

TIME AND THE SIBYL IN MARY SHELLEY'S *THE LAST MAN*

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Eleven years ago, the late Betty T. Bennett asserted that Mary Shelley's 1826 novel *The Last Man* epitomizes its author's belief that "through imagination one can re-see the world" (54) because the work "enfranchises a new world order and a new world understanding" (82) facilitated by the natural and vital power of creative thought. On this basis, Bennett cautioned against pointedly selective readings of the piece since such treatments "often uncritically replicate the [unfavorable] reception history of the novel when it was first published" and are "inconsistent with the abiding philosophy in Mary Shelley's works" (73). Shelley's philosophy, for Bennett, involves a commitment to sociopolitical critique guided by an unwavering faith in the imagination's ability to better the world. In her best fiction generally, and in *The Last Man* especially, Shelley engages the timely and the topical not simply for their own sakes but as a way to spark in her readers the visionary alacrity that revolutionizes the self and so forever transforms a part of humankind.

Bennett's optimistic reading of Shelley's third published novel may at first seem startling, given that *The Last Man* recounts how by the year 2100 a virulent pandemic kills all human life on earth save the narrator, an Englishman named Lionel Verney, who chronicles the history of the disease from its provenance to its cessation. Belonging in part to a body of European literature that includes Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, and Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*, *The Last Man* has been most commonly read over the last decade as a critique of empire, a chilling requiem for an England ineluctably entangled in the shared fate of all brutal and chauvinistic imperial states.¹ Insofar as it registers the imperialist mindset of the time, the novel indeed "rehearses long-standing concerns about the Asiatic corruption of the British body politic, along with more immediate fears about the potentially global ramifications of

‘colonial disease’” (Watt 139). But to read *The Last Man* solely as an index of its day’s anxieties and ideologies is to risk the sort of selective analysis against which Bennett warned. In contrast, Anne K. Mellor incisively mediates between what the novel reveals of pre-Victorian England and what it says regarding the timeless promise of human renewal. By studying the moment when Verney contracts plague from a dying black man vis-à-vis the protagonist’s surprising recovery, Mellor recognizes the redemptive possibility implicit in the work: “This episode suggests that if human beings were forced to embrace the racial Other rather than being allowed to define it exclusively as ‘foreign’ or ‘diseased,’ then they might escape the final destruction threatened by both the biological and the sociological plague” (144) of which Verney writes. In *The Last Man*, the potential for universal solidarity in the face of nightmarish distress becomes realizable because Shelley blends contemporary critique with her vision of the ameliorative imagination and so fosters, in Mellor’s words, “the possibility of alternative beginnings, of never-ending new births” (144).

Taken together, Bennett’s and Mellor’s comments remind Shelley’s twenty-first-century readers that, for as much as it reflects the sociopolitical and cultural milieu of late Romantic England, *The Last Man* serves principally to dramatize its author’s theory of the human imagination as a legitimate source of both personal and public reformation. I assert this point not to discredit current trends in Shelley scholarship but to recast them in light of the idea that Shelley’s denunciation of empire in *The Last Man* gestures beyond the particulars of the pre-Victorian moment to the recurring historical challenge of shaping new and better human communities against paradigms of violence, repression, and despair. For Shelley, the imagination is crucial to answering this challenge because creative thought inspires and sustains new sociopolitical paradigms; in this sense, she finds in the imagination a transformative quality, or, more precisely, the power to effect lasting and meaningful renovation both within the mind and beyond it. By reading her novel primarily as an indictment of British imperialism, many Romanticists fail to note that Shelley presents a unique vision of solidarity in the face of global catastrophe and so neglect the narrative innovations through which she crafts that vision. In what follows, I wish to discuss these innovations as they represent Shelley’s faith in the imagination’s power to give birth to a new world astride the grave of empire.

Shelley’s interest in the imagination as an agent of positive change places the novel within the tradition of British Romantic visionary poetics, that is to say, of the literature of vision and prophecy as it appeared in England between 1789 and 1832 (to use the traditional framing dates for the Romantic period).² During this era, poets and prose writers shared a keen fascination with the creative possibilities conferred by the national legacy of literary prophecy, an inheritance drawn from authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and especially John Milton, the erudite Puritan iconoclast whose hatred of kings so crucially swayed both political and artistic thought

in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the time of the French Revolution, Milton was no less than a Whig saint, as Jared Richman has recently suggested (396). The subversive and transformative elements of the vatic tradition in England, particularly as established by Milton's aesthetically and politically radical work, appealed to both first and second generation Romantic authors who sought not simply to describe their times but to remake them. To such minds, prophecy offered a historically authoritative genre equipped with unique artistic principles and a seemingly timely interventionist ethic, whether turned to the renovation of individual men and women or of whole nations. Miltonic literary prophecy therefore represented a way for art to come to terms with conflict, parochialism, and disenchantment in an age of serious historical crisis. For readers today, the visionary tradition elucidates relationships among Romantics such as William Blake, the Lake Poets, and Lucy Aikin, whose *Epistles on Women* (1810) sets forth her claim that she is "a daughter of Milton," as Jane Spencer has noted (4).

