The Keats-Shelley Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/yksr20

Afterlives: Shelley's Transformative Rhetoric in *Queen Mab* Note 17

Zoran Varga

To cite this article: Zoran Varga (2023) Afterlives: Shelley's Transformative Rhetoric in *Queen Mab* Note 17, The Keats-Shelley Review, 37:1, 60-65, DOI: 10.1080/09524142.2023.2215064

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09524142.2023.2215064

Published online: 16 Jun 2023.

THE KEATS-SHELLEY REVIEW
2023, VOL. 37, NO. 1, 60–65
https://doi.org/10.1080/09524142.2023.2215064

ESSAYS: WINNER

Afterlives: Shelley's Transformative Rhetoric in *Queen Mab* Note 17

Zoran Varga

ABSTRACT

The essay discusses the scope of Percy Bysshe Shelley's transformative rhetoric centred around the body and its potentially revolutionary transformation within the nature/culture landscape, especially through the discourse on vegetarian diet. The topic of the essay is explored through work by Timothy Morton on Shelley's vegetarianism and also on 'dark ecology', trying to juxtapose the concept of diet on the one side, and the idea of ecological awareness on the other side with revolutionary/reformist intentions inscribed in Shelley's transformative rhetoric of his vegetarian discourse. The main focus of the essay is Shelley's *A Vindication of Natural Diet* as part of lengthy notes for *Queen Mab* (printed in 1813), close read as the part of the whole textual body within which it appears. The topic of the essay is explored through the reception of Shelley's poetry in the context of ecocriticism trying to address contemporary ecological issues and its reminiscences within Western civilization.

KEYWORDS

Romanticism; Shelley; *Queen Mab*; ecocriticism; dark ecology; transformative rhetoric

Since mechanical reproduction – since, that is, the invention of the printing press – and especially since the advent of copyright laws, poetry has detached from its authors and wandered somewhat freely in public space. Romantic poets were acutely aware of their afterlives, and their works reflect this, argues Timothy Morton in an essay on the reception of Shelley's work.[1] Furthermore, Morton points out that the idea from *Defence of Poetry* (1821) that poets are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world' could lead us to the conclusion that 'if "unacknowledged" means "unconscious", then even while their writers are alive poems are doing their work outside and beyond the scope of their authors'.[2] In other words, the detachment or 'after-life' quality of poetry resonates with the idea that Deleuze and Guattari are describing in the Introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, suggesting that 'in a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also, lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification'.[3] A book is a *body without organs*, which 'is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as

CONTACT Zoran Varga zokvarga@gmail.com

[1]Timothy Morton, 'Receptions,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 35–45.

[2]Morton, 'Receptions,' 35.

[3]Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Rhizome: Introduction,' in *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), 3–25.

the trace of an intensity'.[4] This essay will discuss the scope of Shelley's transformative rhetoric centred around the body and its potentially revolutionary transformation within the nature/culture landscape, especially through the discourse on vegetarian diet. In order to connect these concepts, the argument will be explored through work by Morton on Shelley's vegetarianism and also on the concept of 'dark ecology', trying to juxtapose the concept of diet on the one side, and the idea of ecological awareness on the other side with revolutionary/reformist intentions inscribed in Shelley's transformative rhetoric of his vegetarian discourse. Also, although Shelley's text *A Vindication of Natural Diet* was published separately as a pamphlet in 1813, the version written as the part of lengthy notes for *Queen Mab* (printed in 1813[5]) will be used for the purposes of this paper and observed as the part of the whole textual body within which it appears.

Immediately addressing the nature in note 17, Shelley writes: I hold that the depravity of the physical and moral nature of man originated in his unnatural habits of life. The origin of man, like that of the universe of which he is a part, is enveloped in impenetrable mystery. Referring to the religious myths as the evidence, he concludes 'that at some distant period man forsook the path of nature and sacrificed the purity and happiness of his being to unnatural appetites' and 'the date of this event seems to have also been that of some great change in the climates of the earth, with which it has an obvious correspondence'.[6] 'The unnatural habits of life' originate in the same 'natural' mystery as man and the universe, which still haunts human existence through stories told since man started to explain the world by mythological narratives. For Shelley, those 'unnatural habits' are the seed of physical and moral depravity in man and by 'forsaking the path of nature' and 'sacrificing the purity and happiness of his being to unnatural appetites' man is re-enacting the self-punishment we have been inscribed through Adam and Eve/Prometheus's transgressions, 'for vegetarianism acts as a master code for interpreting all Fall narratives'.[7] In order to preserve itself, the body needs the continual transgression of 'natural laws' through its 'unnatural habits', which appears physically and morally problematic for Shelley. The body and the civilization as its manifestation perpetuate the logic of 'agrilogistics', described by Morton in *Dark Ecology* as 'a specific logistics of agriculture that arose in Fertile Crescent and that is still ploughing ahead'.[8]

