur; disharmony prevails. Shelley por-

trays the disharmony that exists when nature is separate from man by means of two visions described by Ione and Panthea. Ione sees a vision of the moon, whose analogue is a lunar vehicle, and Panthea witnesses a vision of the earth, whose analogue is a terrestrial orb. Both visions reveal a disharmony appropriate to their cosmic body: the dead moon is frigid and lifeless while the isolated earth is a riot of confusion. At the same time, however, within both the lunar vehicle and the terrestrial orb is a human representative who promises to spark the harmony that is produced by man and that is lacking in nature. The Spirit of the Moon and the Spirit of the Earth, both depicted as infants, lie sleeping in their respective orbs, but both offer the human potential for harmony that will lead the two bodies to union and rebirth, a rebirth initiated by a symbolic act of human sexuality. The visions of Ione and Panthea culminate Shelley's imaginative representation of the primacy of harmony in the universe and the human origin of that harmony.

Introducing the lunar and terrestrial visions, Shelley implies their previous union as well as their imminent reunion when he describes them as hovering on "two runnels of a rivulet." This economy of imagistic expression is immediately repeated to provide to the cosmic orbs a human correspondence, and Shelley employs personification, declaring them to be:

like sisters
 Who part with sighs that they may meet in smiles,
 Turning their dear disunion to an isle
 Of lovely grief, a wood of sweet sad thoughts.

(V, 198-201)

The establishment of this theme of union/disunion/reunion (a kind of harmony) has its stylistic counterpart since Shelley incorporates harmony into both form and theme. The verse in which Ione introduces the Moon and Earth vehicles is couched in "multiple synesthetic tones," in Glenn O'Malley's words.⁶ The blending of sense perceptions that defines synesthesia is, on the metalinguistic level, similar to the imminent reunion of the two cosmic orbs that is implied on the thematic level. Such a complement of theme and style, an instance of Shelley's concern for

harmony in its own right, occurs throughout the architectonically balanced visions of Ione and Panthea.

After the two visions are introduced, Ione describes and identifies the moon and its attendant human spirit, and she discloses the lifeless quality of the reflective orb without precluding its eventual rebirth: water exists, but it is now frozen; motion occurs, but it is strangely silent; there is light, but its brilliance is unhuman and blinding. This landscape hostile to life nevertheless holds those elements essential for man: water, air, and light. It also contains the agent for its own regeneration, the Moon Spirit, an "Infant" whose eyes are like "liquid darkness." That single image masterfully consolidates the earthly nature that was previously described as surrounding the vision: "singing rain" and "gentle darkness," and it serves as the earthly antidote to the dry brilliance of the reflective moon. By this condensed and precise image, Shelley prepares for the harmonization of earth and moon ultimately accomplished by means of the intervention of the human analogue.

Just as Shelley anticipates the eventual union of the moon and earth in his image "liquid darkness," so the diction he uses to describe the moon prepares for the ultimate harmony between the two spheres. The words describing the moon derive primarily from earthly nature: "storm," "air," "light," "sea," "hills," "sun," "clouds," "wind," and "cave." But to these are yoked words that evoke a sense of obscurity: "ebbing," "darkness," "dreams," "dusk," "veil," and "shapes." The resulting combination maintains the disparity between the moon and the earth that now exists, but it also prefigures their reunion. The prominent trope of this passage works similarly. In Ione's relatively short description (twenty-nine lines) appear eight major similes, of which seven employ earthly nature as the vehicle for the lunar tenor. One example, a description of the Infant, will suffice: "white / Its countenance, like the whiteness of bright snow" (IV, 219-20). The choice of the simile to describe the moon is a good illustration of the harmony Shelley creates of both content and form. On the thematic level, the simile suggests the identification of the moon with the earth without equating the two. On the metalinguistic level, the use of the simile — which defines by

reflection — is the apt figure to describe the lifeless moon which “exists” only by reflecting the light of the sun!

Panthea’s vision of the Earth orb parallels that of Ione’s: both visions present a cosmic body in a state of disharmony. Critical opinion, however, has failed to recognize Shelley’s architectonic balancing of the two. Commentators read Panthea’s description of the earth orb as no more than a continuation of the rebirth of earthly nature begun in Act II of the drama. They hold to this view in spite of obvious imperfections in what is supposedly a rejuvenated and perfect earth. The earthly defects differ from those of the lunar vehicle, true, but they are just as crippling. This refusal by critics to admit that the earth, like the moon, is not yet reborn leads Harold Bloom to praise the terrestrial motion as a “divine dance” of joy, prompts Kenneth Cameron to describe the orb as a “circle of perfection,” allows Donald Reiman to marvel at the “colorful and vital” essence of the earth, and inspires Earl Wasserman to interpret the whirling dance as “a representation of the harmonious motions of all the heavenly bodies.”⁷ However, to interpret the earth as already reborn in Panthea’s vision while ascribing to the accepted view of the lunar imperfection in Ione’s vision is to deny Shelley’s architectonic balance and crafted harmony. Moreover, such a reading disregards the implicit comparison of the two bodies as disunited members of a single construct that informs the outset of the passage, it misreads the plot line of Act IV, and — perhaps most unsettling — it misconstrues the idea of perfection that controls the poem, a perfection that is the result of harmony, which a careful reading of Panthea’s speech proves.