Although many Romantics looked to Milton as their salient national forebear, the image of him as England's most inspired and most courageous anti-royalist poet was tellingly revived in the work of such politically radical post-war writers as Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Shelley. After the Battle of Waterloo brought the curtain down on the Napoleonic drama on 18 June 1815, concluding more than twenty years of international bloodshed, Byron and the Shelleys (who in 1816 spent the summer together in Geneva) responded in part to the renewed absolutism of the post-Napoleonic milieu by positing Milton and his literary legacy as the crux of their oppositional writing (epitomized by Byron's use of Milton as a noble counterexample to the Lake Poet Robert Southey in the 1819 "Dedication" to *Don Juan*).³ For these young authors, Milton served as a beneficent guide whose art helped to frame new literary visions created in the face of anachronistic governance in Europe and of intensified Tory repression at home.

After Napoleon's final loss, Romantic visionary poetics reflected the fact that the second wave Romantics, as Stuart Curran writes,

...survived the intellectual terrors of a quarter-century of war that devastated and impoverished Europe within a pervasive metaphorical assumption. Napoleon pitting himself against that amalgam known as the Holy Alliance was the Satanic rebel defying the upholders of orthodoxy. The Napoleonic Wars appeared to the sensitive minds of the age as a reality whose imperatives were no less categorical for being fruitless, but more so, enforced with historical urgency. (227)

Because the restoration of monarchical authority in effect transported Europe backward in time to the *ancien régime* (Cox 55, Bainbridge 178), Mary Shelley and her circle evoked the Miltonic tradition in works designed to inspire both immediate sociopolitical change and permanent transformations in the human mind and heart.

In light of these remarks, we may better appreciate that Shelley's *The Last Man* stands not only as a record of the British imperial psyche in the years preceding the book's publication but as a capstone achievement in British visionary literature. In her late Romantic prophecy, Shelley explores the subversive potential of the visionary imagination, thus carrying forward the spirit of her literary coterie as that spirit manifests itself in such works as Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and Byron's *The Vision of Judgment* (1822). At the same time, in the first of her novels to appear after the deaths of her husband and Byron (in 1822 and 1824, respectively), Shelley surpasses her contemporaries by restoring the Sibyl, a prophetic female voice from Western antiquity, as a principal vatic authority. Through this reconfiguration, she suggests that visionary poetics originates not in patriarchal scriptural history (particularly as Milton interpreted it) but in a distinctly matriarchal pagan past. As *The Last Man*'s fictional "Introduction" explains, Verney's text has been recovered, collated, and published by an Englishwoman whose tour of Naples in 1818 occasions a visit to the Sibyl's desolate coastal cave, where she discovers the fragmented chronicle inscribed on scattered and long unread leaves. Shelley's Romantic traveler thus finds an image of the future in a place of the past and presents it to the eyes of the present. This seemingly vertiginous narrative experiment allows Shelley to unsettle hierarchical, linear understandings of human temporality and so to present history as founded indecisively on disrupted time. Shelley thus assays various notions of literary and temporal continuity to show that humankind's fate, despite history's myriad nightmares, is never foreordained; accordingly, her *Last Man* is less a doomful prediction of imperial decay than a prophecy of hope justified by the regenerative power of the human imagination.

Because an adventurous Englishwoman (who forthrightly protests her interpretative limitations) redacts the sibylline leaves she has found into Verney's plague-chronicle, *The Last Man* invites speculation on how a nightmarish future might look without requiring that this apocalypse be accepted as a direct revelation of literal truth. Rather, the Verney account is a story nested within a story that interweaves past, present, and future into "simultaneous time-scapes" (Mellor 144) and so connects the history of what occurs between 2073 and 2100—the "last year of the world" (Shelley 363)—to both the ancient and contemporary worlds. Verney's narrative is in reality the composite product of three minds separated by more than two thousand years: the Cumaean Sibyl (who does not appear as a flesh-and-blood character) allows an intelligent and ambitious young Romantic to recover the work of a person either long dead or as yet unborn. For this reason, Verney's sketch of the future, in its nihilistic forecasting of a single pattern for history, fails to speak the last word on humankind's destiny.

