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INDEX / CONTENTS

PALINSESTI / PALIMPSESTS

Shelley Recasting of Southey: from Ghost to Monster
SYLVIE GAUTHERON (Paris) 3-28

"Quashed Quotatoes". Per qualche citazione irregolare (seconda parte)
RINALDO RINALDI (Università di Parma) 29-50

L'infelicità del principe felice. Oscar Wilde e Tommaso Landolfi
LUCA FEDERICO (Università di Torino) 51-68

Tracce d'inizio e di fine. Citazioni sacre nelle "17 variazioni" di Emilio Villa
BIANCA BATTILOCCHI (Università di Parma) 69-85

MATERIALI / MATERIALS

Metamorfosi pescatorie: l'uso delle fonti in Giulio Cesare Capaccio
DANIELA CARACCIOLO (Università del Salento) 89-107

Giustino eroico, Giustino tragico. Qualche scheda metastasiana
MASSIMILIANO FOLETTI (Università di Parma) 109-117

Una citazione settecentesca del "Malmantile racquistato": il "Torquato Tasso" di Carlo Goldoni
LUCIA DI SANTO (Università di Milano) 119-136

La copia differente. Due riscritture di Luigi Riccoboni
CATERINA BONETTI (Università di Parma) 137-151

LIBRI (FILM) DI LIBRI / BOOKS (FILMS) OF BOOKS

[recensione / review] Sebastiano Italia, *Dante e l'esegesi virgiliana. Tra Servio, Fulgenzio e Bernardo Silvestre*, Acireale – Roma, Bonanno Editore, 2012
CÉCILE LE LAY 155-159

[recensione / review] Giuseppe Tornatore, *The Best Offer*, Paco Cinematografica – Warner Bros Italia – Friuli Venezia Giulia Film Commission – BLS Südtirol Alto Adige – Unicredit, 2013
FRANCESCO GALLINA 161-167

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SYLVIE GAUTHERON

SHELLEY'S RECASTING OF SOUTHEY: FROM GHOST TO MONSTER

This paper examines young Shelley's interest in and reliance on Robert Southey's early output as evidenced in some poems in the *Esdaile Notebook*. The first five poems of the collection, three of which were written at Keswick, have been highlighted by commentators, in particular Edward Dowden and Kenneth Cameron,[1] for their use of unrhymed stanzas, reminiscent of Southey's own practice: in particular the Odes *Written on 1st January 1794* and *Written on Sunday Morning* (1797), and *The Widow*. Stuart Curran alludes to Southey's influence in the literary genre of the Romantic period and young Shelley's taste for these compositions.[2] What I would like to explore is the earlier phase in

[1] See *The Esdaile Notebook: A Volume of Early Poems, by Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Edited by K. N. Cameron from the Original Manuscript in The Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, London, Faber and Faber, 1964, p 13, p. 15, pp. 175-176, p. 180, p. 182.

[2] S. Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 135.

Shelley's career and what we can learn about its links with the equally early poetic works of Robert Southey.

The reason why I have chosen the *Esdaile Notebook* is because the meeting between Shelley and Southey, in winter 1811, occurred roughly halfway through the composition of the 53 poems that Shelley selected for his collection between November 1810 and summer 1812. Shelley's five poems include the dedicatory piece *To Harriet*, *A Sabbath Walk*, *The Crisis*, *Passion* and another poem entitled *To Harriet*. I will refer to *A Sabbath Walk, The Crisis* and also to *A Tale of Society as it is from facts 1811*, which has interesting echoes of Southey. According to Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat, the manuscript of the *Notebook*, which passed down into the Esdaile family through Shelley's daughter Ianthe, could not have been a candidate for publication. It might have been intended to be an intermediary copy.[3] According to Reiman and Fraistat, the dates of the composition of the poems are not artistically significant as the poems would reflect Shelley's style and taste at the time of their revision between winter 1812 and the summer of 1813, when he was already composing *Queen Mab*. Conversely, the fact that a distinctly Southeyan manner can be detected in these poems is all the more interesting to us. We can imagine that Shelley wished to mark this meeting stylistically by starting his collection with five poems which were composed in a distinctly recognizable Southeyan style. In any case it shows that Shelley did not perceive a conflict between borrowing Southey's early style and producing *Queen Mab*, for which he knew he could be prosecuted. This casts Southey's style in a poetically and also politically, radical light.

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[3] See *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. by D. H. Reiman and N. Fraistat, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, vol. 2, pp. 317-320.

David Duff notes that "Shelley borrowed the medium but resisted the message of Southey's poetry" and I largely go along with this assessment.[4] But I would like to explore the backlash of Shelley's rejuvenation of Southey's technique by presenting two overlapping images. The first image shows the impact of Southey's work on Shelley, which can be called the 'Southeyan Shelley'. I also hope to show the image of Southey which Shelley helped to create by borrowing from his style. What is of interest here are the aspects which drew Shelley towards Southey, what he learnt from him and the way in which he recast some of his poems over a fifteen-year gap, that is, between the time when Southey published his poems, as early as 1797, and the time Shelley wrote his own in 1811-1812.

