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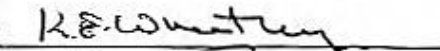
Renegotiating the Apocalypse: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*

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by

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The apocalypse has been written about as many times as it hasn't taken place, and imagined ever since creation mythologies logically mandated destructive counterparts. Interest in the apocalypse never seems to fade, but what does change is what form that apocalypse is thought to take, and the ever-keen question of what comes after. The most classic Western version of the apocalypse, the millennial Judgement Day based on Revelation – an absolute event encompassing all of humankind – has given way in recent decades to speculation about political dystopias following catastrophic war or ecological disaster, and how the remnants of mankind claw tooth-and-nail for survival in the aftermath. Desolate landscapes populated by cannibals or supernatural creatures produce the awe that sublime imagery, like in the paintings of John Martin, once inspired. The Byronic hero reincarnates in an extreme version as the apocalyptic wanderer trapped in and traversing a ruined world, searching for some solace in the dust. John Martin's and Lord Byron's works are from another era fascinated by the apocalypse: the late Romantic period, which saw the like of Percy Shelley and Thomas Campbell adding to the body of apocalyptic literature. Less well known is that Mary Shelley wrote on the subject as well, publishing *The Last Man* in 1826.

The name Mary Shelley is so associated with *Frankenstein* that criticism of her work focused near-exclusively upon it until her other writing began making its way into scholarship in the late twentieth century. Originally published eight years after *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man* is now considered her second most important work (Paley, "Introduction" xiii). Not well-received in its own day, the re-discovered novel now commands a substantial body of criticism. It is unique as a Romantic apocalypse, focusing as much on the process and politics of mankind's gradual decline as on the

sublime awe of the apocalypse itself. Mary Shelley's apocalyptic novel is not only an exploration of the apocalypse, but an assessment of the viability of long-considered traditional Romantic themes. Since Romanticism as a whole is incredibly broad and complex, I limit my scope to Shelley's examination of a few of its main points: its optimism, belief in the power of the imagination, confidence in humankind's self-determination, and aspiration to a transcendent state of being. In Romantic millennialism, these are often wound together into a conviction that humankind constantly improves and will eventually perfect itself. In this essay, the phrase "Romantic ideals" refers to these notions. The greater part of this essay will deal with the particulars of *The Last Man's* renegotiated perception of these Romantic ideals. I contend that, in the novel, these ideals fail to enable humankind to exercise control over themselves or the inescapable systems of existence in the political and natural worlds. This pessimism is modified, however, by an undercurrent of rebirth in which Romantic ideals do play a role. In what follows, I will detail the literary and historical-political background against which Shelley wrote *The Last Man*; explore contemporary and modern critical approaches to the novel; use close reading and structural assessment to demonstrate how the novel reassesses the Romantic ideals based on whether they enable human agency; suggest that the novel's questioning stance is part of a broader trend in writers in the Shelley circle; and briefly assess to what extent the Romantic apocalypse continues in modern apocalyptic fiction.

The Apocalypse and the Romantics

Not all apocalypses are created equal, and the apocalypse comes in three main flavors: millenarian, millennial, and non-millennial. Tim Fulford describes the

millenarian apocalypse as the Biblical apocalypse, in which Christ's second coming purges the wicked from the earth and brings on a thousand years of peace during which Satan is imprisoned and the righteous ascend to heaven (Fulford 21). The word "millennium" refers specifically to this thousand-year period, but can also more generally refer to any sort of period of peace or enlightened living preceding or following an apocalypse. All other apocalypses can be sorted into the categories *millennial* and *non-millennial*. A millennial apocalypse is any apocalypse with an associated millennium, or which is the work of a higher power and "affirms history and our place in a larger design"; thus, the millenarian apocalypse can be seen as a subset of the millennial (Mishra 157). The relationship between apocalypse and millennium in the millennial apocalypse can vary, the context of a given time period determining which of the "elements" is more accentuated, and the "order" in which the two take place – whether the millennium precedes the apocalypse, or the apocalypse is necessary to induce the millennium (Beer 53). The non-millennial apocalypse stands in stark contrast to both millenarianism and millennialism with its predictions of apocalypse without any accompanying millennium. *The Last Man* falls into this final category as humanity succumbs to an inexorable plague. The novel speaks of loss, but not of a paradise on earth or any suggestion of a divine plan.

Especially the millennial apocalypse was at the forefront of the Romantic imagination. As Fiona Stafford points out in *The Last of the Race*, the period generated an influx of pieces named *The Last Man*: in addition to the 1826 novel by Mary Shelley around which this essay is focused, the title is shared with "a poem by Thomas Campbell (1823), an unfinished drama by Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1823-5)... a satirical ballad by

Thomas Hood (1826), a painting by John Martin (1826), and an anonymous prose fragment in *Blackwood's Magazine* (1826)" (Stafford qtd. in Albright 118). In her introduction to the Broadview edition of *The Last Man*, Anne McWhir identifies further works that share the apocalypse as their focus, demonstrating the period's fascination with the end of things, including "The Death of the World" (*European Magazine* 1826) and "The City of the Dead" (*New Monthly* 1826) (McWhir, "Introduction" xvi). Another influential work is *The Last Man, or Omergarus and Syderia, A Romance in Futurity* by Jean Baptiste Cousin de Grainville (1805). de Grainville's work in turn influenced Lord Byron's 1816 poem "Darkness," which draws a desolate picture of the end of days with the extinguishing of the sun. Even works not explicitly apocalyptic often still possess that flavor. C.F. Volney's *The Ruins, Or, Meditation On the Revolutions of Empires: and The Law of Nature* (1791) is not about the apocalypse, but it begins with an image of and an ode to the ruins of empires and ends with recommendations to bring about enlightened government and the ideal mode of human existence – an apocalypse on the national instead of global scale with the collapse of empires, and the lessons which that "apocalypse" imparts leading to an enlightened existence, a sort of secular millennium, without doom.

The preoccupation with the apocalypse by the Romantics cannot be considered without the historical context of the French Revolution, an event which caused ripple effects across Europe and dramatically impacted English thought and politics. The French Revolution brought the apocalypse from the Bible into the realm of possibility as it created the expectation in people for "the millennium to arrive within their lifetimes, preceded by apocalyptic destruction" (Fulford 2). Ronald Paulson in *Representations of*

Revolution separates the Revolution into three distinct phases, each with their own impact on English intellectual life. The first phase “was in general one of approval celebrating the fall of despotism and the rise of a constitutional monarchy,” an attitude no doubt influenced by England’s “pleasure at seeing the French monarch embarrassed and weakened” (Paulson 37-38). Celebration soon gave way to dismay with the entrance of the mob as a specter along with uprisings and the storming of the Bastille leading up to the king’s execution and the National Convention, events which introduced an element of horror of bloodshed to the rhetoric across the channel (38-9). The last phase of the Revolution spans 1793-4, characterized by “The Great Terror,” the rise and fall of Robespierre, and finally Napoleon’s coup (39). Faced by the fear of revolution and the external threat of Napoleon, Britain became politically repressive in the 1790s. Censorship was common, and a culture of suspicion grew. Politics became increasingly polarized, and apocalyptic language – so associated with the language of revolution – became charged. The millennial language used by revolutionaries, in its migration to the political realm, “became a crucial factor in the vituperative war of words that polarized British politics” (3). Following this last phase, the responses of individual first generation Romantic writers disenchanted by the Revolution can be generalized as a shift from radicalism to conservatism. There was some variation, spanning “disillusionment” or “new desperation,” and eventually “nostalgic sympathy for the Revolution” after Napoleon’s defeat (39-40). Although Mary Shelley was born in 1797, too late to observe the history of the Revolution itself, she did grow up in the time of Napoleon Bonaparte. The fear of events in France precipitating other uprisings and the string of French military victories seen to be spreading such rebellious ideas made the French Revolution “a

universal threat,” which meant that Shelley’s awareness of contemporary episodes would most likely have included education of the events preceding her own birth as well as the present fear of a Napoleonic invasion (39). Moreover, her intense connections to her parents’ generation and their writings ensured that she caught up on what she missed. Even her deceased mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, exercised influence as the young Mary read books on her mother’s grave.

The Novel and its Reception

The first challenge which Mary Shelley faced in writing *The Last Man* was how anyone could be reading an account of history at the end of the twenty-first century – a history which had yet to happen – and moreover the history of the last person alive, a state of things which would seem to necessitate there being no one left to read it. The chronologically far-removed setting seems to be more a function of distancing the apocalypse from the present, since the novel highlights no major advances in technology aside from advanced hot-air balloons; indeed, England seems barely changed at all. Still, *The Last Man*’s status as a found text requires explanation for how Lionel’s account exists years before it is written. To accomplish this, the novel positions itself in its prologue as a history-slash-prophecy. The narrator (ostensibly, though not necessarily, Mary Shelley) and her companion (presumed to be Percy Shelley, if the former is Mary) investigate the cave of the Sibyl while on holiday in Naples. Leaving their guides behind, they scramble without lamp or torch through the pitch-black caverns until they reach the central seat of the prophetess. Leaves and bark are strewn across the floor, in languages spanning vast years and geography – they are Sibylline leaves, whose writings contain a

prophecy. The author takes on the project of translating and assembling the pieces into a coherent document, which is the novel itself. The narrator of *The Last Man* is neither the Sibyl nor the author, however. The narrator is Lionel Verney, the one person alive on the face of the earth, who pens the history of humankind's demise as he sits in the empty ruins of Rome. However, that bleak scene is hundreds of pages away from the introduction. Before killing all but one of its characters, the novel first brings them all together.

Lionel and Perdita's father is friend to the king, Adrian's father, until irresponsible spending reduces him to a life of poverty. After the death of both of their parents and living as impoverished orphans for as long as they can remember, the siblings are transported into aristocratic life by Adrian on account of their fathers' friendship. The three of them become fast friends, and their group is soon joined by Adrian's sister Idris and the politically ambitious Raymond who nonetheless gives up his plans of reviving England's monarchy and claiming the crown for himself (for which he needs to marry the royal Idris) and instead marries Perdita, which frees up Idris to later marry Lionel despite her mother's strong objections. Lionel rescues Adrian from a period of madness induced by Adrian's rejection by Evadne, a Greek princess who falls in love with Raymond, and the group of five retreats to an idyllic life at Windsor full of talk, music, and eventually children as well. This idyllic existence ends when Raymond rejoins the political scene as the Lord Protector and then Evadne's resurfacing damages Raymond and Perdita's relationship, causing him and Adrian to leave England to fight for Greek independence. Raymond's capture and subsequent rescue induces Lionel, Perdita, and Clara (Perdita and Raymond's daughter) to travel to Greece, after which they join

Raymond in his campaign against Turkey. Travelling to Constantinople, Lionel finds Evadne on the battlefield, who utters a prophecy of doom as she dies. The plague, the agent of the apocalypse in the novel, first appears soon after at Constantinople. The Greek army arrives at the city to find it already emptied; when Raymond enters it alone despite his soldiers' fears, it explodes and he is crushed by debris. Perdita dies soon after, by suicide when Lionel tries to drag her from Raymond's grave.

Lionel and Clara return to England to a slowly escalating plague. Initially only a far-off phenomenon, it interferes with seafaring trade before entering England itself. When the Lord Protector Ryland (who has replaced Raymond) flees in cowardice, Adrian takes his place to guide England through its fall. He continues to hold this role throughout the rest of the novel through the stages of humankind's destruction – first as England's population declines; then, when invaders ineffectually fleeing the plague try to take over the country; and finally, as the last remnants of humanity travel in an ever-dwindling caravan trying to find some paradise in the Southern regions of the world. Other episodic events occur in the interim, introducing some characters and killing others – notably Idris and her mother, neither of whom dies of the plague. Lionel himself catches the plague but recovers, the only character to do so. Eventually the plague claims its last victim in the Alps, and only four people are left alive: Lionel, Adrian, Clara, and Lionel's son Evelyn. Evelyn then dies of a non-plague illness, and Adrian and Clara drown when the last three living souls are shipwrecked trying to sail to Raymond's grave. Lionel inhabits Rome for a time as he writes the history of humankind's last days, and then sets off on an Odyssey-like voyage with no destination and a dog as his only companion.