In this sense, Verney's chronicle is not a message in a bottle brought either forward or backward in time to 1818 Italy; rather, the work represents

an intricate trans-generational collaboration properly associated with the visionary poetics tradition. Recognizing the Sibyl's cave to be a nexus of collapsed time-states, the cusp at which past, present, and future blend in an extraordinary continuum, the frame narrator describes her artistry in revising the sibylline leaves:

Sometimes I have thought, that, obscure and chaotic as they are, they owe their present form to me, their decipherer. As if we should give to another artist, the painted fragments which form the mosaic copy of Raphael's Transfiguration in St. Peter's; he would put them together in a form, whose mode would be fashioned by his own peculiar mind and talent. Doubtless the leaves of the Cumæan Sibyl have suffered distortion and diminution of interest and excellence in my hands. My only excuse for thus transforming them, is that they were unintelligible in their pristine condition. (Shelley 8)

"What is important," Joseph Anthony Wittreich writes, "is a decipherer—someone to integrate and explain and give continuity to the fragments. Prophetic works are, by definition, fragmentary, the particles of a vision that receives articulation and definition only to the extent that an author of a prophecy is able to make its fragmentary parts cohere, each with the others" (51). The Englishwoman's endeavors thus accord with Wittreich's description of how visionary artists remake their respective literary inheritances (Milton xv).⁴ Just as St. John of Patmos engages and recreates his scriptural predecessors or as the Romantics study and rewrite Spenser and Milton (as well as biblical seers such as Revelation's author), so the traveler to the Sibyl's cave resets Verney's thoughts and words within the scope of her own vision of life. Thus the linearity, cohesiveness, and finality of the plague tale are illusory, simply impressions rendered through the Englishwoman's diligent redaction of the fragmented chronicle. The future collapses into a past recovered in the present by a woman whose collative art suggests that she is not unlike the seer-poet who intervenes in past visions to create new ways of seeing and being.

If in the novel Shelley "asserts the urgent necessity of collective psychic transformation," as Kari E. Lokke claims (133), then she does so with the visionary's faith in the value of human life and the openness of human history. By design, Shelley challenges the deterministic, even fatalistic perspective of history as the record of absolute necessity. Clearly, her novel is neither a fictional reiteration of the 1650s debate between Thomas Hobbes and Bishop John Bramhall regarding chance and necessity nor a revisiting of the early eighteenth-century conflicts between the philosophers Anthony Collins, a necessitarian, and Samuel Clarke, a Newtonian libertarian. At the same time, the book touches upon a polemic in English philosophy (of concern to William Godwin, Shelley's father, and Percy Shelley alike) that allows Shelley to explore both the question of humankind's role in history and the idea that history realizes possibilities rather than circumscribes them.⁵

What distinguishes *The Last Man* from like-minded Romantic calls for transformation is its use of the Sibyl, the revered pagan seer, as its principal visionary ancestress. By transferring vatic authority from the patriarchal Judeo-Christian scriptures to the matriarchal sibylline leaves, Shelley meaningfully questions the masculine bias in Romantic prophecy: consider, for example, that Byron's *The Vision of Judgment* features an all-male cast (inasmuch as saints, angels, and devils can be identified by gender). She thus places "the whole prophetic tradition, previously withheld from women," into contact with "a newly emerging female literature" (Wittreich, "The Work of a Man's Redemption" 50).⁶ Although he looks past women writers such as the British spiritual mystic Joanna Southcott, who asserted herself as a female visionary in her religious writings during the Romantic period (and whom Byron mocked in *The Vision*), Wittreich recognizes that Shelley, by pointedly refashioning British prophecy's longstanding patriarchal idiom, significantly and lastingly amplifies the tradition to accommodate female authors and their perspectives.⁷

Shelley's purposeful evocation of the Cumaean Sibyl carries with it a network of well-known historical associations, not the least of which is the fact that her prophecies were gathered into sacred books to which the classical Romans turned in times of crisis. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price state that "many innovations were inspired by the Sibylline Books, the collections of oracles, kept and consulted by the *duoviri sacris faciundis*, which served both to initiate change and to provide [legitimacy] for what might otherwise have been seen as deviations from the ancestral tradition" (62). Beard, North, and Price specify that these writings, rendered in Greek verse (62), later came to be associated with the Cumaean Sibyl and "were believed to contain the destiny of the Romans" (62), a people whose empire included parts of Asia and North Africa as well as most of Europe. The sibylline prophecies enjoyed a special status in imperial Rome because they were written down, and "the Roman empire," David Potter reminds us, "was an empire of the written word" (95). The Cumaean Sibyl thus was distinguished from other sibyls by virtue of the cultural faith that the Romans showed in her visions as these were recorded in written language.⁸

