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Chapter 7

Ancient Philosophy

Amanda Blake Davis

‘[T]he evils of acquiring Greek & Latin considerably overbalance the benefits’, the young Shelley wrote to William Godwin in July 1812, rejecting the philosopher’s recommendation to study the ancients (*Letters* I: 316). ‘Lucretius forms perhaps the single exception’, Shelley contended, among the ancients as ‘the tracers of a circle which is intended to shut out from real knowledge’ (*Letters* I: 317, 318). However, a sea-change occurred not long after this correspondence and the poet’s early resistance softened. In December 1812, a transformed Shelley wrote to his booksellers ordering ‘the Greek classics’, including ‘Plato (with a translation)’ (*Letters* I: 341, 343).¹ Shelley’s early dismissal of the ancients as ‘the tracers of a circle which is intended to shut out from real knowledge’ is recast in his maturity, where in ‘A Defence of Poetry’, ‘Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and

¹ Shelley’s requests to his booksellers, Thomas Hookham and Thomas ‘Clio’ Rickman, included ancient tragedians, historians, and philosophers, from Aeschylus to ‘Zenophon’. For the full lists, see *Letters* I: 342-345.

circumference of knowledge' (*SPP* 531). The ancients' circumscribing circle gives way to 'the centre and circumference of knowledge' through Shelley's radical absorption in the classics. Poetry is unequivocally Platonic in these lines of 'A Defence of Poetry', where Shelley transports the description of the *anima mundi* of Plato's *Timaeus* into poetry itself. Through his reading and translation of the ancients – and particularly Plato – philosophy and poetry become concomitant for Shelley. Ultimately, Shelley is indebted to the philosopher's use of literary forms over any straightforward adoption of his philosophy of Forms.

'Crucially,' Ross Wilson writes, 'Shelley refused to recognise a distinction between philosophy and poetry'. In radically esteeming Plato a poet in 'A Defence of Poetry', Shelley proclaims that

The distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar error. The distinction between philosophers and poets has been anticipated. Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendour of his imagery and the melody of his language is the most intense that it is possible to conceive. (*SPP* 514)

Wilson draws attention to the 'deft rhetorical twist in the chiasmic inversion of "poets" – "prose writers" – "philosophers" – "poets"' that precedes Shelley's essential recognition of Plato as a poet.² Any easy distinction between poetry, prose, and philosophy is elided. If not Godwin, then who sparked Shelley's lifelong engagement with ancient philosophy? The prime suspect is the self-educated classics scholar, poet, and satirist, Thomas Love Peacock, or 'Greek-peaky', to borrow the moniker bestowed upon him by the 'Romantic Platonist'

² Ross Wilson, 'Shelley's Plato', in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Philosophy*, ed. J. Piers Rawling and Philip Wilson (London: Routledge, 2019), 345–357 (348).

Thomas Taylor. It is no coincidence that Shelley's ordering of 'the Greek classics' from his booksellers in December 1812 followed his first meeting with Peacock in November.³

Ancient philosophy and poetry became truly interfused for Shelley during the 'Attic' winter of 1815–1816 and the formation of the Hellenistic circle, including Peacock and Leigh Hunt, at Marlow in 1817. This period is reminisced upon in Shelley's fragmentary 'Athanasia'.⁴ Shelley pictures Peacock's mentorship, and his first recorded reading of Plato's *Symposium* in 1817, in the poem:⁵

 '[] Plato's words of light in thee and me
Lingered like moonlight in the moonless East,
For we had just then read — thy memory

 'Is faithful now — the story of the feast;
And Agathon and Diotima seemed
From death, and Dark [] released

 'To talk with us of all they knew or dreamed,
Of love divine (*Poems* II: 322, ll. 190-197)

³ 'There can hardly be any doubt that Shelley was introduced to Thomas Love Peacock by Hookham during Shelley's recent stay in London', *Letters* I: 333n1.

⁴ See *Poems* II: 312.

⁵ The first extant record of Shelley reading the *Symposium* occurs in Mary Shelley's journal entry for 13 August 1817: 'Shelley writes—reads Plato's Convivium', (*JMS* I: 178).

Plato unites Shelley and Peacock with his ‘words of light’ through the recollection of the pair’s reading of the *Symposium*.⁶ ‘This it is to be a scholar’, Shelley writes in his fragmentary review of Peacock’s *Rhododaphne: or, the Thessalian Spell*; ‘this it is to have read Homer and Sophocles and Plato’ (*Prose* I: 286), describing Peacock’s poem as containing ‘the transfused essence of Lucian, Petronius, and Apuleius’ (*Letters* I: 569). Peacock is a crucial catalyst in Shelley’s poetic development and in his association of poetry and ancient philosophy, encouraging and inspiring the younger poet to embody ‘the transfused essence’ of the ancients in verse.

