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Recovering the Beauty of Medusa

WHEN P. B. SHELLEY VISITED THE UFFIZI GALLERY IN FLORENCE IN THE fall of 1819, he was drawn there by his interest in Greek sculpture, making his encounter with an anonymous sixteenth-century oil painting of the decapitated "Head of Medusa," then still erroneously attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, in all probability a mere accident.¹ But an almost irresistible aesthetic logic informs the imaginary scenario in which the exiled British Romantic poet makes his way, pen and notebook in hand, through the Florentine collection of "Grecian marbles," only to find himself face to face with Medusa, whose petrifying glance makes her the consummate sculptor of Greek myth, a reverse Pygmalion of sorts, her primordial cave a sculpture hall of melancholy beauty. Whether Shelley's discovery of the painting was accidental or not, his poetic response makes clear that he thoroughly understands the petrifying mythological and representational traps surrounding the Gorgon; for if, as Grant F. Scott has pointed out, there is an undeniable parallelism between Perseus, the slayer of the Medusa, and the ekphrastic poet entering the museum, Percy Shelley clearly attempts to avoid repeating the former's violent approach and cannily resists all identification with his near-namesake.²

1. For an illuminating account of Shelley's pursuit of Greek sculpture in Italy and his attempt to "locate the sceptical, 'disfiguring' iconoclasm of his writing from *Queen Mab* through his 1816 lyrics in the interstices among the various arts and their differing representational capacities both for critiquing and for rebuilding cultural forms or ideological structures," as well as his "effort to communicate an ontological form or spirit of beauty fluidly across history," see Nancy Moore Goslee, "Shelleyan Inspiration and the Sister Arts," *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, eds. Timothy Webb and Alan Weinberg (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 160, 169.

2. See Scott, "Shelley, Medusa, and the Perils of Ekphrasis," in *The Romantic Imagination. Literature and Art in England and Germany*, eds. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 319–20. Taking his cue from Hélène Cixous in her influential essay *Le Rire de la Méduse*, Hal Foster, in his Lacanian reading of the Medusa myth, goes a step further than Scott and points out that Antonio Canova's sculpture of Perseus, Medusa's decapitated head in hand, presides over the grand staircase of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, suggesting, as Foster surmises, that the slaying of Medusa, the "phallogocentric sublation" necessary to enter the symbolic order, might be "the introit of any art museum."

Confronting the Flenish Gorgoneion (fig. 1), Shelley creates a fragmentary ekphrastic shield of words that is not meant to protect against the purported deadliness of Medusa's glance, but rather aims to undo the representational and ideological structures of patriarchal power that make Medusa a monster in the first place, and of which the sword-wielding Perseus is no more than an instrument. By refusing to perpetuate the violence of the possessive gaze, Shelley's "On the Medusa" becomes an ekphrastic poem that subverts the dominant aesthetic rules of a genre playing on male desires and fears and affirming power and control over the female art object. Through the undermining of such modes of seeing in his ekphrastic verse, Shelley ultimately seeks to open up the possibility of *new* modes of perception, unbound by the inherently ideological structures of representation that usually inform the way we see the world. Shelley's verse enables us to realize that acts of representation, be they verbal or visual, are always instances of "inextricable error," acts of power and control that *produce* the very objects they purport to represent. The "strain" of his fragmentary poem also asks us to imagine a poetic mode of perception that might extricate us from such forms of petrification and, in so doing, recover the Medusa's original beauty, which is also the true power of "poetry" in the Shelleyan, non-generic sense of the word. "Beauty" here must lose all gendered connotations, and "poetry" be revealed as non-representational vision, if the fundamental bond is to be broken, by which the original object of a non-possessive gaze must remain forever inaccessible and art be constrained to signal its irrevocable impotence to bring it into view.³ In order to appreciate fully how Shelley aims to unbind both beauty and poetry and to enable a different relation to the (not just female) Other in his fragmentary verse, it will first be necessary to retrace the generic structures that threaten to entrap the ekphrastic writer.⁴

See Foster, "Medusa and the Real," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 44 (Autumn 2003): 186; and Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Galilée, 2010).

3. In her discussion of the relationship between passion and form in Keats, Anne-Lise François examines this bond with great sensitivity and precision, and reminds us that in the lyrical scenes of bondage that allegorize the poetic struggle of bringing a pre-linguistic, pre-rational affective energy into verbal form, "the masculine/feminine binary is itself the effect of the foreclosure by which the appearance of 'poetry' or 'art' coincides with and is inseparable from its containment and feminization: it only ever appears bound, shorn of destructive power, neutralized of its full potential." See Anne-Lise François, "The feel of not to feel it, or the Pleasures of Enduring Form," *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. Charles Mahoney (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 446.

4. Throughout this essay, just like the critics with whose work on *ekphrasis* I am in conversation, I will employ the term in the specialized sense that has become common in literary studies, as referring to the verbal representation of—real or imagined—works of visual art: "the verbal representation of graphic representation" in James A. W. Heffernan's definition.