If similes are the apt figure to communicate the reflective quality of the moribund moon, then paradox is the fit stylistic analogue to mirror the confused state of the earthly orb when it is yet divorced from human order. And the paradoxes that dominate Panthea’s speech render with economical brevity both the infinite complexity of the universal machinery and the attendant disharmony of a world divorced from man. The orb Panthea spies is one “sphere, which is as many spheres,” “solid” yet penetrated by light and music “as through empty space”; it is a “sphere within a sphere” that moves with a “thousand motions,”

but "slowly" and "solemnly" proceeds. This pattern of paradox that illustrates the complexity of the earth is supplemented by a second pattern that depicts the disorder of the unregenerate body. This more subtle pattern takes shape in part by Shelley's yoking of scientific and rationally denotative nouns ("sphere," "space," "orb," "mass," "axles") with adjectives that are indefinite and have irrational connotations ("whirlwind," "unimaginable," "sightless," "self-destroying," and "wild"). Panthea's first impression of the Earth vehicle — that it is a "loud and whirlwind harmony" — is one example of this juxtaposition. And as Panthea reports the vision she sees, the inchoate state of the earth becomes more obvious. For instance, the appearance of the vehicle is as discordant as its sound: its riotous profusion of colour — "purple and azure, white and green and gold" — lacks all order. But this confusion gives way to a reassuring human presence that momentarily relieves the growing anxiety created by this orb, and Panthea announces that she sees spaces that are "peopled." No more does she establish this auspicious image, however, than it is revoked. The peopled spaces on closer inspection contain "unimaginable shapes / Such as ghosts dream dwell in the lampless deep" (IV, 244-45). Richard Fogle, with characteristic insight, notes that this image is as "deliberately inaccessible as possible to human vision."⁸ And so it should be since this sphere is not now congenial to man.

The disharmony within the earthly analogue, which first seems little more than an irritating confusion vaguely alien to man, soon takes on a more ominous shape. Panthea notices that the thousand spinning axles of the orb are "sightless," and this combination of awesome speed with blind indetermination becomes still more terrifying when she realizes that its swiftness is "self-destroying" (with the possible reading of "self" as either murder or suicide). Even the after-effects of the orb are dissonant. As it rolls along, it is "Kindling with mingled sounds, and many tones, / Intelligible words and music wild" (IV, 251-52). Panthea's description implies that the earthly orb is unable to distinguish between order and chaos, or to differentiate between harmony and cacophony (similar to the anomalous Witch of Atlas). Although the orb may intend no harm to life, its inability to empa-

thize with humanity proves lethal for man. The destructive potential of this sphere becomes apparent when Panthea sees its "self-conflicting speed" indiscriminately "grind" nature into an "azure mist." In turn, this mist "drowns the sense." And no matter how sweet, the death that results is real.

The terrestrial orb that Panthea observes, like the lunar vehicle Ione describes, is defective. Divorced from the harmony provided by humanity, the earthly orb is an example of geometrical complexity run riot. But just as the moon chariot holds the agent for its regeneration, so the earthly orb, too, enfolds a human infant. This recumbent child, now asleep, awaits its destiny to temper the inchoate universe and transform the existing disharmony. With its human love, the infant smiles in dreams, and these smiles (according to Ione, whose interruption of Panthea thereby gains emphasis) are "mocking the Orb's harmony" (IV, 269).

Ione's observation that the child mocks the harmony of the earth, appearing as it does at this point in the drama, seems to refute the prevailing interpretation of the earth's regenerate state. If the earth is already reborn, the infant's mocking smile is incongruous. If the earth is perfection, why does the human figure gently ridicule its "harmony"? Newell F. Ford, faced with this inconsistency, explains the contradiction as evidence of Shelley's ironic attitude; Harold Bloom and, more recently, V. A. De Luca concur.⁹ Jerome McGann, less easily appeased, finds the mocking smile to be an early example of the mature and disillusioned "brutal poetic honesty" of the later Shelley, while Joanna Rapf claims a double purpose in Ione's mistaken observation: it "reveals the lower level of her vision compared to Panthea's but, more importantly, allows the reader a moment of comic relief."¹⁰ Each of these readings, of course, seeks to resolve the disparity between universal perfection and the mocking infant.

G. Wilson Knight struggles most intelligently with this dilemma. At first, Knight dismisses the infant's smile as Shelley's attempt to resolve the "antimony" of perfect nature and tragic man by resorting to a "gentle humor." But this explanation can hardly satisfy for long a critic as sensitive as Knight. He returns to the contradiction, and without re-evaluating his previous

estimate of the regenerate state of nature, Knight offers a different conclusion. "Shelley is to this extent a humanist" he declares. "The child is the final fact. . . . We glimpse the purified consciousness, the clairvoyance of Jesus and Blake, mocking all such geometric harmonies."¹¹ Knight apprehends Shelley's fundamental humanism, but his reading is still self-contradictory. By continuing to interpret the earth's condition as one of "harmonies," he is forced into opting for a greater perfection of the Human Spirit than the perfect world realized through Prometheus. Knight's explication, therefore, denies the absolute perfection of Shelley's apocalypse and nullifies the premise of *Prometheus Unbound*.