The early convergence between the two poets may appear intriguing on several accounts: the first being their obvious divergence later on. From the beginning, the political divergence between them is noted by Shelley in correspondence in which he describes Southey's "tergiversation": "Southey has changed. I shall see him soon, and I shall reproach him for his tergiversation — He to whom Bigotry, Tyranny, Law was hateful, has become the votary of these Idols, in a form the most disgusting".[5]

Secondly, how could Shelley become close to Southey when, between the time of the older poet's youth and that of the younger man's, there was a change in literary production? Even though Southey had been labelled a Jacobin, literary Jacobinism barely existed at the end of the 1790s, according to Michael Scrivener.[6] Scrivener notes that popular

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[4] Cf. D. Duff, *'The Casket of my Unknown Mind'. The 1813 Volume of Minor Poems* in *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, Edited by A. M. Weinberg and T. Webb, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, p. 63.

[5] Cf. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by F. L. Jones. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964, vol. 1, p. 208 (Letter 15 December 1811).

[6] See M. Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories. John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, p. 1.

radicalism after the 1790s was not Jacobin. On the contrary, the anti-Jacobin cultural reaction prevailed between 1797 and 1805, and in the second wave of the reform movement, the new names in radicalism in 1809, among them Burdett and Cobbett, were clearly not Jacobins. Scrivener places Shelley among the polite Jacobins, alongside William Hazlitt during the second wave of democratic reform.[7] Yet, as we will see in a moment, it is precisely these Jacobin poems, dating from the time when Southey had become the 'whipping boy' of the conservative periodical "The Anti-Jacobin", that are echoed in Shelley's own poetry. The features which Shelley inherits from Southey in these poems are those which are politically attacked for their style by Southey's opponents. The vigorous heroic couplets of George Canning and John Hookham Frere denounce the exponents of the 'new morality', and the anarchic metrical experiment, such 'monstrosities' as Coleridge's Dactylics and Southey's Sapphics are perceived to be distortions forced into the English language.[8] The impact of these imported cadences upon the language, disarranging iambic regularity, was denounced as an attack on an English ethos. "The Anti-Jacobin" attacked Southey's lyrical dissidence, by which I mean that Southey felt compelled to design poetic devices to convey the lyrical mode imported from remote foreign places. Some aspects of Southey's so-called unrestrained prosody and plain style must be connected to trends that were initiated by the examples of earlier poets, such as William Collins or William Cowper and the desire to revive what was perceived as the spirit and the enthusiasm of classical poetry, whose prosody does not include rhyme. This desire opened the way for attempting Latinate forms and unrhymed stanzas, following the example of the Pindaric ode. Southey may

[7] See ibidem, p. 5.

[8] See R. Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Poetry. In Search of the Pure Commonwealth*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000, p. 64.

be said to have tried to separate these forms from their inherited 'gentile' and learned connotations, to de-process them, and recast them so as to deal with themes such as the lives of the lowly, and a rendition of simplicity and rugged authenticity. However, there is also a concern in Southey with the modern epic, and the form in which modern events and reality could be conveyed. Through William Taylor, who translated German poetry, he was acquainted with the solution which the Germans found in composing in a version of the Greek hexameter – Homer's metre. The German language was endowed with a new sense of its original specificity through the translation of Homer's hexameters into German, thereby giving a classical version of itself. Southey was sensitive to this lyrical sense, which we realize is several times removed, since it was conveyed to Southey through an English translation of the German rendition of Greek rhythms; this was how far Southey had to go to reach his lyrical sense. He acknowledges his debt to Taylor's translation of Klopstock and others when he says:

> "He has made me acquainted with the odes of Klopstock by translating them for me, till I heard these I knew nothing of lyric poetry. [All] that I had previously seen were the efforts of imagination. These are the bursts of feeling from one who has fed upon the scriptures till he thinks & feels & writes with the holy enthusiasm of Isaiah."[9]

This research into the lyrical to which young Shelley may have been sensitive was part and parcel of young Southey's attempt to bid for poetic empowerment by becoming the mouthpiece for the extension of the franchise to a larger section of the population, and therefore for redressing what he saw was an imbalance within society. It may be worth quoting Southey's reaction to Francis Jeffrey's presentation of him as the champion

[9] *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, General Editors L. Pratt, T. Fulford and I. Packer, *Part Two: 1798-1803*, Edited by I. Packer and L. Pratt, Letter to John May – 7 June 1798, web address www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_Two/HTML/letterEEd.26.323.

of a new spirit in modern poetry in the "Edinburgh Review" of October 1802:

> "There certainly is a design in the most part of my poems to force into notice the situation of the poor, and to represent them as the victims of the present state of society. [T]he object is to make my readers think and feel – as for the old Antijacobine cry that it is to make the poor rebellious that is too absurd to require answer. [T]he Poor do not read books of poetry upon fine paper, nor are the poems addressed to their capacities or understanding! [T]he charge which the Scotch critic makes applies to me far more than to Coleridge and Wordsworth – for it is I who in the language of Mr Canning and Mr Cobbett am κατ εξοχην the Jacobin poet."[10]

Shelley became interested in Southey's early poetry after a fifteen-year gap between the years after Southey's production, around 1797, to Shelley's poems around 1812. We may assume that this period and change did not make Southey's choices seem outdated to Shelley. Yet Southey had moved away from poems that had been savagely parodied by Canning and Frere, the main contributors of the 1797-1798 "Anti-Jacobin" or "Weekly Examiner", edited by William Gifford who afterwards edited the "Tory Quarterly Review" to which Southey, in turn, was ironically one of the major contributors by the time Shelley came to visit him in Keswick. No new collection of his original shorter poems appeared after *Poems* (1799) when Southey turned to writing epics.[11] Maybe this period in time was the distance that made it possible for Shelley to grasp something of Southey to be reactivated; it is the gap that makes his poems telling or pressing because they bear witness to a spirit that had become barely audible.

