

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *European Romantic Review* (2023) <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10509585.2023.2205079>

“Load Every Rift”: Power, Opposition, and Community in Romantic Poetry and Heavy Metal

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Abstract

This essay discusses ideas presented on the Romanticism and Metal Studies panels at BARS/NASSR 2022, surveying the transdisciplinary field of Metal Studies and exploring metal’s Romantic inheritances by reading the poetry of canonical Romantics—including John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth—alongside and against metal music and culture. In the spirit of New Romanticisms, our argument contributes to James Rovira’s recent identification of rock and metal as modern Romanticisms, adding that Romanticism and heavy metal are both aesthetic categories that signify power. Romanticism and metal are anachronistic modes that share a proclivity for hybridizing form and genre and for mixing high and low styles. A pairing of Shelley’s elegy for Keats, *Adonais*, with Pantera’s elegiac ballad “Cemetery Gates” underscores the themes of communion, opposition, and power that drive this essay. While power is an obsession that unites metal and Romanticism, some of their models of communication and community resist straightforward alignment. Archetypal Romantic transmissions in the Wordsworthian vein are imagined to be powerful direct communications from an inspired author to a hushed reader. Metal’s models of transmission are often messier, more various, more communal, more directly oppositional, and considerably nosier.

Metal, like Romanticism, is a term that signifies powerfully but speculatively. Ruminating upon heavy metal's genre formation in the 1970s, music critic Scott Woods noted that he and his fellow "writers all seem to be using the word 'metal' (and its derivatives) as an actual adjective, to get at how the music sounds" (qtd. in Weinstein, "Just So Stories" 43). Robert Pattison, in his formative 1987 study of rock music and Romanticism, *The Triumph of Vulgarly*, uses "heavy-metal" in an adjectival sense, as in "heavy-metal rock music," searching out a way to describe the heavy riffs and metallic distortion that came to define this new genre of rock (175). "Black Sabbath's early records," Deena Weinstein writes, "were not considered heavy metal by the band or most of their fans"; instead, they "labeled the band as a prog-rock group. It was only after heavy metal crystallized as a genre, in the second half of the 1970s, that Black Sabbath 'became' heavy metal" ("Reflections" 25–26). "Romanticism" as a critical label or category leads a similarly anachronistic and posthumous existence, a resistance to precise definition that has been amplified by James Rovira's recent identification of rock and metal as a "modern expression of Romanticism" (*Rock and Romanticism: Blake* xii).¹ The Romantics were not knowingly Romantic, much as Black Sabbath were not knowingly metal. Byron is ignorant of his Romantic identity, for instance, in "perceiv[ing] that in Germany as well as in Italy there is a great struggle about what they call 'Classical and Romantic,' terms which were not subjects of classification in England—at least when I left it four or five years ago" (5: 104). A comparable conundrum is faced by metal critics and Romanticists when it comes to pinning down both genres' meanings and origins. "Where Romanticism is often held to have inaugurated an epoch of freer artistic creation, dispensing with observance of established conventions of specific genres as a condition of artistic excellence, heavy metal is amazingly generically differentiated," Ross Wilson writes, listing off "thrash, speed, death, stoner, sludge, groove, nu (or is that nü?), doom, progressive,

extreme, traditional—and that’s just for starters” (27). “The difficulty is not just knowing what [Romanticism] really means,” Seamus Perry notes, “but knowing even *how to go about deciding* what it really means” (3).

Despite their potential haziness as definitional terms, we can confidently assert that Romanticism and metal share a preoccupation with power, although “power” is pluralistic in both cases. In the bluntly titled anthem, “Power Metal,” from the 1988 album of the same name, the residually glam, quasi-speed metal iteration of Pantera imagines metal—in both a figurative and playfully literal sense—as a force of violence, but also as a powerful fusion of band and listener. “My soul was spawned from hell / My body coiled in steel,” vocalist Phil Anselmo wails, describing himself as “Put on this earth to melt / It down to the core.” “I’ll make you feel such pain / You’re coming back for more,” Anselmo howls between screeches of “Power Metal!” Metal’s power, here, is its melting together of band and audience through music that is Dionysian in its binding of pleasure and pain. Power in Romantic poetry, however, tends to be multitudinous. In Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, for example, power is ambiguous, being at once love, peace, hope, authority, and darkness. The tyrannical Jove is “an awful image of calm power” as much as the redemptive Love springs “from its awful throne of patient power” (1.296 and 4.557). Such resonances and dissonances bespeak both Romanticism and metal’s linguistic and aesthetic entanglements and their contrary impulses as forms of resistance.