Alongside its imaging of reading the *Symposium* in memory, the ‘memories of an antenatal life’ in ‘Athanasia’ contribute to the fragment’s Platonic cast by alluding to the anamnesis of the *Phaedo* (*Poems* II: 318, l. 91). The word ‘antenatal’ reappears in *Peter Bell the Third* and *The Sensitive-Plant* with its Platonic inflections, anticipating Shelley’s translation of the *Phaedo* in 1820. The satirical mode of *Peter Bell the Third* chastises Wordsworth’s fall into conservatism. ‘What a beastly and pitiful wretch that Wordsworth!’, Shelley exclaimed to Peacock in 1818; ‘That such a man should be a poet! I can compare him with no one but Simonides, that flatterer of the Sicilian tyrants, and at the same time the most natural and tender of lyric poets’ (*Letters* II: 26). The double life of Shelley’s ‘antenatal’ *Peter Bell* refers to the former life of Wordsworth’s *Peter Bell*, conceived with *Lyrical Ballads* yet unpublished until 1819, but also recalls Wordsworth’s indebtedness to Plato’s

⁶ ‘There can be no doubt that the reading of the *Symposium* by Shelley in 1817 was due to Peacock’, James A. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1949), p. 49. Shelley’s translations of Plato are quoted from this edition, abbreviated as ‘Notopoulos’, references hereafter appearing in the text.

Phaedo in the anamnesis of his ‘Ode (“There was a time”)', a poem of Platonic import and lasting influence on Shelley, wherein ‘Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting’.⁷ Plato’s philosophy of pre-existence is transmuted through Wordsworth’s Ode in the ‘dim recollections’ of *Peter Bell the Third* (*Poems* III: 125, 5.428). Despite their differences, Wordsworth’s high estimation of the *Phaedo* – ‘Plato’s records of the last scenes of the career of Socrates’ – as among ‘the most pathetic of human compositions’ chimes with Shelley’s own estimation of Plato as a poet.⁸ In *The Sensitive-Plant*, the Platonic cast of the ‘antenatal tomb / Where butterflies dream of the life to come’ (*Poems* III: 307, 2.53-54) is intensified by the speaker’s delineation between the Sensitive-plant’s spirit and decaying ‘outward form’ (*Poems* III: 314, Conclusion, l. 3). But in posing a world like the cave of the *Republic*, wherein ‘nothing is, but all things seem, / And we, the shadows of the dream’, Shelley artfully weaves another poet’s envisioning of Plato – Calderón de la Barca’s *La vida es sueno* – into his own (*Poems* III: 315, Conclusion, ll. 11–12). ‘I have been reading nothing but Greek and Spanish’, Shelley writes to Peacock in November 1820; ‘Plato and Calderon have been my gods’ (*Letters* II: 245). Shelley’s gleams of Plato are kaleidoscopically refracted through others.

Shelley’s intermixing of ancient philosophy and poetry is evident from his first major work, *Queen Mab*, and its references to Lucretius, Plutarch, Porphyry, and Pythagoras in a mystic muddling of Neoplatonism. The young Shelley gleaned Plato through a glass darkly from Thomas Taylor’s Orphic interpretations and Floyer Sydenham’s translation, ‘so harsh

⁷ William Wordsworth, in *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 299, ll. 58-59.

⁸ William Wordsworth, quoted in Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*, 2 vols (London: 1851), II: 482.

and un-English in its style, as universally to repel’, as Mary Shelley declaimed it, to Ficino’s Renaissance Neoplatonism and Dacier’s eighteenth-century Plato, twice removed from the Greek through French and English.⁹ And yet, in *Queen Mab* ‘Shelley is the unconscious heir of Plato’ (Notopoulos 177). Mab’s summoning of Ianthe’s soul, ‘The perfect semblance of its bodily frame’, invokes the *anima mundi* of the *Timaeus* while the pairing of the body as a ‘useless and worn-out machine’ that ‘Rots, perishes, and passes’ with the soul’s immortality in the body-prison of the *Phaedo* (*CP* II: 169, l.133; l.155-156).