Despite its non-millennial pessimism, contemporary readers of *The Last Man* considered it as very supportive of what we now call Romantic ideals, complaining that it “merely mouthed the Romantic theories of Percy Shelley”; this perspective was probably skewed by the conception of Mary Shelley as a grief-stricken widow with no business writing about the apocalypse (Tichelaar 216). Critics had plenty of complaints about the book, calling it a “Raw-head-and-blood-bones” (*The Literary Magnet or Monthly Journal of Belles Lettres*), “a sickening repetition of horrors... sheer nonsense” (*The Literary Gazette, and the Journal of Belles Letters*), “the offspring of a diseased imagination, and of a most polluted taste” (*Monthly Review*), “the perpetration of her [Mary Shelley’s] stupid cruelties... most pitiful, and unimaginative,” and lacking “anything really sublime, or striking, or terrible” (*Blackwood’s*) (*The Last Man* 411-414). Even compliments come with qualification: the novel is called “an instance of strange misapplication of considerable talent” (*The Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres*), and “[bearing] the impress of genius, though perverted and spoiled by morbid affection” (*Monthly Review*) (McWhir 411-412).

Scholars both past and present both view the novel as a *roman à clef*, with this “little band of elect” as a re-creation of people in Mary Shelley’s life: Adrian is the embodiment of Percy Shelley; Lord Raymond, Byron; Perdita, Mary Shelley’s step-sister Claire Clairmont (and some of Shelley herself); Lionel Verney, Shelley herself; and other minor characters as Shelley’s children or public figures of the time (Mishra, Paley n.p.). Anne McWhir points out, however, that such delineation is far from simple and characters overlap in whom they represent (McWhir “Introduction” xx-xxi). But modern scholarship of the work is far removed from its early predecessors. Compliments of

genius come without qualification; McWhir calls it “an extraordinarily ambitious book” (McWhir xvi). The biographical element of the text is no longer viewed as the only way to read it – Richard Albright writes, “the long tradition of reading her fiction as almost entirely biographical is ultimately reductive” (Albright 119). Nor is it a tool to criticize its author for poorly disguising autobiography as fiction, and it is instead considered an essential piece of background knowledge to investigating the complex text. Sometimes the significance of different biographical elements is reconsidered or reworked, but even this is usually part of a larger argument rather than the subject of a paper on its own. *The Last Man* is a goldmine for modern criticism, a novel gone virtually unstudied for a century and rich with interwoven symbols, themes, and intense intertextuality. It is unsurprising that the body of scholarship encompasses a wide breadth of approaches, including biopolitics and the contagionism/anticontagionism debate (McWhir 2002, Wang 2011, Melville 2007), constructions of gender (Goldsmith 1993, Mellor 2002, Fisch 2003), conceptions of time (Albright 2009), theater and art (Wagner-Lawlor 2002), and politics (Sterrenberg 1978, Fisch 2003). However, the most common article on *The Last Man* assesses the book’s treatment of Romanticism – namely, whether it defends or rejects it. This subject is sometimes addressed on its own, yet often through the lens of one of the aforementioned topics. It is most often wound up with *The Last Man*’s politics since the French Revolution so politicized the apocalypse, and also because one’s opinion on the novel’s ultimate opinion of Romanticism largely determines whether it is totally antipolitical (Sterrenberg) or offers a critique with the possibility of progress (Fisch). Scholars line each side of the ring: Vijay Mishra, Morton D. Paley, and Robert Lance Snyder are three critics who have argued that humankind’s doom in *The Last Man* lacks

any explanation which could render it understandable or meaningful, and Anne McWhir and Lee Sterrenberg also argue that the text refutes Romantic ideals. Other scholars including Anne K. Mellor, Hartley Spratt, Mary Poovey, and Jean de Palacio (these last two referenced by Fuson Wang in her 2011 article) see the text as more optimistic. Steven Goldsmith notes that the novel has a thread of “obscured utopianism,” but only two authors I have found, Fuson Wang and Audrey Fisch, definitively write that *The Last Man* neither totally rejects nor accepts Romanticism, but instead takes a revisionary stance (Goldsmith 265).

The thesis that Mary Shelley rejects Romanticism is especially inviting given that some of these Romantic ideals belonged to Mary Shelley’s mother and father; the *roman à clef* autobiographical angle lends a sense of drama of a daughter’s intellectual independence. Sterrenberg demonstrates how Shelley takes the metaphors of “diseases and plagues – which previous writers had used as hopeful symbols of the revolutionary process” and reworks them into the “pessimistic and apocalyptic” context of a truly apocalyptic plague, thus undercutting the “meliorative political views of her parents’ generation” (Sterrenberg 328). The same holds true for Mary Shelley’s husband, Percy Shelley, author of the utopian *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Mary Shelley’s novel is distinctly non-millennial; in contrast, both first and second generation Romantics are known for producing a number of great works which “celebrated” the millennium or millennial apocalypse, such as Wordsworth’s *Prospectus to the Recluse* (1814) (Paley, “Apocalypse Without Millennium” n.p.). These works are often utopian, glorying in schemes for mankind’s improvement and viewing the French Revolution as the inception of such a change. William Godwin, Mary Shelley’s father, wrote in *Enquiry Concerning*

Political Justice (1793) that the “powers of the [human] mind” could “resist disease and even death” perhaps even to immortality (Sterrenberg 333-4). His vision of a “slow, natural progression to a rational, communal society, to an anarchistic millennium” places him solidly in the category of millennialist (Fulford 5).

Mary Shelley’s non-millennial apocalypse does diverge from much of the previous Romantic discourse on the subject, both first and second generation. The plague, previously a symbol of regeneration, is an inexplicable phenomenon with no rhyme or reason to its construction, and characters who attempt to impose justification or locate some millennium all fall short and are killed without fanfare by the same plague they fail to explain. Shelley’s plague lacks definition, reason, or pattern, and is as immune to explanation as treatment – as Robert Snyder characterizes it, a “grotesque enigma mocking all assumptions of order, meaning, purpose, and causality” (Snyder 436). Snyder uses the plague to demonstrate that Mary Shelley diverges from her father’s “rationalism” and her husband’s “perfectibilitarianism” (Snyder 438). However, other scholars find room for optimism. The text has a persistent cyclical aspect which creates a narrative of “alternative beginnings, of never-ending new births” (Mellor 144). Nor can the prominent role of the power of the imagination be ignored, especially given that Lionel essentially recreates the past through writing and becomes the “dreamer of eternity” (Spratt 536).

In my approach to *The Last Man* I posit that the text does not blindly follow or totally reject Romantic ideals; the lack of consensus and indeed directly opposed opinions from so many scholars is a strong indication that the novel itself is not one-sided. I argue that Mary Shelley sees Romantic ideals – optimism, the power of the imagination, self-

determination, and the ability to use nature and art to access a transcendent state of being – as relatively useless outside of their internal appeal. The external world is under the control of two systems, political and natural, which exercise more agency over humankind than humankind does over itself. Romantic ideals have no power to change this dynamic; nor is there any escape from these systems, although individual characters' powers do mitigate the situation through some reclamation of contextual agency. Certainly the French Revolution demonstrated that political systems will go their own way regardless of human intentions, and some critics have interpreted the plague as an embodiment of the Revolution. Romantics at first largely considered the French Revolution as a millennial force, or at least evidence of human progress; Mary Shelley's non-millennial novel critiques this early optimism. The plague is also the stuff of reinterpreted Romantic nature. The Romantics often saw nature as interacting with or even downplaying human agency, but Mary Shelley's is a darker take as she transforms the benevolent nature of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" into a more capricious and life-threatening force not dissimilar to that in her earlier novel *Frankenstein*. So Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* is a thorough critique of unfounded Romantic optimism; however, the novel's structure exerts a mitigating force on this condemnation. It proposes a very real possibility of rebirth and rebuilding for which Romantic ideals provide essential energy, with further suggests that these ideals *do* have value for human progress. Nor is this conflicted state unique to Mary Shelley's novel: darkness and doubt appear in other Romantic texts as well, meaning that *The Last Man* is less a departure from than a continuation of them.

My method begins with a thematic analysis of the search for Eden in the novel, in which the repeated failure to construct a pantisocratic idyll or otherwise locate or build Eden demonstrates characters' futile attempts to escape the agency-sapping political and natural systems. Then I move to intensive close-reading into the concepts of politics and nature in the novel, and show how political and natural language intersects with constructions of self-control and its extreme embodiment in the form of madness. In addition to direct description, assorted and seemingly disparate motifs also contribute to the lack of agency: sailing and ships, plays, and insects. I then examine how the novel assesses forms of power through comparing Lionel, Adrian, and Raymond. Each character's power echoes the *roman à clef* of a major Romantic figure and allows a limited reclamation of contextual agency, but the wielders remain under the control of political and natural systems. As mentioned, an analysis of the novel's cyclical structure mitigates the novel's pessimism by introducing the possibility of rebirth and making it impossible to conjecture the ultimate doom for its protagonist.

A brief comparative close reading of Shelley with the works of her circle, including William Godwin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron will further reveal that her doubts of Romantic ideals did not start with her but are rather part of a broader trend of each generation in turn shifting to a darker vision of the world, and one of non-millennialism. Finally, as the non-millennial apocalypse is the status quo for modern apocalyptic fiction, I will glance at how the Romantic apocalypse survives or is altered in 20th and 21st century.

The Search for Eden

Sometimes it seems as if every character in *The Last Man* has an idea of what paradise is, and how they'll get there. Adrian first lives in "gardens of delight and sheltered paths" when he believes Evadne loves him; when she spurns him, he turns to imagining a world without "death and sickness... hatred, tyranny, and fear," and claims that humankind can achieve it: "The choice is with us; let us will it, and our habitation becomes a paradise. For the will of man is omnipotent" (*TLM** 45, 76). In the midst of a plague exacerbated by warm temperatures, Lionel somehow believes they will find paradise by going south: "We must seek some natural Paradise, some garden of the earth, where our simple wants may be easily supplied, and the enjoyment of a delicious climate compensate for the social pleasures we have lost" (312). Raymond dreams in less explicitly Edenic terms; as Lord Protector, he aims "to render England one scene of fertility and magnificence" (106). These dreams of paradise echo William Godwin's rhetoric of human improvement, and also Percy Shelley's *Queen Mab* (1813) and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). On the most basic level, none of these characters' hoped-for paradises are achieved. The non-millennial outcome of *The Last Man* essentially critiques that Romantic dream: the optimism that the human race can achieve such heights, and that it has sufficient self-determination to make its dreams manifest.

One character who very explicitly and painfully displays this failure of Romantic ideal is the astronomer Merrival. Merrival's first appearance is in a conversation between himself, Lionel, and Ryland. Merrival predicts that, after a "hundred thousand years... the pole of the earth will coincide with the pole of the ecliptic... an universal spring will

* Page references to *The Last Man* (*TLM*) are to the Oxford World's Classics edition.

be produced, and the earth become a paradise” (220). He waxes eloquent to Idris about how this period of peace will be unfortunately followed by one of “earthly hell” (in an interesting reversal of the sequence of the millenarian apocalypse), undaunted by Ryland’s skepticism and contemptuous comments – which later prove all too accurate – that all the present company will be “underground” far before the occurrence of these events (ibid). Merrival’s charming optimism soon vanishes. His family dies at the hands of the plague, and his “visionary” perspective is replaced by a “delirium of excessive grief” (305).

On one level, Merrival’s and others’ failure to find paradise is strong evidence for *The Last Man*’s critique of Romantic ideals. On another, it demonstrates the inability of characters to escape the harsh reality of existence under the purview of two inescapable systems: the political, and the natural. Characters’ attempts to find paradise are essentially attempts to escape the control of these systems. This dynamic is also represented in the novel’s several partial, but never entire, constructions of pantisocracy.

