

Transitional Justice in *Prometheus Unbound*

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“Transitional Justice” is the name given to forms of justice particular to societies transitioning from autocratic or totalitarian regimes into democratic ones. The problem of transitional justice is how to manage that movement, how to honor the past but also move away from it so that a society does not slip into an endless cycle of revenge for past harms. Its chief formal innovation is to replace the trial, with its mandate of meting out punishment, with the truth commission, whose goals include the restoration of relationships and the healing of a society. Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, and El Salvador have employed truth commissions within recent memory. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission is the most famous of them all.

Percy Shelley’s lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) is a play about transitional justice—long before the term was invented. Think, for instance, of the opening moments of this drama, which encompass: a frozen world in which Prometheus’s curse—“Fiend, I defy thee! With a calm, fixed mind, / All that thou canst inflict I bid thee do” (I.262-3)—has so worked itself into the structure of things that no one can remember when anything was different; the recalling of the curse, when Prometheus hears his own words repeated back to him and is forced to acknowledge them; his strange phrase “it doth repent me” (I.303) when confronted with the effects of his words (“words are quick and vain;” says Prometheus. “Grief for a while is blind, and so was mine. / I wish no living thing to suffer pain” (1. 303-5); and finally Earth’s reaction to Prometheus’s repentance, which she reads as a defeat.¹

In this paper I explore some of the consequences of reading Shelley’s drama in relation to transitional justice. The French Revolution, whose possibilities and failures are Shelley’s constant theme, offers the most historically relevant example of a transitional justice project gone awry. I argue that *Prometheus Unbound* is an extended meditation on *love* as the missing ingredient of the French Revolution. Such love has little to do either with the couple form or with so-called free love; rather, love’s particular kind of universalism makes it possible to re-think the Revolution by means of the affects that attend transition.

I. Reconciliation

At the start of *Prometheus Unbound*, forgiveness and justice seem to be locked in a zero-sum battle. One way to solve this dilemma is to suggest that the tyrant Jupiter is really a part of Prometheus—his self-projection, perhaps, so that the two represent not so much opposed principles (tyranny and freedom) but two sides of the same coin. When Prometheus originally leveled his curse, then, he was in effect giving voice to the Jupiter in himself. This interpretation has the virtue of making the drama feel very Greek, and it

¹ All references will be to *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat, second edition (New York: Norton, 2002). Hereafter SPP.

is a familiar and satisfying critical position.² But it is hard to extend this reading much beyond the first act, for soon Asia's forgiving love will release Prometheus from the consequences of *his* own actions. Prometheus's reward for indirectly causing thousands of years of suffering is to retire to a cave with Asia and cultivate the arts, hardly a fair reward.

Shelley himself points to the tension between justice and forgiveness when he writes in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* that if he had simply framed his story according to what tradition tells us about Aeschylus's play, "I should have done no more than have attempted to restore the lost drama of Aeschylus....In truth," he goes on, "I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind" (SPP 206). In post-Napoleonic Europe, the word *restoration* can have only one meaning: all over Europe, thrones are being re-established, and kings are re-ascending them. If reconciliation means a restoration of the way things were, then it means submission to a political theology and the definitive end of the democratic dream of the French Revolution.³ To forgive, to repent, to reconcile—it looks like the cost of such gestures is that perpetrators get off too lightly.

But as we know from the play's opening lines, Prometheus's rigid, unbending opposition *also* plays into Jupiter's hands. So the choices seem to be a "feeble" reconciliation that soft-pedals hard questions of justice, or a principled oppositionalism that refuses any forward movement.