For musicologist Robert Walser, the figurative force of metal music and culture has Romantic-period roots that anticipate the genre’s advent. “*The Oxford English Dictionary* traces ‘heavy metal’ back through nearly two hundred years,” Walser writes, noting that “in the nineteenth century, ‘heavy metal’ was both a technical term and a figurative, social one,” defined

as “ability, mental or bodily; power, influence; as, he is a man of heavy metal; also, a person or persons of great ability or power, mental or bodily; used generally of one who is or is to be another’s opponent in any contest; as, we had to do with heavy metal” (22). In twentieth-century popular mythology, heavy metal’s origins are murkily traced from musical sources, from the “heavy metal thunder” of Steppenwolf’s “Born to be Wild” to the “very heavy and metallic loud” sound of Jimi Hendrix to the literary borrowing of “Heavy Metal” from William S. Burroughs’ *Nova Trilogy* (qtd. in Weinstein “Just So Stories” 43). Perhaps in response to the possibilities evoked by such allusive, tentative narrativizations, Metal Studies—the transdisciplinary study of heavy metal music and culture rooted in the fields of sociology and musicology—has recently taken a literary turn. As Samuel Thomas puts it, “exploring the relationship between metal and literature has the potential to consolidate, expand, and unsettle a range of scholarly fields,” where “[e]ngaging with literary metal means engaging with enduringly complex questions about value, reception, allusion, influence, and genre” (413). These are questions that this essay, and its starting point as papers presented on the Romanticism and Metal Studies panels that we organized for BARS/NASSR 2022, engage with. Considering metal’s Romantic inheritances and resonances in the spirit of “New Romanticisms,” our panels encouraged readings of heavy metal through the lenses of Romantic Studies in order to plumb the consonances and discords between two aesthetic and cultural categories that share certain positionings and concerns while remaining resolutely hard to pin down.

The latter part of this essay brings together and develops the papers we gave at “New Romanticisms,” which bookended two rich panels considering Romanticism and Metal Studies. We hope that many of the other papers given will be published in due course, but we want to give a brief flavor here to evoke the range of approaches that the call for participants gathered.

The first panel, “Romantic Aesthetics and Heavy Metal,” broached topics from Romantic lyrical dramas’ influence on symphonic metal to black metal’s responsiveness to Romantic song cycles. Lucia Dodaro pinpointed symphonic metal bands’ direct references to Romantic texts, from Goethe’s *Faust* to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Christabel,” while Ro Nowak considered how Franz Schubert’s *Winterreise*, itself a translation of poems by Wilhelm Müller into music, is indirectly translated into the music, lyrics, and aesthetics of black metal bands. Darren Gray focused on the first-generation Romantics and the first generation of metal by comparing Black Sabbath’s “War Pigs” with the aesthetics of the Romantics’ anti-war stances, considering Coleridge’s shifting discomfiture as recorded in “The Recantation: An Ode” and its retitled version, “France: An Ode.” The second panel, “Romanticism, Metal, and Cultural Resonances,” considered Romanticism’s modern reverberations in metal music, artwork, and culture. In “‘Born Too Late’: Romanticism and Doom Metal,” Julian Knox posited doom metal as intrinsically Romantic in its backward glances and anxious futurity. Paying particular attention to the Los Angeles-based doom metal band Saint Vitus and their 1986 lament at their being “born too late,” Knox drew out in doom metal the latent belatedness that haunts Romanticism. Shifting to European Romanticism, Nicole Lee introduced French black metal as a form of “NeoRomanticism,” considering the ways in which black metal’s Norwegian roots are transplanted in the music and cover art of French band Blut Aus Nord. Keen attention to metal bands’ cover art continued in Camila Oliveira’s “Blake’s Prophetic Books and the Heavy Metal Scene of the Nineties,” in which Oliveira demonstrated how Blake’s artwork inspired and illuminated metal bands’ album sleeves and lyrics. Metal’s engagements with Romanticism, these papers affirmed, encompassed the aural, the visual, and the verbal in equal measure. Ludic qualities were also highlighted. In “‘An Orgasm of Buffoonery’: Romantic Irony in *Spinal Tap*