Shelley thus recovers the sibylline prophetic tradition partly to challenge the patriarchal aspects of Romantic visionary literature without departing from historical precedents. It should be noted that this interpretation countervails Samantha Webb's contention that, by 1826, the Sibyl had become a powerless symbol of Western antiquity. For Shelley's audience, Webb claims, "the Sibyl does not carry the prophetic authority she once did. Therefore the editor, as the figure who grounds the frame of reference for this novel in the contemporary world, receives the Sibylline text as an artifact, a historical curiosity from a bygone era, which achieves its value as a rare object, not as a prophetic warning" (132). She likens Shelley's frame narrator to Walter Scott's Peter Pattieson, who, in the 1816 novel *Old Mortality*, "reworks" the title character's

“biased history into an ‘authoritative’ one” (Webb 132); consequently, the frame narrator “refuses to appropriate the scattered Sibyl’s leaves for the prophetic purpose they would have carried in ancient Rome—as a kind of revelatory sacred document that inscribes the end of the world by merely describing it” (Webb 132-33).

By portraying Shelley’s Englishwoman as an antiquarian (132-33), Webb misses the fact that she is also a modern-day chresmologue, that is, a collector who facilitated the circulation of prophetic texts in the classical Roman world (Potter 95-96). “The *chresmologos*,” Potter states, “did not claim authority as a prophet for himself (as far as we know this seems to have been an overwhelmingly male profession): his claim to importance rested upon his credibility as an accurate purveyor of ancient wisdom” (95). Although the chresmologue seldom redacted the prophetic books within his possession, he contributed significantly to the promulgation of these works, as Potter notes by stating that “it was the ubiquitous *chresmologos* who spread the wisdom of the inspired sages throughout ancient society” (96). As Shelley’s “Introduction” suggests, the unnamed Englishwoman performs a similar role by presenting what she has recovered from the sibylline leaves not because the plague-chronicle is a historical oddity but because the work possesses a visionary importance imparted to it by the spirit of the Cumaean Sibyl.

The Sibyl and her legacy therefore offer Shelley a superb exemplification of an expressly non-Christian European tradition that nevertheless upholds several tenets of the British visionary genre, key among which is that literary prophecy is not by nature predictive.⁹ Prediction differs from written prophecy in that the former presupposes a single direction or pattern for human history, whether at the personal or communal level, whereas the latter posits history as unsettled and changeable. By extension, the poet-seer is neither a soothsayer, like the one who forewarns Shakespeare’s Caesar, nor a supernatural clairvoyant, like any one of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*. To elucidate this point, we may look at one of the central scenes in English vatic literature, namely Adam’s vision of the human future in the two closing Books of *Paradise Lost*, as illustrative of how prophecy reveals the pliancy of history and summons humanity to intervene rather than to acquiesce. “As Adam learns from Michael’s historical drama,” David Loewenstein asserts, “the history of the human race involves no linear process; rather it consists, as Adam himself observes, of men in successive ages treading ‘Paths indirect’” (XI.631, 97).

Adam’s vision, as Morton Paley argues, helps to illuminate *The Last Man*’s shape and tone (115). Shelley draws her novel’s epigraph from the penultimate Book of *Paradise Lost* (XI.770-72); the verses she selects are an especially piteous outcry: “Let no man seek / Henceforth to be foretold what shall befall / Him or his Children.” Since she writes her mature work from a post-Waterloo perspective, we may speculate fairly that Shelley uses these lines with some thought to those verses that follow:

I had hope
 When violence was ceas't, and War on Earth,
 All would have gone well, peace would have crown'd
 With length of happy days the race of man;
 But I was far deceiv'd; for now I see
 Peace to corrupt no less than War to waste. (XI.779-84)

If the novel were linearly predictive, her explicit and implicit allusions to *Paradise Lost* would support Paley's claim that Shelley evokes visionary principles to lament rather than to celebrate humankind's destiny (115). But this criticism, in light of both Loewenstein's analysis and Milton's poem itself, proves at best the right finding from the wrong premise. We need look only one hundred lines further into Book XI to find, with Loewenstein (97), the redemptive and benevolent imagery that moves Adam, after witnessing five strife-filled visions (including the vision of the lazar-house), to rejoice in the promise of a new covenant, to come after the Great Flood, between humankind and God:

O thou who future things canst represent
 At present, Heav'nly instructor, I revive
 At this last sight, assur'd that Man shall live
 With all the Creatures, and their seed preserve. (XI.870-73)

Michael's prophecy blends the sweet promise of halcyon days with bitter scenes of hopelessness, thereby diversifying the significances to which the spectacle of history points (Loewenstein 124). Literary prophecy in fact disallows the closure of history to possibilities. Thus Adam and Eve depart Eden with "the World...all before them" (XII.646) and so enter history, as Loewenstein suggests, "with humility and courage" (125). Despite what Adam has seen with his eyes and what Eve has seen in her dreams, hope continues because history promises myriad possibilities rather than a single, inevitable outcome. Seemingly paradoxical, what the Archangel reveals to the first people matters less as a description of the future than as a summons to the human imagination to seize historical opportunity, to dream and to enact new realities for humankind. The prophecy, in other words, encourages imaginative transformation.

Just as the concluding verses of Milton's poem complicate the idea that history follows a pre-established course, the few pages comprising Shelley's "Introduction" transform the notion of unidirectional history that Verney's chronicle of the future advances for some readers. If the frame narrator feels little worry after her look at the twenty-first century (a point of concern for Audrey A. Fisch), it is because she knows she has simply gazed into one possible future, and she realizes that what she has seen is best interpreted as a general delineation of human truths rather than as a precise description of what awaits humankind in the years ahead.¹⁰ By recasting the sibylline leaves,

the frame narrator prophetically intervenes into the plague-chronicle and, by extension, into history itself. More exactly, she knows that what she presents to her readership warns rather than damns, cautions rather than condemns. She restores Verney's story to persuade her audience of the imagination's capacity to generate dreams that may countervail the world's nightmares. Surely, cataclysm cannot be prevented merely by foretelling it, and history's crises and catastrophes are myriad. Nevertheless, Shelley's frame narrator (here reflecting her author's faith in human creativity) seeks, like the Archangel Michael, to move her audience to rethink human community against the image of its discontinuation.

In this respect, *The Last Man* renders a prophecy within a prophecy, or rather a vision of history within a vision of history. Verney and the Englishwoman's stories come together across time, imperceptibly intertwining in a way too complex to dismiss as authorial legerdemain or as a prose version of Chinese boxes or matryoshka dolls. As the Englishwoman intimates, a part of this effect owes to her editorship and a part owes to the prophetic influence conveyed by "the slight Sibylline pages" (Shelley 8): "Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form. But the main substance rests on the truths contained in these poetic rhapsodies, and the divine intuition which the Cumæan damsel obtained from heaven" (Shelley 8). Because the Sibyl remakes time's linear structure to allow the Englishwoman access to the Verney account in 1818, a general temporal distortion recurs throughout *The Last Man*, intensifying as the piece moves beyond its initial *roman à clef* drama (in which Verney's intimates, who lead the newly inaugurated English republic, resemble members of the Shelley-Byron circle) to the bedlam sparked by the plague's appearance in England and finally to the eastward flight of the British people to the shores of a Europe where almost no human life remains.

The Last Man reaches a particularly poignant moment as Verney—soon to find that he is hopelessly alone in a plague-savaged world—records the movements of the last few English survivors across a depopulated continent:

We loitered along the lovely Vale of Servox; passed long hours on the bridge, which, crossing the ravine of Arve, commands a prospect of its pine-clothed depths, and the snowy mountains that wall it in. We rambled through romantic Switzerland; till, fear of coming winter leading us forward, the first days of October found us in the valley of La Maurienne, which leads to Cenis. I cannot explain the reluctance we felt at leaving this land of mountains; perhaps it was, that we regarded the Alps as boundaries between our former and our future state of existence, and so clung fondly to what of old we had loved. (331-32)

For Verney, Europe's sovereign mountains figure tellingly both in landscape and in timescape, the latter collapsing and coalescing past, present, and future

into a temporal state within which, to borrow Verney's later remark, "each moment contain[s] eternity" (Shelley 345). The Alps emblemize a division, in the here and now of Verney's narrative, between the post-monarchical English past (Verney's story begins where the history of England's royalty ends) and a stateless future, or rather a future in which monarchy reappears in the abstract, whether universalized (the narrator's plague-as-world-queen metaphor, which I shall discuss) or particularized (late in the book, Verney likens himself to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, "that monarch of the waste") (Shelley 347).