"The Anti-Jacobin" may have played a role in Shelley's predilection for Southey, since through the attacks of the review Southey's radical credentials appeared incontrovertible. Southey's *Poems* (1797) was

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[10] Ibidem, Letter to John May – 9 March 1803, web address www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_Two/HTML/letterEEd.26.765.

[11] See R. Southey, *Poetical Works 1793-1810*, vol. 5: *Selected Shorter Poems c. 1793-1810*, Edited by L. Pratt, London, Pickering and Chatto, 2004, p. XXVII.

parodied in all but one of the first five numbers of "The Anti-Jacobin". The deriding strategies of "The Anti-Jacobin" mirrored the image of the enemy which the editors portrayed for themselves. They intended to fend off attempts made in favour of legitimate reform by amplifying, inflating, exaggerating, and turning into burlesque the threat that they both caricatured and denounced. Their strategy reproduced the faults which they found in the poets they targeted as they denounced

> " […] the springs and principles of the species of poetry, which are to be found in the exaggeration, and then in the direct inversion of the sentiments and passions, which have in all ages animated the breast of the favourite of the Muse, and distinguished him from the 'vulgar throng'."[12]

Pretending to support the oppressed, the poets were in fact secretly patronizing elitists, affecting simplicity while practicing unappealing plainness, and making poetry unpopular. These deriding satirical strategies may have been of special interest to Shelley who was, at that time, adept at the hoax, the poetical prank and plagiarism.[13] Shelley was also an aspiring poet in search of suitable craftsmanship to build up his powers. The spoof might have been one channel for writing for one who, like Shelley, could not yet exercise his profession as a writer; it could be a manner of writing in serious jest. Following Gérard Genette's distinction, the pastiches of Southey's radical poems in "The Anti-Jacobin" create a relation through imitation, rather than by generation of a text through transformation.[14] To this extent, the pastiches promote the elements of Southey's style to the status of a model which can then be imitated. Shelley may have been sensitive to this enhancement of Southey's style and mannerism through

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[12] *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, London, printed for J. Wright, 1801, pp. 3-4.

[13] One may think of *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*, or the poem taken from Matthew Gregory Lewis in *Original Poetry: by Victor and Cazire*.

[14] See G. Genette, *Palimpsestes*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1982, p. 131.

deriding strategies which Shelley may even have relished for their own sake.

In any case, "The Anti-Jacobin" strengthened the terms of the debate in order to turn any kind of criticism into incitation to disorder that was denounced as being self-destructive. Interestingly, an inflating tendency may also be found in Shelley's expression of despair in the poems which I will be looking at here. They convey something of a desire for the worst to come to the worst, since, in Shelley's assessment of the situation, the old order is doomed to destruction. When criticism is turned into the manifestation of an inclination towards destructiveness, and consequently when young Shelley's rhetoric begins to sound rabid and is reminiscent of the tone in which "The Anti-Jacobin" caricatured Southey's works, then, by contrast and under the effect of this distortion, Southey's position tends to be pushed into the opposite direction, towards a more moderate or conservative position. What is then brought into focus is not the discrepancy between the values which Shelley and Southey espoused in 1811-1812, but the kernel of potentially conservative values within Southey's early radicalism and values upon which his later Toryism would be built.

Still, Shelley was able to regard Southey as an ally and his poems as relevant to the existing state of things and society as it was. Of Shelley's reworking of Southey's *Thalaba* in his *Queen Mab*, Michael O'Neill notes that it seems likely that "Shelley heard in Southey's rhythmic measures, impulses towards freedom".[15] Young Shelley may have felt close to a Southey who could arouse distaste or discomfort. In this respect, the comparison between Charles Lamb's and Shelley's reactions to Southey's

[15] Cf. M. O'Neill, *Southey and Shelley Reconsidered*, in "Romanticism", 17, 2011, p. 15.

Curse of Kehama is significant: where Lamb is disturbed,[16] Shelley is revelling and declares *The Curse of Kehama* to be his favourite poem.[17]

But Shelley's relation to Southey makes aspects of Southey come through in ways which, as later correspondence between the two poets makes clear, were far from comfortable for Southey himself. We see that Shelley quickly becomes both Southey's ghost and a repellent monster which needs to be brought face to face with the image of the monstrosity he presents to others; this Southey would charitably do for Shelley.

The first element we have in this respect is Southey's depiction of Shelley in a letter to his friend Grosvenor Bedford, dated 4 January 1812:

> "Here is a man at Keswick who acts upon me as my own Ghost would do. He is just what I was in 1794. His name is Shelley – son to the member for Shoreham, with 6000 £ a year entailed upon [him], & as much more in his fathers power to cut off. […] He is come to the fittest physician in the world – At present he has got to the Pantheistic stage of philosophy, & in the course of a week I expect he will be a Berkeleyan, for I have put him on a course of Berkeley. It has surprised him a good deal to meet for the first time in his life with a man who perfectly understands him & does him full justice. I tell him all the difference between us, is that he is 19 & I am 38. & I dare say it will not be very long before I shall succeed in convincing him that he may be a true philosopher & do a great deal of good, with 6000 £ a year, – the thought of which troubles him a great deal more at present than ever the want of six pence (for I have known such a want) did me."[18]

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[16] Cf. *The Letters of Charles Lamb*, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1926, vol. 1, p. 331 (Letter to Robert Southey – 6 May 1815): "*Kehama* is doubtless more powerful, but I don't feel that firm footing in it that I do in *Roderick*; my imagination goes sinking and floundering in the vast spaces of unopened-before systems and faiths; I am put out of the pale of my old sympathies; my moral sense is almost outraged; I can't believe, or with horror am made to believe, such desperate chances against omnipotences, such disturbances of faith to the centre. The more potent, the more painful [is] the spell. Jove and his brotherhood of gods, tottering with the giant assailings, I can bear, for the soul's hopes are not struck at in such contests; but your Oriental almighties are too much types of the intangible prototype to be meddled with without shuddering".