Pantisocracy is Greek for “all of equal power” (“Pantisocracy”). In modern political terms, it is “a form of social organization in which all members are equal in social position and responsibility, usually also having property in common” or “a political doctrine advocating this” (“Pantisocracy, n.”). Historically, the term refers to a plan created by “Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey... and others” to emigrate to America and create such a “utopian society” along the Susquehanna River, in which inhabitants’ time would be split between practical work and leisurely philosophizing and writing (“Pantisocracy”). Pantisocracy can also be thought of as a version of “domesticating the millennium” by creating earthly paradise in miniature (Roe 89).

Spurred by “millenarian idealism” which the French Revolution first inspired and then disappointed, pantisocracy expressed a desire to escape “the increasingly violent arena of political activity” to a “community based around family and private attachments,” a drive mirrored by Sterrenberg’s observation that nature became a “haven” from politics in a period of “post-revolutionary despair” (Roe 96, Sterrenberg 325). Nicholas Roe pointedly highlights the inherent paradox of the notion, which drew its “theoretical backgrounds” from Thomas Paine and Adam Smith, and its “motive to virtue” from Godwin’s *Political Justice*: a comfortable, egalitarian farming society would actually require a lot of capital and goods to be feasible (Roe 90-93). The simple life is not so simple at all. In this sense, it is also an attempt to escape from nature: the pantisocratic vision sees nature only as a haven and fails to take into account the harsh reality of what survival in nature actually entails.

Pantisocracy appears in multiple partial incarnations in *The Last Man*, despite never being explicitly mentioned by name. It gradually approaches but never achieves its full character. Its first incarnation is Lionel and Perdita’s impoverished life, living in a cottage with Lionel poaching game for most of their food. This first pantisocratic representation is a very partial one. It has the aspect of living in nature, but none of the intellectual or social connections and none of the comfort that Coleridge supposed he would have. The next incarnation is a little closer, with the added element of an intellectual existence. Occupying the cottage vacated by his sister and so poor that “peasants would have disdained [his] scanty fare,” Lionel occupies his hours with “poetry” and “metaphysics” and mooning over Idris (*TLM* 77-78). The social aspect is added when Adrian and Idris begin regular visits to Lionel, although the hierarchical structure of their

interactions (with the royal siblings more wealthy and distinctly not sharing Lionel's living conditions) means the pantisocratic image is still incomplete (80). The main cast of characters – Lionel, Idris, Raymond, Perdita, and Adrian – does finally reach an egalitarian existence with respect to each other when they all live together at Windsor, by virtue of the poorer Lionel and Perdita respectively marrying the wealthier Idris and Raymond. Their “happy circle” achieves a utopian existence as they spend entire days “under the leafy covert of the forest with our books and music”: “nor were we ever weary of talking of the past or dreaming of the future. Jealousy and disquiet were unknown among us; nor did a fear or hope of change ever disturb our tranquillity. Others said, we might be happy—we said—We are” (90).

However, their idyllic life is only possible with very non-pantisocratic aristocratic levels of wealth; and while neither “fear or hope of change” ever disturbs this existence, the call of politics – *actual* change – does as it draws Raymond back to the stage of ambition to become Lord Protector, a development which leads to the near-destruction of his marriage and his eventual death. Ryland, Raymond's political rival and advocate of republicanism, performs a similar maneuver. Ryland plans to settle somewhere in the American west and even goes “so far as to make several journies far westward... for the purpose of choosing the site of his new abode,” but political “ambition” draws him back away from his pantisocratic inclinations (241). Shelley uses these partial representations of pantisocracy to critique its feasibility. The paradise which it projects cannot exist in its entirety: some element must be sacrificed, whether comfort, society or simplicity. For example, when Lionel lives alone and eats ludicrously small amounts in his cottage, Shelley critiques the hypocrisy which ostensibly promotes a simpler, less materialistic

way of living but actually requires a surfeit of goods to avoid a Spartan existence (Roe 90-91). However, she still acknowledges the notion's appeal. The image of life and Windsor especially is described in appealing terms that acknowledge the magic of everyday life, surrounded by nature, filled with intellectualism and conversation with a small social circle. While not a completely accurate pantisocracy, life at Windsor does succeed in creating a localized millennium, and its appeal and sway over the mind is undeniable. Still, pantisocracy itself is portrayed as unfeasible.

Pantisocracy never does manage to achieve its full potential in the novel, though it does manage to get close in two more instances. When the plague has devastated England's population, the necessity for a cooperative and subsistence existence creates egalitarianism:

Poor and rich were now equal... It was a sight for the lovers of the human race to enjoy... Youths, nobles of the land, performed for the sake of mother or sister, the services of menials with amiable cheerfulness. They went to the river to break the ice, and draw water: they assembled on foraging expeditions, or axe in hand felled the trees for fuel. The females received them on their return with the simple affectionate welcome known before only to the lowly cottage – a clean hearth and bright fire; the supper ready cooked by beloved hands. (*TLM* 309)

Here, pantisocracy exists in almost all its elements: an simple and egalitarian existence with precious and strong familial relationships, even with a river to serve in place of the Susquehanna. Value is accorded to humble joys, and an economy levelled by the plague erases material class differences. However, the intellectual aspect is missing, along with tranquility. The affluence which allowed the wealthy their “exalting and refined pursuits”

is gone, and the former aristocrats no longer philosophize but, “with diminished numbers and care-fraught hearts, huddled over a fire, grown selfish and groveling through suffering” (ibid).

The final incarnation of pantisocracy, and probably the closest it ever comes to completion, does not appear until after the plague has claimed its final victim. The plague does not actually leave Lionel as the last man, but stops with Lionel, Adrian, Lionel’s son Evelyn, and Raymond and Perdita’s daughter Clara still alive. The four of them experience “days of joy... O days replete with beatitude, days of loved society... talk, thought enchaining, made the hours fly—O that we had lived thus for ever and ever!... true philosophy taught us reason” (429). With food plentiful and every building of the world available to them, they take up residence at the Vice-Roy’s palace in Milan. A disease separate from the plague and then a shipwreck eventually take Lionel’s companions from him, but while they live, the four of them exist in near-perfect happiness – the last four human beings alive achieve virtual utopia. Only that fact, that they are the last four human beings alive, mars their bliss. Lionel writes, “There were few books that we dared read; few, that did not cruelly deface the painting we bestowed on our solitude, by recalling combinations and emotions never more experienced by us” (431). With that, the verdict is cast. Pantisocracy is acknowledged as having power over the human mind as an appealing dream, but no more. Like other characters’ dreams of paradise it can never, even in the most extreme context, become a reality. Perhaps the closest anyone ever comes to paradise is Lionel at the end of the novel, with the whole world his garden of Eden; but it is a twisted Eden, with everyone else already fallen.

The impossible search for Eden through pantisocratic dreams or otherwise demonstrates that there is no way to swap harsh realities for paradise; except, perhaps, through death. The next section uses close reading to explore the exact nature of those realities within the novel, and how they essentially control the entire human race.

Close Reading: Politics, Nature, and Control

While reading the novel, it is impossible not to notice the recurrence of certain unusual phrases used to describe individuals' actions or psychological states. Many of these phrases are political, noteworthy for using language associated with government and power when those subjects are not actually on the table. Examples include (italics mine):

All the time she could *command* she spent in solitude. (TLM 15)

My passions are my *masters*; my smallest impulse my *tyrant*. (152)

This was not altogether the fact... while the *slave* of pride, she fancied that she sacrificed her happiness to the immutable principle. (293)

I had delivered myself up to the *tyranny* of anguish. (456)

Meanwhile, other psychological language makes use of natural imagery (italics mine).

His praises were so many *adder's stings* infixed in my vulnerable breast. (23)

A moral *tempest* had wrecked our richly freighted vessel. (155)

His voice had recovered its bland tone, but a *dark cloud* still hung on his features. (196)

This natural-psychological imagery seems almost commonplace at first, but reveals its significance when examined in conjunction with the role nature plays in the text: as something humankind believes they have dominated, when they actually have not; as a

source of Romantic beauty and solace; and as part and parcel of the all-killing plague. Political-psychological and natural-psychological language alike pervade the text, so the meaning of one cannot be determined without also explaining the presence of the other. To complicate the issue, other symbolic language recurs which cannot be easily slotted into one of these two categories: religious language, especially of sacrifice; life as a naval journey; settings or periods of time likened to theater performances; and humankind's repeated comparison to insects. Mary Shelley's web of words is as intricate as it is extensive, and unravelling the web is a multi-step process.

The first step is to recognize political-psychological and natural-psychological language as the primary carriers of meaning, and also their relationship to each other. They are the primary carriers of meaning because, of all the repeated language, theirs is the most directly reflected by the novel's context and plot. The shadow of the French Revolution already gives the apocalyptic novel a political cast; and politics is the business of Raymond, and later Adrian, as first one then the other negotiates for and holds the position of Lord Protector. How to manage policy in a dying world is an inquiry which the novel raises, and then addresses as it becomes Adrian's prerogative after Ryland abandons the Protectorate in cowardice (244). An entire article could easily be devoted to the political machinations of the novel: the way in which England's abolished monarchy functions more like an oligarchy, Ryland's failed attempt to abolish rank and establish a republic, how Adrian's taking up the post of Lord Protector practically re-establishes the monarchy. (Such an investigation, however, would require extensive and sophisticated knowledge of the historical politics of Europe, Shelley, and her circle. I do not intend to attempt it here.) Nature is no less important, suffusing the text as backdrop

and actor. Beautiful natural imagery is juxtaposed with the chilling knowledge that nature is also the source of the apocalyptic plague. The plague itself is considered part of nature and becomes almost a character in the novel, and certainly an agent. Nature also plays an important role in the text's structure as the novel begins and ends with Lionel, alone, inhabiting a rural environment. He starts life outside of civilization, and civilization's ebb leaves him there at the novel's close. Cycles of seasons become important markers, especially once the plague hits and winter is the only palliative to its virulence.

The two initially seem to contradict each other – how could politics and nature be two sides of the same coin? – but the picture becomes clearer if politics is considered to be a system of human interaction, and nature as a system of the non-human environment including flora and fauna, weather, landscape, and disease. In the political system, human beings constantly push and pull on each other in an inextricable web of reactions to one another, many of them involuntary, which severely limit the agency of each individual person. The interactions of a family, for example, are domestic politics, and religious language can also be considered a subcategory of political-psychological language. Perdita's relationship with Raymond is often described in such terms: "She erected a temple for him in the depth of her being, and each faculty was a priestess vowed to his service" (92). Another, powerful passage in the novel positions Adrian as a religious sacrifice to mankind. Recently recovered from madness, Adrian stands overlooking a valley, and pledges himself to the cause "of bestowing blessings" on humankind:

His voice trembled, his eyes were cast up, his hands clasped, and his fragile person was bent, as it were, with excess of emotion. The spirit of life seemed to

linger in his form, as a dying flame on an altar flickers on the embers of an accepted sacrifice. (76)

Notice that both of these religion-inflected statements imply that the speaker, in establishing a religious relationship, gives up a good deal of her or his personal agency. The rest of the recurrent symbols – life as a sailing ship, theater or plays, and insects – require an additional element to reconcile the Sybilline leaves into a pattern: that of self-control, without which a person can have no agency.

Self-control, politically-phrased as self-command, is a huge theme throughout *The Last Man*. The very first page of the narrative after the introduction brings it up, as Lionel recounts his family history: “My father . . . left his bark of life to be impelled by these winds, without adding reason as the rudder, or judgement as the pilot for the voyage” (9). Lionel’s father, the reader soon finds out, is a man of “wit and imagination,” and of high status until his addiction to gambling and debauchery causes him to leave London in dishonor (9-11). He dies in obscurity, survived by his widow and two young children (12-13). Ironically, while his son Lionel will become the last man, the father himself is a “lost man” (12).