That the Alps suggest to Verney a clear delimitation in the English refugees' sense of their own history is unsurprising since he often describes temporal matters in spatial terms. For example, as he and his companions prepare to sail from Dover to Calais, Verney notes that "death had hunted us through the course of many months, even to the narrow strip of time on which we now stood; narrow indeed, and buffeted by storms, was our footway overhanging the great sea of calamity" (289-90). And long before Adrian—England's Lord Protector, Verney's closest friend, and an avatar of Percy Shelley—arranges the survivors' evacuation to France, Verney claims: "Time and experience have placed me on an height from which I can comprehend the past as a whole; and in this way I must describe it, bringing forward the leading incidents, and disposing light and shade so as to form a picture in whose very darkness there will be harmony" (Shelley 209).

In tracing out his approach to historiography, Verney casts light also on his sense of history itself. By using a topographical metaphor to express historical perspective, he appears to posit human history as a closed pattern; seemingly, the pandemic discontinues the relation of the past with the present and so by extension with the future. Although the natural world's deep time is unaffected by the plague—animals live on, the seasons change, the seas maintain their magnificence and the mountains their grandeur—human history, in Verney's eyes, seems to have ceased.¹¹

As the plague-chronicle continues, this idea of history becomes significantly unsettled by the sibylline influence that is everywhere throughout *The Last Man*. In her analysis of Mary Shelley's thoughts on history *vis-à-vis* Sir Walter Scott's, Deidre Lynch notes that the novel "challenges such closure" as one finds in Scott's *Waverley* (1814) "by running the tape of history backward" (139): "the convention that diagrams time's linear, progressive advance as a westward migration of civilization from Greece to Rome to England to America" is put "into reverse" when "the plague arrives in England on a ship that has voyaged east across the Atlantic from Philadelphia" (140). Lynch suggests that Shelley purposefully counters the chronologically orderly and mistily nostalgic method that Scott prefers (see also Lynch 135-50).

As a Romantic visionary artist, Shelley seeks to discredit the idea that history is linear and unidirectional; for her, history must not be organized by the same logic that cites the past as an authority for dynastic succession,

primogeniture, imperialist aggression, and whole traditions of oppression. To borrow from Ina Ferris's discussion of Romantic-era Irish writers such as Lady Sydney Morgan and Michael Banim, the "sense of the past as unclosed, as an ongoing power that might be turned to present account, prompt[s] an understanding of history writing as neither memorializing remembrance (as in nationalist historiography) nor as impartial knowledge (as in the emerging Rankean model) but precisely—and romantically—as active recollection" (141-42). Accordingly, these authors create "a model of history as a pointed intersection of the horizons of past and present directed to shaping of the horizon of the future" (Ferris 142). By virtue of her novel's sibylline timescape, Shelley achieves what Anne McWhir calls a "visionary synchronicity" (xxvii) that complicates history as a resource for institutional forms of power.

Time collapses throughout Verney's account of the pandemic that devastates humankind in the late twenty-first century. For example, upon revisiting the now empty home of his late sister, Perdita, Verney says, "The time when in proud and happy security we assembled at this cottage, was gone—soon the present hours would join those past, and shadows of future ones rose dark and menacing from the womb of time, their cradle and their bier" (201-02).¹² Later, in one of his last moments with her, Verney gently admonishes his wife, Idris, who has been imagining their love's continuation in the afterworld: "Let us not...neglect the present. This present moment, short as it is, is a part of eternity, and the dearest part, since it is our own unalienably. Thou, the hope of my futurity, art my present joy" (266). In both instances, Verney articulates his emotions through thoughts and words that point to time's indistinctness; in essence, he sees his world and the people around him as belonging to a reordered temporal scheme in which past, present, and future commingle to the point of inseparability.

This reconfiguration of time appears also in Verney's passage on the last plague victim's interment in the ice caves at Chamonix, the "rocky vale" at which the disease's "barbarous tyranny" finally ceases (330). Verney dryly commemorates the nightmare's passing, unable to forget the tremendous scope of the pandemic's ravages: so far as he knows, only four people outlive the disease. He likens the now spent plague to a female ruler: "She abdicated her throne, and despoiled herself of her imperial sceptre among the ice rocks that surrounded us. She left solitude and silence co-heirs of her kingdom" (330). This metaphorical representation provides an ironic counterpoint to his much earlier notation of the King of England's abdication in 2073 and the subsequent creation of an English republic. By likening the plague to a royal person, Verney brings his chronicle back to its beginning; less an insight into Verney as a political thinker than as a man struggling to make sense of time, history, and human mortality, the plague-as-world-queen metaphor bridges the novel's last moments with its first (see McWhir xxxiii-xxxiv).