Is there a third possibility? Whatever it may be, it cannot be the restoration of a fantasized prior wholeness. But nor can it be the wholesale rejection of whatever vision of plenitude that fantasy might have offered. Indeed, it may be closer to a "missed opportunity," the phrase William Galperin uses to describe the characteristically dense everydayness of Jane Austen's fictions. The missed opportunity is a historical possibility "sufficiently passed or irretrievable to have (never) happened," he writes.⁴ The possibility of non-feeble reconciliation, that is to say, remains perceivable only as an "index," in Galperin's words again, "of what was also possible" in a past now too sedimented to serve as anything other than a staging-ground for either restoration or opposition. As such, it speaks in the voice not merely of the conditional ("if only we had done things differently") but of the paradoxical ("if we had done things differently, the past wouldn't now be available to us as an index of what was possible").

II. Narratives of Justice and Forgiveness

In her history of transitional justice, the legal scholar Ruti Teitel distinguishes between what she calls Phase One transitional justice, of which the Nuremberg trials are the archetypal example, and Phase Two, exemplified by the South African TRC. At Nuremberg,

² See especially, and famously, Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 257-261. See also Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (New York: St. Martin's, 1981) 133-142; Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 73-87; and Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 156.

³ It is a nice historical irony that there is now some controversy among scholars about whether Aeschylus actually wrote *Prometheus Bound*—a possibility that makes Shelley's refusal of a restoration project even more pointed, since it might have been a restoration of something that never was.

⁴ William H. Galperin, "'Describing What Never Happened': Jane Austen and the History of Missed Opportunities," *ELH* 73.2 (2006), 355-382; 362.

justice trumped all other concerns, but in the intervening years various actors have moved to complicate the model, supplementing justice with such values as peace, reparation, and the rebuilding of personal identity. Most famously, the TRC speaks of “another kind of justice—a restorative justice which is concerned not so much with punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships—with healing, harmony, and reconciliation.”⁵

As might be expected, there is an active debate about whether Phase Two represents an advance or a retreat from Phase One. Do concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation expand the boundaries of the political? Or is the focus on reconciliation in fact apolitical, in the sense that it addresses feelings rather than structures?

In his short book *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Jacques Derrida offers a different way to think about forgiveness.⁶ Derrida suggests that the important tension is not between forgiving and not forgiving, but between conditional forgiveness (*If you apologize or repent, I will forgive you*), and limitless, infinite, unconditional forgiveness. True forgiveness, Derrida says over and over, is forgiving the *unforgivable*:

despite all the confusions which reduce forgiveness to amnesty, to acquittal or prescription, to the work of mourning or some political therapy of reconciliation ... it must never be forgotten ... that all of that *refers to a certain idea of pure and unconditional forgiveness*, without which this discourse would not have the least meaning. [P]ure and unconditional forgiveness, in order to have its own meaning, must have no ‘meaning,’ no finality, even no intelligibility. It is a madness of the impossible.⁷

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says something almost equally nonsensical, when Peter asks him how many times he should forgive: “As many as seven times?” asks Peter, clearly thinking that he is going the extra mile. But “Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven’” (Matthew 18.22). Seven is the number of completion or fulfillment in the Bible, so the ideal here is one of infinite forgiveness, orders of magnitude beyond completion. If you think that forgiveness is *ever* complete, Jesus seems to be saying, then you’re on the wrong track.

Unsurprisingly, both Jesus and Derrida bring us into Shelley’s vicinity—and more particularly into the vicinity of *Prometheus Unbound*, which is obsessed with the problem and power of words, the means by which they can be unsaid without being unsaid, and the misunderstanding and incomprehension that typically greets such attempts. As Shelley puts the thought in his short fragment “On Life,” “We are on that verge where words abandon us” (*SPP*, 508). Indeed, Derrida’s invocation of unconditional forgiveness as a particular kind of madness resonates strongly with certain moments in *Prometheus Unbound*, in particular with a formulation from Demogorgon that arises near the very end:

⁵ TRC Final Report; Vol. 1, Chapter 1, paragraph 36 (1998), <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/> [accessed March 25, 2015]. See also Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

⁶ [Editor’s Note: This work, and the same author’s *Of Hospitality* were also cited during the 2014 Workshop.]