In note 17, Shelley very accurately detects violence inherent in the logic of agrilogistic project which is being perpetuated for twelve thousand years already:

[4]Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4.

[5]There is a complex relationship between the existence of *Queen Mab* and its notes, which haunts its reception and history. It is almost as if versions of texts are echoing its own future afterlives and significance. The first version of *Queen Mab* was printed in 1813 in an edition of 250 copies, but not published because of fears of prosecution. 'A Vindication of Natural Diet' was published separately as a pamphlet in 1813, with several passages omitted from the text written in notes to *Queen Mab*, which is also important to have in mind when going through the textual landscape. In 1821, William Clark published a pirated edition of the poem, which also points to its radical aura, especially considering the fact that it influenced early trade union and Chartist movements, and more generally, nineteenth- and twentieth-century radical working-class and British Marxist thinkers and activists. This rhizomatic haunting of cultural consciousness (to use the term by Deleuze and Guattari) intertwines with Shelley's afterlife in numerous popular forms as Morton describes in great detail (see 'Receptions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*).

[6]Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83. Subsequent references to his edition will be given within parentheses in the main text.

[7]Timothy Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 131.

[8]Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 42.

> Man, and the animals whom he has infected with his society, or depraved by his dominion, are alone diseased. The wild hog, the mouflon, the bison, and the wolf, are perfectly exempt from malady, and invariably die either from external violence, or natural old age. But the domestic hog, the sheep, the cow, and the dog, are subject to an incredible variety of distempers. (84)

The 'infection' does not belong only to human but also to non-human and 'by now, nature and the unnatural, innocence and vice, health and disease, the raw and the cooked, the plain and the figurative (or disguised) are all in play'.[9] To demarcate between (non) human is the performative play of agrilogistics. It is 'an agricultural program so successful that it now dominates agricultural techniques planetwide'. Explicitly, Morton calls it 'toxic from the beginning to humans and other lifeforms', which one can read in Shelley's observation of human infection.[10] The cultivation is the program, which originated from the fear induced by climate change, and which started human sacrificing of 'purity and happiness of his being' through the 'unnatural habits of life'. It is an afterlife which haunts the present state infusing it with depravity. We are being made aware of the crisis, which emerges from itself as the dream (or is it a nightmare?) of escape from the previous crisis. The escape dream itself is a fiction, infused by natural forces, which are dark and terrifying:

> The idea that humans began 'civilization' in Mesopotamia is a retroactive positing if ever there was one. Humans looked back and designated the time of early agrilogistics as a unit, justifying the present as if civilization suddenly emerged like the goddess Athena from the head of the human without any support. Without coexistence. 'Civilization' was a long-term collaboration between humans and wheat, humans and rock, humans and soil, not out of grand visions but out of something like desperation.[11]

Shelley's discursive afterlife haunts the 'civilization' as the form of retreat by proclaiming that language is seen as the contagious force in a way that 'the supereminence of man is like Satan's, a supereminence of pain; and the majority of his species, doomed to penury, disease and crime, have reason to curse the untoward event, that by enabling him to communicate his sensations, raised him above the level of his fellow animals' (85), making the discourse of vegetarianism transformative and radical.