and the Heavy Metal Tradition,” Rory Edgington identified in metal’s spirit of excess and absurdity and in Romanticism’s tendency toward bathos a shared proclivity for self-irony. Uniting two seemingly unrelated outputs of the 1980s, Anne Mellor’s *English Romantic Irony* and the heavy metal “mockumentary” *This Is Spinal Tap*, Edgington explored how heavy metal music expresses Romantic irony through its self-mockery, self-destructiveness, and unabated enthusiasm. Both forms, perhaps, can enjoy teetering on what Spinal Tap’s singer, David St. Hubbins, characterizes as the “fine line between stupid and clever.”

In light of this complex series of interactions, we can now return with a fuller sense of the genres’ entanglements to questions of power and generic distinction. If metal’s distinguishing feature is that of power, we might align this with Romanticism through assertions like Thomas De Quincey’s claim that “All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature to communicate knowledge” (332). Robert Walser writes that metal music’s distinctive use of the power chord “is at once the musical basis of heavy metal and an apt metaphor for it, for musical articulation of power is the most important single factor in the experience of heavy metal”; the “overdriven sound” of the power chord “evokes excess and transgression but also stability, permanence, and harmony” (23). Strikingly similar claims have been made for Romantic poetry. “The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power,” William Hazlitt affirms (4: 214). For William Wordsworth, in “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” power and music are interfused in the “ample power” of “The still, sad music of humanity” (93 and 92). Fozzy, a metal band fronted by former World Wrestling Entertainment star-turned-singer Chris Jericho, may expound metal music and culture at its basest. But in “Wordsworth Way,” the band seems to invoke both the poet’s own entwining of high and low styles and the theatricality and performativity of what Gillen D’Arcy Wood identifies as the

“operatic Wordsworth” (99). In something of a metal “Lucy poem,” Jericho feelingly “remembers the day she died,” “Like her image in my mind / Seasons change.”

Beyond its melding of heavy riffs with a metallized Wordsworthian mode, “Wordsworth Way” conjures Pantera, the metal band perhaps most associated with power’s vulgar display, in directly quoting the refrain “But the memories remain” from the band’s elegiac nineties metal ballad, “Cemetery Gates.” Launching off from Walser’s identification of the origin of the phrase “heavy metal” within a nineteenth-century discourse of bodily and mental power and opposition, power and metal might be seen as the combined driving forces of both Shelley’s elegy for John Keats, *Adonais*, and Pantera’s “Cemetery Gates.” “Consistently in his writing,” Paul A. Vatalaro affirms, “Shelley associates Power with music and with voice” (148) and Michael O’Neill identifies *Adonais* as a poem “about poetic power,” in the Hazlittian sense, and as one that enacts “its own demonstration of such power” (50, 51). The elegy, fueled by Shelley’s retributive, undeniably metal, urge to “[dip] my pen in consuming fire for [Keats’s] destroyers” performs through poetic power what the power chord plays out in metal music: an excess of emotion and a transgressive display of power (*Letters* 2: 300). This overwrought excess opposes the “stability, permanence, and harmony” floated by the poem’s Neoplatonic cast: “The One remains, the many change and pass” (52.460). *Adonais* dramatizes a struggle between spirit and matter through its reanimation of the slain Keats: “he is not dead, he doth not sleep,” “’tis Death is dead, not he” (39.343; 41.361). Through repeated allusions to Keats’s poetry, Shelley oracularly voices the dead poet’s words by “rekindl[ing] all the fading melodies” (2.16). The intertextual, reanimating power of the poem shines through this line where Shelley interfuses the “Fast-fading violets” of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” with the “Heard melodies” of his “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” revoicing the dead poet (51; 11). The poem’s speaker and addressee are melted together through

intertextual echoes. The deceased Keats is invoked in both *Adonais* and “Cemetery Gates,” intentionally in the former, and indirectly in the latter through Anselmo’s unexpected quoting of The Smiths’ 1986 pop hit, “Cemetery Gates,” wherein, past the cemetery gates, Morrissey croons, “Keats and Yeats are on your side.” Shelley’s self-portraiture as “a Power / Girt round with weakness” (32.281–82) anticipates Keats’s figuration as the pantheistic “Power . . . / Which has withdrawn his being to its own” (42.375–76), and in metal performances, singer and audience undergo a similar fusion. Driving *Adonais*’s poetic power is Keats’s advice to Shelley in 1820 to “load every rift . . . with ore” (*Letters* 2: 323), allusively recalling Spenser’s “Metal loaded every Rift” in the *Faerie Queene* (2.7.28). From rifts to riffs, Romantic poetry and heavy metal are loaded with the language of power.