What makes all such polemics unnecessary is the realization that the earthly orb has yet to be reborn. The infant spirit "mocks" the earth's "harmony" because it does not exist. Nature, divorced from man, has no harmony; harmony is a human quality. The human representative mocks the pretension of the self-involved orb which, because it lacks harmony, is unable to comprehend its incomplete state. Until the human spirit is involved in earthly nature, until the symbolic human sexual act occurs between moon and earth, there can be no harmony. Knight is right on one count: Shelley is a humanist.

The action of Act IV corroborates the unregenerate state of nature at the beginning of the act. The physical worlds do not participate in their symbolic reunion for more than one hundred lines after the visions of Ione and Panthea. Only then does the moon exclaim, "Brother mine . . . Some spirit is darted like a beam from thee, / Which penetrates my frozen frame" (IV, 325-29). And only then does the earth reply: "Love / Bursts in light," and "it interpenetrates my granite mass" (IV, 370). From *this* symbolic sexual union springs the transformation of both spheres and the participation of the human spirit in the life of each. Nor is there any doubt about the source of this rebirth. The earth clearly explains that it is "Man . . . compelling the elements with adamant stress"; "Man, one harmonious Soul of many a soul / Whose nature is its own divine controul" (IV, 396-401). Man, continues the earth, "All things confess his

strength" (IV, 412), and (as in the *Defence*) man is the source of harmony:

Language is the perpetual Orphic song,
Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng,
Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and
shapeless were. (IV, 415-17)

Shelley's humanism *is* profound. Man is omnipotent: "The lightening is his slave," "the tempest is his stead," and "the abyss shouts from her depth laid bare, / 'Heaven, hast thou secrets? Man unveils me, I have none'" (IV, 422-23). Man harmonizes the cacophonous elements of earth and breathes life into the lunar wasteland. With the infusion of the human spirit, the dance of the cosmic union begins, and it leads to the final apocalypse.

The architectonic balance Shelley creates between the two visions of Ione and Panthea, his complementary mirroring of theme and form have yet a third attempt at harmonization: the attempted union of reader and text. According to Shelley, he hoped to capture the imagination of the reader by the power of his verse and thereby transport his audience to the sublime level of the poem. For the poem to succeed, consequently, the reader may be no passive participant but must be an active partner. Through the power of poetry, reader and text unite and harmony is revealed to man. In his *Defence*, Shelley explains: "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" (p. 505). This chaos of the familiar world is exactly that which *Prometheus Unbound* seeks to resolve on the thematic level as well as on an experiential level. If Shelley succeeds, then by the close of the drama the reader has created a new universe for himself. Obviously, not every reader will achieve this state, and Shelley warns that his lyrical drama is intended only for the "elect," for the "highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers" (p. 135). Whether *Prometheus Unbound* accomplishes the ultimate harmonization — that of reader with text — can be attested to only by the "elect."

NOTES

- ¹ Olwen Campbell, *Shelley and the Unromantics* (London: Methuen & Co., 1924), p. 202.
- ² *Prometheus Unbound*, IV. ll. 570-74. All subsequent quotations from Shelley's poetry and prose are from the Norton Critical Edition of *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, selected and edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), and the page number or line number appears in the text.
- ³ A good discussion of verse types and musical figures occurs in Vida D. Scudder's article "The *Prometheus Unbound* of Shelley," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1892, pp. 391-401. Scudder concludes, "from a single melodic theme [Shelley] evolves a vast whole or ordered harmony" (pp. 391-401).
- ⁴ Earl Wasserman in *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971) develops and elaborates upon this mythic syncretism.
- ⁵ *Shelley: The Man and the Poet*, 2 vols. (London: Ward and Downey, 1888), II:193.
- ⁶ *Shelley and Synesthesia* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964), p. 169.
- ⁷ Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 336; Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), p. 109; Reiman, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Twayne's English Authors Series, ed. Sylvia E. Bowman (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), p. 86; Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, p. 363.
- ⁸ *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley: A Comparative Study* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1949), p. 53.
- ⁹ Ford, "Paradox and Irony in Shelley's Poetry," *Studies in Philology* 57 (1960), 656; Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), p. 145; De Luca, "The Style of Millennial Announcement in *Prometheus Unbound*," *K-SJ* 28 (1979), 95.
- ¹⁰ McGann, "The Secrets of an Elder Day: Shelley after *Hellas*," *K-SJ* 15 (1966): 26; Rapf, "A Spirit in Search of Itself: Non-Narrative Structure in Act IV of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*," *K-SMB* 30 (1979), 41.
- ¹¹ Knight, *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (London: Methuen & Co., 1941), p. 222.