Nor is he the only character for whom lack of self-control is the Achilles’ heel and cause of destruction. Evadne dies because she is unable to control her “hopeless love” for Raymond; Raymond, because he becomes fatalistic after hearing Evadne’s dooming prophecy and rushes alone into Constantinople despite wiser counsel (181). He tells Lionel, “the separation at hand is one over which I have *no control* . . . the days are already counted” (*italics mine*) (187). Raymond also fails to control his political ambition. It tempts him from the idyll of Windsor, and it (combined with his uncontrollable

depression) impels him into Constantinople when he knows it to be plague-ridden. Unable to deal with the “inconsolable grief” of Raymond’s death, his wife Perdita dies soon after him by suicide when taken from his grave (215). Idris for her part fears uncontrollably for the safety of her children, and she worries herself into bad health and eventual death: “anxiety... never for a moment slept in her heart,” and “the very soul of fear had taken its seat in her heart” like “the vulture that fed on the heart of Prometheus,” making her “thin and pale” until she dies of nothing more than cold temperatures during a journey by carriage (286, 303-4, 354). Crucially, not one of these characters actually dies of the plague – an odd coincidence, unless the underlying cause of lack of self-control unites them.

If these characters do not have control over their own actions even to the point of death, where does that agency revert to? Close reading points to the systems of politics and nature. Human beings’ actions and feelings are controlled by these two things: their interactions with other human beings, and the earth they inhabit. Compared to the influence of these two overarching structures, a human’s control over his or her own feelings and actions is minimal. A helpful comparison is thinking of any politician who wants to enact reform, but due to the political system is forced to spend all of her or his time raising money and campaigning: the system, not the politician, exerts the most influence over the politician’s actions. Alternatively, the decision to take a certain trip can hinge on the state of the weather; more seriously, a natural disaster can deprive a person of life, family, property, or all three, in an instant. The constant application of political-psychological and natural-psychological language to characters throughout the text strongly suggests that these external forces operate in extreme versions of themselves,

not only influencing decisions, but controlling characters' psychology and actually possessing more agency than the characters themselves.

Take the above political-psychological quotations. The political system manifests itself in how certain reactions to other people control characters against their conscious wishes; physical actions and psychological states are largely externally induced, rather than internally created. Perdita spends "all the time she could command" by herself (15). Since the entire existence of a human being is made up of segments of time, the presence of time which a human cannot control already indicates a certain amount of agency given up to other sources. Since Perdita uses the time she *does* control to avoid interaction with human beings, the time she does not control is therefore made up of that interaction – so, by definition, Perdita relinquishes a portion of her agency to the political system. Her husband Raymond is also particularly prey to domestic politics. When he gives up the position of Lord Protector, he does so because his involuntary reaction to Perdita, falling in love with her, leaves him no choice in the matter. Raymond characterizes his lack of control by casting his head and heart in a hierarchy of political power: "“But here,’ and he struck his heart with violence, ‘here is the rebel... this over-ruling heart... while one fluttering pulsation remains, I am its slave’” (64). (The tyrant and slave dynamic, as seen in the last two quotations above, is a fairly common description.) The political-psychological language casts the heart as an independent political agent, demonstrating how Raymond is controlled by how Perdita pulls at him, and their interaction essentially forces him to give up his ambitions.

It is ironic, or perhaps appropriate, that Raymond loses so much agency to the political system, seeing as his own charisma triggers the web to pull powerfully on others

as well. When first introduced as a character, Raymond's appearance is described in political-psychological terms, with "lips which to the female eyes were the very throne of beauty and love," and a personality which "conquered" Lionel's dislike for him (48). These characters' reactions to Raymond are, like Raymond's own love for Perdita, involuntary responses induced by reactions to other people: the political system at work. The use of political-psychological language significantly transfers agency from individual characters to the psychological forces acting upon them – but more than that, implies the characters never held that agency in the first place.

Even the descriptions which lack explicit natural or political language often give agency not to the character, but to the forces acting upon them. When Idris worries herself to death, she is not the agent of that worry; rather, "anxiety" is in control as it "[takes] its seat in her heart" and never sleeps (286, 303-4). The physical symptoms of the anxiety are likewise described as actors: "sleep and appetite fled from her, a slow fever preyed upon her veins" (317). Idris is not in command of herself. Her interpersonal context – that is, her position in human politics, in this case her connection to her children – produces anxiety, controlling her actions, and the natural symptoms act on her body of their own accord.

The natural-psychological language operates in the same fashion. When praises for Adrian affect Lionel like "so many adder's stings," it is evidence of both the political and natural systems: political because it involves human interaction, natural because it produces an instinctive, animal-like reaction in him over which Lionel has no control (155). When Raymond's emotional affair with Evadne wrecks his marriage and career all at once, its likeness to a "vessel" sunk in a "tempest" correctly characterizes the situation

outside the purview of any human agency, like a ship in a rough storm that cannot help but sink (155). Though the situation itself lies within the political-psychological realm of human interaction, the metaphor reminds the reader not only of the lack of agency but also the natural impetus behind emotions and emotionally-motivated decisions. (Love in particular belongs to both the political and natural-psychological systems as an agency drain; it is also heavily linked to madness, which is the most extreme form of agency loss.) The final quotation – “a dark cloud still hung on his features” – also demonstrates how external effects override agency (196).

It may seem that these examples, though using natural-psychological language, actually refer to the effects of the political system. However, they do differ slightly: political-psychological language is more effective at reassigning agency from the individuals to the psychological forces or emotions affecting them, and natural-psychological language is a reminder that such a loss of agency is due to humankind's place within the natural system. Humankind's place *within* as opposed to *without* the natural system is an important one, because it renders the race vulnerable to that system; for instance, to death by plague. An ecological reading might conclude that the plague destroys humankind as and because humankind once did the same to nature. Although the time period of *The Last Man*'s writing makes this unlikely, the novel does express awareness that humankind is arrogant in its assumptions of mastery over the earth. The plague, which decimates mankind but leaves nature and non-human animals untouched, is then still a karmic response. As the plague becomes an increasing presence in the novel, it is identified as an embodiment of nature and also a free agent. It is personified

innumerable times, and its identification as female further suggests that it is the Hyde to Mother Nature's Jekyll:

I see plague! She has invested his form, is incarnate in his flesh, has entwined herself with his being, and blinds his heaven-seeking eyes... We no longer struggle with her. We have forgotten what we did when she was not... Plague sat paramount the while, and laughed in scorn. (316)

Some references uncannily echo Lionel's own tendency to be described as treading upon the earth (such as on page 25 in the novel): "unerasable footsteps of disease over the fertile and cherished soil," "Our enemy, like the Calamity of Homer, trod our hearts, and no sound was echoed from her steps" (307, 315). The parallel sets up the plague not only as the enemy of humankind, but as Lionel's personal adversary – which makes sense, given he lives in a world with no humans available to fill the role.

Still other references to nature combine the natural-psychological with political-psychological language: "while the earth preserved her monotonous course, I dwelt with ever-renewing wonder on her antique laws" (308). This hybrid language demonstrates the interrelatedness of the natural and political systems; how they are, as mentioned, two sides of the same coin. Included in this category are any references to the plague as "enemy," because such references characterize her as a political military adversary, as well as any which refer to positions of power or relative hierarchy: for example, "Plague sat paramount the while" above (277, 316). The use of hybrid psychological language to create a personified plague emphasizes that the two systems actively claim agency over the human race.

This connection is especially clear when self-control crops up in its most extreme form of absence: madness. Characters go mad, or seem to go mad, fairly frequently throughout the course of *The Last Man*. Sometimes madness is used to describe characters who simply lose control of an extreme emotion. Such is the case with the first mention of madness in the book when Lionel, convinced Adrian's father wronged his own father and angered by the peoples' admiration of the royal son, is "driven half mad" (23). Other times, characters driven by excess emotion – often love, or unrequited love – actually go insane, such as when Adrian temporarily loses his mind after romantic rejection by Evadne. Lionel wonders, "Was there indeed anarchy in the sublime universe of Adrian's thoughts, did madness scatter the well-appointed legions, and was he no longer the lord of his own soul?" (43). This particular sample of political-psychological language is especially clear in illustrating the loss of self-control: as surely as a defeated general loses command of his forces, Adrian's agency is held by the political system, not by himself. The process of going insane is likewise described as a military conflict: "fortitude and agony divided the throne of his mind. Soon, alas! was one to conquer" (46).

The various other symbols mentioned – sailing, plays, and insects – which before seemed disparate, all unify to further support the theory that the political and natural systems hold sway over humankind. There are too many examples of sailing to count in the text, so I will simply cite here one which is fairly representative:

Gasping, not daring to name our hopes, yet full even to the brim with intense expectation, we stood, as a ship-wrecked sailor stands on a barren rock islanded by the ocean, watching a distant vessel, fancying now it nears, and then again that it is bearing from sight. (295)

The sailing metaphor pulls from the biography: Percy Shelley loved sailing, and drowned in a sailing accident. In the novel, his reincarnation Adrian dies along with Clara in the same way. Since a sailor controls neither the weather overhead nor the waves beneath the craft, sailing provides an apt metaphor for how each individual person is subjected to inescapable outside forces – in the novel, the political and natural systems – and has only as much personal agency remaining as those systems do not claim for themselves. A sailor can only reach the shore safely if the weather wills it. Recall the quotation from the beginning of this section: “A moral tempest had wrecked our richly freighted vessel” (155). Given agency, Raymond would supposedly choose to keep his trust with Perdita (perhaps while managing to see Evadne as well) and not give up the protectorate and all his projects for the good of mankind; but the political system is the sea on which he sails, and it decides to sink him.

Theater imagery appears frequently throughout *The Last Man*, and likewise represents lack of agency. In its most basic form, it appears in the form of the word “scene”: any period of time, any location, any event in the novel is fair game to be called a scene, which occurs around 120 times in the novel. A fairly standard example is, “the scene of all my hopes” (41). Frequently, the word is accompanied by other words or phrases which extend the metaphor: “the gay scene, whose actors,” or “Yes, I will witness the last scene of this drama” (38, 64). Less frequently, the metaphor becomes deeply explicit: “Farewell to the well-trod stage; a truer tragedy is enacted on the world’s ample scene, that puts to shame mimic grief: to high-bred comedy, and the low buffoon, farewell! – Man may laugh no more” (322). The only actual play in the novel is *Macbeth*, which Lionel attends in plague-stricken London. Though at first it serves as an escape

from awful reality, the play's many deaths too closely echo the plague's toll. The "inferior actor" becomes "excellent" because the lines he speaks are, in essence, truth; and in the audience, "a burst of despair was echoed from every lip" (282-283). In the context of self-control, the actors generally have very little. An actors' every move and line is predetermined, and though he or she can interpret the script, the end of the play is already written. The author of the play of life, the drama of the world, is supposed to be God – and would be, if this were a millennial apocalypse; but this performance is non-millennial. No divine director calls out the lines. If an author does exist, it is Lionel, a poor god indeed.

Insects are the grittiest of the symbols, enacting some of the gruesome shock-value not dissimilar to cinematic gore. Insects appear only a few times in the novel, but each time stand out in direct comparisons to human beings. Politicians are compared to "ten thousand hives of swarming bees," a party broken up by news of the plague to "summer-flies scattered by rain," the movements of the remaining living humans as ants around "an anthill immediately after its destruction... running hither and thither in search of their lost companions" (58, 245, 316). The politician Ryland, after abandoning his post as Lord Protector, holes himself up with "piles of food laid up in useless superfluity" only to be "discovered dead and half-devoured by insects" (319). Not only does Ryland demonstrate the utter uselessness of resistance, the useless food stockpile represents the futility of all humankind's planning for the future – and his body eaten by insects, how man is sunk so low in the great chain of life. After becoming the last man, Lionel finds a vacant cottage with food on the table:

In truth it was a death feast! The bread was blue and mouldy; the cheese lay in a heap of dust. I did not dare examine the other dishes; a troop of ants passed in a double line across the table cloth; every utensil was covered with dust, with cobwebs; and myriads of dead flies. (454)

The insects here play a double role. They take from Lionel the role of eating food prepared by other human hands, and the many dead flies are representative of the human dead. In drawing an equivalence of humans and insects in each of these instances, Mary Shelley places human beings firmly within the system of nature, and so subject to its control – if it wishes, it can wipe them out with a plague as easily as swatting flies. And it does. Humans no longer occupy the middle of the celestial ladder between God and the worms, but occupy the same rung as the flies and have a comparable amount of agency.