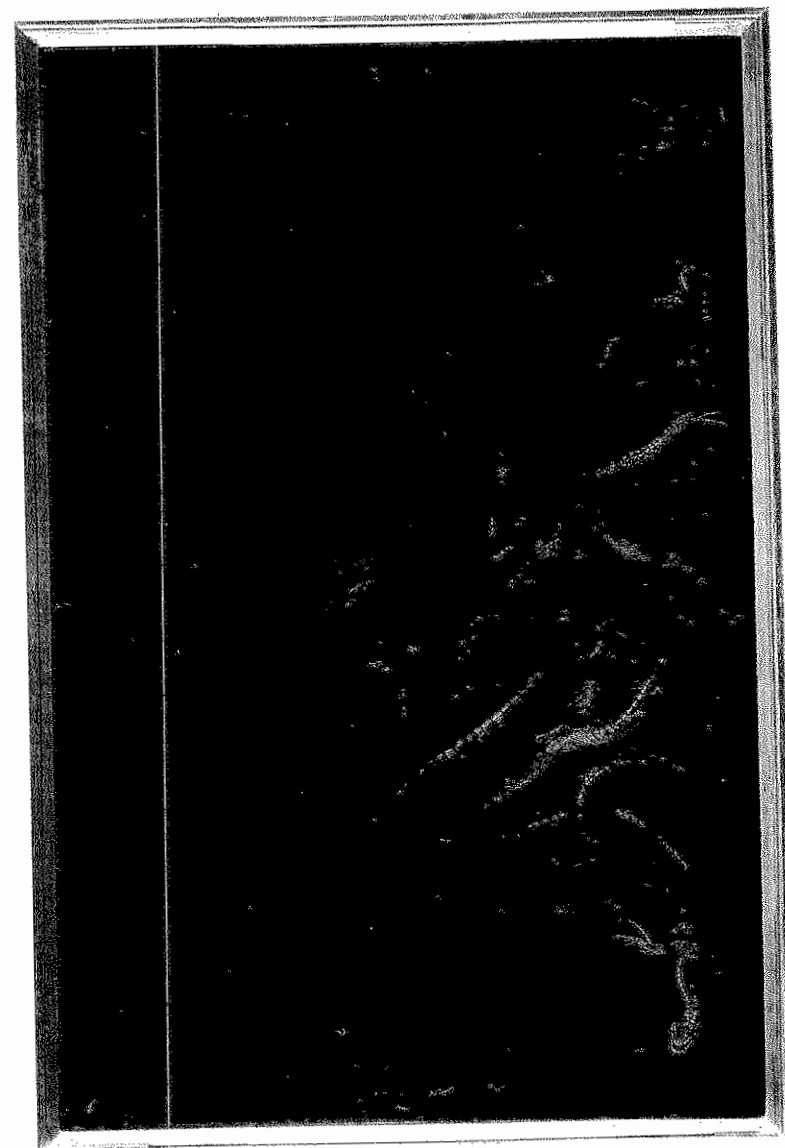


Figure 1: Anonymous, 17th century, *Medusa*. Flemish School (Style of Caravaggio). Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. Photo Credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

1. Ekphrasis

W. J. T. Mitchell has argued that female otherness is overdetermined in ekphrastic texts, as the genre is mired in gendered assumptions about the relationship between the verbal and the visual—the male logos controlling and taking possession of the female image—which always gives its inter-medial texts “overtones . . . of pornographic writing and masturbatory fantasy,” and turns the verbal obsession with the ekphrastic image into “a kind of mental rape that may induce a sense of guilt, paralysis, or ambivalence in the observer.”⁵ Medusa, the once beautiful maiden, who, according to myth, was raped by Poseidon and transformed into a snake-headed monster by Athena as punishment for her “association” with the earth-shaker, can hence be seen as an emblem of the repressed sexual violence hidden by the representational illusions of *ekphrasis*. Consequently, Mitchell, in his reading of Shelley’s poem, calls it nothing less than the “primal scene” of *ekphrasis* (PT 172). Questions of gender are indeed never far from questions of *ekphrasis*, with painting and the visual arts usually coded “female,” and poetry and the verbal arts coded “male,” and Mitchell surmises that the urge to turn the differences in sign-types, forms, and materials between the two arts into gendered metaphysical oppositions stems from a tendency to construe the relationship between self and other as one between a speaking and seeing subject and a seen and silent other: “It isn’t just that the text/image difference ‘resembles’ the relation of self and other, but that the most basic pictures of epistemological and ethical encounters (knowledge of objects/acknowledgment of subjects) involve optical/discursive figures of knowledge and power that are embedded in essentialized categories like ‘the visual’ and ‘the verbal’” (PT 162). For that reason, Mitchell explains, the semiotic differences involved in ekphrastic encounters can in-

See Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 299. As Janice H. Koelb has demonstrated in *Poetics of Description*, however, this is indeed a restricted sense of the word’s original Greek meaning, mistakenly presumed to cover its full extension by twentieth-century criticism in the wake of Leo Spitzer’s influential 1955 essay, “The ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn,’ or Content vs. Metagrammar.” When it first comes to be used as a rhetorical term in the first century, C.E., Koelb’s study shows, *ekphrasis* denotes the vivid description of a broad range of objects, of which works of visual art are only one category and not one that receives particular attention. Translated into Latin as *descriptio*, *ekphrasis* figures centrally in European literature as *description*, a term whose crucial poetic function Koelb’s study elucidates (with special emphasis on the Romantic *ekphrasis* of place) and rightfully aims to rehabilitate for critical discussion more broadly. Koelb’s concerns are important, and, while a change in terminology would have been unwieldy for the purposes of this essay, *ekphrasis* should be understood in the following to denote a sub-category of the literary mode of description, the more accurate translation of the term. See Janice H. Koelb, *Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature* (Gordonville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

5. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 168–69; hereafter cited in the text as PT.

form a broad array of social relations construing children, women, and colonial others, for example, as so many silent objects that need to be spoken for in a discourse of power.

There could hardly be a better illustration of the gendered dynamics at stake in the ekphrastic mode than Albrecht Dürer’s woodcut “Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman,” or “Draftsman Drawing a Nude,” an illustration in his *Instruction in Measurement with Compasses and Straightedge in Lines, Planes and Whole Bodies* [*Unterweisung der Messung mit dem Zirkel und Richtscheit in Linien, Ebenen und ganzen Körpern*] of 1525 (fig. 2). As Svetlana Alpers has pointed out, Dürer’s woodcut, with its rendering of geometrical perspectival practice, is a representation of Leon Battista Alberti’s instructions for picture-making in the latter’s famous treatise *On Painting* of 1435, and forms part of Dürer’s project of importing Italian perspectival technique to the European North. It was Alberti who instructed the artist to employ a rectangle modeled on the window frame and who recommended the use of a reticulated net covering the viewing pane, allowing the painter easily to transfer a two-dimensional “slice” of a three-dimensional whole onto the surface in front of him by means of geometrical segmentation.

Dürer’s woodcut thus illustrates the visual regime that has, for better or worse, come to be seen as almost synonymous with European pre twentieth-century art as such, that of a (male) spectator looking out on the world as if through a window, constructing and taking possession of it from a centralized, privileged subject position, in and to which all lines of sight continually converge.⁶ The woodcut makes the gendered character of this perspective and the inherent power of representation quite clear, and—through the identification with the artist’s perspective it invites—it encourages, as Barbara Freedman puts it, “the equation of right spectatorship with a controlling patriarchal perspective.”⁷ By revealing the implements and frames of representation, the print makes unmistakably obvious that we are conditioned to see the female body as constructed by the male gaze. As Brian Wolf has remarked, the grid in the center of the image, separating male artist from female model, the observer from the observed, is not only central to Dürer’s claim to represent the world as we truly see it, but also holds the key to the woodcut’s “ideological disposition.”⁸ The slightly angled grid, as Wolf points out, by opening out from right to left, in fact

6. Alpers, “Art History and its Exclusions: The Example of Dutch Art,” in *Feminism and Art History*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 182–99.

7. Freedman, *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 2.

8. Wolf, “Confessions of a Closet Ekphrastic: Literature, Painting and Other Unnatural Relations,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3, no. 2 (1990): 197.