Shelley’s power in *Adonais* is tempered with weakness in a similar manner to the way in which power in metal music is conveyed through distortion. “[D]istortion begins to be perceived in terms of power rather than failure” only in metal music, Walser notes (59). “One of the most significant ways that death metal empowers its listeners is through its inversion of power,” Jack Harrell writes (101); similarly, *Adonais* harmonizes the elegist and elegized through their mutual poetic power. The poet as “a Power / Girt round with weakness” empowers and unifies the audience of fellow mourners through their shared grief. Shelley’s self-elegiac identification with Keats is foregrounded in the poem’s preface, where he describes Keats as being “buried in the romantic and lonely cemetery” in Rome, surrounded by “massy walls and towers, now mouldering and desolate”; “The cemetery is an open space among the ruins, covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place” (529). Keats’s sense of being “half in love with easeful death” in his “Ode to a Nightingale” is intensified in *Adonais*’s invocation of the dead poet, where Shelley darkly

poses the prospect of being entirely “in love with death.” Fixated upon death and deathly spaces, metal music similarly “might make one in love with death.” Julian Knox, considering black metal’s Romantic inheritance, writes that to listen to such music is “to listen to the voices of the dead” (251). Through growling, rasping vocals and distorted electric guitars, metal orphically expresses the dead. The metallic shrieks of the electric guitar and the vocalist’s high-pitched screams forge, in “Cemetery Gates,” a mimesis of the dying. The hybridized mode of “Cemetery Gates,” the guitars shifting from acoustic ballad to electric distortion, accompanies the vocalist’s sense of a life left incomplete and the mental transportation to the space past the cemetery gates.

From the massy, moldering walls of Keats’s resting place in Rome to the cemetery gates of Pantera’s hybridized metal ballad, both poem and song are mutually empowered by an allusive internal dialogue or sharing of power between elegist, audience, and elegized subject. The vocalist Phil Anselmo’s refrain—“pass the cemetery gates”—plays upon the ambiguity of passing as dying, and as the song closes, the riff, an essential component of metal music, eerily voices a reply to Anselmo’s wailing refrain of “gates” in a shrieking pitch that matches the mourners’ wails. Although Anselmo’s “gutter poetry” cannot hold a candle to Shelley’s elegy when judged according to traditional high-cultural value systems, metal music and Romantic poetry are aligned in empowering their respective audiences through a shareable performance of grief, power, and memory (Torreano).

Thus, one thing that unites metal and Romanticism is a kind of intense commitment that might be performative and at times playful, but which also bespeaks a determination to mean something, a determination often made in the face of a world presented as uncaring or malign. Some of the complexities of this position are helpfully teased out in a song that is not itself metal in a strict sense, but which was written by someone who deeply loves metal: The Mountain

Goats' "The Best Ever Death Metal Band in Denton." At the point when this song was written, The Mountain Goats was mostly John Darnielle, and this essay will credit the song to him as it proceeds, following the registered writing credit. In doing so, it will take a fairly traditional Romantic position on authorship, in which cultural works are seen as arising from the febrile minds of alienated individuals, with limited credit given to shared forms or to the affordances of a cultural commons. However, this is a position from which metal, at least in some forms, swerves: a difference (or dissonance) worth acknowledging. While metal and Romanticism share an obsession with power, their models of communication and community align less neatly. Archetypal Romantic transmissions in the Wordsworthian vein are imagined to be powerful direct communications from an inspired author to a hushed reader. Metal's models are often messier, more various, more communal, more directly oppositional, and considerably noisier.