From the perspective of Shelley's afterlife, there should exist a possibility to reconcile 'the advantages of intellect and civilization with the liberty and pure pleasures of natural life' (85). He believes that there should be a way to 'take the benefits and reject the evils of the system' and he finds it in the 'abstinence from animal food and spirituous liquors', which 'would in great measure capacitate us for the solution of this important question'. The proposed abstinence is seen as the way to give the capacity to humanity to move away from depravity which is infecting it. From the revolutionary perspective, it could be another infection, which requires the adaption of the immune system, and it goes along the lines of future coexistence, which Morton proposes in *Dark Ecology* and also the future evoked in Canto 8 of *Queen Mab* where 'Hope was seen beaming through the mists of fear: / Earth was no longer hell; / Love, freedom, health, had given / Their ripeness to the manhood of its prime, / And all its pulses beat / Symphonious to the

[9]Morton, *Revolution in Taste*, 131.
[10]Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 42.
[11]Ibid., 45.

planetary spheres' (59). The notion of vegetarian diet was politicized at the moment of entering in the discourse at the end of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a possible remedy to humanity. Morton shows how in the period 1790–1820 there were many consumers of vegetable food and their diets became politicized, as well as the real reach of such actions: 'The social attitudes and practices within and around the texts on vegetable diet negotiated between "natural" ideologies, which tried to mediate culture and *laissez-fare* and present radical social change as peaceful and humane'.[12]

It is right to conclude that Shelley's position is ambivalent, emphasizing the constant tension within his transformative rhetoric. Shelley did not consider the vegetable diet as the all-encompassing solution, but rather an experiment in social politics. The experiment, which could purify the body and mind, would then give a human the potential to behave in a different, more 'natural' way. Shelley clearly states that 'the system of a simple diet promises no Utopian advantages. It is no mere reform of legislation, whilst the furious passions and evil propensities of the human heart, in which it had its origin, are still unassuaged' (86). It is 'an experiment which may be tried with success, not alone by nations, but by small societies, families, and even individuals' (86), being a clear anarchist intention, which does not prescribe one-fits-all solutions but calls for revolutionising the afterlife. Moreover, Morton is emphasizing in *Revolution* the perpetuating ambiguity between *Queen Mab* and *Vindication*, which is 'retaining the figurative density of *Queen Mab* but refracting its critique of tyranny, superstition and commerce through a lived, personal response to ethics, while emphasizing the code of radical self-presentation' (69) and advocating 'the cultivation of the virtuous individual in accordance with the dance between virtue and politics in *Queen Mab*' (69).

In this regard by following Shelley's conclusion of Canto 8 in *Queen Mab*, the future state of human is the transformative afterlife, where human and non-human coexist equally:

> All things are void of terror: man has lost
> His terrible prerogative, and stands
> An equal amidst equals: happiness
> And science dawn though late upon the earth;
> Peace cheers the mind, health renovates the frame;
> Disease and pleasure cease to mingle here,
> Reason and passion cease to combat there;
> Whilst each unfettered o'er the earth extend
> Their all-subduing energies, and wield
> The sceptre of a vast dominion there;
> Whilst every shape and mode of matter lends
> Its force to the omnipotence of mind,
> Which from its dark mine drags the gem of truth
> To decorate its paradise of peace. (64)

'The gem of truth' is being produced under the influence of existing forces from 'every shape and mode of matter' in order to escape 'purging and policing of the "enthusiastic", buzzy, vibratory (Greek *enthuein*) energies that shimmer around its [aesthetic] fringe,

[12]Morton, *Revolution in Taste*, 56.

forever turning beauty into something slightly strange'.[13] However, this peace is an uncanny afterlife, existing here and now in the 'interpenetrating subjectivity, without (and here is the elision) getting rid of "me", the reformed-reformist subject, so that "I" will have literally to love others as "myself"'.[14] In other words, one can listen to the wisdom of the plants as Deleuze and Guattari describe: 'even when they have roots, there is always and outside where they form a rhizome with something else – with the wind, an animal, human beings (and there is also an aspect under which animals themselves form rhizomes, as do people, etc.)'[15] The reformist/revolutionary quality of words is what connects us to the afterlife, with Shelley or without him.

The language Shelley creates is directed towards its own redemption (as well as the body), or as Morton emphasizes, it is 'a Utopian language: it does not advocate a return to the past, but a return back to the future which in some way is a perfect sublimation of an originary perfection', which is characteristic for revolutionary Shelley.[16] He evoked his own afterlife which haunts him back from the future. Vegetarianism is the force that would affect all kinds of 'unnatural' habits such as 'the mistakes cherished by society respecting the connection of the sexes', 'the putrid atmosphere of crowded cities, the exhalations of chemical processes', 'the muffling of our bodies in superfluous apparel' and 'the absurd treatment of infants' (85), dealing with a range of contemporary topics as well as ecological thinking or more ambitiously ecological awareness.