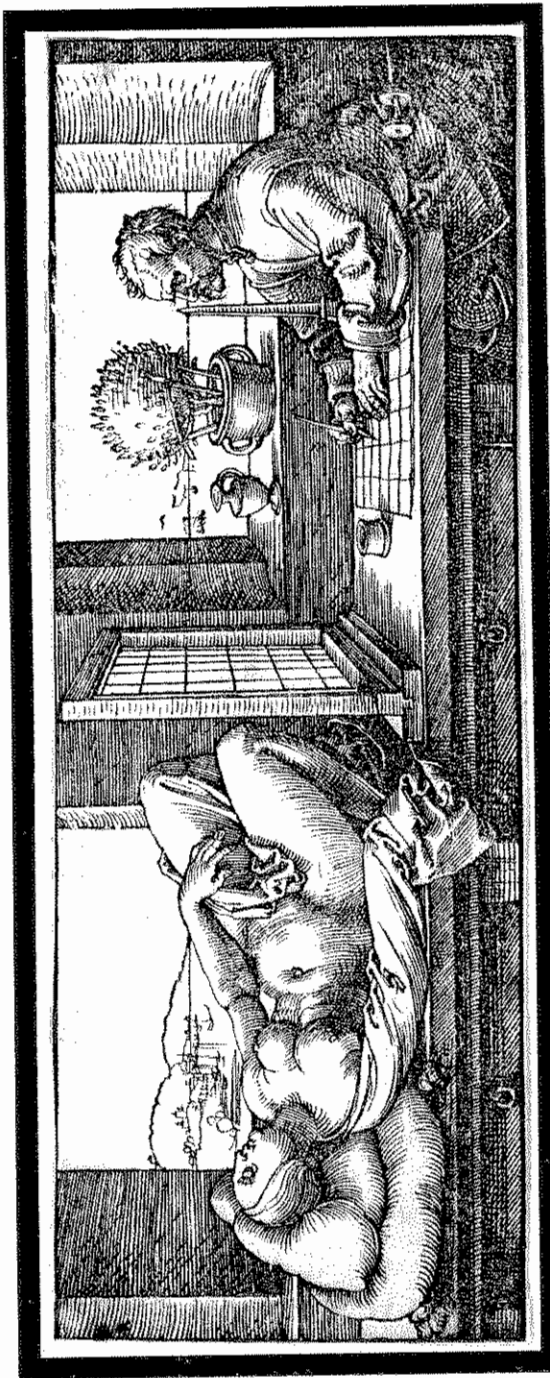


Figure 2: Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). *Draftsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman*, c. 1600, Woodcut, sheet: $3\frac{1}{16} \times 8\frac{7}{16}$ in. (7.7 × 21.4 cm). Gift of Henry Walters, 1917 (17.37.314). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

places us on the draftsman's side, and makes us complicit with the artist's perspective, which has become ours. In a truly lateral view we could not see the grid, nor would we see the model in a position that effectively denies her depiction by the artist. Dürer in fact contrives to give us two oscillating perspectives simultaneously, one lateral (that of the spectator), one frontal (that of the artist), and in an only seemingly objective, "realist" perspective, we are given a view of the model as she is seen by the artist, even as we are allowed to witness the *mise-en-scène* of that purportedly neutral act of seeing as if from the "outside." We hence cannot see the woman other than already framed and shaped by the gaze of the male artist who controls how she will appear. Her eyes, significantly, are closed, and whatever dangers her gaze may entail have been brought under control, at least for the moment.

Tellingly, this gendered dynamic also extends to the nature/culture dichotomy rendered in the print: The rounded shapes of the hills, visible through the rectangular framing device of the windows in their self-reflexive repetition of the artist's representational grid, echo the shapes and position of the female model, while the decorative tree on the "male" side is doubly bounded, both by its pot and the frame of sticks that limits the direction of its growth.⁹ In another ideological conflation, women and nature become one and the same object of the male gaze, and Svetlana Alpers's claim that "[t]he attitude toward women in this art—toward the central image of the female nude in particular—is part and parcel of a commanding attitude taken toward the possession of the world,"¹⁰ distills the quintessence of the woodcut's ideological purchase. Barbara Freedman suggests that this ideological structure can be reversed and subverted if one inhabits the female rather than the male perspective, from which the woman can appear relaxed and self-contained, her self-pleasuring gesture suggesting autonomy rather than male fantasy, while the male role now seems constrained, fixed, and painfully rigid, if not downright ridiculous.¹¹ The artist's and spectator's dominance may indeed be unsettled in this way, but such a subversive strategy nevertheless leaves the underlying ideological structures in place. For both positions remain cultural constructs that depend on each other and the distinctions that separate them; choosing the female perspective inevitably also affirms the male and strengthens the dynamic that locks both of them in place. Both perspectives depend on the

9. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's comparison of Catherine Earnshaw's plight in her marriage to Edgar Linton to the fate of an oak tree planted in a flower pot readily comes to mind, and can restore—through the threat for the breakable container of culture it entails—the violence Dürer's print must inevitably repress.

10. Alpers, "Art History and its Exclusions," 187.

11. Freedman, *Staging the Gaze*, 2.

representation created by the male artist, and neither provides space for a glimpse of Medusa before her gaze turns both deadly and monstrous.

Dürer's woodcut in fact can serve as a two-fold illustration of the relationship between text and image underlying ekphrastic writing, because it not only visualizes the power dynamics between gazing subjects and silent objects with which Mitchell is concerned, but also, and even more importantly, because it undermines the very distinction on which they rest, for Dürer's image is clearly a powerful act of rhetoric, a network of visual speech acts in no need of words. Ekphrastic texts, as Brian Wolf has remarked, usually perform the same ideological operation the print reveals to our voyeuristic gaze, when they drain the art object of its inherent rhetorical powers, rendering it mute in order to benevolently give it voice in the medium of language, naturalizing the culturally constructed claim that all rhetoricity is of necessity linguistic.¹² In its "ideological disposition" then, it is Dürer's woodcut, rather than Shelley's poem, that presents the "primal scene" of *ekphrasis*, as it exposes us to an objectifying gaze at work, while asking us to identify that very gaze as ours. Both texts, one visual, one verbal, stage the insidious ways in which processes of representation are caught up in ideological positioning. Shelley's poem, however, ultimately moves beyond the framework of Dürer's print, and—not content merely to show how discourses of power in fact do their work—seeks to attune its readers to other melodies and harmonies that would make different forms of vision possible. Such attunement, however, requires the undoing of modes of thought and hence of seeing and hearing so fundamental to the Western tradition that we find them already encoded in the prehistorical figurations of Greek myth.