The systems of politics and nature are pervasive, and inescapable. Characters try to escape politics through nature and rural living, even as some of Mary Shelley's contemporaries did, but find it impossible – just as Raymond is drawn back to politics from the idyllic Windsor, proving the inescapable nature of the political system. Escape from nature is equally impossible, as the pervasive natural-psychological language reveals her hold over the human psyche. Pantisocracy attempts to reap the benefits of nature without an accompanying respect for its destructive force. Romantics, as mentioned previously, do acknowledge the power of nature and its ability to make a person feel small; Mary Shelley's nature also does this, but by a darker route. Her nature is capricious, and can be malicious; when Lionel attempts to feed a baby goat with “a handful of fresh grass,” he is attacked by its sire and nearly devolves into a destructive

rage himself (459-460). Spring and all its flowers, “sunshine, and plenty” is also “companion” to the deadly plague (316).

As with some other apocalyptic or scientific cautionary tales, there seems to be a lesson embedded in all of this of humankind’s hubris. Nature, as demonstrated, holds dominion over humankind; and what agency she does not claim is eclipsed by the limitations people have to endure in dealing with each other. And yet, since humankind has grown and constructed grand projects and even more ambitious dreams – such as Raymond’s seemingly endless pool of schemes for the species’ improvement – people imagine themselves as masters of the earth. On the first page of the main narrative, Lionel describes the English earth as “subdued to fertility” by the “labours” of his countrymen. He asserts, “So true it is, that man’s mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man, and that Nature herself was only his first minister” (9). The power of the human imagination, that Romantic ideal, proves futile throughout the novel as the “first minister” reclaims the throne for herself. Humankind’s powerlessness before nature and politics – demonstrated by the insects and other symbols, and the political and natural-psychological language – all mock the Romantic ideal of self-determination; and without self-determination, the other ideals ring hollow. Optimism seems foolish; imagination becomes limited to the mental realm, without any ability to influence the actual world; and an aspiration to transcendence farther away than ever.

Yet, Mary Shelley does not completely reject these beliefs. Her characters still hold individual power which allows for a recovery, albeit a limited one, of contextual agency, which recovers some hope for the Romantic ideals along with it.

Power

While the political and natural systems empty out agency for the humankind in the novel, characters' individual forms of power allows some restricted reclamation. Characters' powers originate from either the political or natural system and give that character contextual agency *within* that system, but no agency *over* the system itself. Raymond's charisma, for example, enables him to operate at strength within the political system (he has great ability to influence other people), but he is still prey to the system itself (he himself can also be greatly influenced). The recovery of some personal agency does modify the novel's bleakness, even though how that agency is dwarfed by that held by the political and natural systems still reads as the dominant factor. Critics like Sterrenberg have read characters' deaths as proof of Mary Shelley claiming the failure of their beliefs. Similarly, I look at this limited power's failure to generate more than just contextual agency as a further critique of that ideal of self-determination. It is also a critique of the power of imagination, as characters envision vivid goals which their power is then far inadequate to make manifest.

Morton Paley also examines Romanticism and power in *The Last Man* as a "search for the actuation of true power" through reconciliation of "knowledge and power." Lionel expresses power, but it is only the power of "brute force," and he loses it when he enters civilization and gains knowledge. Adrian likewise is described as having power, but not knowledge. Lord Raymond has both, but lacks the self-discipline to "continue long to do so," and dies. None of the novel's three main protagonists succeed in coming into the true Romantic form of power, which Paley uses as evidence of the novel's critique of the "Romantic ethos" (Paley n.p.).

Paley's assessment gave me the idea to assess the power of Adrian, Raymond, and Lionel according to my own close reading, in which I find these three characters' powers inadequate to the task of overcoming the political and natural systems. Lionel's power is a natural power. Adrian's power is political: it is of persuasion, and it is a pure power, devoid of violence or corruption, based in logic and goodness shining out of him. While Raymond's power is also political and likewise allows him to influence other individuals, his ability is as mentioned founded rather on charisma and ambition, and it carries a military flavor as well. Of course, Adrian and Raymond both represent major Romantic figures through *roman à clef*: Adrian is Percy Shelley and Byron is Lord Raymond, and it is easy to see how the biographies of the source individuals influence the characters. Adrian is an idealization of Mary Shelley's deceased husband, and Raymond shares Byron's romantic (lowercase "r") appeal and military involvement. The *roman à clef* reading has been done and this essay will not linger over it, but it is significant that the two characters each represent a major Romantic figure. Mary Shelley critiques Romantic ideals by giving these characters significant power still inadequate to attain personal agency, and the *roman à clef* gives an extra bite.

Lionel's power is introduced with his initial characterization as a rough and uncouth shepherd inclined to poaching and violence. He is purely physical being, "practiced to feats of strength" and "tall and muscular" (*TLM* 18, 25). Comparative to Lionel's "tall and muscular" stature, Adrian's "tall and slim" form indicates that the latter's power is political and civilized compared to Lionel's natural force: "I was rough as the elements, unlearned as the animals I tended," as he later describes himself (25, 14). The association of Lionel's physical power with nature and the earth is emphasized by

the repeated description of his steps upon the ground. His “step was firm with conscious power,” and he is a “ruffian that trod the earth” (15). When Lionel passes into civilization, he enters “the demesne of civilization” through a gate and “trod [his] native soil” as opposed to wild earth (27). The transition necessitates Lionel sacrifice his power, since the power itself is the antithesis of civilization: Lionel is “unlearned,” following only nature’s “one law... that of the strongest,” with which he wages “war against civilization” (14, 19).

Upon entering the civilized realm, Lionel seems to gain none of the interpersonal powers similar to Adrian or Raymond’s. He spends a good deal of time studying, but his philosophical ramblings are random and contradictory. Interpersonally, or in other words, politically, he is catastrophically useless. He attempts to save Perdita from a lonely life lingering over Raymond’s grave, and she commits suicide. He tries to protect Adrian by running for the position of Lord Protector himself but fails, and Adrian accuses him with the same word as Perdita – “Unkind!” (213, 253). He tries to rescue the innocent Juliet, a side-character previously introduced from the evil prophet, and is captured himself. He only escapes when Juliet saves him; she herself cannot escape because the prophet holds her child (387-93). The reader later learns that the prophet kills Juliet and her child before committing suicide himself (406-7). Lionel repeatedly tries and fails to persuade others, and act as a leader. He is unable to persuade his troop to return and help Adrian at Versailles, and later he “objected the dangers of the ocean” but is unable to “refuse” Adrian and Clara their desire to sail to Raymond’s grave in Greece – a decision which leads to Adrian and Clara’s deaths (402, 439-40). The moment of their deaths, perhaps the final moment of all human civilization, signals the return of Lionel’s natural power.

He fights the ocean waters and survives, regaining dry land, his step upon which is the symbol of his strength. Lionel's ability to operate with strength within the natural system, and his total ineptitude within the political system, demonstrates that his power comes from the natural system; only there does he recover some agency.

While Lionel's power is natural and physical, Adrian's is purely political and non-physical. It is spiritual, and also informed by the wisdom and persuasive power of the Greek orators whose busts decorate his library (27). He is compared to Jesus in the depiction with "morning sunbeams tinged with gold his silken hair, and spread light and glory over the beaming countenance," Moses by bringing from Lionel's "rocky heart" the waters of "affection," and Daniel in that his "smile would have tamed a hungry lion" and that he domesticates *Lion-el* (26-27). Lionel describes that process through political-psychological language: "his vivacity, intelligence, and active spirit of benevolence, completed the *conquest*," "I felt *subject* to him; and all my boasted pride and strength were *subdued* by the honeyed accents of this blue-eyed boy" (italics mine) (26-7). Two quotations in particular identify Adrian's persuasive and intellectual abilities as his source of power:

'Man but rush against' his breast, and it would have conquered his strength; but the might of his smile would have tamed a hungry lion, or cause a legion of armed men to lay their weapons at his feet. (27)

'This,' I thought, 'is power! Not to be strong of limb, hard of heart, ferocious, and daring; but kind, compassionate and soft.' (29)

It seems that Adrian has the power which Lionel lacks extremely: political power over other men. He even has the power to stand between desperate armies and, to a man, get

them to not only stop their attack, but unite in a spirit of brotherhood: “On either side the bands threw down their arms, even the veterans wept, and our party held out their hands to their foes, while a gush of love and deepest amity filled every heart” (303). The episode is impressive; but it is also dubious. No one person, no matter if they are the heir to Cato himself, could stand between two armies and get them not only to stand down, but start weeping and come together like repentant sinners. If true, the instance proves a great reclamation of agency in the political context; however, Lionel’s narrative bias idealizes Adrian throughout the narrative, and seems to be at work here as well.

Moreover, Adrian dies at the hand of nature by drowning, proving that any agency Adrian’s political power is contextual, and only useful within that system. Adrian is still at the mercy of the natural system, as proved by his death, and even the political system, demonstrated by the episode wherein unrequited love for Evadne causes his temporary madness. Power originating from a system does not allow power over that system, or any other.

Raymond’s power is also political, yet carries a different vibe from Adrian’s. If Adrian is the classical orator, Raymond is Caesar, or Napoleon: charismatic, ambitious, and military. His charisma is presented in how he quickly overcomes Lionel’s dislike for him: “Wit, hilarity, and deep observation were mingled in his talk, rendering every sentence that he uttered as a flash of light. He soon conquered my latent distaste” (48). His ambition, mingled with pride, is likewise spelled out early in the novel. Noble but poor and unable to acquire the respect he desires, he leaves England to fight in the Greek wars, and coming back suddenly inherits a fortune (39-40). When suddenly acquired wealth causes an accompanying increase in veneration,

His proud heart rebelled against this change. In what was the despised Raymond not the same? If the acquisition of power in the shape of wealth caused this alteration, that power should they feel as an iron yoke. Power therefore was the aim of all his endeavors; aggrandizement the mark at which he forever shot. In open ambition or close intrigue, his end was the same – to attain the first station in his own country. (40)

Of course, Raymond temporarily gives up his ambition to marry Perdita, but the draw of power eventually proves too great. He becomes Lord Protector and is initially successful before he spirals into vice, echoing the demise of Lionel's father. His political downfall and eventual death from fatalistic depression are both the result of psychological-political interactions with Evadne. Raymond's political power allows him to soar high in the world of human politics, but the system itself takes him out.

Lionel's physical abilities, natural and allowing him to operate at strength within that system, necessitate an accompanying weakness in political power. Adrian's political power is balanced by his physical weakness, and even his power is too idealized to be believable; moreover, even his political abilities do not allow him to operate with impunity in civilization, as when his unrequited love for Evadne drives him mad for a time. Raymond's political power does not seem to be accompanied by any natural bodily deficiency, but he fails to exercise agency over his own actions, and the political system easily dispatches him. All these characters possess considerable power which gains them contextual agency, and yet none of them are able to successfully have agency over their own fates because their powers come from the very systems which control them. The political and natural systems administer all of human existence; and while

power originating in these systems can allow an individual to operate at strength within one system or the other, the system itself still determines the structure within which that power can operate: it still exerts control.