[17] See *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, cit., vol. 1, p. 101 (Letter to Elizabeth Hitchener – 11 June 1811).

[18] *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, cit., *Part Four: 1810-1815*, Edited by I. Packer and L. Pratt, Letter to Grovesnor Charles Bedford – 4 January 1812, web address www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_Four/HTML/letterEEd.26.2012.

Yet, by 1820, their paths had drawn sufficiently apart for an acerbic exchange of letters to take place over a negative review of *The Revolt of Islam* (1818). In response to Shelley's indecorous demand for confirmation that Southey was not the author of the review, the poet replied:

> "Except that *Alastor* which you sent me, I have never read or seen any of your publications since you were at Keswick. The specimens which I happen to have seen in reviews and newspapers have confirmed my opinion that your powers for poetry are of a high order, but the manner in which those powers have been employed is such as to prevent me from feeling any desire to see more of productions so monstrous in their kind and so pernicious in their tendency."[19]

The former ghost has turned into a monster. Shelley described himself as "an innocent and a persecuted man, whose only real offence is the holding of opinions somewhat similar to those which you once held respecting the existing state of society", and he reproached Southey for going against the Christian message: "instead of refraining from 'judging that you be not judged', you not only judge but condemn". It is then easy for Shelley to remind Southey of his former attack on cursing in *The Curse of Kehama*, repeating the motto and epigraph of the tale: "'curses are like young chickens, they have always come home to roost'. *I* hope the chickens will not come home to roost".[20] This is Southey's reply in which, among other things, he reproached Shelley on his wife's suicide:

> "You say that your only real crime is the holding opinions something similar to those which I once held respecting the existing state of society. That, sir, is not your crime, it would only be your error; your offence is moral as well as political, practical as well as speculative nor were my opinions ever similar to yours in any other point than that, desiring, as I still desire, a greater equality in the condition of men. I entertained

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[19] *Letters of Robert Southey. A Selection*, Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by M.H. Fitzgerald, Oxford – New York – Toronto – Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1912, p. 320 (Letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley, July 1820).

[20] Cf. ibidem, p. 327 (Letter of Percy Bysshe Shelley to Robert Southey – 17 August 1820).

erroneous notions concerning the nature of that improvement in society, and the means whereby it was to be promoted. Except in this light, light and darkness are not more opposite than my youthful opinions and yours. You would have found me as strongly opposed in my youth to atheism and immorality of any kind as I am now, and to that abominable philosophy which teaches self-indulgence instead of self-control.

[…] It appeared to me a duty to take that opportunity of representing you to yourself as you appear to me [...] for though you may go on with an unawakened mind, a seared conscience, and a hardened heart, there will be seasons of misgivings, when that most sacred faculty which you have laboured to destroy makes itself felt. At such times you may remember me as an earnest monitor [...] ."[21]

Southey's robust denial betrays his resistance to being taken for Shelley's spiritual kindred spirit, and his concealed awareness of his closeness to him. On the face of this letter, we may wonder at how disastrously revealing to Southey Shelley became in preserving, reactivating and amplifying the antagonistic potential contained within Southey's early poetry. In their shared lyrical dissidence, Shelley may appear like a monster to Southey in the sense that, apart from living his life along principles which Southey strongly rejected and instead of containing revolutionary tendencies which Southey dreaded, Shelley amplified them and went diametrically the other way.

1. *"A sabbath Walk", "Written on Sunday Morning" and the failure of a model of Christianity*

In these poems, Shelley and Southey are both critical of the sceptical attitude which defends 'sentimental unbelievers', those who support the established religion as a social necessity, yet do not believe in its doctrines. The editors of *Poems* note that Shelley's rhymeless metre, "like his sentiment, is close to that of *Written on Sunday Morning*". They also see the poem as "an early example of Shelley's habit of criticizing an admired

[21] Ibidem, pp. 330-331 (Letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley – September 1820).

predecessor by modifying the latter's vision of reality while following his metrical form or accepted 'myth'".[22] David Duff selects *A sabbath Walk* as a case demonstrating the point that Shelley borrowed the medium but not the message of Southey's poetry for it turns into "a vitriolic attack on Christianity and on the moral and political values Southey now espoused".[23] In general, I agree with this view if it is understood that, perhaps as a result of his current visit to Southey, the values which the latter now upheld could be read by Shelley in a poem composed as early as 1795. The poem is not so close to the spirit of Southey's poem as the editors of *Poems* make out, for Shelley has applied his craft in designing stanzas whose prosodic features are not bound by the pastoral scene carefully designed by Southey. Attention is thereby deflected in Shelley's piece from the scene to the nuances of its discourse and to what may be perceived as its obtrusive rhetoric. Shelley has chosen unrhymed stanzas and lines of various lengths to convey sincerity and the unsolicited movement of the heart, as opposed to hypocrisy. Some of these lines are like a defiant poetic manifesto defining what is "sweet" to him. Shelley does not fail to underline his reflective appreciation of effects that could be held to be in breach of harmony by stern defenders of regularity, as in the case of the strain on the rhythm entailed by the use of sequences of three polysyllables in line 5:

> "Sweet are the stilly forest glades:
> Imbued with holiest feelings there
> I love to linger pensively
>   And court seclusion's smile.