2. Medusa

If *ekphrasis* is at heart "about" questions of representation, the same is true for the Medusa myth, which is fundamentally concerned, as has often been remarked, with matters of seeing and the control and manipulation of gazes. The specific elements of the myth are worth recounting here in some detail, for they allow us to understand the deep connection between representation and violence from which Shelley's verse aims to liberate the reader. To begin with, Perseus' encounter with Medusa is framed (in both Apollodorus' and Ovid's versions of the myth) by his encounter with the *graiæ*, the three weird sisters, who, in a curiously mirrored doubling, guard the three sleeping gorgons. Perseus overcomes them by intercepting the one eye that the three sisters share. In Apollodorus' version, the need to recover the eye and their single tooth forces the *graiæ* to reveal the hiding

12. Wolf, "Confessions," 185.

place of the nymphs who will give Perseus the magical implements he needs to confront Medusa: the winged sandals, the Hades helmet that makes him invisible, and the *kibisis*, the pouch in which he can safely transport the medusa's head.¹³ In addition of course, Perseus is protected by the shield he receives from Athena, the crucial tool that enables him to deflect, manipulate, and mediate the object of his gaze and allows him safely to decapitate the sleeping Medusa while Athena guides his hand. Perseus, as Grant F. Scott points out, hence frames his approach to the gorgon in much the same way the ekphrastic poet frames his encounter with the beautiful art object, in a process of mediation analogous to the one that allows the latter to turn a living and potentially threatening female other, who might "look back" and trap his gaze, into a mute object of male representation. Only by a representational "sleight of hand," which allows him to see obliquely without being seen, can Perseus decapitate Medusa and evade the mortal danger of petrification.¹⁴

Medusa's mythological fate, too, is inseparable from her transformation into an object of male desire and fear, and, in what amounts to the same thing, an object of female rivalry. Raped and violated by Poseidon, the once beautiful Medusa is transformed into a snake-headed monster by Athena, who punishes the victim for having become an object of male desire. A flimsy shred of rationalization is offered in some versions of the myth, which let the rape take place in Athena's temple, a justification that, if anything, enhances the injustice of Medusa's fate. Athena will ultimately mount Medusa's apotropaic head on her shield after Perseus has fulfilled his task, rendering Medusa a triple, if not quadruple, victim of patriarchal violence, a fact that must have made her, as Jerome McGann surmised in a 1972 article, an irresistible figure for Shelley.¹⁵ As such a victim, Medusa is ultimately indistinguishable from Athena herself, who enacts patriarchal power in a female guise, using Perseus as her male instrument of punishment. In *The Mirror of Medusa*, his 1983 study of the Medusa myth and the demonization of "narcissism" in Western culture, Tobin Siebers argues persuasively that both Medusa and Athena, as well as Medusa and Perseus, are in fact doubles. Perseus indeed becomes Medusa when he uses her head as a weapon to kill his enemies, appropriating her deadly gaze and making

13. In Ovid's condensed and shortened version of the myth, the nymphs and their gifts are no longer mentioned, and the eye alone is enough as a talisman to face Medusa. For the extant classical versions of the myth, see Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, *The Medusa Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Garber's and Vickers's reader collects a helpful array of texts on Medusa from classical antiquity to the twentieth century.

14. Scott, "Perils of Ekphrasis," 319–21.

15. Jerome J. McGann, "The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconology," *SiR* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1972): 3–25.

the threat of Medusa and the apotropaic function of the gorgoneion indistinguishable. The birth of Athena, that most male of female Greek goddesses, from the head of Zeus, meanwhile, mirrors Medusa's death, in which both the winged horse Pegasus and the giant Chrysaor—father of Geryon, whose cattle Hercules must steal in one of his civilizing tasks—spring forth from her neck. What could be more emblematic of the sun-dering appropriations of discourses of power than the fact that Pegasus, both the winged horse of poetic inspiration and the mythological bearer of Zeus' lightning, the Olympian's most fearful weapon, is the offspring of Medusa? Athena, as Siebers puts it, must overcome Medusa in order to establish her own identity, and she remains marked by the monstrous force her civilizing power is meant to keep at bay.¹⁶ The head of Medusa, whose name means "queen" in Greek, becomes the *aegis* of Athena, displayed on the shield of the protectress of the city, and the doubling of Medusa and Athena is cointantaneous with the origins of patriarchal Western European culture.¹⁷ In this sense, the Medusa myth recounts the foundational violence at the origin of history itself and reveals the ongoing processes of "civilization" to be dependent on the creation of Others whose kinship is rendered invisible in the act of representation, and on narratives of oppositions and externalized horror that serve to legitimize continued bloodshed. "There is never a document of culture without being at the same time a document of barbarism," Walter Benjamin asserts in "On the Concept of History," after highlighting that "only that historian has the gift to kindle the spark of hope in what has passed" who realizes that even the dead are not safe from continued victimization by "the enemy if he is victorious," as their fate is first appropriated and then forgotten to produce the "empty time" of a history of victors.¹⁸ Only the snake—the emblem of both Medusa and Athena and, because of the sloughing-off of its skin, the symbol of death and rebirth, the restorative powers of nature, and ultimately of eternity itself—remains as a reminder of Medusa/Athena's now inaccessible original unity and of the chthonic goddess that may have been worshipped by a prior, much older, matriarchal civilization.

Like Benjamin's historical materialist, Shelley is unwilling to victimize Medusa even further, and his ekphrastic poem not only utterly subverts the conventions of the genre, as both Mitchell and Scott point out, but also

16. Siebers, *The Mirror of Medusa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

17. The "mailed radiance" and the "brazen glare" of the snakes in stanzas three and five of Shelley's poem may in fact allude to Athena's armor and shield and hence to this doubling of goddess and Gorgon.

18. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938–1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott and others, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, 2003), 392, 391 (translation modified).

seeks to provide a glimpse beyond the doubling effects of a representational mirror that inescapably yokes together oppressor and oppressed in the seemingly unalterable dynamics of power. Shelley's ekphrastic fragment, to which we can now turn, does not work verbally to represent a visual representation, but rather aims to capture an "image that," in Benjamin's formulation, "flashes up momentarily in the instant of its recognizability, never to be seen again."¹⁹

3. Looking at Medusa

Most strikingly, in the poem's first line, in contrast to ekphrastic convention, the perceived object itself is described as "gazing," rather than as the passive object of another's gaze. Shelley's verse, as it were, returns Medusa's gaze to her, not as a mere reflection, but as a restored form of visual agency originating from an autonomous source not already appropriated by the poem's speaker. At the same time, all representational frames that could situate Medusa at a safe rhetorical distance are removed, as both Mitchell and Scott remark. The fact that the speaker encounters a representation in the form of a painting is not mentioned, nor is Leonardo indicated as its author: neither form of mediatory distancing is part of the poem itself. Consequently, the poem does not speak *for* the object, as, say Keats's ode does for the urn, and the opening "It lieth" creates the illusion that we are immediate witnesses to the scene, without mediatory protection from Medusa's gaze.²⁰