Crucially, Darnielle's song begins with a band of two—Cyrus and Jeff, "a couple of guys who'd been friends since grade school"—rather than a lone individual. The sense of togetherness the song articulates in its vision of band practice demonstrates a key manner in which the creative imaginaries of metal and Romantic art diverge. Canonical Romantic poetry often positions the solitary poet as revelator and the reader as grateful recipient. There are, of course, famous Romantic collaborations—such as Wordsworth and Coleridge's work on *Lyrical Ballads*—and well-known coteries—such as the circle around Leigh Hunt. However, the internal rhetorics of Romantic works usually distance companionship from the process of composition and occurrence, as is the case when Coleridge addresses Charles Lamb from his lime-tree bower or Wordsworth addresses Coleridge in *The Prelude*. Having been together is a more common form of positioning than being together. While Wordsworth defines poetry in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling," he also stipulates that "it

takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity” (611). This characteristic form of Romantic retrospection privileges representing the individual mind’s reflections, rather than more reciprocal forms of exchange. The condition for *Adonais* is Keats’s permanent absence, at least in body.

By contrast, while metal thematizes alienation, its performative contexts often imagine togetherness: songs of disaffection designed to be played loudly by bands to screaming crowds. Even when metal lyrics take the form of Romantically inflected retrospections, musical immediacy and performative flair change the manners in which such reflections communicate. Metal arises from blendings that make potent, immediate noise: drums and guitars like those possessed by Jeff and Cyrus produce heard melodies, rather than Keats’s putatively “sweeter” “unheard” melodies (“Ode on a Grecian Urn” 12, 11). There are metal auteurs who work alone layering parts together in the studio (particularly in certain subgenres like black metal), but both in live performance and on recordings, the reality or impression of a real-time plurality of aligned sounds is often crucial, as in the shrieking interplay between Anselmo’s voice and Dimebag Darrell’s guitar at the close of “Cemetery Gates.” While it can articulate a lone reflective voice, metal often speaks through dissonant, jostling noise. A quintessential group might require a drummer who can play fast, loud, and accurately; a guitarist skilled in the shaping of distortions; a bassist who holds everything together; and a singer who gives the music its shamanic channel. There are a lot of different ways in which metal can be sung, but it tends to require the singer to commit powerfully to performativity, whether that be through screams and growls; a more restrained execution that relies on actorly control, timing, and irony; or shifting between different dynamics. The present-minded temporalities of metal thus place greater emphasis on the performance of overflow than on recollections in tranquility. Metal can include

quieter and more reflective passages, but it turns on volume. While the eleven-plus minutes of Type O Negative's "Black No. 1"—the best song ever written about hair dye—begin slowly with spooky organ, a slow bassline and low, stagey vocals, the song really kicks in with the guitar riff and the double-tracked double-edged affirmation "She will" screamed over the top. The shapes of metal's overflowing may in practice be carefully crafted rather than spontaneous, but power in the moment is crucial to metal's core affects. While Shelley shapes poetry to be like a voice, the affordances of performance and recording allow metal directly to voice.

In keeping with this immediacy, metal is often happy locating itself as arising from less refined roots than Romantic works tend to claim, although it also takes pleasure in mixing registers. To take Faith No More song titles as an example: it is possible to imagine a Wordsworth poem titled "The Morning After" or "Ashes to Ashes," and certain songs, like "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies," have clear high-culture credentials, in this case alluding to a book by James McNeill Whistler. However, it is considerably harder to imagine Wordsworth writing something called "Be Aggressive," "Surprise! You're Dead!" or "Jizzlobber." Where Romanticism veers towards the heightened and transcendental, many metal artists acknowledge cruder and more quotidian entanglements, sometimes with angry gestures of resistance, sometimes with half serious, half ironic gestures of appropriation that place considerably less weight on considered originality than canonical Romantic claims for the Poet's irreducible individuality. This might be exemplified by Faith No More covering Lionel Richie, the Bee Gees, or Portishead with considerable respect for the original songcraft, or their choosing to open their hotly anticipated 2009 reunion shows with a cover of Peaches & Herb's R&B duet "Reunited" before crashing in to their own "From Out of Nowhere." Certain forms of metal flirt

with purity discourses—as with the Manowar-coined slogan “Death to False Metal”—but there are many strands that take joy in its potential for being a hybridized or bastard form.