[22] Cf. *The Poems of Shelley*, Edited by G. Matthews and K. Everest, London and New York, Longman, 1994, vol. 1, pp. 198-199.

[23] Cf. D. Duff, *'The Casket of my Unknown Mind'. The 1813 Volume of Minor Poems* cit., p. 63.

This mountain labyrinth of loveliness
Is sweet to me even when the frost has torn
All save the ivy clinging to the rocks
Like friendship to a friend's adversity!
Yes, in my soul's devotedness
I love to linger in the wilds.
I have my God, and worship him,
O vulgar souls, more ardently
Than ye the Almighty fiend
Before whose throne ye kneel.

'Tis not the soul pervading all,
'Tis not the fabled cause that framed
The everlasting orbs that framed
The everlasting orbs of Heaven
 And this eternal earth.
Nor the cold Christian's blood-stain'd King of Kings
Whose shrine is in the temple of my heart, –
'Tis that divinity whose work and self
Is harmony and wisdom, truth and love,
Who in the forests' rayless depth
And in the cities' wearying glare
In sorrow, solitude and death
Accompanies the soul
Of him who dares be free."[24]

Shelley is able to make his meaning wind itself around the lines like the ivy they are describing. In Shelley's poem the only ivy available is prominently metaphorical, symbolising indomitable, republican fraternity. Shelley's recovery of religious vocabulary ("shrine", "temple", "divinity") is secured upon the series of negatives, attacking both pantheism and any notion of a transcendent being. The "soul of him who dares be free" and the man who "has *his* God" highlight human independence which is made possible by toppling the transcendent god.

All this steers the reader away from Southey's attention to what, in comparison, may appear as niceties that appear closer to the 18th century

[24] P. B. Shelley, *The Esdaile Notebook*, in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by D. H Reiman and N. Fraistat, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, vol. 2, pp. 8-9 (lines 1-27).

spirit of Collins's *Ode to Evening*, whose metre has inspired Southey's poem:

> "Go thou and seek the House of Prayer!
> I to the Woodlands wend, and there
> In lovely Nature see the GOD OF LOVE.
> The swelling organ's peal
> Wakes not my soul to zeal,
> Like the wild music of the wind-swept grove.
> The gorgeous altar and the mystic vest
> Rouse not such ardor in my breast,
> As where the noon-tide beam
> Flash'd from the broken stream,
> Quick vibrates on the dazzled sight;
> Or where the cloud-suspended rain
> Sweeps in shadows o'er the plain;
> Or when reclining on the clift's huge height
> I mark the billows burst in silver light.
>
> Go thou and seek the House of Prayer!
> I to the Woodlands shall repair,
> Feed with all Nature's melodies.
> The primrose bank shall there dispense
> Faint fragrance to the awaken'd sense;
> The morning beams that life and joy impart
> Shall with their influence warm my heart,
> And the full tear that down my cheek will steal,
> Shall speak the prayer of praise I Feel!"[25]

Shelley has no time for sensuous delight: he is sternly denunciatory. The great difference between the two poems is that Southey still has a religion to meet, and he says where he does so, whereas Shelley does not even use the term once, but he carries his God. Southey takes more pains in depicting a rural scene with strong pastoral undertones, in which religion is like a female being, to be met there, totally in line with Collins's personification of Eve in his *Ode to Evening*:

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[25] R. Southey, *Poetical Work 1793-1810*, General Editor L. Pratt, vol. 5: *Selected Shorter Poems c. 1793-1810*, Edited by L. Pratt, London, Pickering and Chatto, 2004, pp. 96-97 (lines 1-25).

> "Go thou and seek the House of Prayer!
> I to the woodlands bend my way
> And meet RELIGION there.
> She needs not haunt the high-arch'd dome to pray
> Where storied windows dim the doubtful day:
> With LIBERTY she loves to rove,
> Wide o'er the heathy hill or cowslip'd dale;
> Or seek the shelter of the embowering grove,
> Or with the streamlet wind along the vale.
> Sweet are these scenes to her, and when the night
> Pours in the north her silver strams of light,
> She woos Reflection in the silent gloom,
> And ponders on the world to come."[26]

Southey regards faith as something precious enough to relinquish its pretence. Faith in a transcendent Being, even if it is naturalized into something like the all-pervading soul, is regarded by Shelley as being offensive. It does not need curing because it is the poison. While both poems convey similar disgust at the failure of a Christian model, Southey deplores whereas Shelley attacks. Shelley's "in my soul's devotedness / I love to linger in the wilds" is reminiscent of Southey's "I to the woodlands bend my way", but differs in the kind of love it intends to meet. The idyllic atmosphere of Southey's poem refers to a type of happiness which relies on a kind of general trust in things. Shelley takes the opposite view in which such trust has been replaced by mankind's self-reliance. Shelley says something different, but in a way that is still recognizably Southeyan. Compared to Shelley's defiant rhetoric, Southey's meaning appears mild and emollient.

[26] Ibidem, p. 97 (lines 26-38).