19. Benjamin, "Concept of History," 390 (translation modified).

20. All analyses and interpretations of "On the Medusa," reproduced in full in the appendix, must proceed with the strong caveat that the poem was never finished and readied for publication by Shelley himself and that the status of the text that has come down to us is far from clear. Mary Shelley first published stanzas 1–4 in her 1824 edition of her husband's *Posthumous Poems*, establishing the order of the stanzas, filling some of the lacunae of the text still evident in her fair copy book, and most likely providing the title. The original drafts Mary Shelley consulted are lost, and the fair copy book she produced only contains stanzas 5, 1, and 2 (in this order) of the fragment she would publish in 1824, the final two lines of stanza 4, and two additional groups of four and five lines respectively, both of which she discarded. See Irving Massey, ed., *Bodleian MS Shelley adds. d.7, vol. 2. The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts: A Facsimile Edition, with Full Transcriptions and Scholarly Apparatus* (New York: Garland, 1987). The two groups of additional lines were first discovered by Neville Rogers, and published, in an editorial decision on Rogers's part not warranted by the textual evidence, as an additional nine-line stanza in his essay "Shelley and the Visual Arts," *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin* 12 (1961): 8–17. Much like the Medusa's "trunkless head," Shelley's poem is itself "[T]he fragment of an uncreated creature," and the text we are working with reflects Mary Shelley's aesthetic choices just as much as Percy's. Even in fragmentary form, a stable text authorized by Shelley himself, simply does not exist. For a detailed discussion of the textual status of "On the Medusa" see the headnote and editorial apparatus for the poem in Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington, with the assistance of Laura Barlow, eds., *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. 3, Longman ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 221–23.

Many more such reversals of readers' expectations are at play in the opening stanza: the word "supine" in line two, deemed almost redundant by Scott, is likely a play on the epithet one would assume a cloudy mountain peak in a Romantic-era poem to receive: "sublime." The lack of a comma keeps the reference of the adjective ambiguous, as it is severed by almost two lines from the subject it qualifies. Furthermore, in its second, metaphorical connotation, supine can also mean "manifesting mental or moral lethargy," or an "unwillingness to do one's duty," and consequently becomes a synonym for "abject." The abject "it" of the Medusa's decapitated head hence trades places with the law-giving male mountain and vice versa, and, if "the power is there," as Shelley's "Mont Blanc" suggests, it has now become entirely ambiguous whether that power resides in abjection or sublimity. In line with such destabilizing substitutions, any points of orientation or lines of sight are equally uncertain in Shelley's ekphrastic space. There are no "far lands" to be seen in the painting, which does not show the "below" Shelley's verse presents, and we consequently do not know who does the seeing, nor who or what is "seen tremblingly." In the additional lines Mary Shelley decided not to include in the version she published in 1824, it is the night air itself that trembles, but in the opening lines of the fragment as we have come to know it, the adverbial construction might refer to the acts of seeing of any number of potential spectators, or might in fact refer to the lands below themselves. There is no orientational stability to be found in Shelley's lines. Horror and beauty, coupled in line four, spell another *coincidentia oppositorum*, at least in the terms of Burkean aesthetics, with which Shelley plays in "On the Medusa." For Burke, horror is an aspect of the sublime, part and parcel of the astonishment that is the first and most prominent emotion triggered by the sublime experience.²¹ No object, however, could be classified as both horrifying and beautiful in the aesthetic framework of Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, exploded here by Shelley's verse as it fuses both aesthetic categories. Like the ekphrastic genre itself, the Burkean aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime are also a highly gendered discourse, pitting seductive female beauty against overpowering male sublimity, and it is no wonder that Shelley's Medusa cannot find expression in either.

When "its" lips and eyelids now come into view, they can be seen to synecdochically suggest word and image, poetry and painting, as modes of representation that necessarily transform loveliness into a shadow. Simultaneously, however, Shelley's words also provide a very precise rendering of the shadow that is actually falling across Medusa's forehead, eyelids, and

21. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 53.

mouth in the painting itself, and the verbal image blends the literal and the figural in a breakdown of allegorical readings typical of Shelley's poetry. This neither literal nor figural shadow of loveliness is then paradoxically described as a source of light in yet another quintessentially Shelleyan subversion of hierarchies, letting light and darkness lose all oppositional clarity of Platonic or Enlightenment thought and turning them into indistinguishable stand-ins for one another. If we are to see Medusa, Shelley's poem suggests, none of the binary oppositions that usually organize our media of representation will be of any use. "Shining" from the shadow and closing the stanza are, finally, anguish and death, the main objects of the fear the Burkean sublime first of all evokes. In Shelley's stanza, however, they are inextricably linked to loveliness, an aspect of the Burkean beautiful, hence redoubling the subversion of aesthetic distinctions already effected in line four. As hierarchies, oppositions and distinctions are reversed, blurred and undermined in Shelley's text, no truth or clarity is to be had, as things only "seem like," but never "are." The opening "It lieth," as more or less all commentators on the poem remark, is clearly a pun: what we see and hear is a representation, an illusion, a lie.²² Shelley's language opens up to a realm it can never adequately represent and pushes the reader to "that verge where words abandon us," as Shelley puts it in "On Life," another fragment written in 1819. And Shelley's assessment in that text of the spectator's reaction to the inadequacy of words (and images, we would need to add) applies equally well to "On the Medusa": "[W]hat wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know."²³ Like life itself, the original countenance of Medusa cannot be known or captured—possessed—as it underlies and opens up prior to the very distinctions that enable our modes of representation. Carol Jacobs, in her close reading of Shelley's poem, can thus say that Shelley's text can be read in two ways, both as representing the head of Medusa as an object that is depicted, and as a performance of what Medusa *does*, undermining and undoing all categories of representation. In the same vein, W. J. T. Mitchell asserts that all oppositions—sublime/beautiful, pleasure/pain, male/female, etc.—necessary for the possessive, controlling male gaze (on display in Dürer's print) to enjoy female beauty, are dissolved by Medusa (*PT* 172). Such a dissolution of categories is precisely her power, a power—terrifying only for the reifying

22. In her essay on "Percy Bysshe Shelley and the Ekphrasis of Hair," *European Romantic Review* 24, no. 2 (2013), Leila Walker convincingly argues for putting "On the Medusa" into intertextual dialog with the second of Leigh Hunt's three sonnets to Dr. Batty, "To —, M.D., On His Giving Me a Lock of Milton's Hair." Hunt's poem begins with the words "It lies before me there," and Walker gives Shelley's text an additional social and literary dimension by making Medusa's hair contiguous with Milton's as seen by Hunt (236–38).