However, Shelley’s ‘unconscious’ Platonism in *Queen Mab* gains direction, under Peacock’s influence, in the epic-romance, *Laon and Cythna*. Moulded upon Peacock’s *Ahrimanes* in its formal structure and incorporation of Manichean philosophy, *Laon and Cythna* also bears the classical influence of *Rhododaphne* and its echo chamber of the ancients. “‘I expected the statues and images to walk’”, Peacock quotes from Apuleius in the Preface to his ‘Thessalian Spell’.¹⁰ Echoingly, Shelley, in his review of *Rhododaphne*, describes the reader’s experience as similarly enchanted: ‘We stand in the marble temples of the Gods, and see their sculptured forms gazing and almost breathing around. [...] We visit the solitudes of Thessalian magic, and tremble with new wonder to hear statues speak and move’ (*Prose* I: 285). Anticipating ‘Athanasius’, Shelley’s experience of reading the ancients through Peacock is transfused into *Laon and Cythna*. The poem’s anonymous Narrator, channelling Peacock’s use of Apuleius, beholds the ancients as ‘Sculptures like life and thought; immovable, deep-eyed’: ‘The Great, who had departed from mankind’ are infused with new life (*Poems* II: 89, 90; l. 51, 54). *Laon and Cythna* borrows from Peacock’s works

⁹ Mary Shelley, Preface to *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, 2 vols (London: 1840), I: viii.

¹⁰ Thomas Love Peacock, *Rhododaphne: or, the Thessalian Spell* (London: 1818), vi.

in form and content, but it most notably carries the classicist's influence by translating shades of the ancients into its textual fabric.¹¹ In particular, Peacock's artful translation of a choral ode from Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* into the verse 'motto' of *Ahrimanes* 'may have influenced Shelley's habit of translating from the Greek', Notopoulos notes (*SC* III: 238 and Notopoulos, 39). Despite the pair's differences of opinion around the *utility* of poetry, culminating in Shelley's writing of 'A Defence of Poetry' as a riposte to Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry*, the 'transfused essence' of the ancients binds Shelley and Peacock through poetry. Peacock's Socratic posture as teacher and provocateur gives rise to some of Shelley's finest 'strains of unpremeditated art' ('To a Sky-Lark', *PS* III: 470, l. 5).

Shelley's readings in Peacock's company are evidenced in the 'Marlow List', Peacock's record of over 300 books that were in Shelley's possession before his departure for Italy in 1818 (an annotated digital edition of the 'Marlow List', prepared by Nora Crook, is forthcoming on *Romantic Circles*). Volumes of Lucretius, Plutarch, and Seneca appear alongside more modern expressions of ancient thought, from Bacon and Berkeley to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Walter Savage Landor. Through his readings, Shelley imbues his poetry with the quality of philosophy to the extent that the two become an entangled intermixture, to adapt the poet's phrasing from *Epipsychidion*. But it is Plato among the ancients who holds greatest sway over Shelley, from his early, extracurricular readings of the dialogues in bowdlerised form at Oxford, to his translations from the Greek, and Plato's fateful presence in the postscript of his last letter to Mary: 'I have found the translation of the *Symposium*' (*Letters* II: 444). Shelley shirks pure Platonism's unwavering idealism, instead remaining an idealist in a sceptical tradition. And yet, as Peacock writes, 'The Academy is essentially sceptical', and 'it is in negation that Plato shines most', uncannily echoing

¹¹ See *Poems* II: 24.

Coleridge's Miltonic assertion that Plato is 'dark with an excess of Brightness'.¹² Shelley mines the interstices of Plato's dialectics for poetic ore, and where Plato casts poets as liars and outcasts from his ideal republic, Shelley embraces his fellow poets, including Plato, as 'the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration' (*SPP* 535). Rather than finding fault, as Socrates does, with Ion's account of the poet as a vessel of divine inspiration, Shelley exalts the possessed poet as a fount of 'harmonious madness' ('To a Sky-Lark', *PS* III: 477, l. 103).