While a close reading of the novel totally negates individual agency and criticizes Romantic optimism, the power of the imagination, and especially self-determination, characters' powers provide some modification of the novel's rejection of Romantic ideals by allowing a limited reclamation of contextual agency. As I will explore in the next section, Mary Shelley modifies the novel's darkness even further with a cyclical narrative structure, suggesting the possibility of rebirth and the endurance of Romantic ideals.

Narrative Structure

As previously mentioned, *The Last Man's* narrative structure diverges from that of other contemporary apocalyptic and "last man" tales. The concept of a last man was introduced far before Shelley used it, and not only the idea but also the title appears over and over again. In choosing the title *The Last Man* and thus aligning the book ostensibly with a subject already popular, Shelley purposefully creates a certain expectation which she then breaks. The aforementioned "Last Man" texts are mainly concerned with the sublime effects of their grand imagery, and start their works with little or no prelude to the action of the apocalypse itself. Byron begins with a "dream... The bright sun was extinguish'd"; Campbell with "All worldly shapes shall melt in gloom,/The Sun himself must die"; de Grainville's work with a "Celestial Spirit" speaking of "the last ages of earth" (Byron *ll.* 1-6, Campbell *ll.* 1-2, Cousin de Grainville 4-5). Mary Shelley's novel takes 175 pages, well into Volume II, to even mention the plague which spells out

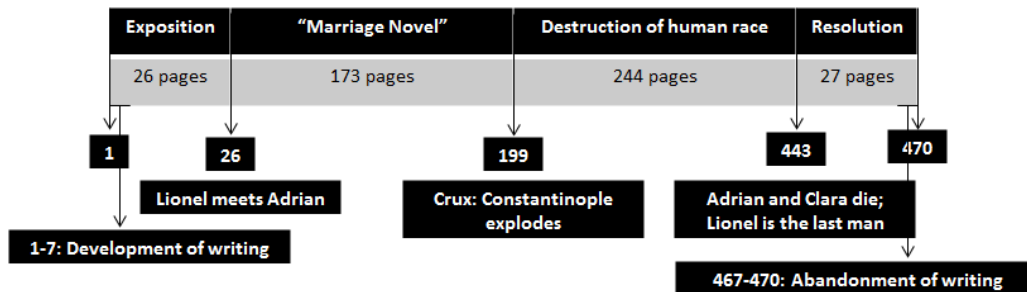
humankind's doom. Fully half the novel is spent setting up character, scene, and political situation, which raises the question of why the novel is structured like this.

Since Mary Shelley does not start off her novel with the grandeur of the apocalypse, the novel must have some purpose which requires half of its narrative to be free of the plague. Following this logic, Shelley uses those plague-free pages to set up character, scene, and political situation, a carefully-constructed world in which to release the plague, and creates her commentary on Romantic ideals through this process; in oversimplified terms, the world is Romanticism, and the plague is her commentary. Sterrenberg analyzes how Shelley assesses ideas including nature as a revolutionary force – interpreted optimistically by her mother Mary Wollstonecraft and more negatively by Edmund Burke – and “her father’s rationalism and utopianism” (Sterrenberg 330-333). He views the novel as a “survey [of] a wide variety of utopian and revolutionary theories that she believes have failed,” introducing “various reforming ideas” which “are cancelled out by the advent of the plague” (Sterrenberg 343). As Shelley renegotiates what an apocalyptic work can look like, she creates a medium to renegotiate Romantic ideals in a way which would have been unfeasible had the novel shared the structure of other mentioned apocalyptic works.

While expressing Shelley’s pessimistic commentary, the narrative structure also exerts a mitigating force on that commentary. The structure is cyclical, creating a possibility for rebirth which is additionally supported by other imagery in the text. Further, it makes the novel an encapsulated narrative bounded on both sides by solid horizons. This second assertion leapfrogs off Albright’s analysis of time in the novel, of which he says, “It is an ancient prophecy of a future apocalypse written retrospectively

by its lone survivor... Since history is now complete, we can perceive it in its entirety” (Albright 133). While I argue that history continues, Lionel’s narrative is complete and entire, impermeable beyond its bounds; so, although the reader ultimately leaves Lionel as the last man and cannot say he will ever find another human being, it is likewise impossible to affirm he will not. Thus, the novel refuses to fully extinguish hope. This, coupled with the very Romantic language at the novel’s close, effectively tempers the novel’s darkness and transforms a refusal of Romanticism into a mere critical assessment. I will go over the structure in more detail before returning to this idea.

The Last Man is written in three volumes and most critics assess its structure accordingly, but I argue that its true structure is one of parallelism. The novel can be folded in on itself right down the middle, and each half divided into two concurrent sections. The sections are as follows: from the beginning to when Lionel meets Adrian (*TLM* 1-26), from meeting Adrian to the crux of the novel, the explosion of Constantinople (26-199, a length of 173 pages), then until the deaths of Adrian and Clara leave Lionel the last man (199-443, a length of 244 pages), and finally from their deaths until the end of the novel (443-470, a length of 27 pages). This structure is built on a series of turning points which irrevocably change the course of the novel in a way that other events in the text do not, and evident parallels match each section with its counterpart on the opposite side of the fold. The similarity of the amount of pages for each set of concurrent sections makes it more likely that this structure is intentional.



As said before, the two biggest chunks of the novel are its domestic “marriage novel” section spent setting up character and scene, and then the chapters wherein humanity is all but destroyed – as Canuel calls the section, the “*marche funebre*” (Canuel 147). Between these is the crux point along which the novel folds inwards: the explosion of Constantinople. It marks the narrative’s crux precisely because it divides the marriage novel from the dark Gothic novel, marks the unleashing of the plague, and causes the first death of a major character. Evadne is technically the exception to this rule, dying a few pages earlier; however, her death is still deeply involved with the events at Constantinople – she dies after prophesying them.

The supernatural flavor of the crux makes it unique in the novel, and this uniqueness helps identify it as a folding point. The scene is possibly the most Gothic in the text, a sudden event of terror which seems at first glance seems to be of divine wrath:

But at that moment a crash was heard. Thunderlike it reverberated through the sky, while the air was darkened.... Fragments of buildings whirled above, half seen in smoke, while flames burst out beneath, and continued explosions filled the air with terrific thunders... Horrible sights were shaped to me in the turbid cloud that hovered over the city. (*TLM* 199)

Following this, a raincloud supposedly brought by “the concussion of air occasioned by the blowing up of the city,” as Lionel explains in parentheses, brings real thunder,

lightning, and a deluge (ibid). Lionel's uncertain fumbling for an explanation of the miraculous weather, the comparisons to thunder, descriptions of building fragments seeming to move suspended in air, and the seeing of nightmarish shapes in clouds, give the scene an awful resemblance to the wrath of a higher power. No higher power is mentioned, but nor is any mortal description of bomb or explosive placed by human hands. The scene fulfills Evadne's chilling prophecy of only a few pages previous: "fire, and war, and plague, unite for thy destruction – O my Raymond, there is no safety for thee!" (181). She repeats this list – fire, war, and plague – twice. Constantinople fulfills all of these conditions: Raymond brings war to Constantinople and dies among flames in the city where the plague originates. Constantinople physically carries the plague and symbolically releases it. Prior to its destruction, soldiers "seemed afraid... and stood as if they expected some Mighty Phantom to stalk in offended majesty from the opening" (198). The Mighty Phantom as plague manifests shortly after in Lionel's dream of Timon's last feast, when Raymond's "shape, altered by a thousand distortions, expanded into a gigantic phantom, bearing on its brow the sign of pestilence" (202).

The unique nature of the events at Constantinople, and the dramatic difference between the novel's tone before and after the fact, demonstrates the work to be overall parallel in structure with an ascent and a descent. An examination of opening and closing sections of the novel, which I label the exposition and resolution, reveals that they further double each other. As a result, the novel is not only parallel, but cyclical. The exposition and resolution double each other because in both Lionel is a lone wanderer, and they are bounded by Lionel's membership in civilization; he joins it when Adrian enters the narrative, and leaves it when Adrian dies.

The commencement of Lionel's friendship with Adrian is both dramatic and sudden. Lionel is wild and a loner, with his sister Perdita his only companion. He technically serves as the "chief" of a "band" of other wild young men like himself, but their association is more practical and animalistic than social: each of them is pointedly described as "friendless," which creates an important parallel to Lionel's literal friendlessness at the novel's close (14). Lionel, furious at Adrian for commanding the wealth and power which he believes himself also entitled to have, attempts to provoke the royal son by poaching on his lands. The second time he is caught, Adrian himself appears. Lionel describes himself at that moment in wild, bestial terms: "My garments were torn, and they, as well as my hands, were stained with the blood of the man I had wounded; one hand grasped the dead birds... the other held the knife; my hair was matted; my face besmeared with the same guilty signs that bore witness against me on the dripping instrument I clenched. Tall and muscular as I was in form, I must have looked like, what indeed I was, that meanest ruffian that ever trod the earth" (25). As discussed previously, Lionel's power is of the earth, and the phrase used here and elsewhere of his treading upon it is a mark of his power's source. This passage also emphasizes the brute nature of that power as dirty and wild, as a bodily "form" opposed to a civilized mind. He is also "guilty," smeared with blood and condemned by the physical evidence in a way reminiscent of *Macbeth*. His guilt further establishes the dividing line between him and civilization, which exiles the guilty to prison or death.

Adrian comes upon Lionel's earthly vagabond all light and air: "his appearance blew aside, with gentle western breath, my cloudy wrath" (25). This embodiment of "sensibility and refinement" with "gold" and "silken" hair is the polar opposite of a

ruffian, and distinctly designated to contrast with Lionel's wildness (26). In the space of a page, the beast is tamed; Lionel begs forgiveness for his "crime," Adrian gives it, and suddenly Lionel is a part of civilization. He goes from wild and bloody to beginning his intellectual education, sitting in Adrian's library decorated with busts of "old Greek sages" (27). Lionel's entrance to civilization is as quick and simple as stepping through a garden gate: "The trim and paled demense of civilization, which I had before regarded from my wild jungle as inaccessible, had its wicket opened by him; I stepped within, and felt, as I entered, that I trod my native soil" (27). Lionel still treads the earth, but his step is altered. The "native soil" also implies that civilization, not brute survival, is man's correct state of being – which, of course, renders his fate as the last man especially tragic.

Lionel re-enters that state of nature, leaving civilization, when Adrian and Clara die in a shipwreck while he manages to swim to shore. During and especially after the event, the text is thick with references to Lionel's pre-Adrian days as a strong, wild savage. On the boat, he realizes that he as a being of natural power has more chance than surviving the wreck than the physically weaker Adrian; and this proves true as Lionel, thrown into the ocean, immediately regains some of his brute aspects of his early life. He "instinctively" battles the waves as if they were a "lion," and the "bitter pride" which "[curls his] lip" is reminiscent of the "bitterness" and pride he felt in his youth – "resentment" at the perceived "injustice" which landed his father in poverty, and a consciousness of being at "war against civilization" (444, 23, 19). Gaining land on a stretch of wild beach, Lionel then goes through a period of unconsciousness which he describes as being "deprived of life," his waking from which is rebirth into the non-civilized world (445). The trappings of civilization – statues and paintings, buildings,

even entire cities – remain, but civilization itself is gone. His existence is now more bodily, with the senses and physical needs becoming prominent. Upon awakening, Lionel’s first task is to “restore [his] frame to the use of its animal functions” and “bodily powers” (445). He then wanders up the beach and finds an old watch tower to sleep in, but dreams “of sights and sounds peculiar to my boyhood’s mountain life, which I had long forgotten” (447). He recalls how he was an “untaught shepherd-boy” when he met Adrian and considers how his continued strength from those years will aid him in this new existence (451, 455). Entering a saloon, he sees himself in the mirror a “wild-looking, unkempt, half-naked savage” just as he used to be (455). He is as alone as he was in those early days – even more so, since then he had his sister Perdita.