Chamonix thus takes on a twofold significance, serving as both the site of the last plague-grave and as a cradle of civilization, a place of human nascence.

At Chamonix, though, the waters of life are suspended in icefalls, séracs, and the Mer de Glace. Amid this glacial icescape, Verney further explores his conflicted sense of temporality and history:

My present feelings are so mingled with the past, that I cannot say whether the knowledge of this change visited us, as we stood on this sterile spot...The coming time was as a mighty river, down which a charmed boat is driven, whose mortal steersman knows, that the obvious peril is not the one he needs fear, yet that danger is nigh; and who floats awe-struck under beetling precipices, through the dark and turbid waters—seeing in the distance yet stranger and ruder shapes, towards which he is irresistibly impelled. What would become of us? O for some Delphic oracle, or Pythian maid, to utter the secrets of futurity! O for some Œdipus to solve the riddle of the cruel Sphynx! Such Œdipus was I to be—not divining a word’s juggle, but whose agonizing pangs, and sorrow-tainted life were to be the engines, wherewith to lay bare the secrets of destiny, and reveal the meaning of the enigma, whose explanation closed the history of the human race. (330)

For Verney, history appears to be at an end; the future promises little save further cause for fear and trembling. But his loss of heart is put into question by his invocations of the classical world. Verney associates vatic power with antiquity, that is, with a past so far removed from the current moment that no recourse to prophecy, to the transformative imagination, now exists. His readers, however, realize that the Cumaean Sibyl’s continually vital power governs the recovery and reconstitution of his text. A hallmark of the Sibyl’s legacy involves the simultaneity of time states, as Olga Peters Hasty points out in her discussion of the twentieth-century Russian author Marina Tsvetaeva (who wrote a cycle of poems on the Sibyl): “measured time is transcended by the eternal voice, and temporal divisions are done away with as past, present, and future converge” (197). Verney acquiesces in hopelessness without realizing that the very prophetic authority that he laments as irretrievably lost in the past in fact prevents his account of humankind’s future from becoming irretrievably lost in the past (see Lynch 142).

Shelley’s rethinking of time in *The Last Man* reflects an acute interest not only in the Sibyl and her legend but also in questions regarding the temporality of human life, questions which, as several scholars recently have shown, received serious consideration in the literature of the Romantic period. William Wordsworth’s nocturnal poetry, for example, is haunted by the “de-sanctification” and “secularization” of human time by “the clock-reckoning of modernity,” as Christopher Miller asserts (3). Karen Hadley writes that the predictability and regularity of time as measured by clocks and watches—and as taxed by William Pitt in the late 1790s (693)—led Romantic authors to ascertain a conflict between what William Deresiewicz, in *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets*, calls “Bergsonian *temps*—linear, unidirectional clock-time” (37) and what John Wyatt, in *Wordsworth and the Geologists*, refers to

as *deep time*, that is, the unquantifiable time of the earth and the cosmos (157). Such humanly produced records of time and history as the clock, the timeline, the archive, and the museum typically register the principal ideologies and powers of the moment (the Great Exhibition of 1851 being a familiar case in point, see Laurie Kane Lew). In *The Last Man*, Shelley overturns artificially kept time and chronological history, thereby undermining two basic props of both conventional English literature and the British worldview in the years following the Napoleonic Wars.

Although partly emblematic of a shared interest among the Romantics, Shelley's reworking of linear time and chronology in *The Last Man* uniquely speaks to late Romantic literature and culture. After her 1823 homecoming, as Bennett notes, Shelley unhappily realized that England "was quickly solidifying around a materialistic value system in which women's lives were increasingly restricted" (84). This England—repressive, intolerant, John Bullish—came into being after the French wars closed with Napoleon's loss in the countryside near Mont-Saint-Jean (see Woolf, esp. 94). Although Waterloo and the 1815 Treaty of Paris promised a new age of peace for England, the reality was that Wellington's victory and Viscount Castlereagh's statecraft simply resuscitated and refortified the old absolutism that the French Revolution initially contested. Further soured by the less-than-admirable political stance struck by the Prince Regent (who became King George IV in 1820), the nation's new day must have seemed horribly anachronistic in the eyes of a liberal intellectual like Shelley, whether she looked from home or abroad (see Orr 250). The Prince Regent's backward notions of royal governance, joined to his autocratic temperament and corroborated by Tory policy-makers such as Castlereagh, Liverpool, Sidmouth, and Eldon, fostered an authoritarian post-war climate worsened by poor harvests, significant unemployment, public disaffection, and incidents of bloody violence such as the Peterloo Massacre. Furthermore, by the time *The Last Man* appeared in print, John Keats, Percy Shelley, and Byron all were dead, Southey had received the Poet Laureateship, and Wordsworth actively supported the Earl of Liverpool's Tory administration (which controlled Parliament since Spencer Perceval was assassinated in 1812). *The Last Man* reflects the fact that Shelley, by the age of twenty-nine, witnessed not only wartime violence and postwar authoritarianism but also the moment of British Romanticism's greatness flicker (see Hilton 235-80).