2. *Southey's and Shelley's Sapphics in "The Widow" and "The Crisis"*

Sapphics are striking not only for mingling trochees and dactyls, but also for bringing two lines of this rhythm to an abrupt and cruel end, with a shortened and chiasmic version of the same rhythm: one dactyl and one trochee. This falling rhythm can create a stern tone. This metre has been used for conveying unnatural reversals, fateful paradoxes and sheer mental torture. It had in the past characterized poems of future doom, undoubtedly because the shortened line is used to create the effect of sealing fate and hastening its fulfilment. Isaac Watts' *Day of Judgment* and Cowper's *Lines Written during a Period of Insanity* are examples of the use of Sapphics.[27] To the themes of religious awe and forlorn spiritual isolation, Southey adds moral dejection and a scene of social destitution.

Southey describes the kind of distortion within society that went against nature and reason, and led the radical orator and writer John Thelwall to declare that, when rights are denied, the people have a right to renounce the broken compact, and dissolve the system. In relation to this poem, "The Anti-Jacobin" described the Jacobin poet's procedure as follows:

> "He contemplates, he examines, he turns him [every person in a lower position, whom the Jacobin poet considers as the victim of avarice and the slave of aristocratical insolence and contempt] in every possible light, with a view of extracting from the variety of his wretchedness, new topics of invective against the pride of property. He indeed, (if he is a true Jacobin), refrains from relieving the object of his compassionate contemplation, as well as knowing that every diminution from the general mass of human misery must proportionately diminish the force of his argument."[28]

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[27] The connection was noted by Christopher Ricks: see *The Poems of Shelley*, cit., vol. 1, p. 201.

[28] *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, cit., p. 9.

The gist of this attack is not only to pretend that the thermometer is responsible for the temperature, but that, as a Jacobin, the poet has an interest in things reaching the worst scenario, and he will therefore contribute to inciting indignation. The latter accusation would apply more suitably to Shelley's *Crisis* than to Southey's *Widow* – the two poems which use Sapphics to different effects.

Southey's poem is entirely geared towards the widow's final exhaustion, and his long drawn-out Sapphics extend both the misery of the widow's condition and the compassion for it:

> "Cold was the night wind, drifting fast the snows fell,
> Wide were the downs and shelterless and naked,
> When a poor Wanderer struggled on her journey
> Weary and way-sore.
>
> Drear were the downs, more dreary her reflections;
> Cold was the night wind, colder was her bosom!
> She had no home, the world was all before her,
> She had no shelter.
>
> Fast o'er the bleak heath rattling drove a chariot,
> 'Pity me!' feebly cried the poor night wanderer.
> 'Pity me Strangers! Lest with cold and hunger
> Here I should perish.
>
> Once I had friends, – but they have all forsook me!
> Once I had parents, – they are now in Heaven!
> I had a home once – I had once a husband –
> Pity me Strangers!
>
> I had a home once – I had once a husband –
> I am a Widow poor and broken-hearted!'
> Loud blew the wind, unheard was her complaining,
> On drove the chariot.
>
> On the cold snows she laid her down to rest her;
> She heard a horseman, 'pity me!' she groan'd out;
> Loud blew the wind, unheard was her complaining,
> On went the horseman.
>
> Worn out with anguish, toil and cold and hunger,
> Down sunk the Wanderer, sleep had seiz'd her senses;
> There, did the Traveller find her in the morning,

GOD had releast her."[29]

The poem is dominated by a defeatist sense of paralysis: by the final stanza, the widow ceases to be the subject of any action, and becomes instead "her" in the last six lines of the poem. A remark by Jon Cook on Southey's early play *Wat Tyler* on Southey's depiction of the poor is useful:

> " […] their poverty and suffering become emblematic of moral purity and elevation. Behind the play's overt political message – that poverty must be abolished in the just society — is the strong, underlying feeling that this same condition is Christian nobility and the source of heroic distinction."[30]

This may be exactly the kind of overtones that Shelley intended to avoid by his forceful rhetoric. Sapphics enabled Shelley to make his mark on the account of the state of affairs fifteen years later, and to make a totally different point in reversing the weight of doom from the widow to the order governing the society into which she disappears without a voice. In *The Crisis*, Shelley brings the ominous potential contained as undertones in Southey's Sapphics to a more threatening pitch:

"When we see Despots prosper in their weakness,
When we see Falshood triumph in its folly,
When we see Evil, Tiranny, Corruption
Grin, grow and fatten –

When Virtue toileth thro' a world of sorrow,
When Freedom dwelleth in the deepest dungeon,
When truth in chains and infamy bewaileth
O'ver a world's ruin –

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[29] R. Southey, *Poetical Work 1793-1810*, General Editor L. Pratt, vol. 5: *Selected Shorter Poems c. 1793-1810*, cit., pp. 106-107.

[30] J. Cook, *Representing the People: Crabbe, Southey and Hazlitt*, in *Penguin History of Literature*, vol. 5: *The Romantic Period*, Edited by D. B. Pirie, London, Penguin Books, 1994, p. 242.

> When Monarchs laugh upon their thrones securely,
> Mocking the woes which are to them a treasure,
> Hear the deep curse, and quench the Mother's hunger
> In her child's murder –
>
> Then may we hope the consummating hour
> Dreadfully, sweetly, swiftly is arriving
> When light from Darkness, peace from desolation
> Bursts unresisted.
>
> Then mid the gloom of doubt and fear and anguish
> The votaries of virtue may raise their eyes to Heaven
> And confident watch till the renovating day star
> Gild the horizon."[31]

Whereas Southey encapsulates the political issue within the human interest contained in a scene and focuses on a typical, even symbolic, individual fate, in Shelley's poem, all individual human portrait disappears. Instead, he defines the evil forces that lie behind Southey's human figure directly and he makes the most of the rhetorical effect that can be drawn from the antithesis between "Despots", "Falsehood", "Evil", "Tyranny", "Corruption" and "Virtue", "Freedom", etc. While Southey relies on the fiction of the narrator's voice keeping silent in order to let the widow's utterance come forth, Shelley brings in a prominent, though disembodied, "we" who is therefore the witness, speaker and addressee of the discourse. He starts the poem, with the words "When see", and progresses towards the end with the words, "Then may we hope". Shelley's poem may therefore considered as a running commentary on Southey's poem.