Furthermore, Morton argues in *Revolution* that '*A Vindication* is not simply advocating a "return to nature" but a way of *naturalizing culture*' and 'human sciences are the path of humanity's return to a naturally good nature, which is another way of saying that human reflexivity is natural'.[17] Morton will explore this discursive logic even deeper in *Dark Ecologies*, following the paths of afterlives in search for ecological awareness, but to return to Shelley's note 17, Morton clearly points out in *Revolution* that,

> Culture, the cooked, is a transgression of nature which also perverts nature, the raw. Reasoned science may stop this perversion but is itself an aspect of culture (Shelley is self-consciously explicit about this), which from its inception involved perverse disfigurings of nature. [. . .] To turn culture into medicine is one of the significant prescriptions of *A Vindication*.[18]

The infinite downward loop of afterlives is at work. Dark ecology is manifested within the gap between nature/culture, and following Shelley's rhetoric through Morton's argumentation one gets back to Deleuze and Guattari (see *Anti-Oedipus)*. Morton concludes in *Revolution* that 'natural diet does not only decode (as it decodes Christian Fall narratives) but also reterritorializes' and 'indeed in the rhetoric of natural diet, it seems inevitable that the social field is actually *constituted* through libidinal investments'.[19] To conclude the point on transformative implications of Shelley's reformist intentions in vegetarian discourse we once again go back to Morton's *Revolution*:

[13]Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 95.
[14]Morton, *Revolution in Taste*, 98.
[15]Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 11.
[16]Morton, *Revolution in Taste*, 132.
[17]Ibid.,135.
[18]Ibid.
[19]Ibid., 136, 137.

> Meat is intimately connected with language, whether it is linked with the emergence of civilization and the death of natural innocence, or whether it is seen as sustaining a social economy, as a social discourse. To redeem the language from its fallen state is to redeem the body cut up in the votive offering which founds the social order – to re-imagine the social body through its origins.[20]

However, there remains open the question of Shelley's afterlives, or more explicitly the question of reception and influence of his transformative rhetoric. Since this essay started with the question of reception, it is appropriate to conclude it in the same tone. On the one side, there was the intention to 'represent social change as a return to some essential element of the existing state of affairs' and Morton appropriately asks 'How is it possible to convince a criminal, a drunkard, a meat-eater, a madman, embroiled in irrational passion to desist, or a society deluded by custom to lose its habits?'.[21] From the contemporary point of view, the possible answer could go in the direction that the understanding of Shelley's poetical and political imagination has faded, or it could be that his afterlife is still present somewhere within the layers of collective consciousness and that it searches for other afterlives to connect with. The transformative nature of Shelley's rhetoric stays in the open space, in-between the polarities, and is a living matter, in the sense of 'dark ecology'. Vegetarian discourse is 'a representation of sensual and intellectual bliss and benign contact with nature' but also 'a discourse of purity, cleanliness and order', which is 'typical of the ways in which the body is brought into line in the new age of urbanized, industrial production'.[22] Shelley (and his afterlives) was a voice from the future haunting its own (and our) present. Transformative rhetoric will always function in the form of an open question, written in the note: 'How much longer will man continue to pimp for the gluttony of death, his most insidious, implacable, and eternal foe?' (88). Possibly, evoking the answer will model all kinds of future coexistence(s).

Notes on contributor

Zoran Varga is currently a doctoral student at the University of Zagreb, writing his PhD thesis on politics and aesthetics in Percy Bysshe Shelley's late poetry. He has a master's degree in English Language and Literature – British Literature and Culture and Comparative Literature from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. He is also a member and secretary of the Croatian Association for English Studies, the national branch of the European Society for Studies of English. His professional interests include British Romanticism, Romantic and Modernist Poetry, Literary Criticism, and Politics and Literature.

[20]Ibis., 138.
[21]Ibid., 168–9.
[22]Ibid., 239.