At the same time, *The Last Man* is best approached neither as a prose *séance* couched in a *roman à clef* nor as a record of the pre-Victorian imperialist mind. Whether an expressly Godwinian performance, as Pamela Clemit suggests (196), or a self-assertive quest for authorial identity in a swiftly changing literary world, as Webb claims (120), the novel establishes Shelley as a key voice in the tradition of British visionary poetics. Through the work, Shelley intervenes into this tradition by challenging its elemental biases, not for the sake of mere contradistinction but to nurture, in a phrase from Kathy L. Glass's

work on the nineteenth-century African American writer Anna Julia Cooper, “a coalitional consciousness” (45) that could remake history for the benefit of all. Her focus on the life-affirming power of the imagination permits Shelley to advance the idea that history, the sum of human choices, always opens new and better courses to those daring enough to seek them out. Accordingly, what she invents in Lionel Verney’s nightmare chronicle serves less to encode imperial destiny than to dramatize the imagination’s transformative power, how creative thought can redefine the self and the other for the better and so, ideally, bring about reconciliation and new ideas of human community. In this light, the piece should be considered not as a valediction forbidding hope but as a study in beginnings.

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NOTES

¹ Representative critical readings in this vein include Bewell 296-314 and Joseph W. Lew 261-78.

² The idea of visionary poetics originates with Wittreich; see especially his *Visionary Poetics: Milton’s Tradition and His Legacy*. Throughout the essay, the phrases “visionary poetics,” “vatic literature,” and “British or Romantic prophecy” are interchangeable. Note also that visionary poetics refers to an aesthetic rather than simply to writing in verse and so pertains to Mary Shelley’s prose works, including, of course, *The Last Man*.

³ Particularly relevant are stanzas 10 and 11, lines 73-88, of Byron’s “Dedication.”

⁴ For perspectives on Wittreich’s theory of a visionary tradition, see Newlyn 15-17 and Shawcross 71-73. Important to note is the recent work of Miller who persuasively demonstrates the influence of seventeenth-century British women prophets on Milton and his *Paradise Lost* (77-106).

⁵ For more on this subject, see Chappell. See also Clark, who provides a concise overview of the Doctrine of Necessity as Percy Shelley understood it from Godwin’s 1793 *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* and integrated it into his early poem *Queen Mab* (published 1813). Clark argues that both Godwin and Percy rely on the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume and that both “miss totally the subtlety of Hume’s argument” (408). See Clark 407-09 and Percy Shelley 15-71.

⁶ Wittreich establishes the context for this assertion in “‘The Work of Man’s Redemption’”; see particularly 47-48.

⁷ For her take on Southcott, see Mellor 144-49. For Southcott and the tradition of female prophecy, see Thomas 52.

⁸ Consider that the Roman poet Virgil’s evocation of the Cumaean Sibyl in his *Fourth Eclogue* so persuasively recapitulates the Sibyl’s foretelling of “the coming of peace...that the poem has been taken to be an actual prophecy” (Potter 70), a fact reflecting the statures of both the poet and the prophetess.

⁹ In her discussion of the younger Romantics, Butler claims that “the English liberal writers of the post-war period are extrovert not introvert, and pagan not Christian” (123-24).

¹⁰ Fisch notes that Shelley’s frame narrator “seems strangely unaware of any public and political function for the prophetic narrative” (279); consequently, “the manuscript, instead of offering lessons about politics and survival, instead of functioning as prophecy, has offered ‘solace’” (280). From this perspective, Shelley’s Englishwoman mitigates the visionary power of the sibylline leaves because she fails to see, or at least neglects to discuss, the recovered narrative’s revolutionary potential.

¹¹ For discussions of the deep time concept, see Brodhead and Wyatt 150-68, especially 155-58.

¹² The actress and poet Mary Robinson was known as Perdita, after her most famous stage role (the part being from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*). It is unclear whether Shelley had Robinson in mind when naming this character.

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