23. P. B. Shelley, *The Major Works*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 636; cited hereafter in the text by page as *SMW*.

male gaze—that manifests in the fluid, unrepresentable, but nevertheless quite tangible energy Shelley calls Beauty, or Poetry.²⁴

4. Medusan Politics

The political valence of such Medusan power becomes quite explicit when one considers the immediate historical context of Shelley's poem, the radical working class movement for parliamentary reform that culminated in the massacre at St. Peter's Field in Manchester on 16 August 1819, for here, too, the struggle is inseparably linked to questions of representation, while the historical events to which Shelley links Medusa reenact the binary oppositions of a mythical structure that has lost none of its potency. "Peterloo" famously brought Shelley's blood to a boil in Italy and led him to write "The Mask of Anarchy," one of several unpublished attempts of the exiled poet to rouse Britons to political action from "across the sea." Shelley's "On the Medusa" must be located in this political context, as all recent readers of the text agree, because the Medusa was an important part of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary imagery during the 1790s, which was recycled and reused in the post-Napoleonic struggle for reform in England. During the 1790s, Edmund Burke most powerfully associated revolutionary energies with mythological imagery of monstrous femininity, and one of the best-known scenes in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which describes the crowd conducting the French King and Queen from Versailles to Paris, can serve as a reminder of the potency of such rhetorical conflation: "Their heads [those of two members of the palace guard] were stuck upon spears, and led the procession; whilst the royal captives who followed in the train were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shapes of the vilest of women."²⁵

From "the furies of hell," it is not far to Medusa, hell's queen, and the Medusa features prominently in a political cartoon of 1792 that is meant to summarize Burke's *Reflections* (fig. 3). The cartoon was first discussed in this context by Neil Hertz in an influential article in 1983, in which Hertz analyzes the way—mainly for the French 1848 revolution and the Paris commune of 1870—political threats come to be represented as sexual threats.²⁶ Medusa is herself the beheader/castrator here and as such becomes the

24. Jacobs, "On Looking at Shelley's Medusa," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 163–79. For a discussion of this "liquefying," extra-symbolic power of the Medusa from a Lacanian perspective, see also Hal Foster's essay "Medusa and the Real."

25. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 60–61.

26. Hertz, "Medusa's Head: 'Male Hysteria under Political Pressure,'" *Representations* 4 (Autumn 1983): 27–54.



Figure 3: Thomas Rowlandson, after a design by Lord George Murray, *The Contrast*. Published on behalf of the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, 1792. Hand-colored etching. British Museum, London.

symbol of French liberty.²⁷ Britannia, clearly presented as Athena, and Medusa are obviously doubles and appear as two faces of the very same coin, while the symbol of liberty, the Phrygian cap, appears on both sides.²⁸ Such doubling ambiguities are fully in keeping with the doubling of Medusa and Athena at the heart of the Medusa myth itself, and the inexorable dynamics of history here repeat themselves in a series of revolutionary and reformist struggles that do not create new modes of seeing, however much they aim to bring about new historical beginnings. In these concrete historical instantiations of the mythological template, the debate continues to be fundamentally a struggle over representation—these indeed *are* the ekphrastic aesthetics of politics. Medusa can become either a powerful counter-revolutionary symbol, signifying the demonic and horrific consequences of Jacobean radicalism, or a potent symbol for all the abject political Others repeatedly abused and oppressed by a fundamentally unjust patriarchal government, used by the radicals themselves to rally liberal opposition. In either case, as the cartoon shows, Britannia and British liberty cannot be had without Medusa, as Shelley is only too aware.

Both Barbara Judson and Ashley Cross have more recently read the

27. As is well known, Freud, in his 1922 essay "The Head of Medusa," makes Medusa the very emblem of the castration complex.

28. For the fascinating ambiguity of the Phrygian cap, a signifier whose uncontrollable meanings can be mobilized by both sides of the political spectrum, see Hertz, "Male Hysteria," 40–50, and Ashley Cross, "'What a World We Make the Oppressor and the Oppressed': George Cruickshank, Percy Shelley, and the Gendering of Revolution in 1819," *English Literary History* 71, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 172–73.

Medusa figure in Shelley's poetry in 1819 as emblematic of his poetic attempt to rescue the discourse of sensibility (Judson) or representations of women more generally (Cross) as a means to move British readership to action and hence to effect social change, even though both discourses had become thoroughly entrenched in political polemics and were used and abused by both conservatives and liberals for opposing political ends.²⁹ Cross reads "On the Medusa" in connection with the use of female figures in two of George Cruickshank's political cartoons and Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy" and shows Shelley struggling and ultimately despairing to employ female characters without falling into the trap of male appropriation himself. From this perspective, "On the Medusa" becomes the record of an aesthetic and political impasse. Judson mentions "On the Medusa" in passing and discusses a whole nexus of Medusa figures in Shelley's poetry in 1818/19, such as Demogorgon in *Prometheus Unbound*, the madman in "Julian and Maddalo," and Beatrice in *The Cenci*, for which the Medusa of Shelley's poem becomes the metonymical emblem. Judson also sees Shelley reaching a dead end, most poignantly embodied in the figure of Beatrice, who, even though—and also *because*—she does not resort to the feminine discourse of sensibility, but rather employs rational male discourse to reach her ends, is turned into a monster by the projections of the oppressive male gaze: that of the scheming Orsino, and, of course, of her father, Count Cenci, who brutally rapes and silences her.³⁰ Identifying with Medusa, seeking—and failing—to remake her gaze as unaffected by the appropriating forces of political rhetoric, Shelley is hence seen to discover the impossibility of a politically effective language, expressive of a revolutionary and liberating beauty not yet identical with terror.

The "inextricable error" of stanza five, conspicuously rhymed with "terror" and "mirror," hence becomes, in the words of Ashley Cross, "the violence of patriarchal oppression" itself, a closed system of representation that will inevitably either absorb any oppositional discourse or turn it into a monstrosity.³¹ The "thrilling vapour of the air" at the heart of this stanza is, in another Shelleyan fusion of the literal and the figural, both the verbal representation of the dying breath of Medusa depicted in the Flemish painting, as Carol Jacobs points out, *and*, as Ashley Cross rightly suggests, a figure reminiscent of "the vapour of a vale" that arises between the "maniac maid" and Anarchy in Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy," where the vapour ultimately grows into "a Shape arrayed in mail / Brighter

29. Judson, "The Politics of Medusa: Shelley's Physiognomy of Revolution," *English Literary History* 68, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 135–54; Cross, "What a World."

30. Judson, "Politics of Medusa," *passim*. For another analysis of Beatrice as a Medusa figure, see Walker, "Ekphrasis of Hair."

31. Cross, "What a World," 199.

than the viper's scale," a shape that will usher in revolutionary victory (*SMW*, 403).³²

In "On the Medusa," such revolutionary potential seems immediately transformed by the containing dynamic of "error"—language's "disfiguring" power, Paul de Man might say—which "kindles" the "gleam" of the serpents' "brazen glare," and turns the breath of life into a self-reflecting mirror, the instrument of Medusa's undoing, making the gorgon complicit in her own petrification. In another uncanny doubling typical of Shelley's verse, the sheen of the "viper's scale" can hence connote hope just as much as despair, death just as much as life. In the final analysis, the "inextricable error" of Shelley's poem is thus representation itself, a petrifying patriarchal mirror that will reify and essentialize oppositions and distinctions to leave little hope for non-violent change.