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 45, emphasis added.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
 To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;
 To defy power which seems Omnipotent;
 To love, and bear, to hope, till Hope creates
 From its own wreck, the thing it contemplates (IV. 570-4)

Shelley's infinitives, like Derrida's own famous invocation of the "to come" (*l'avenir*," as the unexpected arrival of the other (distinct from "*le futur*," which is the predictable or inevitable or foreseeable future), invoke an indefinite future-beyond-the-future. To bear, to endure, to hope, to love: we might recall the allegorical figure of Hope, trampled and arisen, in Shelley's poem *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819). In that poem, it is pure figure—"a mist, a light, an image," and then finally a "Shape" (SPP 103, 110)—that accomplishes the miracle of political change. Such shapes are what Prometheus calls, just before he retires to his cave and disappears from the drama, "arts, though unimagined, yet to be" (III.iii.56).

Derrida thus helps us to grasp the importance of language to our thinking about justice—indeed, the importance of the incantatory power of words and the way they can create a better future (*l'avenir*) than any future (*le futur*) imaginable at the moment. And to be sure, it is encouraging to think that unimagined arts of forgiveness are coming yet. But leaning so heavily on a future but dimly figured forth also risks undervaluing the more prosaic kinds of forgiveness—conditional, grudging, and difficult as they are—that make up lives lived amidst more secular, everyday, temporalities. "Restoration" may be too backward-looking, that is, but *l'avenir* is pitched too insistently forward. One advantage of the "missed opportunity," as Galperin describes it, is that it is lodged in the past and yet insists that it is that past itself (Hope's "wreck," in Shelley's more dramatic phrasing) rather than the future-to-come, that constitutes a horizon of possibility to be "contemplated." Of course, whether this is more than a literary conceit, whether, that is, it counts as a real political possibility, and whether it makes sense to speak of a future of the missed opportunity—this is difficult to say.

III. Power

Hannah Arendt's account of forgiveness may be useful here. The human capacity to act, to jointly compose a world, is Arendt's great topic in *The Human Condition*. Given the complicated web of human relations that she calls "plurality," the repercussions of any single action are unpredictable and potentially infinite. Because we act *in time*, moreover, the consequences are by definition irreversible, for we cannot wind time back up again. Arendt calls forgiveness a "redemption from the predicament of irreversibility":

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover ... Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant

willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.⁸

The power to forgive is a necessary condition of political life. Like contemporary critics of transitional justice, Arendt acknowledges that forgiveness is “backward-looking”—but for her that is not a criticism but instead the condition of any action directed toward the future. And like Derrida, Arendt thinks that forgiveness is linked to the power of language—but unlike the “madness” of infinite forgiveness, Arendt’s forgiveness takes place in the human world, with intimate reference to a past otherwise irredeemable. For her, political speech is the highest form of human action, and forgiveness is almost unique among speech acts in that it can undo what would otherwise be the inevitable temporal consequence of our actions (what she calls fatality). Forgiveness does not escape time, but it does suspend time’s otherwise determining effects. It is thus a shining example of the non-sovereign form of freedom essential to the human condition (HC 234). It makes politics possible.

Arendt means something very specific when she refers to the *power* of forgiveness. “The only indispensable factor in the generation of power is the living together of people,” she writes (HC 201). Power is a potential that arises whenever people are together, springing up between and among them in the “space of appearance.”⁹ It is thus by its very nature impermanent: it gathers and disperses as human beings gather and disperse. And power is also therefore fundamentally distinct from *strength*, which has to do with our physical or bodily existence, including strength of mind and of character, and from *force*, which has to do with the application of violence or the threat of violence within the political arena.

Demogorgon, the most enigmatic of the many enigmatic figures in *Prometheus Unbound*, is Shelley’s effort to theorize what Arendt (and Shelley, as it happens) calls power. The name derives either from *daimon* (spirit) or from *demos* (people)—in either case a good illustration of the almost magical way that power arises from the condition of what Arendt calls plurality, which depends on social bonds among people.