To return to how metal is located in Darnielle’s lyric: Jeff and Cyrus live in an archetypal suburban youthscape of a kind often ambivalently romanticized in twentieth-century culture. While this setting might draw some glow from Romantic-period visions, growing up in Denton is a considerable way from Wordsworth’s enchanted skating. Their three potential band names—“Satan’s Fingers, and The Killers, and The Hospital Bombers” —resonate with the more alienated end of the Romantic spectrum, but also speak to the straightforwardness valued in a performative form and to metal’s being comfortable with vulgar display. None of the names are precisely good ideas, but they are perhaps good bad ideas, in line with the kinds of transgressive frisson that the gothic in general and Byron in particular played significant roles in popularizing. If they are rather conventional transgressive forms, like the pentagram in the following verse and the vision of success that Jeff and Cyrus share based around “stage lights and Lear jets and fortune and fame,” this is partly a function of Darnielle (and metal) centering lyric immediacy. The kinds of complex coding that can be parsed in written verse seem deeply abstruse when encountered at the speed of song.

Darnielle’s lyrics acknowledge that while metal can partake of the queerer and more proleptic desires common in Romantic poetry, it also values broad-brush, confrontational pleasures. This is something Darnielle explores further in his short book on Black Sabbath’s album *Master of Reality*, in which he channels the voice of a teenage narrator, Roger Painter, who is confined in a psychiatric center and trying to explain the album’s sustaining power so that his custodians will return his tape. In seeking to document his attachments, Painter writes that

some of the hardest things in the world are also very simple like for example a sword or even a big rock. . . . This is really why Black Sabbath is my favorite

band. They are not trying to show off all the stuff they can do even though I am pretty sure they could be as complicated as they want to be. They just put all of their energy into this one riff and let it loose like an avalanche. (26)

Painter reminds us that it is easy to get too clever when writing about metal. Part of its joy lies in its viscerality, in its daring at times to be—and be seen as being—simple or stupid. While much Romantic verse self-consciously alludes to other places and times, hinting at complex shadings of meaning, metal’s performative immediacy mandates a tighter focus, with most metal songs containing moments or stretches where the principal pleasure for the listener is that something sublimely loud is happening right now. This is not to deny the resonance of passages where a singer like Tool’s Maynard James Keenan croons cryptically and allusively, weaving in with the rhythm section’s complex polyrhythms, but rather to point out that he also screams for a solid twenty-five seconds on “The Grudge,” and that his bandmates conjure similar moments where sound is everything. Some metal songs make a point of going hard all the time, others depend on dynamic contrast, but in most, a degree of unrepentant loudness—the kind of brashness figuratively expressed in Darnielle’s imagined band names—is a key element of their power.

Unrepentant commitment is also important to the turn that “The Best Ever Death Metal Band in Denton” takes as it moves towards its conclusion, which sees its heroes separated and demeaned:

This was how Cyrus got sent to the school
 Where they told him he’d never be famous
 And this was why Jeff, in the letters he’d write to his friend
 Helped develop a plan to get even

When you punish a person for dreaming his dream,
 Don’t expect him to thank you or forgive you
 The best ever Death Metal band out of Denton
 Will in time both outpace and outlive you

Hail Satan, Hail Satan tonight
 Hail Satan, Hail Hail

Darnielle's song is about intolerance and exclusion, but hinges on the promise of community and resistance. This is true within the lyric—Jeff does not abandon Cyrus, and Darnielle does not abandon his protagonists—but it is also true in the way the lyric invites participation. When the song is sung live, the “Hail Satan” chant with which it concludes inevitably brings in the audience, making them part of the song: co-signatories through joining in. This is an effect Darnielle borrows from metal, which demands that you listen (often in part through its volume), but also invites you to indulge in something larger. While Romantic verse dreams alternative, alienated dreams, it is often rather chary about admitting that its audience might feel the same way. There are, of course, exceptions that call for participation, like Shelley's rousing conclusion to *The Mask of Anarchy*, but many Romantic poems subtly neg their readers, as in Wordsworth's assertion in “Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman” that if his reader had in their minds “Such stores as silent thought can bring,” then they too might find “A tale in every thing” (84; 90). Poems like this encourage a reflective stance, but imply the reader will have to do considerable mental work to approach the poet's level. By contrast, a metal performance invites its audiences to move, dance, mosh, and yell, becoming part of the subculture being evoked, acknowledging alienation together. We might think of the effect engendered by the build and release in Rage Against the Machine's “Killing in the Name”: there is something deeply cathartic about the closing repetitions of “Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me.” Such invitations often represent quite loose forms of communication—those who propelled “Killing in the Name” to Christmas Number 1 in the UK in 2009 did so to protest the dominance of reality show *The X Factor* rather than the kinds of police hypocrisy and brutality the song rages against. We should not be complacent about the ease with which a forceful politics of discontent can be dissipated or

manipulated. However, we should also appreciate the ways in which the voices of the singers and players of metal can become other voices, or collective voices.