5. "but there is life in death"

The ekphrastic, mythological, and political contexts of Shelley's poem discussed in this essay in fact all hinge on the seeming impossibility of avoiding the rhetorical and ideological violence inextricably linked to acts of representation. And yet Shelley's poetic efforts, fraught with ambiguity and contradiction as they are, ultimately seek to open up a realm beyond representation, a realm that allows for the dissemination of ideas without predetermining the shape they might take. Part of that effort must remain purely negative but is for that reason no less important, as Shelley reminds us in his skeptical philosophical speculations in "On Life." Since "nothing exists but as it is perceived," as Shelley argues in that 1819 fragment, no touchstone for absolute truth independent of the workings of the human mind can be found, and "[p]hilosophy, impatient as it may be to build, has much work yet remaining as pioneer for the overgrowth of ages" (*SMW*, 635). Rather than constructing new systems of thought on the false premise of immutable foundations, the work of the philosopher—and much the same is true for the Shelleyan poet—consists in clearing the underbrush of the mind, in freeing paths for thought in consciousness' "dark wood of error." Philosophy, Shelley asserts, "makes one step towards this object [i.e. the building of new systems]; it destroys error and the roots of error. It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation" (*SMW*, 635). Poetically, the Shelley of "On the Medusa" finds himself in a similar, if even more skeptical position. For here the error in question, the "misuse of words and signs" Shelley's poem identifies,

32. Jacobs, "On Looking," 174; Cross, "What A World," 191.

turns out to be "inextricable," an inherent limitation of human language that cannot be pulled out by its metaphorical "roots." Nevertheless, the poetical process of uncovering such limitations still forms a crucial part of the effort to transform the language of power, a language now revealed as a mode of representational "error" and hence forced to drop its mask of truth. Poetic language may not be able to push us any further than to the limit of a vacancy, "where thought no more can trace," but "this is much," the Shelley of "On Life" might respond (*SMW*, 633).

More than that is only conceivable in the utopian scenarios of Shelley's visionary poetry, where an aesthetic opening moves the poetic text beyond and outside of history—explodes its continuum, as Benjamin might say—and where human consciousness and the processes through which it represents itself and the world to itself have been utterly transformed. A well-known stanza from Earth's paean to the new humanity—still "man" in Shelley's language—in her dialogue with Moon in act 4 of *Prometheus Unbound* can serve as an example:

Leave Man, who was a many-sided mirror
Which could distort to many a shape of error
This true fair world of things—a sea reflecting love;
Which over all its kind, as the sun's heaven
Gliding o'er ocean, smooth, serene, and even,
Darting from starry depths radiance and light, doth move.
(*SMW*, 307)

Importantly, "[t]his true fair world of things," which the new humanity will recover, and for which we might substitute Medusa in her non-representational and non-representable beauty, is *already there*, here and now, even though we do not perceive it. No utopian end of history is necessary to bring it about. The "world of things" indeed remains constant, while it is "man" who changes from a distorting "many-sided mirror" to "a sea reflecting love." The utopian moment Shelley envisions is hence not a material change, but rather a change in modes of perception, or maybe better, modes of reflection, as the distortions produced by our current conceptual and representational mirroring apparatus, the metaphorical "veil" so favored in Shelley's poetical vocabulary, are removed. Crucially, in Shelley's conception, this reflective change entails—at least in metaphorical terms—the disappearance of the distinction between mind and nature. Rather than an artificial, man-made instrument, a "mirror," the new "man" will be a "sea," and Shelley conspicuously shifts the vehicle of his metaphorical construction from the realm of art to that of nature. As the mirror of consciousness dissolves, Shelley's metaphors suggest in a verbal evocation of an extra-linguistic moment, thought and reflection no longer

represent but become the processes of an only seemingly external "nature." And "love," too, the emotional essence to which "man" has now become receptive, is no longer a specifically human emotion, but is revealed as a cosmic form of energy, a "heaven" that "glid[es]" "over all its kind," "darting" "radiance and light" from "starry depths" beyond the sun.

Shelley's "love" here has affinities with the "intellectual love" Benedict Spinoza discusses in book 5 of the *Ethics*, a text Shelley knew well and on a translation of which he worked intermittently. In book 5 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza is concerned with a form of intuitive knowledge that gives us access to the essence of our body/mind, allowing it to realize that it inheres and subsists in the eternal substance of God or Nature, as our "inadequate ideas," which imprison us in the distorted and fragmented conception of reality we usually call knowledge, give way to "adequate ideas" that allow us to see *this* world in its true form. Spinoza asserts that from this kind of intuitive knowledge "there necessarily arises the intellectual love of God."³³ In contradistinction from love as a human passion, this intellectual love is eternal, and when experiencing intellectual love, the individual mind for Spinoza hence both actualizes its own essence and understands this essence to be non-individual; it is left "as the sun's heaven," as Shelley might put it. While I do not mean to suggest that Shelley's text straightforwardly enacts Spinozan philosophical ideas, the shift in perception Shelley's poetry is meant to bring about is structurally equivalent to the one Spinoza aims to produce in his *Ethics*. Both Shelley and Spinoza seek to move the reader beyond the usual limitations of our cognitive apparatus, Spinoza with the help of the "geometrical" method employed in the *Ethics*, Shelley by means of poetic language.³⁴

"Love" of course is extolled by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* as "[t]he great secret of morals" and defined there as "a going out of our own na-

33. Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. G. H. R. Parkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 308 (5P32C). Spinoza's God or substance is of course far from the patriarchal God of organized religion Shelley saw as so oppressive and inimical. The political importance of Spinoza's work for Shelley, particularly of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, need not be stressed here.

34. Shelley remakes Spinoza's concepts in the poetic medium just as much as he does those of other philosophers. The effort to trace Shelley's poetics to their philosophical origins, while important, becomes counterproductive once any such philosophical influences are seen as stable and definitive. Shelley has been recruited for (Platonic) idealism, materialism, and skepticism in the critical literature, and has also been called an advocate of a self-contradictory combination of all of the above. But to search for a prior philosophical perspective that could serve as the key to Shelley's poetical positions is ultimately mistaken. In terms of philosophical thought, too, Shelley seeks to make different approaches fruitful in the medium of poetry in order to open up new modes of thought, not equatable with the perspectives beyond which they emerge.