In Shelley's poem, human interest cannot be pegged to any kind of scene, let alone narrative. In his taste for forceful rhetoric over scene, the rattling sound and rhythm may have stayed in his ear possibly through the parody of Southey's verse in "The Anti-Jacobin" which scans the poem in

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[31] P. B. Shelley, *The Esdaile Notebook*, in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 10-11.

such a way so as to demonstrate that the rhythm distorts language and absurdly cuts across the presumed meaning. The point is reinforced by "The Anti-Jacobin"'s imitation of Southey's dactylics in *The Soldier's Friend* in which the explosive intent perceived in this kind of verse is stressed at the expense of considered meaningfulness, as the stanza ends in rhythmic nonsense:

> "Liberty's friends thus all learn to amalgamate,
> Freedom's volcanic explosion prepares itself,
> Despots shall bow to the Fasces of Liberty,
> Reason, philosophy, 'fiddledum diddledum,'
> Peace and Fraternity, higgledy, piggledy,
> Higgledy, piggledy, 'fiddledum diddledum'.
> *Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera*"[32]

The cluster of similar abstract terms in both "The Anti-Jacobin" and in Shelley's poem creates the impression of a chant which, in Shelley, evokes the movement of a grinding mill. In *The Crisis,* all the lines of both stanzas end on the same negative note. The perversity of such distortions reaches its climax in Shelley's world where laughter, having become the exclusive preserve of the powerful, can only be a mockery of values that have been turned upside down, and "woes" have become "a treasure". Perversion is unable to put itself right, and piles crime upon crime by quenching "the Mother's hunger / In her child's murder" (lines 11-2). In Shelley's poem, the mixture of indignation and pity is so uncomfortable that the 'worst coming to worst' is paradoxically called for as a form of relief, a paradox that is reflected in the three adverbs towards the close of the poem("Dreadfully, sweetly, swiftly"). However, this relief is not the extinction into which Southey's widow is finally absorbed. Perspective and logic are similar to the themes in *Ode to the West Wind*: if winter is here,

[32] *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, cit., p. 22.

can spring be far behind? The good times will come. Have the powers of endurance which Southey idealizes in the figures of the widow and the soldier's wife become accomplices to the oppression which they bear? Is there anything profitable to be gained from acquiring the ability to endure and withstand a form of inhumanity? Shelley's inflexible response in *The Crisis* was a call for the inevitable liquidation of a derelict order.

3. *"A Tale of Society as it is from facts 1811" as a fantastic revision of "The Sailor's Mother"*

In *A Tale of Society as it is*, Shelley takes up the general style of popular parables that had been practised by Southey in his eclogue *The Sailor's Mother* (1798), as well as by Wordsworth in particular in *The Affliction of Margaret* (1804). This largely conventional, pathos-laden narrative form was by 1811 an established vehicle for protesting social injustices and advancing radical means to redress these ills. From his correspondence at the time of composition, we know of Shelley's newly-gained awareness of poverty among the people of Keswick which "seems more like a suburb of London than a village in Cumberland".[33] The correspondence also provides us with a version of the poem in the form of seven stanzas whose title *Mother and Son* is reminiscent of Southey's poem.[34] It has also been noted that, in works of this sort, both style and content deflect the overt burden of didacticism from the poet, suggesting that the poet is somehow merely an objective observer recording human suffering, and that the radical views expressed spring from the hearts and mouths of the oppressed figures whose plight his poems ostensibly record.

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[33] Cf. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, cit., vol. 1, p. 223 (Letter to Elizabeth Hitchener – 7 January 1812).

[34] See ibidem, pp. 224-226.

Yet this is precisely not the option that Shelley has chosen for his poem. At no point are his characters allowed to speak.

Southey's eclogue dramatizes an individual story through the telling exchange between an old woman on her way to see her fatally injured son (a situation recalling Wordsworth's *Old Man Travelling*, 1797), and a traveller whose voice – the dispassionate voice of unshakeable moral comfort and order – is subjected to drilling irony. The mother keeps referring to her affectionate, human link to her son, whereas the traveller keeps responding in terms of want and provision, with the latter in fact far from being guaranteed to those in need of it. The harm that was done to the old woman's son cannot be pinned down, not only because of the mother's ignorance, but because, to her, it is too awful to be considered as "English" in any way; it is alien, foreign and wicked:

> "TRAVELLER:
> Nay nay cheer up! A little food and rest
> Will comfort you; and then your journey's end
> Will make amends for all.You shake your head,
> And weep. Is it some evil business then
> That leads you from your home?
> WOMAN:
> Sir I am going
> To see my son at Plymouth, sadly hurt
> In the late action, and in the hospital
> Dying, I fear me, now.
> TRAVELLER:
> Perhaps your fears
> Make evil worse. Even if a limb be lost
> There may be still enough for comfort left
> An arm or leg shot off, there's yet the heart
> To keep life warm, and he may live to talk
> With pleasure of the glorious fight that maim'd him,
> Proud of his loss. Old England's gratitude
> Makes the maim'd sailor happy.
> WOMAN:
> 'Tis not that –
> An arm or leg – I could have borne with that.
> 'Twas not a ball, it was some cursed thing
> Which bursts and burns that hurt him. Something Sir