This contrast might be brought home using a scene from Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie's comic *The Wicked + The Divine*. In this scene, the comic's protagonist, Laura Wilson, has been taken down through the darkness under London to meet the Morrigan, one of twelve young people who have accepted a deal that grants them fame, magic, and musical talent for two years, but guarantees death afterwards—a Faustian Romantic conceit that sees many of the characters become paranoid and isolated. After a sinister build-up, a page turn that initially seems bathetic finds Morrigan in the middle of a karaoke performance of My Chemical Romance's "I'm Not Okay (I Promise)" (Gillen 54). However, the performance of a shared touchstone shakes things loose. Morrigan is singing for herself, but also for Laura, whose companion asks a question that finally allows her to admit that she, too, is not okay. "I'm Not Okay" is less specific a description of an emotional state than the nuanced gradations often essayed in Romantic poetry, but this makes the song (or sentiment) in many respects more available and applicable for appropriation and self-expression. As Darnielle's Painter writes, "some of the hardest things in the world are also very simple." However, these things are not always easy to say. While Romantic poetry works its way carefully towards what it presents as powerful truths, much of the metal that speaks to and for wide subcultural audiences gives brash, immediate voice.

Before playing "The Best Ever Death Metal Band in Denton" as a closer to a San Francisco crowd at the Swedish American Hall in 2009, Darnielle offered his audience the following introduction:

This is a song about hope in your life. There is a magnificent Mark Eitzel song title, "It Is Important Throughout Your Life to Proclaim Your Joy." It is also

important to admit, on occasion, to the righteousness of your fury. The justness of your cause in the face of those who would do you wrong, and who would rob you of your youth, and who would ignore what's good and beautiful in you.

Romanticism and metal both recognize that the rules of the world as they stand can often be blinkered and insufficient, and both offer other ways of seeing and being. Romantic poetry is often reflective and thoughtful, sometimes despairing and sometimes utopian. It is seldom loud, seldom crude, and seldom all that direct. In its expanding Romantic resistance into new kinds of performative space, metal can be all these things, but its most important role is as a combination of objection and alternative in a shared language that is, at least in part, appropriable. While Romantic poets often insist on their unconquerable singularity, even when seeking to strip language back to the Wordsworthian "language really used by men" (597), metal's performative, collaborative, audience-provoking interventions allow it to center on being different together.

To put it crudely, then, it seems clear that the legacies of Romanticism inform metal's obsession with legitimate, illegitimate, transcendent, and uncomfortable forms of power, and that Romantic voicings and aesthetics bleed forward into metal's postures. Both Romanticism and metal partake of the paradox of the countercultural, seeking to oppose and escape from established frameworks while being queasily subject to the possibility of both echoing and becoming them. Perhaps, though, both hold to the hope that this directionality can ultimately be reversed. Writing enviously of Byron, Shelley opined that "he touched a chord to which a million hearts responded, and the coarse music which he produced to please them disciplined him to the perfection which he now approaches" (*Letters* 2: 436). Romantic poetry is a more self-consciously refined discourse than metal, metal is proud in its loudness, but nevertheless there are ways in which they are revealingly commensurate in their themes, dynamics, and

devotions. Both are forms for conflicted idealists who feel at risk of being chastened, but determine nevertheless to go for it.

Notes

¹ See also the collection's sequel, *Rock and Romanticism: Post-Punk, Goth, and Metal as Dark Romanticisms*. Although not inclusive of heavy metal, Romanticism's persistence is explored in Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle's *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism*, wherein their identification of "the various modes and conditions of romanticism's present darkness" may be easily extended to metal: "undersongs and undertones, foreclosed futures, horrors seen and unseen, lost causes, reading and even dancing in the dark" (14).

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