But although Lionel is removed from civilization, or rather, civilization is removed from him, he critically does not again descend past the “sacred boundary which divides the intellectual and moral nature of man from that which characterizes animals” (29). Upon seeing the mirror, he endeavors to fix his appearance on the motivation so that, should he encounter another human, he will not scare them off (455-6). He paints messages on town walls, hoping that whoever sees them will find him in Rome. But is he a fool to do so? Is he really the last man, or are there other survivors?

In the end, the reader is never allowed to learn whether Verney will be alone to the end of his days. Remember that the narrative has a parallel structure; and since the exposition and resolution mirror each other, its structure is cyclical as well. The cyclical structure implies that the end of the novel is not merely an end, but cradles the possibility – not certainty, but the possibility – of rebirth. *The Last Man* also holds out for that possibility through its Edenic imagery. The novel’s exposition and resolution both take

place in quasi-Edenic settings, with the protagonist inhabiting a largely natural world. The resolution is, if anything, more Edenic as the “granaries of Rome” remain stocked, echoing Eden’s natural abundance (464). Lionel’s final choice to leave Rome and sail around the earth is reminiscent of Adam and Eve’s exile from Eden at the end of *Paradise Lost*, and while their exile is a new beginning of hardship, it also promises fertility and children. That same Miltonic scene is mentioned explicitly earlier in the novel: “Man... is solitary; like our first parents expelled from Paradise, he looks back towards the scene he has quitted... Like to our first parents, the whole earth is before him, a wide desert” (322). Lionel at the time renders the scene sterile, claiming that “posterity is no more,” but the very comparison reads as contradictory: the very essence of the exile from Paradise is of beginnings (322). The contradiction continues the text’s refusal to conclusively destroy solid hope of humankind’s continuance. Though death and sterility abound, each quasi-Eden becomes like a womb not unlike the Sibyl’s cave in the novel’s introduction, with the potential to bring civilization from its wild depths. Lionel himself is compared to a founder of civilization, describing himself in the exposition “as uncouth a savage as the wolf-bred founder of old Rome” (14). He recalls himself as such in the novel’s resolution while in Rome itself, quoting the very same phrase – the implication being that, as Romulus founded Rome and Rome essentially served as the crucible of civilization, Lionel’s journey from Rome will serve the same purpose: he will re-found civilization, which necessitates the success of his search for survivors (465).

Other imagery of rebirth also crops up throughout *The Last Man*, its persistence refusing to accept humankind’s total demise. The novel several times uses the phrase “impregnated” to describe atmosphere – as in “the air, impregnated with the freshest

odour” (300). Air carries a close association with the plague, which in some theories originates in ill vapors or is carried on the wind; so the repeated implication of the pregnancy suggests the plague is an instrument of not only death, but rebirth as well. Perdita’s forest cottage sits between young and ancient forest, the younger with “regular beauty... stood erect and seemed ready to advance fearlessly into the coming time” while the older oaks “blasted and broke, clung to each other... a weather-beaten crew” (41-2). Such a description implies great and violent change, but not annihilation.

These themes of rebirth are far from certain. Even as myriad imagery supports rebirth, other symbols pointedly do not. Alone in Rome, Lionel imagines himself among the scenes of classic antiquity: the orations of Cicero, readings of Horace and Virgil, the throngs of plebeians, and then the Pope and other inhabitants of modern Rome, only to have that dream-vision crumble and leave the “desart ruins of Rome” even more desolate than before (462). Visiting the statues at the Vatican, Lionel finds himself drawn to the “human shapes” of the statues there, and “often, half in bitter mockery, half in self-delusion, I clasped their icy proportions, and, coming between Cupid and his Psyche’s lips, pressed the unconceiving marble” (465). The message is poignant, and clear: these statues are the closest remaining objects to the image of humans, and they are cold, uncaring, and infertile. Yet the novel, through its cyclical structure and optimistic ending pages, refuses to accept that Psyche’s lips are the closest Lionel will ever come to embracing another human being. *The Last Man* is a dark novel, a pessimistic novel, but it purposefully qualifies its own pessimism through persistent imagery of renewal and its cyclical structure.

Feminist scholar Anne K. Mellor also finds themes of rebirth in *The Last Man*. She builds her argument on the assumption that female reproduction as an act of “commingling (in the womb), separation (of the fetus from the womb), and renewed commingling (through breast-feeding)” causes women writers to tend towards a “continuous” conception of time which can be “circular, regressive or forward-moving, but it cannot be ruptured or broken with ultimate finality” (Mellor 140-141). Such a conception is less likely to treat the apocalypse as an end than as a rebirth. Then male reproduction, as an act of “ejaculation and separation” yields a model of time which is “breakable, rupturable,” and therefore more likely to embrace an apocalypse as a true and final end (141). Mellor identifies the “three simultaneous time-scapes in [Mary Shelley’s] novel—the classical era of the Sibyl’s oracle, the nineteenth century in which the Editor finds and assembles the sibylline leaves, and the late twenty-first century in which the narrative proper is located” as evidence for “the possibility of alternative beginnings, of never-ending new births” (144). She finds in the three time-scapes the same cyclicity that I recognize in the novel’s structure. She also posits another strong argument for rebirth in *The Last Man*: that, at its close, “Lionel Verney is still alive... still seeking human companionship” (143).

A close reading of the novel’s first and final pages indeed provides useful evidence for the novel’s cyclicity and tempering of its non-millennialism with some much-needed optimism and Romantic ideals. The introduction holds the apocalypse at a more comfortable arms-length, and offers its own interpretation of the text. The narrator of the introduction says of the text (s)he translates from the Sibyl’s leaves,

My labours have cheered long hours of solitude, and taken me out of a world, which has averted its once benignant face from me, to one glowing with imagination and power. Will my readers ask how I could find solace from the narration of misery and woeful change?... Yet such is human nature, that the excitement of mind was dear to me, and that the imagination, painter of tempest and earthquake, or, worse, the stormy and ruin-fraught passions of man, softened my real sorrows and endless regrets, by clothing these fictitious ones in that ideality. (*TLM* 7)

And here, perhaps, is some of the answer to why the apocalypse remains such a fixture of human imaginings: it is such an immense idea that it dwarfs normal human concerns. The imagining of the apocalypse is itself a Romantic exercise – fascinating, yet also fiction, not really to be feared. Audrey Fisch contends that the introduction has its narrator who simultaneously constructs and questions agency in the same way that I have found Romantic ideals questioned yet maintained (Fisch 280). Her assessment of agency is more optimistic than mine, but reinforces that the introduction promotes progress over non-millennialism: “We can complicate the question of individual power, or agency, and retain deconstruction without abandoning the possibility for change and thus without deleting all progressive politics” (279).

Due to the novel’s cyclicity, the introduction can be read in conversation with its final pages. The novel’s introduction of seven pages, detailing finding the text fragmented on the floor of the Sibyl’s cave, is the inception of Lionel’s written narrative. The final three pages of the novel mark the completion of that project, which Lionel then dedicates to the dead and leaves behind him to embark on an odyssey of exploration. The

two sections are both about new beginnings, explorations (of the labyrinthine cavern or the whole world); and they both carry classical associations of the Sibyl and *The Odyssey* as Lionel pronounces “I... would dare the twin perils and Scylla and Charybdis... I should reach the pillars of Hercules” (*TLM* 469). They also deal with the birth and death of writing. The beginning of the novel sees the inception of writing in the womb-like Sybil’s cave as the author assembles meaning from gibberish, and the end of the novel can be construed as the death of writing when Lionel concludes his narrative and abandons it in Rome. Yet Lionel does not abandon language altogether. He brings with him “a few books; the principal are Homer and Shakespeare—But the libraries of the world are thrown open to me—and in any port I can renew my stock” (469). Although he does not have any human being to talk to, he has the literature of the entire world at his feet (along with a faithful dog). As in *The Twilight Zone* episode “Time Enough at Last,” the end of humanity is not so terrible if one has books to read. (Fortunately, as far as we know, Lionel does not suffer from an impairment of vision.)

Lionel’s refusal to abandon language or hope of finding another human being is too optimistic to indicate a total rejection of Romantic ideals – and further suggests that, if he succeeds in rebuilding the human race, it will be these ideals that provide him with the essential energy and will to continue against all hope. To reiterate, the specific ideals in question are optimism, belief in the power of the imagination, conviction of self-determination, and the aspiration to a transcendent state of being. Lionel is optimistic; although he knows it is possible he will live out his days alone, he never relinquishes the possibility of a “companion,” and to “again feel my heart beat near the heart of another like to me” (469). He certainly believes in the power of the imagination, imbuing the

coming journey with the gravity of an ancient Greek odyssey and “wild dreams” of “spicy groves of the odorous islands of the far Indian ocean” despite the overarching likeliness of the coming journey’s challenges and the unlikeliness of its success (469). Self-determination is trickier. Lionel actively chooses to abandon a safe existence for a risky one, but even here, the politics of psychology are at work as he describes his motivations in those terms: “wild dreams... *ruled* my imagination” and “neither hope nor joy are my *pilots* – restless despair and fierce desire of change *lead* me on” (italics mine) (470). Even with every political system on the earth dismantled, Lionel’s thoughts remain in political patterns. In that way, he is no freer than before; however, since Lionel is the only human being definitely in existence, the only possible sources of motivation not in his own mind are his immediate surroundings. He is in as ultimate a stage of self-determination as a human being could ever experience. Outside of the web of the political system, there are no interpersonal forces controlling him, the only psychology available is his own, and the only motive for action comes from himself. The natural system does still limit him, but his personal power is also natural, which allows him to operate at strength within it. Lionel has as much self-determination as any human has ever possessed.

It could even be argued that Lionel has achieved Romantic transcendence – an earthly transcendence, granted, but transcendence nonetheless. At the novel’s close, Lionel has abandoned writing, and is in a place beyond music; he inhabits a unique world which is possibly an abyss, or possibly the peak before its depths. The Romantics both aspired to and feared transcendence as a place beyond all writing and human contact, a totally mental and spiritual state followed, in all probability, by oblivion. Lionel is there. As an apocalyptic wanderer, he achieves the ultimate Romantic aspiration.

A Romantic Trend?

Romanticism itself is a huge and complex phenomenon spanning decades and nations, so I do not presume to have the expertise to declare a new trend in the era. However, my research has turned up a certain pattern among the literary figures in the Shelley circle. In the first generation of Romantics, I look at William Godwin; in the second, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. Several of my points come from insights I noticed in articles, although I have read the majority of the pieces I mention in this section. A more thorough investigation would be required to validate my findings for the majority of authors across Romanticism, rather than just those I look at here, but what I have already found is substantial evidence that Mary Shelley's anti-millennialism did not begin with her.

When conjuring "Romanticism," there are a few easy images: Wordsworth in the Lake District, Percy Shelley's utopian conclusion to *Prometheus Unbound*, a Byronic figure wandering in the wilderness. It also conjures the sublime, such as dizzying alpine spires, or the image of a single human being left on the entire earth: Steven Goldsmith describes the concept of a last man as "invoke[ing] the sublime... in imagining the unimaginable – the very dissolution of the faculty of imagination – it stages fear in order to produce the effect of subsequent empowerment" (Goldsmith 268). Mary Shelley was definitely a Romantic, though *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* seem far distant from William Godwin's limitless hope for mankind's improvement or the utopian visions of Percy Shelley. Even further, these writers weren't so far removed as one might think. It is well-known that the first generation became less radical – and I say, less optimistic and

millennial – as the French Revolution failed to fulfill their hopes for it and in England left a culture of suspicion and censorship in its wake, and eventually fear of Napoleonic invasion. As previously mentioned, Fulford describes how the French Revolution had had such stock placed in it by English onlookers that in some it even created an expectation for an apocalypse and then millennium to occur “within their lifetimes” (Fulford 2). I cannot say whether or not the authors I discuss felt this way, but such extreme belief is evidence of the huge energy generated around the event. When the French Revolution descended from glorious to disastrous, it greatly affected English thought. Romantics entered a stage of “shared renegotiation of millenarian belief” in which each writer redefined their own apocalypse (11). Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake replaced their lost hope of regeneration of the world with the “psychological equivalent – regeneration in the individual” (Paley, qtd. in Fulford 11). John Beer describes this process for these authors as an “internalized apocalypse” and dates its development to the late eighteenth century (Beer 61). The process is evident in their writing: Wordsworth’s optimism in “Tintern Abbey” (1798) becomes more modulated in “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” (1807), Coleridge writes the transcendental “This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison” (1797) and then his own more solemnly contemplative “Dejection: An Ode” (1802), and Blake writes *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and then the much darker *Songs of Experience* (1794).