They do not use on board our English ships,
It is so wicked!"[35]

At a fundamental level, this harm takes on a kind of obscure inhuman existence: Southey carefully manages the tone of his eclogue, making the reader a witness to the strain put on the belief of the trusting and patriotic woman. This is the aspect which seems to have caught Shelley's imagination:

"WOMAN:
[…] they should show no mercy to them
For making use of such unchristian arms.
I had a letter from the hospital,
He got some friend to write it, and he tells me
That my poor boy has lost his precious eyes,
Burnt out. Alas! that I should ever live
To see this wretched day! – they tell me Sir
There is no cure for wounds like this,. Indeed
'Tis a hard journey that I go upon
To such a dismal end!"[36]

In *A Tale of Society as it is*, Shelley comes as close as possible to what might be a sober narrative, modelled on the story of the old mother's loss of her son. However, he leaves no room in the character's minds for doubt about the kind of harm that has been done to the son, and, like in *The Crisis*, Shelley resorts to direct denunciation:

"Her son, compelled, the tyrant's foes had fought,
Had bled in battle, and the stern control
That rules his sinews and coerced his soul
Utterly poisoned life's unmingled bowl
And unsubduable evils on him wrought.
He was the shadow of the lusty child

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[35] R. Southey, *Poetical Work 1793-1810*, General Editor L. Pratt, vol. 5: *Selected Shorter Poems c. 1793-1810*, cit., pp. 317-318 (lines 16-33).

[36] Ibidem, p. 318 (lines 35-43).

> Who, when the time of summer season smiled,
> For her did earn a meal of honesty
> And with affectionate discourse beguiled
> The keen attacks of pain and poverty
> Till power as envying this, her only joy,
> From her maternal bosom tore the unhappy boy."[37]

He does not make it more specific than Southey, but he has seized on the potential for something fantastical within the obscure feeling of Southey's Woman, and gives it a kind of visionary scale. The son does appear in the poem, but he is construed as an apparition, both as the ghost of himself that he has turned into a living dead and as the figment of his mother's imagination:

> "It was an eve of June, when every star
> Spoke peace from Heaven to those on Earth that live.
> She rested on the moor…. 'twas such an eve
> When first her soul bbegan indeed to grieve –
> Then he was here…. Now he is very far.
> The freshness of the balmy evening
> A sorrow o'ver her weary soul did fling,
> Yet not devoid of rapture's mingled tear;
> A balm was in the poison of the sting:
> This aged sufferer for many a year,
> Had never felt such comfort…. She suppressed
> A sign, and turning round clasp'd William to her breast.
>
> And tho' his form was wasted by the woe
> Which despots on their victims love to wreak –
> Tho' his sunk eyeball, and his faded cheek,
> Of slavery, violence and scorn did speak –
> Yet did the aged Woman's bosom glow;
> The vital fire seemed reillumed within
> By this sweet unexpected welcoming.
> O! consummation of the fondest hope
> That eve soared on Fancy's dauntless wing!"[38]

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[37] P. B. Shelley, *The Esdaile Notebook*, in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, cit., vol. 2, p. 36 (lines 60-71).

[38] Ibidem, pp. 34-35 (lines 36-56).

The first evocation of the son, presented as something close to self-delusion, prevents that character from gaining any substance, especially as later on "the pair" fade into the background of undefined and unacknowledged silhouettes. Shelley does not deal with dreadful aspects in the comparatively naturalistic vein which Southey manages. The rest of Shelley's poem is in the same explicit, denunciatory and pathetic vein, a direction that is quite different from Southey's dramatized voices and irony. With its super-Spenserian stanza, the direction given to the poem is also quite different from the earlier instances of Latinate, unrhymed verse. It seems that all the perceived stiffness imposed upon the English language by the Latinate metres has now gone into the harshness of his denunciation, a declamatory rhetoric which only an elaborate rhyme scheme could sustain:

> "And now cold charity's unwelcome dole
> Was insufficient to support the pair,
> And they would perish rather than would bear
> The Law's stern slavery and the insolent stare
> With which the law loves to rend the poor man's soul –"[39]

It is possible to realize that Southey led Shelley on a poetical path before the meditative Wordsworthian vein had a major impact on him. In the cases which I have examined Shelley makes the most of Southey's prosodic innovations. He is able to use Southey's metres and rhythms as suitable vehicles to make his own arguments. While Southey provided Shelley with the opportunity to shape his confrontational approach, Shelley's uncompromising attitude, on the other hand, no longer relies on the values which Southey intended to uphold and defend, such as endurance, the dignity of the lowly and the praise of poverty, which may

[39] Ibidem, p. 36 (lines 72-76).

act as the mainstays of the order in which they are kept in place. Shelley gave his poems a direction which Southey was not prepared to accept. Shelley preserved the antagonistic potential of Southey's verse by sealing it into his own critique of Southey's vision of reality at the time. If, as I think apparent in the examples which I have discussed, Shelley's production can be perceived as intensifying, or even aggravating Southey's radicalism, then Shelley's debt turns his putative inheritance into a legacy which Southey could not recognize or approve. Shelley thus becomes a very awkward progeny for Southey.

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