'On Love', written as a companion piece to Shelley's translation of the *Symposium* as *The Banquet* (composed with great speed over ten days in July 1818), ascends the Platonic ladder of love in the *Symposium* by imagining 'a frame whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own' (*SPP* 504). The prose poetry of 'On Love' embodies Eryximachus' account of music as 'the knowledge of that which relates to Love in harmony and rhythm'. In Shelley's translation, Eryximachus claims

In the very system of harmony and rhythm, it is easy to distinguish love. The double Love is not distinguishable in music itself; but it is required to apply it to the service of mankind by rhythm and harmony, which is called poetry, or the composition of melody (Notopoulos 427)

Philosophy – the love of wisdom – is interpenetrated with the love of poetry, or love *as* poetry. This doubleness is exemplified in Shelley's unfinished introduction to *The Banquet*. Beginning, 'Plato is eminently the greatest among the Greek philosophers', Shelley's prosaic

¹² Thomas Love Peacock, 'Müller and Donaldson's *The History of Greek Literature*', in *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones, 10 vols (London: 1931), X: 212. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, quoted in James Vigus, *Platonic Coleridge* (London: Legenda, 2009), 20.

description shifts into a poetic register in describing Plato's language as 'one irresistible stream of musical impressions', 'melted by the splendour and harmony of his periods' (Notopoulos 402). Publishing *The Banquet* in 1840, Mary Shelley writes that Shelley's version 'for the first time introduces the Athenian to the English reader in a style worthy of him' – a poetic and distinctively Shelleyan style.¹³ Poetry in this philosophical key, like Diotima's account of love in the *Symposium*, 'bind[s] together...the whole universe of things' (Notopoulos 442).

Through poetry, as Michael O'Neill affirms, Shelley 'find[s] a language that rises to the challenge of, and serves as an aesthetic equivalent for, Platonic vision'.¹⁴ While translating the *Symposium* draws Shelley into deeper communion with the poetic shade of Plato, the ancient philosopher's presence is also translated into earlier compositions.

Nor should we seek to know, so the devotion
Of love and gentle thoughts to be heard still there
Louder and louder from the utmost Ocean

Of universal life, attuning its commotion (*Poems* II: 169, 6.29.2592-2595)

The 'Ocean / Of universal life' in *Laon and Cythna* melds together two aspects of a single passage in the *Symposium*, harmonising 'universal beauty' with the 'wide ocean of intellectual beauty' (Notopoulos 449). These lines invoke Diotima's account of the true lover's devotion to suprasensual love and their turn toward 'universal beauty' in order to 'abundantly bring forth his conceptions in philosophy' (Notopoulos 449). Through his addition of 'intellectual', Shelley takes poetic license with Plato by transposing his own

¹³ Mary Shelley, Preface to *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, I: viii.

¹⁴ Michael O'Neill, *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence: New Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 31.

‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ upon the ancient philosopher’s ‘wide ocean of beauty’, suggesting, as O’Neill writes, that ‘Shelley found in Plato a subject-rhyme with his own intuitions’.¹⁵ Similarly, gazing upon Cythna, ‘whose motions gifted / The air they breathed with love’, Laon erupts into a free translation of a Platonic epigram:

‘Fair star of life and love,’ I cried, ‘my soul’s delight,

Why lookest thou on the crystalline skies?

O, that my spirit were yon Heaven of night,

Which gazes on thee with its thousand eyes!’ (*Poems* II: 219, 10.26.3784-3791)

Shelley’s jotting of ‘Apuleius’ below this stanza in the manuscript draft references one of his Neoplatonic routes to the epigram.¹⁶ But heavily saturated in Peacock’s influence as the poem is, Shelley’s noting of ‘Apuleius’ may also gesture toward *Rhododaphne*. Shelley’s creative translation of the Platonic epigram into the Spenserian stanzas of *Laon and Cythna* resonates with Peacock’s proclivity for freely translating the ancients into his own poetic productions – notably, his epigrammatic use of Sophocles in *Ahrimanes* – and the formative influence of translating ‘the transfused essence’ of the ancients into verse.

Shelley’s major works are enlivened by his readings and translations of ancient philosophy. The shade of ‘great Plato’ haunts Shelley’s final fragment, ‘The Triumph of Life’, while Lucretian simulacra are floated in the image of ‘These shadows, numerous as the dead leaves blown / In Autumn evening from a poplar tree—’ (*CP* VII: 16, l. 254; 29, ll. 528-29). Ancient philosophy, in an intermixture of forms and figures, becomes inextricably interwoven in Shelley’s poetry. Ultimately, in transmuting Plato’s *Ion* into ‘A Defence of Poetry’, poets form ‘sacred links of that chain’, Shelley writes, ‘which descending through the minds of many men is attached to those great minds whence as from a magnet the

¹⁵ O’Neill, *Shelleyan Reimaginings*, 31.

¹⁶ See *Poems* II: 219.

invisible effluence is sent forth which at once connects, animates and sustains the life of all'
(*MW* 687).