IV. The Politics of Love

The remainder of this paper, substantially shortened here, used Shelley to help outline a particular kind of care and caretaking that focuses on those social bonds: love. My historical example is taken from the ambivalent example of the *curés*, local priests who had made up a substantial anti-aristocratic, proto-revolutionary body intriguingly positioned within a secularizing state. They were part of the Catholic Church, but their sympathies lay more with ordinary people than with privileged bishops. In Shelley’s drama, the gradual, transitional role of these parish priests is taken by Asia, associated with love throughout the play and whose movements in Act II catalyze Prometheus’s release. Asia is the character in this drama who enacts love, and is therefore changed by it. In Act II, she begins as Prometheus’s mirror or ego-ideal much as Jupiter had been. By the end of

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 1998) 237. Hereafter HC.

⁹ It is not accidental that this sounds like Hardt and Negri and like Occupy, *avant la lettre*; Arendt seems newly relevant to our own political moment.

the Act, however, Asia has undergone a remarkable transfiguration. Her sister Panthea is indeed almost blinded by it: “How thou art changed! I dare not look on thee; / I feel, but see thee not,” she says (II.v.16-17). Felt rather than seen, a “working in the elements,” as Panthea calls it, “love, like the atmosphere,” ranges everywhere:

nor is it I alone,
 Thy sister, thy companion, thine own chosen one,
 But the whole world which seeks thy sympathy.
 Hearest thou not sounds i’ the air which speak the love
 Of all articulate beings? Feelest thou not
 The inanimate winds enamoured of thee? (II.v.32-37)

What so startles Panthea is that the love now pouring forth from Asia is not exclusive but multi-directional, a mutual interchange with the world that is dazzling, elemental, and ambient. Asia, agreeing, will soon declare that “common as light is love” (II.v.40).

The thought I am pursuing here is that transitional justice requires love of just this kind, “common as light.” Shelley’s historical context for thinking about this issue is of course the French Revolution, which is a case study in how *not* to do transitional justice. But why did it fail? Earl Wasserman writes, correctly in my view, that for Shelley “The Hour of Love must succeed the Hour of Revolution with ... unrelenting haste.”¹⁰ The vacancy created by political revolution, if not filled with love, will be filled with something else. This, says Wasserman, is why Asia ascends so rapidly after Demogorgon. Wasserman’s point should be strengthened, though: it is not simply that love must rise as soon as tyranny is overthrown—it is that the overthrow itself must be grounded in love: that is why nothing changes in the world of *Prometheus Unbound* until Asia begins her movement toward a universal love.

At the end of Act II, when Asia has completed her transformation, she appears to travel backward through time: “Beyond the glassy gulphs we flee / Of shadow-peopled Infancy, / Through Death and Birth, to a diviner day,” she declares (II.v.101-103). Critics have seen a Platonic reference here, which is surely right: perhaps this is a vision of the soul as it exists before birth, or of the transformed cave into which Asia will eventually disappear with Prometheus. Indeed, readers who view Shelley as primarily a Platonist or an “idealist” are likely to see all of *Prometheus Unbound* as a kind of psycho-drama that happens more or less simultaneously. By contrast, and as my focus on forgiveness and on the bonds of love suggests, I read the drama as existing within time (the Spirit of the Hour has already been set on its way). For it is only time, with its relentless forward movement, that makes forgiveness, with its curious retrograde motion, necessary and even possible. What does Asia see on her own retrospective visit to a diviner day? It is, she reports, “Peopled by shapes too bright to see” (II.v.108). Here Shelley again verges on a language of the infinite, on the aspiration for pure figure. But shapes, as Asia’s phrase implies, may become people, may be brought into a web of relations and choices—in short, into history—even in the aftermath of the failed revolutions of the recent past. Better, then, to see Asia’s movement as another example of transition, the recovery of an opportunity that will mean, for her, the multiplying of contact, the undergoing of love.

¹⁰ Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, 325.