I argue that not only these Romantics, but also William Godwin, and later the second generation of Romantics, also underwent a similar change. Godwin and both generations of Romantics influenced the writing of Mary Shelley; Sterrenberg notes that while *The Last Man* can be classified as just one of many “post-Napoleonic works... which shared analogous themes of the end of the race or the end of empire,” it is by far

the “most expansive in its allusions to the political writings and events from the era of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Empire, and the Greek revolution against the Turks” (Sterrenberg 327). I have argued in this essay that *The Last Man* neither completely defends nor rejects Romantic ideals, which requires the novel to not be totally non-millennial, and have proposed characters’ power and the text’s narrative structure as modifying that darkness. There is still plenty of bleakness in the novel, but if that same non-millennialism can be found in the work of these other Romantics, it suggests the non-millennialism in Mary Shelley’s own work is due at least in part to the influence of, as opposed to the rejection of, those writers. It changes the narrative, because Mary Shelley’s work is then less a refusal of Romantic values than an evolution of them. The writers that I address in depth here are members of Mary Shelley’s own family, partly because they exhibit the trend very clearly, and partly because there is no doubt of their impact on her life and writings.

William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft are late Enlightenment thinkers, but associated with the major Romantics and shared some of their ideas. Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) endorses the “powers of the human mind... if freed from institutional restraints,” and makes “utopian arguments” that the human mind can eventually beat sickness and “even death” (Sterrenberg 334). His ideas influenced the work of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Percy Shelley (Fulford 6). Mary Wollstonecraft too was optimistic, one of those who viewed revolution like a passing disease which strengthens the national body (Sterrenberg 330). Whether Wollstonecraft would have exhibited the shift towards non-millennialism which I am discussing here will never be known, as she died shortly after Mary Shelley’s birth. William Godwin certainly does,

with his second edition of *Political Justice* as well as his novel *Caleb Williams, or Things as They Are* (1794). Godwin's second edition of *Political Justice* in some ways contradicts the utopianism of the first, as he explores disasters which could end the human race: "has improvement been the constant characteristic of the universe? The human species... Will it continue for ever? The globe we inhabit bears strong marks of convulsion, such as the teachers of religion, and the professors of natural philosophy agree to predict, will one day destroy the inhabitants of the earth" (qtd. in Sterrenberg 334). Godwin shies away from a thorough exploration of "convulsion theory" and maintains his utopian stance overall (ibid). Such avoidance, especially in a time when conceptions of lastness were all the rage, suggests that he guesses where such considerations will lead and refuses to undo the work of all his prior reasoning. Some of that non-millennialism comes out in *Caleb Williams*. In *Caleb Williams*, Caleb Williams is forced through a labyrinth of abuse of power by Falkland. It is a narrative of the powerful holding and keeping their power, unassailable despite their crimes. In the ending first published, Caleb Williams forgives Falkland's crimes, meaning that none of the distasteful "things as they are" are going to change. In the originally written but second-published ending, Caleb Williams goes insane.

Of the second generation Romantics, it is easiest to see the shift to non-millennialism in Percy Bysshe Shelley. Though he never relinquishes his political radicalism, he does give up on his earthly paradise of *Queen Mab* (1813) and *Prometheus Unbound*. *Prometheus Unbound* is pretty much the height of Romantic millennialism: from having his liver regularly torn out, Prometheus goes on to depose the king of the universe and usher in perfect peace and universal co-existence. This deed is

accomplished through his mental strength and forgiveness of Jupiter, and the willingness of himself and others to dare to imagine a new reality. Percy Shelley writes in *A Defence of Poetry* that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” testifying to the power of the mind to make manifest what it imagines; and such is the law of the land in *Prometheus Unbound*. Yet his later elegy for Keats, “Adonais” (1821) is, though optimistic, not unreservedly so. The poem is a presence in *The Last Man*. Percy Bysshe Shelley describes how Adonais has escaped into death from the dream that is life, a nightmare with “Desolation... whose wings rain contagion” (PBS ll. 247-248). Rome plays a significant role in the poem as the resting place of Adonais, even as Rome is Lionel’s final known location in the novel. Albright even begins his article with a quote from “Adonais,” which Mary Shelley also wrote in her letters after her husband’s death: “But I am chain’d to Time, and cannot thence depart!” (Percy Shelley, qtd. in Albright 122). When Adrian offers his soul as a sacrifice for mankind, the language echoes “the silence of that heart’s accepted sacrifice” in “Adonais” (PBS l. 315). It could be argued that Mary Shelley’s Adrian offers his heart in vain – after all, he dies along with everyone else – but he does succeed in ushering humanity more gently into the twilight. That aside, “Adonais” contains chilling images of Death, Corruption, and Hunger, and lays down a fairly harsh assessment of the state of the world to support its claim that, to use the cliché, Keats has gone to a better place. The poem ends on a mixed note, which is sometimes interpreted as suicidal:

I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;

Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,

The soul of Adonais, like a star,

Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are. (*ll.* 492-5).

As William A. Ulmer reports, “Adonais” precipitated a “great divide” in Shelleyan critics arguing for life or death or, like Ulmer’s own position, “apocalyptic approaches” (Ulmer 427-8). And still darker is Percy Shelley’s last and unfinished work interrupted by his death, *The Triumph of Life* (1822, published 1824).

The Triumph of Life is an eerie supernatural poem. In it, the narrator sees a vision of a triumph in the Roman sense of a victory march, in which successful generals received their accolades and displayed their prisoners of war in a massive parade through the city. The triumph is led by a chariot driven by “Life,” and a mass of suffering humanity struggles behind – youths dancing savagely, the elderly limp behind. The narrator encounters Rousseau in the vision also watching the triumph, so old and bent down he appears like an “old root which grew/To strange distortion out of the hill side” (*PBS ll.* 182-3). He tells the narrator that those who are chained to the chariot itself are

The great, the unforgotten: they who wore
Mitres & helms & crowns, or wreathes of light,
Signs of thought's empire over thought; their lore
Taught them not this—to know themselves; their might
Could not repress the mutiny within (*ll.* 209-213)

The chaining of the great to the chariot makes sense; in a Roman triumph, the enemy leaders were chained to the chariot of the victor – and probably headed for execution. It is a withering assessment of the eternal reward for greatness. Noticeably, it again reflects the theme of self-command, of agency over oneself: like Raymond, these people fell because they “could not repress the mutiny within” (*l.* 213). Rousseau then relates a

winding narrative of sleep and forgetfulness, from which he emerges to see the ghastly triumph. The structure of introducing the triumph, going into Rousseau's vision, and returning to the triumph, is cyclical, but it is a despairing spiral rather than a cycle of rebirth as in *The Last Man*. The poem is terrible, and mournful. Echoes of it play out in *The Last Man*, when Adrian leads what could be the last survivors of the human race through wilderness and desert, with a few dropping off to die every day just as the triumph kills those it drags along. The last march of humanity is likewise characterized by ghastly supernatural imagery, seeming ghosts and demons which turn out to be no more than deluded, plague-stricken wanderers – and this awful scene is “Life” (l. 609). Goldsmith writes that “The Triumph of Life” and *The Last Man* both “represent the inability of human beings to transcend their conditions,” and is perhaps even more “subversive of traditional ideals” than Mary Shelley's novel (Goldsmith 261-2). As “The Triumph of Life” stands in its incomplete form, it certainly seems a bleaker work than *The Last Man*, which at least never relinquishes hope of life, and does not imagine a universal hell after death.

Coda

The Romantic era was a good time to write about last things, evidenced if nothing else by the pure volume of works concerned with it. The 20th and 21st centuries have also proven highly receptive to the subject of the apocalypse, probably because there is no shortage of threats which could actually plausibly cause mass extinction. The specter of the atomic bomb has haunted society's imagination ever since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and only more so following the tensions of the Cold War. Diseases evolve year by year in

response to medicine, and bacteria are increasingly resistant to antibiotics. Super-viruses like the bird flu, swine flu, or the newest Zika scare, appear suddenly and with terrifying virulence. Global warming is making the weather dangerously unpredictable, is already beginning to affect the agricultural vitality of low-lying countries like Bangladesh, and poses a constant looming threat of coming floods and storms. Any of these could plausibly wipe out a large segment of the human population. This is not a fear unique to modern times, but a perennial one. Where not dramatically added to by science, as with nuclear or biological warfare, the threats remain basically the same; disease and natural disaster have always been humanity's constant companions.

The key difference I have found with modern apocalyptic literature is that it is not as concerned with the idea of lastness as it is with post-apocalyptic scenarios. Some works play with the idea of humanity's extinction, such as *The Children of Men* by P.D. James (1992) when universal infertility threatens the continuance of the human race, and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood (2003) in which a gene scientist creates an ideal, new human race, and releases a virus intended to wipe out all but one person. However, neither scenario is played out. The plot of *The Children of Men* centers around safeguarding the one pregnant woman in existence, and multiple human survivors populate the post-apocalyptic world of the *Oryx and Crake* trilogy. Humankind today is so numerous and widespread that it is hard to imagine a scenario which achieves complete extinction. As a result, a greater proportion of modern apocalyptic literature foregrounds post-apocalyptic rather than annihilation scenarios. As such, the "apocalypse" often colloquially can refer to some great disaster, not just one that wipes out humankind. *The Last Man* rests on the fence between these total and non-total apocalypses: whether

or not Lionel's continued existence will yield a renewal of the human race or just a drawn-out death is ultimately left up to speculation.

The most significant theme I have found reemerging in modern apocalyptic literature is that of the search for an earthly paradise. The definition of this can range from an actual Edenic location to simply a safe space to rest or, depending on the work, not be eaten by zombies. Related to the search for Eden is the figure of the post-apocalyptic wanderer. The themes usually appear in tandem, with the wanderer physically travelling in search of a safe haven. Such is the case in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006): the protagonist and his son trudge day by day through the wasteland of America, dodging cannibals and trying to find the coastline to follow south in search of a warmer, safer place. The wanderer can also appear without the search for Eden. In *The Postman* by David Brin (1997), the hero wanders from one human enclave to the next. At first he seeks only temporary haven, but he eventually becomes the postmaster helping to build connections between settlements, and his travelling achieves new purpose. On the flip side, in *Alas, Babylon* by Pat Frank (1959), a small town in Florida is basically the only safe space remaining in the state after a nuclear attack covers most of the United States with radiation. The characters do not wander, but through the course of the novel go from scrambling to survive to building an Eden-like existence with plenty of resources. *World War Z* by Max Brooks (2006) (absolutely nothing like the movie), has Eden-finding and Eden-creation both: its characters first search for safe spaces, then create one by systematically removing all the zombies from America.

Since these works are chronologically so far removed from the Romantic era, it can be difficult to find direct influence and is perhaps more useful to assess how

recurring images and themes represent what is persistently so fascinating about the apocalypse. However, I can say with some confidence that the image of the apocalypse itself can be considered in line with the Romantic sublime. The idea of the apocalypse itself, when considered seriously, is and terrifying. And it supplies a plethora of awe-inspiring images, the most classic of which is a lone figure – the apocalyptic wanderer – in a wide, bleak landscape bereft of other human life. The wanderer itself carries echoes of the Byronic hero, and going even farther back, the Wandering Jew. The apocalypse has a profound draw, which has kept it in the human imagination from the time of ancient peoples to Mary Shelley's time and to today, and will continue to keep it in the human imagination for centuries.

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