ture, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action or person, not our own" (SMW, 682). Love in other words, through a process of sympathetic identification, replaces in Shelley's account the process of representational mirroring that proves so destructive in "On the Medusa." Rather than (re)constructing the other by means of a normative grid that takes possession of and remakes what we see in our own image, as does the draftsman's gaze in Dürer's print, "love" in Shelley's conception entails an imaginative projection that leaves behind all relationships structured around a clear subject-object distinction.³⁵ It is particularly pertinent for the discussion at hand that Shelley conceives of poetry, too, as a mirror, a "mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted," and which "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world" (SMW, 680–81). The work of poetry, in other words, is to undo the damage inflicted by the distortions of the "many-sided mirror" of representation and to provide hints for an entirely different type of reflection, the "sea reflecting love" envisioned in *Prometheus Unbound*. "Poetry," Shelley claims in the *Defence*, "turns all things to loveliness: it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed: it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things" (SMW, 698). This co-presence of oppositions is by now familiar to the reader of "On the Medusa," a poem that does precisely the kind of work Shelley describes in this passage from the *Defence*. If on the level of the poem's *content* the co-presence of horror and grace in the Medusa's countenance proves deadly, it is not, as this essay has attempted to explain, Medusa's gaze that triggers such deadly petrification, but rather the mirror with which we approach her. This holds equally true if one assumes with James Heffernan that the "gazer's spirit" turned into stone in stanza two is Medusa's, not the spectator's, as most readers of the poem assume.³⁶ The mirrors of consciousness are internal structures, modes of representation deeply informed by ongoing linguistic and ideological conditioning, and they do their petrifying work without any additional implements; they must, however, be externalized in order to work on Medusa, who remains "beautiful" until she becomes an object for a consciousness already entrapped in such modes

35. In a 2008 essay, George C. Grinnell reads Shelley's "On the Medusa" as a critique of "normalizing" physiognomical regimes that purport to be able to discern an individual's moral interiority by means of a decipherable code imprinted on her face and skull. For Grinnell, Shelley's poem ultimately works to open up an ethical space that has affinities with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas in that it asks us to imagine the moral claims a radically unreadable Other exerts on us. See Grinnell, "Ethics in the Face of Terror: Shelley and Biometrics," *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 30 (2008): 332–51.

36. For Heffernan's convincing case, see his *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 121–22.

of mirroring. Medusa must perceive herself as such a spectator would—in a man-made mirror—if she is to be petrified by her own gaze. Were she to be seen in the mirror of poetry Shelley depicts in the *Defence*, and which provides the only potential transformation of the violence of representation into the non-representational harmony Shelley's utopian visions hold out, Medusa could appear in a different light. When Medusa's beauty is refracted in the mirror of regular consciousness, however, its experience can only horrify, and what "turns the gazer's spirit into stone" as we learn in stanza two is "less the horror than the grace / . . . / 'Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown / Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain, / which humanize and harmonize the strain." Horror, darkness, and pain are intimately familiar to us and reproduce well in the mirrors we commonly employ; they are in fact the everyday life that surrounds us, and we have come to accept their sight and effect as constitutive of human reality. From this perspective, grace and beauty must appear terrifying, utterly alien, and Other. Even if "humanize[d] and harmonize[d]" by horror and pain, one glimpse of such Otherness is enough to petrify.³⁷ We no longer recognize that "intellectual love" or the "spirit of beauty" offers a revelation of our own essence in its non-representable fluidity. Only Poetry—in the non-generic sense of the term—Shelley maintains, can help us shift away from this fundamental distortion. It is hence not surprising that the underlying process depicted in stanza two of "On the Medusa," that of an otherworldly melody and "strain" of music harmonized by a human listener, is *formally* the same as the process Shelley presents at the opening of the *Defence* to elucidate that Poetry "is connate with the origin of man":

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre; which move it, by their motion, to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. (SMW, 675)

37. The Longman editors suggest "hues" in the plural instead (see Appendix), arguing that it is grammatically required because the noun governs the verbs to humanize and to harmonize. Both Mary Shelley's fair copy book and the 1824 *Posthumous Poems* give "hue," but Mary Shelley corrects to "hues" in 1847. (See *Poems of Shelley*, 221.) Subsequent editorial decisions differ, but all previous critics have assumed "hue" in the singular. Grammatically, it is perfectly possible for the relative clause to refer to "the darkness and the glare of pain," while the reference remains ambiguous even if "hues" in the plural is chosen. In addition, Mary Shelley's fair copy book has a lacuna in this particular line, which is only filled with the word "beauty" in the 1824 edition. Percy Shelley's intention in either case is irretrievable, and the line represents *in nuce* the textual problems of the fragment as a whole.

If we knew how to look, listen, and imaginatively adjust our perceptions, in other words, we could experience Medusa's gaze, not as a petrifying glance of sheer terror, but rather as an instant of pure poetry, as a revelation of "the hidden beauty of the world."

In the closing paragraph of the *Defence*, the poets themselves become "the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present," as their texts open up an extra-temporal realm that is nevertheless immediately connected to the historical present, since the "fair world of things" they make visible is always already before us. Rather than petrifying and foreclosing the potential of the present by freezing it into fixed forms of representation, this imaginative act of mirroring an "unapprehended inspiration" provides a glimpse of a space where aesthetics and history interact in ways that are unforeseen, where history is made and unmade and remains aesthetically alive and in flux as imaginary and revolutionary potential. Against all odds, poetry, in Shelley's sense, by undermining and defying fixed distinctions, endeavors to give us a vision of Medusa's beauty, a beauty we otherwise do not see because the Gorgon always appears to us as already the object of Poseidon's possessive gaze.

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APPENDIX

P. B. Shelley, "On the Medusa of Leonardo de Vinci In the Florentine Gallery," 1819. From *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. 3, eds. Donovan, Duffy, et al., Longman ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 221–23.

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,
 Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine;
 Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;
 Its horror and its beauty are divine.
 Upon its lips and eyelids seem to lie
 Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,
 Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,
 The agonies of anguish and of death.

Yet it is less the horror than the grace
 Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone,
 Whereon the lineaments of that dead face
 Are graven, till the characters be grown
 Into itself, and thought no more can trace;
 'Tis the melodious hues of beauty thrown
 Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,
 Which humanize and harmonize the strain.

And from its head as from one body grow,
 As [] grass out of a watery rock,
 Hairs which are vipers, and they curl and flow,
 And their long tangles in each other lock,
 And with unending involutions show
 Their mailèd radiance, as it were to mock
 The torture and the death within, and saw
 The solid air with many a ragged jaw.

And from a stone beside, a poisonous eft
 Peeps idly into these Gorgonian eyes;
 Whilst in the air a ghastly bat, bereft
 Of sense, has flitted with a mad surprise
 Out of the cave this hideous light had cleft,
 And he comes hastening like a moth that hies
 After a taper; and the midnight sky
 Flares, a light more dread than obscurity.

'Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror;
 For from the serpents gleams a brazen glare
 Kindled by that inextricable error,
 Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air
 Become a [] and ever-shifting mirror
 Of all the beauty and the terror there—
 A woman's countenance, with serpent locks,
 Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks.