CHAPTER 5

Radical Suffering
Shelley's Legacy in Nonviolent Revolution

James Chandler

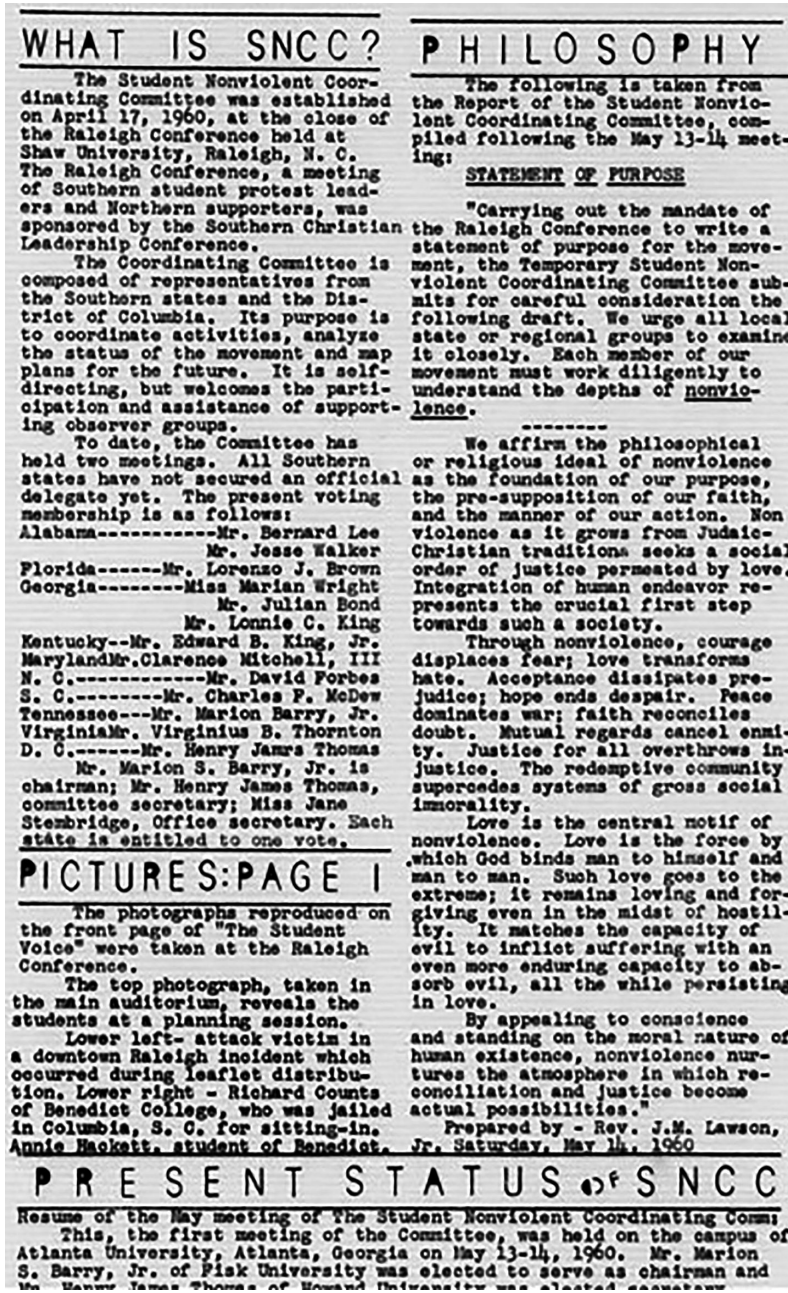
I

In 1960, in the midst of the lunch counter sit-ins protesting racial discrimination across the American South, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was established in Raleigh, North Carolina to support the ongoing struggle for civil rights.[1] In June of that year, SNCC circulated the first issue of a newsletter, *The Student Voice*, which included a history of its founding, a program of events, and a brief statement of purpose by the Reverend James Lawson, whom Martin Luther King, Jr. would later call "the mind of the movement" and "the leading strategist of non-violence in the world."[2] Lawson's influential statement reads in part:

> We affirm the philosophical and religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the pre-supposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Non-violence as it grows from the Judaic-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love […]
>
> Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regards cancel enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice […]
>
> Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love. [See Figure 1]

As Congressman John Lewis (then a member of SNCC and already a disciple of Lawson) would later recall, Lawson's statement provided a set of principles for the conduct of American protests going forward. Their reach soon extended to nonviolent political movements in Northern Ireland and

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006



WHAT IS SNCC?

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was established on April 17, 1960, at the close of the Raleigh Conference held at Shaw University, Raleigh, N. C. The Raleigh Conference, a meeting of Southern student protest leaders and Northern supporters, was sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The Coordinating Committee is composed of representatives from the Southern states and the District of Columbia. Its purpose is to coordinate activities, analyze the status of the movement and map plans for the future. It is self-directing, but welcomes the participation and assistance of supporting observer groups.

To date, the Committee has held two meetings. All Southern states have not secured an official delegate yet. The present voting membership is as follows:

Alabama----------Mr. Bernard Lee
Mr. Jesse Walker
Florida------Mr. Lorenzo J. Brown
Georgia--------Miss Marian Wright
Mr. Julian Bond
Mr. Lonnie C. King
Kentucky--Mr. Edward B. King, Jr.
MarylandMr.Clarence Mitchell, III
N. C.----------Mr. David Forbes
S. C.---------Mr. Charles F. McDew
Tennessee---Mr. Marion Barry, Jr.
VirginiaMr. Virginius B. Thornton
D. C.-------Mr. Henry James Thomas

Mr. Marion S. Barry, Jr. is chairman; Mr. Henry James Thomas, committee secretary; Miss Jane Stembridge, Office secretary. Each state is entitled to one vote.

PICTURES: PAGE 1

The photographs reproduced on the front page of "The Student Voice" were taken at the Raleigh Conference.

The top photograph, taken in the main auditorium, reveals the students at a planning session.

Lower left- attack victim in a downtown Raleigh incident which occurred during leaflet distribution. Lower right - Richard Counts of Benedict College, who was jailed in Columbia, S. C. for sitting-in. Annie Hackett, student of Benedict.

PHILOSOPHY

The following is taken from the Report of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, compiled following the May 13-14 meeting:

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

"Carrying out the mandate of the Raleigh Conference to write a statement of purpose for the movement, the Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee submits for careful consideration the following draft. We urge all local state or regional groups to examine it closely. Each member of our movement must work diligently to understand the depths of nonviolence.

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the pre-supposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Non violence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regards cancel enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supercedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities."

Prepared by - Rev. J.M. Lawson, Jr. Saturday, May 14, 1960

PRESENT STATUS OF SNCC

Resume of the May meeting of The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Comm:

This, the first meeting of the Committee, was held on the campus of Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia on May 13-14, 1960. Mr. Marion S. Barry, Jr. of Fisk University was elected to serve as chairman and

Figure 1 *Student Voice* (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC), Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 1960). Civil Rights Movement Archive (www.crmvet.org/)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

South Africa that emulated the American civil rights movement. In diverse national and international conflicts, Lawson's words became words to live by, even to die by.

Beyond the New Testament theology cited by Lawson, the writings and actions of Mahatma Gandhi are rightly seen as a crucial point of origin for the American civil rights movement. Students of Percy Shelley, however, might be forgiven for hearing in Lawson's document certain resonances of the poet's writings from almost a century and a half earlier, especially his responses to the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, when a peaceful public assembly in Manchester was attacked by the local Yeomanry with support from the Fifteenth Regiment of British Hussars, themselves veterans of Waterloo. Indeed, Shelley's writings responded to conditions and events that seem, in retrospect, to have established a kind of template for such fatal encounters between peaceful social-justice protesters and armed forces of the state as took place in Selma and Derry.

The most famous of Shelley's writings about Peterloo, *The Mask of Anarchy*, probably offers his best-known slogan for the politics of nonviolence – "Ye are many, they are few" – a line later echoed by activists around the world.[3] Yet his most explicit and detailed treatment of the subject appears in a very different piece of writing composed in the aftermath of Peterloo, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, the unfinished pamphlet in three parts that would not be published until 1920. In section three of the *View*, Shelley sketches out a scenario for the work of the "true patriot" in bringing about a more just society in a moment of crisis.[4] As part of his effort "to enlighten and to unite the nation and animate it with enthusiasm and confidence […] [h]e will promote […] open confederation" and "discourage all secret confederations" (*PVR* 48). And to this end, "[he] will urge the necessity of exciting the people frequently to exercise their right of assembling, in such limited numbers as that all present may be actual parties to the proceedings of the day" (*PVR* 48). To this point, Shelley echoes the teachings of William Godwin, who had advocated open assembly and discouraged cabals a quarter of a century earlier in *Political Justice*. But the ghastly case of Peterloo leads Shelley to a final piece of advice for this true patriot:

> Lastly, if circumstances had collected a considerable number as at Manchester on the memorable 16th of August, if the tyrants command the troops to fire upon them or cut them down unless they disperse, he will exhort them peaceably to defy the danger, and to expect without resistance the onset of the cavalry, and wait with folded arms the event of the fire of the artillery and receive with unshrinking bosoms the bayonets of the charging battalions. (*PVR* 48)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

Coming almost a century and half before SNCC (and seventy-five years before Gandhi's passive resistance campaign for Indian rights in South Africa), this passage stands as the earliest such statement that I know of. Yet it does not seem to be well known to activists in or even scholars of these movements. There is no mention of Shelley in, for example, any of the essays collected in *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Concepts, Cases and Controversies* (2020) or, say, in Judith Butler's philosophical investigations in *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, published in the same year.[5]

A number of questions thus urge themselves on our attention. There is a historical question about the relation of Gandhi's views to Shelley's, a question complicated by the fact that the *Philosophical View of Reform* was not published until long after Gandhi's South African campaigns: the first edition of the *View* appears in 1920 from Oxford University Press. There is the biographical question as to how Shelley was able to come to the views he so precociously held on this matter. There is the literary critical question about how Shelley's tendency to write in different genres matters to his expression of these views: to see the point of this question, one need only consider the difference between the stanza of the *Mask* and the paragraph of the *Philosophical View of Reform*. There is the question of how Shelley's views developed in relation to those of *his* own contemporaries. And then there is that question of why Shelley's writings on nonviolence have had relatively little acknowledged uptake in our own moment.

II

To take up that last question first (though I return to it in closing), it is important to recognize that none of the three civil rights leaders I have mentioned acknowledge Shelley as part of their canon of thinkers and writers. There is no evidence, for example, that Shelley's writings formed any part of Lawson's curriculum in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt, where he mentored Lewis and others in the late 1950s. Among English-language writers in the nineteenth century it is Henry David Thoreau, not Shelley, who tends – under the slightly different rubric of "civil disobedience" – to be included in the canon the movement developed from Lawson's curriculum. Lawson's 1960 "Statement of Purpose" does refer more broadly to the "Judaic-Christian tradition," however, and it seems fair to say that the New Testament injunction to "turn the other cheek" seems to capture something crucial about Lawson's teachings. This emphasis turns out to be important for the Shelley connection in a number of ways.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

Like John Keats, Shelley was no friend to ecclesiastical Christianity, but unlike Keats Shelley did reserve a special place in his thinking for Christ himself. There are moments in his mature work where the trope of the "imitation of Christ" seems to be in play, and occasionally the figure of Christ himself – as distinct from Christianity – becomes explicit in Shelley's thinking. Writing in May of 1820 to Leigh Hunt about Charles Ollier, the publisher of *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley waxed expansive:

> [I]n fact they are all rogues. It is less the character of the individual than the situation in which he is placed which determines him to be honest or dishonest[;] perhaps we ought to regard an honest bookseller, or an honest seller of anything else in the present state of human affairs as a kind of Jesus Christ. The present system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms before we shall find anything but disappointment in our intercourse with any but a few select spirits. (*Letters* II: 191)

There are reasons, as we shall see, to think of Shelley's greatest hero, Prometheus himself, as typifying such Christ-like virtue in Shelley's syncretistic understanding of how the human imagination expresses itself across cultures.

The comment about Ollier, however, also indicates Shelley's sense of the depth and scale of the issues he was confronting: if the passage I cited from the *Philosophical View of Reform* shows Shelley's commitment to nonviolence, the comment about Ollier shows his commitment to revolution. It is all the more surprising, then, that there should be no recognition of Shelley's precocious writings among the nonviolent revolutionaries of the American civil rights movement, not even in Lawson's aptly titled recent volume, *Revolutionary Nonviolence*. By contrast, scores of references can be found in that book to the teachings of Gandhi, another figure who generally falls *outside* the Judeo-Christian tradition – though, like Shelley, Gandhi was open to the teachings of Christ (for a time, he actually sought to bridge the gap between Hinduism and Christianity). The figure of Gandhi, as it turns out, offers a path for connecting Shelley and the American civil rights movement. The path is circuitous but not altogether without signposting.

Lawson's intellectual debt to Gandhi, for example, amounts to more than a recognition that the latter's teachings were "in the air" after his successful campaign for Indian independence. Lawson's life experience in fact supplies specific links between the Christian-led American civil rights movement and the earlier movement that resulted in the decolonization of India in 1947. Ten years John Lewis's senior, Lawson was of age to be

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

drafted for military service in the Korean War. At Oberlin College, he was introduced to Gandhi's life and thought by two of his teachers, A. J. Muste and Bayard Rustin. Though he qualified for a college deferment, he instead became a conscientious objector and spent thirteen months in prison as a result in the early 1950s. Thereafter, he went to India, specifically to study the ways and means of Gandhian nonviolence, and then undertook a tour of African countries involved in the struggle to liberate themselves from European imperialism. His writings on nonviolence show the extent to which he had taken on the Gandhian concept of *satyagraha* – or "soul force" – which Lawson has recently re-urged as "both a philosophy and a methodology" for the movement identified with Black Lives Matter.[6] But Lawson also makes it clear that Gandhism was already central to his mentoring of Lewis's cohort in the late 1950s.

It might not seem that Gandhi's teachings on nonviolence bring us any closer to Shelley, especially if we focus narrowly on *A Philosophical View of Reform*. Since the *View* wasn't published until 1920, and since Gandhi had already published his own fully developed account of passive resistance in his first book, *Hind Swaraj* (1909) – it appeared in English translation that same year as *Indian Home Rule* – there seems to be a gap in transmission. There are nonetheless some broad lines of connection between Shelley and the young Gandhi. Like Shelley, Gandhi had a syncretistic view of religion, which he acquired in part from his mentor in the 1890s, the Jain savant Raychandbhai. He was well-versed in Hindu doctrines pertaining both to vegetarianism and to passive resistance. Such resemblances do not, however, count as evidence for a line of transmission, not of the sort that is widely claimed for Leo Tolstoy, whom Gandhi cited often and is known to have read before writing *Hind Swaraj*.

I want to suggest that while Shelley's importance to Gandhi is more mediated, it arises earlier and may prove no less important. The mediation comes in the person of one Henry Salt, a London intellectual in the Fabian circle of writers like George Bernard Shaw. Gandhi made Salt's acquaintance early on during his sojourn in London to obtain his law degree (1888–1891). Gandhi himself writes in his autobiography that the initial connection was on the basis of their shared practice of vegetarianism.[7] Leela Gandhi has beautifully shown how Gandhi's encounter with Salt would have led him to Shelley on the question of vegetarianism, but I want to suggest that Shelley's importance to Salt, and thus potentially to Gandhi, far exceeded their common interest in what Shelley called "the vegetable system of diet."[8] Salt's keen interest in Shelley extended to a range of moral and political issues, and we have it on Salt's own authority

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

that one of these issues is revolutionary nonviolence.[9] Salt, the Fabian socialist, recognized that Shelley's goal was nothing less than the overthrow of "the present system of society as it exists at present [...] with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms" – *and* the achievement of this outcome without resort to physical force. Salt understood that Shelley believed that the great cause was to be won, in Salt's words, by "a passive and constitutional process": "[i]t was because [Shelley] aimed at a complete but bloodless revolution that he distrusted and deprecated much of the teaching of Cobbett and his followers, in whose speeches he detected too many traces of the spirit of revenge."[10]

In reconstructing Shelley's articulation of nonviolent revolution, Salt was of course working with an archive missing certain pieces that are available to us today. He probably would not have known Shelley's letter to Hunt about Ollier, for example, nor would he have had access to the full surviving text of *A Philosophical View of Reform*: Salt acknowledges that it exists but notes that it "is to this day known only by excerpts and paraphrases."[11] He seems to have read all the rousing poems that Shelley wrote in the wake of Peterloo, like *The Mask of Anarchy*, and even quotes at some length from Shelley's "Song to the Men of England." Much of Salt's sense of Shelley's politics of revolutionary nonviolence, however, comes from Shelley's pre-Peterloo compositions. And he singles out *Prometheus Unbound* for his highest praise. A "trumpet blast of universal freedom," he writes, "may be said to ring through every passage of 'Prometheus Unbound'."[12] For Salt, *Prometheus Unbound* is "that splendid vision of the ultimate emancipation of humanity from the oppression of custom."[13] He saw it as the crowning achievement of the poems Shelley composed over the previous half-decade or so, a series of compositions "perfected by the solemn idealistic harmonies of 'Prometheus Unbound.'" These were all poems, Salt declared, that "Shelley devoted to the purpose of showing how the world may be regenerated by the power of love."[14]

Salt published these words in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Monograph* in 1888, the very year of Gandhi's arrival in London. He had already published an earlier book on Shelley (*A Shelley Primer*) just the year before, and he would go on to publish subsequent books on Shelley in 1896 and 1913. In light of the intensity of Gandhi's involvement with Salt and his circle, and his interest in the vegetarianism that Salt himself traced back to Shelley's writings, it seems reasonable to assume that Gandhi had some exposure – in these London years that were so formative for his future thinking – to Shelley's wider political views about nonviolent revolution. It is true that Thoreau is another figure on whom Salt published in these years: his

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

biography of the American pioneer of civil disobedience appeared in 1889. And it is also true that Gandhi and Salt would correspond about Thoreau decades later.[15] The Gandhi-Thoreau connection, accordingly, has had its share of critical attention.

Yet there are aspects of Salt's appreciation of Shelley that make him a figure even more apposite than Thoreau for understanding the sources of Gandhi's revolutionary nonviolence. One of these is that Gandhi became a more committed vegetarian than Thoreau and one more dedicated to integrating a vegetarian sensibility into an understanding of politics. Another is suggested by Salt's comment that Shelley was put off by any teachings, like Cobbett's, that he thought betrayed "traces of the spirit of revenge." In both the advocacy of the vegetarian sensibility and the opposition to the spirit of revenge, therefore, we might say that Salt sees Shelley as resisting on principle what we might call *bloodthirst*. Gandhi's own principled resistance to bloodthirst would be enshrined in the doctrine and discipline of *satyagraha* and eventually bequeathed to early leaders of the American civil rights movement like Lawson, Lewis, and of course King himself.

In one respect, these three Black leaders might even be seen as hewing closer to Shelley's version of this principle than to Gandhi's, for, like Shelley, they readily and explicitly name it "love." "The great secret of morals is Love," Shelley famously wrote in his 1821 *A Defence of Poetry* (published in 1841), in part a rewriting of *A Philosophical View of Reform* (*SPP* 517). We recall that Lawson, translating *satyagraha* into his own terms for the young civil rights movement in 1960, positioned love at the heart of his philosophy, "the central motif of nonviolence": "Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man." Lawson's way of framing his understanding of the Gandhian movement as centered on love, after all, is why contemporary students of Shelley might read his 1960 "statement of purpose" with that shock of recognition that is my starting point in this essay.

III

Not all thinkers about revolutionary nonviolence in our time follow Lawson in framing the issues – or in describing the kind of "force" or *graha* they involve – in such Shelleyan terms. Judith Butler, for example, in her recent meditation on nonviolence, argues that it "is less a failure of action than a physical assertion of the claims of life."[16] In Shelley's moral and political vocabulary, "life" proves to be a far more equivocal word

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

than "love," a point not lost on readers of his dismaying and unfinished final poem, *The Triumph of Life*. In what remains his greatest achievement, *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley showed that love – not life – was the answer, as Salt clearly understood. And yet Shelley himself was not always obviously consistent in framing such issues from one work to another, and it is worth considering how and why this might be so. It has to do with Shelley's complex understanding of genre.

I noted earlier that Shelley's most explicit treatment of the question of nonviolence was his discussion of passive resistance in giving advice to those who, like the protesters at Peterloo, find themselves participating in a peaceful assembly that comes under physical attack. But the advice he gives in this case, when one looks closely, seems to center more on temperance and courage than on love. The "true patriot," writes Shelley, "will exhort them peaceably to defy the danger, and to expect without resistance the onset of the cavalry, and wait with folded arms the event of the fire of the artillery and receive with unshrinking bosoms the bayonets of the charging battalions" (*PVR* 48). To complicate matters further, Shelley goes on in the *View* to suggest that even the virtues of temperance and courage involve something more like a *calculation* than an act of moral or political virtue. His larger overview of the situation in which nonviolent resistance is called for, indeed, is decidedly cast in terms of risks and benefits:

> Men are every day persuaded to incur greater perils for a less manifest advantage. And this, not because active resistance is not justifiable when all other means shall have failed, but because in this instance temperance and courage would produce greater advantages than the most decisive victory. (*PVR* 48)

Removing the issue even further from the domain of morals, and thus from that of love, Shelley goes on to buttress this explicit risk-benefit analysis with a detailed (and remarkably prescient) psychological analysis of the likely conduct of an armed authority in the confrontation. Although, by "the instinct of his trade," the soldier will chase down "those who fly" or beat down those who resist, nonetheless, "if he should observe neither resistance nor flight he would be reduced to confusion and indecision" (*PVR* 49). The soldier thus faced with "an unresisting multitude of their countrymen drawn up in unarmed array before them, and bearing in their looks the calm, deliberate resolution to perish rather than abandon the assertion of their rights," may be induced to recollect "the true nature of the measures of which he was made the instrument, and the enemy might be converted into the ally." This is, I think, a striking analysis of the social-psychological forces at work in the new kind of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

confrontation represented by Peterloo. But what, one might well ask, has love got to do with it?

In the terms of *A Philosophical View of Reform*, the answer seems to be: not much. So what then to make of Shelley's apparent departure here from his own foundational commitment to the principle of love? The answer to this further question can be found in the larger argument of the *View* itself, and ultimately in a larger understanding of genre in Shelley's body of work. The *View* was written, as I have already suggested, under the pressure of certain immediate historical circumstances centering on Peterloo and the repressive legislation rushed through Parliament before the end of the year: the notorious Six Acts. We have seen that its third section provides Shelley's way of engaging directly with the political crisis of this moment. Section one, by contrast, offers a compressed and schematic history of the relationship between liberty and intellectual production from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present day. Paradoxically, and crucially, this history has implications that seriously delimit the *View* itself – the very text in which it appears. It is a remarkably subtle rhetorical feat, and one not as fully appreciated as it should be.

The key passage in section one's sweeping history narrates the modern phase of the story, a phase that for Shelley occurs roughly in the seventeenth century. Shelley identifies in that epoch a momentous breakthrough in literature and thought that corresponds to what he would later call his nation's "last struggle for liberty" (*PVR* 8). To the poetry of Milton, and the revolution in which he participated, Shelley juxtaposes a new level of philosophical investigation: "deeper enquiries into the point of human nature than are compatible with an unreserved belief in any of those popular mistakes upon which popular systems of faith with respect to the cause and agencies of the universe, with all their superstructure of political and religious tyranny, are built" (*PVR* 8). Shelley has a roster of key thinkers who effected this great transformation, loosely associated with what we sometimes still call the Scientific Revolution: "Lord Bacon, Spinoza, Hobbes, Boyle, Montaigne, regulated the reasoning powers, criticized the history, exposed the past errors by illustrating their causes and their connexion, and anatomized the inmost nature of social man" (*PVR* 8).

Problematically, these great breakthroughs give way to the phase we now call "the Enlightenment," though for Shelley it was less about intellectual light than about pragmatic application. The philosophes and other political thinkers of the eighteenth century, he argues, resorted too quickly to cashing out the philosophical advances of the previous century in the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

service of schemes of social improvement. They did so for understandable reasons: society was in desperate need of change. In taking this pragmatic turn, however, they proved themselves short-sighted:

> Considered as philosophers their error seems to have consisted chiefly in a limitation of view; they told the truth, but not the whole truth. This might have arisen from the terrible sufferings of their countrymen inviting them rather to apply a portion of what had already been discovered to their immediate relief, than to pursue one interest, the abstractions of thought, as the great philosophers who preceded them had done, for the sake of a future and more universal advantage. (*PVR* 9)

The eighteenth-century compromise, according to Shelley, involved delimiting the horizon of inquiry and settling on a repertoire of terms and concepts that frame even the most advanced discourses of the current moment:

> The result of the labours of the political philosophers has been the establishment of the principle of Utility as the substance, and liberty and equality as the forms according to which the concerns of human life ought to be administered. By this test the various institutions regulating political society have been tried, and as the undigested growth of the private passions, errors, and interests of barbarians and oppressors have been condemned. And many new theories, more or less perfect, but all superior to the mass of evil which they would supplant, have been given to the world. (*PVR* 10)

Thus, as Shelley saw it, was born the utilitarianism of an enlightened thinker like Jeremy Bentham. And thus was established the United States of America, whose "system of government [...] was the first practical illustration of the new philosophy" (*PVR* 10). Shelley praises the US constitutional experiment, but he makes it clear that its limits are those of the utilitarianism that subtends it. What the United States lacks is what Shelley calls most simply "poetry," and this, for Shelley, turns out to be the strong suit of contemporary Britain.

Seen in this light, the great irony of *A Philosophical View of Reform* is that some of its most salient terms, such as the terms of its particular account of revolutionary nonviolence, are precisely those of the limited philosophical outlook whose etiology Shelley carefully traces in section one. In a sense, moreover, the reasons for his resort to the utilitarian outlook in the *View* are the same as of the pragmatic enlightenment philosophes: that is, the pressures of the historical moment. In other words, section three, with its detailed advice for protesters, should be recognized as Shelley's detailed pragmatic engagement with a present political and social crisis. That is why his analysis is carried out in the language of cost-benefit calculations. And

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

that is why, in writing to his friend Leigh Hunt about what he was doing, he said that he was working on a pamphlet "like Bentham's something," that could serve as a kind of handbook for the movement. Bentham is himself named in section one of the *View* as a figure associated with "the principle of utility" (*Letters* II: 201). No thinker of that moment, after all, was more thoroughly associated with this principle than Bentham.

At the same time, however, the *View* is a piece of writing *not* altogether "like Bentham's," since it also contains a meta-view, a radically "philosophical view" of the practical advice it offers in the current circumstances. Like so many of Shelley's relentless literary experiments, that is, the *View* stages an immanent critique of the genre in which it is cast. One need only think of the immanent critique of satire with the satirical *Peter Bell the Third*, the immanent critique of the sublime Romantic landscape poem with "Mont Blanc" (and the picturesque one with "Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples"), the immanent critique of English tragic drama with *The Cenci*, or the immanent critique of Athenian tragedy with *Prometheus Unbound*.[17]

IV

If the enlightened pragmatism of Shelley's approach to nonviolent resistance in *A Philosophical View of Reform* amounts to a utilitarian response to an immediate crisis, then one must look elsewhere in his writings for the "deeper inquiries" we saw described in the *View* as incompatible with "systems of faith with respect to the cause and agencies of the universe, with all their superstructure of political and religious tyranny." The masterpiece singled out by Salt, *Prometheus Unbound*, probably answers to that purpose as well as any work in Shelley's *oeuvre*. True, it is not without its own sense of address and historical context: like *The Revolt of Islam* before it, Shelley's idealized drama vaguely shadows the historical situation of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars. At the same time, explicitly cast as a revision of the plot of Aeschylus's ancient tragedy, its "action" takes place on a level well beyond the historical particulars of its moment. Indeed, historical particulars are generally registered in *Prometheus Unbound* only by way of artfully indirect representations.

Consider the moment in Act III, when the Spirit of the Hour returns from his tour of reawakened earth to report to Prometheus and Asia on the new order of things that accompanies their own transformation. The Spirit-messenger delivers an account, in Salt's words, of a "world […] regenerated by the power of love."

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

> There was a change … the impalpable thin air
> And the all-circling sunlight were transformed
> As if the sense of love dissolved in them
> Had folded itself round the sphered world. (III.iv.100–103 [SPP 267])

It is when the Spirit reports on the details of the change that the poem produces its indirect representation of the actual state of the world in 1818–1819 by dint of reporting what love has overcome:

> None fawned, none trampled; hate, disdain, or fear,
> Self-love or self-contempt on human brows
> No more inscribed […]
> None with firm sneer trod out in his own heart
> The sparks of love and hope, till there remained
> Those bitter ashes, a soul self-consumed,
> And the wretch crept, a vampire among men,
> Infecting all with his own hideous ill.
> None talked that common, false, cold, hollow talk
> Which makes the heart deny the *yes* it breathes
> Yet question that unmeant hypocrisy
> With such a self-mistrust as has no name. (III.iv.133–152 [267–268])

Shelley's dismaying representation of the state of society becomes a catalogue of contemporary ills worthy of the most somber realist – a Defoe or Balzac. Yet its "realism" is presented not only in fictional retrospect but also in the perspective of a "philosophical view" even more markedly than in *A Philosophical View of Reform*.[18] Shelley here depicts the ills of the society "as it is" (to use the idiom of the moment), with all its superstructure of maxims and forms, but only from the point of view of their having already been overcome in the nonviolent revolution for which he is advocating.

Begun in September 1818, *Prometheus Unbound* was largely composed well before the state of emergency that would lead Shelley to resort to the quasi-utilitarian compromise he brokered in the *View*, with its pragmatic advice for dealing with armed forces on the street. It is a work thus freed to aspire to the kind of transformative breakthrough achieved by the likes of Milton and Spinoza in the seventeenth century. The central issue it addresses on that aspirational level, accordingly, is none other than the revolutionary power of love and its implications. Moreover, what lends *Prometheus* far greater relevance for such shadows of futurity as Gandhi and Lawson is the way in which it explicitly connects love with *suffering* – here understood as the condition in which the realms of the ideal and actual can come together.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

When John Lewis wrote in his memoir about his discipleship with James Lawson in the late 1950s, the nexus of love and "redemptive suffering," which Lewis called "a holy and *affective* thing," was very much the heart of the lessons he learned from Lawson: "It opens us and those around us to a force beyond ourselves, a force that is right and moral, the force of righteous truth that is the basis of human conscience."[19] Lewis cautions, however, that this suffering is only redemptive if it is accompanied with "a graceful heart":

> This is a very difficult concept to understand, and it is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence. We are talking about *love*, here […] a love that accepts the hateful and even the hurtful.[20]

When Shelley set to work on *Prometheus Unbound* in pursuit of such "deeper inquiries" that he felt utilitarianism unfortunately left behind – inquiries best pursued through poetry in his expanded understanding of the term – something like the "difficult concept" that Lewis learned from Lawson was exactly what he sought to explore.

Though its temporality is not straightforward, *Prometheus Unbound* is rightly seen as a drama whose decisive moment occurs soon after it begins, with Prometheus's Act I "recalling" of his curse on Jupiter. The choreography of this episode is staged in such a way, however, as to raise a question about how it counts as an "action" in the first place, perhaps even *whether* it counts as an action. For when Prometheus speaks the paronomasia – "the Curse / Once breathed on thee I would recall" (58–59, remember / retract, *SPP* 211) – it is an open question whether we should consider his disposition in this key episode as active rather than passive. At stake is a further paronomasia in Act I about two senses of suffering, as when, for example, Prometheus is called "Awful Sufferer" (I.352 [*SPP* 220]). On the one hand, to suffer is to endure pain. Adam Smith explained that the core sense of "sympathy" is "our fellow feeling with the sufferings, not that with the enjoyments, of others."[21] Such enjoyments can be a comfort to suffering, though not for Prometheus, who acknowledges to Earth that he may not share her fleeting comforts – "flowers and fruits and happy sounds" – as do "all else who live and suffer" (I.187–188 [215]).

And yet, on hearing his own curse spoken back to him, Prometheus announces, pivotally, "I wish no living thing to suffer pain" (I.305 [*SPP* 218]). This introduces a second sense of suffering as *undergoing* rather than *undertaking*. This sense is reinforced by Panthea, who reports that the fearsome Phantom looks "Like one who does, not suffers wrong"

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

(I.239 [*SPP* 216]). The "action" of Shelley's drama is in part defined in the movement between these two understandings of what it means to suffer. Thus, the very form of Prometheus's "recalling" of the curse involves, in effect, his suffering of his own curse, now spoken to him by the Phantasm of Jupiter. The act of the curse, in other words, is undone by another act in which an undertaking becomes an undergoing, when the one who issues the curse is made to suffer the effect of his own words. What is clarified in the reversal of position so carefully staged in this pivotal moment is not only the initially unacknowledged revanchism of Prometheus's starting point in the drama but also the degree to which that revanchism establishes the power of Jupiter in the first place. To forgive Jupiter, in the vision of this drama, is to eliminate him.

Prometheus Unbound's poetic exploration of pain in relation to the grammatical categories of active and passive is fundamental to its "deeper inquiries" into those issues of causality and human nature that Shelley praised in early modern writers. Indeed, its crucial reversal of perspective on the curse, in which one suffers what one does, quite specifically dramatizes his idea of love in action. Shelley's most ambitious staging of the radical love that subtends nonviolent revolution, in short, thus plays out as an act of radical suffering.

What is at stake here for Shelley, finally, is the politics of a certain understanding of sensibility, an understanding especially prominent within a tradition of British empiricism where, as William Empson once noted, "The word [*sense*] considers sensations not as means of knowledge, but of suffering."[22] Prometheus is a figure traditionally associated with both knowledge and suffering, and Shelley's intervention in the politics of sensibility is perhaps best grasped in contrast to one of the most important accounts of poetic sensibility – of the relation of knowledge and suffering – in his own moment. I mean the account offered in an important 1815 apologia by Wordsworth, unquestionably the poet with whom Shelley engaged most strenuously in the last years of his abbreviated career. As with so many of the issues that mattered to him, it was with and against Wordsworth that Shelley developed his mature understanding of suffering.

Shelley dramatically altered his view of Wordsworth soon after the publication of the 1815 *Poems*, which included not only a preface but also an "Essay Supplementary" that defended his poetry in the face of what he took to be popular neglect and critical abuse. The essay, in particular, would prove negatively pivotal for Shelley's future writing and provoke the immanent critique he undertook in two crucial poems of 1816: "To Wordsworth" and *Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude*. Yet because of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

Wordsworth's circuitousness, what Shelley found so objectionable in the poet's 1815 self-defense, and in its implications for love and suffering, is not immediately obvious. Wordsworth launches the essay inauspiciously with a brief history of English poetry that explains the failure of his readers fully to appreciate his poetry on the principle that, with few exceptions, no truly great and original poet has ever been properly appreciated in his own time. The second phase of the essay enters more deeply into this explanation with a second principle: that truly great and original poets, among whom Wordsworth unabashedly numbers himself, all face "the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed."[23]

Why, Wordsworth asks, should this task be so challenging? And then he answers his own question with a series of cagey questions:

> Is it in breaking the bonds of custom, in overcoming the prejudices of false refinement, and displacing the aversions of inexperience? Or, […] does it consist in […] making [the reader] ashamed of the vanity that renders him insensible of the appropriate excellence which civil arrangements, less unjust than might appear, and Nature illimitable in her bounty, had conferred on men who may stand below him in the scale of society? Finally, does it lie in establishing that dominion over the spirits of readers by which they are to be humbled and humanized, in order that they may be purified and exalted?[24]

I call these questions cagey because after answering "No," Wordsworth pivots to declare not that they are the wrong questions but rather that they are asked with a mistaken assumption in mind: "If these ends are to be attained by the mere communication of *knowledge*, it does *not* lie here."[25] The critique of this assumption about the role of knowledge in these matters in turn leads directly to a critique of contemporary ideas about the term "TASTE," as involving "a metaphor, taken from a *passive* sense of the human body, and transferred to things which are in their essence *not* passive, – to intellectual *acts* and *operations*."[26]

Once the question of suffering surfaces out of this mistaken understanding of taste as "passive," it elicits an analysis by which Shelley must have been struck:

> Passion, it must be observed, is derived from a word which signifies *suffering*; but the connexion which suffering has with effort, with exertion, and *action*, is immediate and inseparable. […] To be moved, then, by a passion is to be excited, often to external, and always to internal, effort; whether for the continuance and strengthening of the passion, or for its suppression, accordingly as the course which it takes may be painful or pleasurable.[27]

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

For Wordsworth, the argument about knowledge and suffering sets the stage for an account of genius (modeled on his own) in which the relationship of original poet and active/passive reader is recast in the roles of inspiring leader and energized follower.

> Genius is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe […]. What is all this but an advance, or a conquest, made by the soul of the poet? Is it to be supposed that the reader can make progress of this kind, like an Indian prince or general – stretched on his palanquin, and borne by his slaves? No; he is invigorated and inspirited by his leader, in order that he may exert himself; for he cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like a dead weight.[28]

The QED of this circuitous line of reasoning is the poet's striking formulation of what Thomas De Quincey calls the distinction between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power: "Therefore to create taste is to call forth and bestow power, of which knowledge is the effect; and *there* lies the true difficulty."[29]

There would have been much to provoke Shelley in Wordsworth's mid-career reframing suffering and sensibility within a broader ideological framework. If the poet-reader relationship is cast hierarchically, as a form of dominion of a leader over a follower, the larger picture of society here emerges as likewise hierarchical. It is structured as a "scale" of positions each with its "appropriate excellence." Most especially, Shelley would not have failed to notice that, for Wordsworth, what "vanity" makes us "insensible" to is not the *suffering* of those below us on the scale but rather the appropriate *excellence* of their position there, conferred as it is not only by the great bounty of "Nature" but also by civil arrangements that prove to be, in the poet's words, "less unjust than might appear." Shelley may well have recognized that Wordsworth here openly, if indirectly, espouses a central principle in Edmund Burke's social theory – the idea of a "true moral equality" (as Burke put it) that outweighs the abstract inequality pursued both by contemporary reform movements and by the nonviolent revolutionary movements to which they gave rise.[30]

But is there in fact evidence that Shelley read Wordsworth this way, that he saw Wordsworth's argument about suffering in light of some such form of acquiescence in the political status quo? In Act I of *Prometheus Unbound*, the "Awful Sufferer" at the center of the drama, having "recalled" his curse on Jupiter by having it spoken to his own face by the Phantasm of Jupiter, is subjected to a further series of trials and temptations. He is shown the image of another sufferer, "a youth / With patient looks, nailed to a crucifix"

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

(I.584–585 [*SPP* 228]). One of the Furies who torments Prometheus with this "emblem" taunts him with the suggestion that such suffering is the opposite of redemptive: "those who do endure / Deep wrongs for man" achieve nothing more than to "heap / Thousand-fold torment on themselves and him" (I.594–596 [228]). The problem is that what the Furies call the "slaves" of the Church that bears Christ's name – a name that Prometheus will not speak for it has "become a curse" – have inverted Christ's own values (I.604 [228]). The "wise, the mild, the lofty, and the just" have become the victims of the system run by these "slaves," which has not only brought terror into their lives but also ensured insensibility to the spectacle of suffering created by inquisition and oppression (I.605, 606 [228]).[31]

Beneath this spectacle lie yet darker facts of the contemporary world, since, as the Fury reveals this hidden order of things, "In each human heart terror survives / The ruin it has gorged" (I.618–619 [*SPP* 229]). Those who are "strong and rich—and would be just" cannot maintain their openness to suffering in this milieu: they "live among their suffering fellow men / As if none felt" (I.630–631 [229]). These lines, about an insensibility that rationalizes a social hierarchy by projecting insensibility onto its victims ("as if none felt"), are meant to be the Fury's final trump card, the last best effort to lead Prometheus to despair. Yet Prometheus responds in a fashion that marks his own ultimate moral triumph in the play (though we are still in Act I):

> PROM: Thy words are like a cloud of winged snakes
> And yet, I pity those they torture not.
> FURY: Thou pitiest them? I speak no more! [Vanishes] (I.632–634 [229])

Shelley here stages one of the most complex acts of human sympathy imaginable. Prometheus expresses pity for a specific but complex category of fellow humans, namely those who do not suffer pain at the thought that many human beings who "would be just" do not themselves suffer pain at the spectacle of injustice. Such persons avoid suffering sympathetically with the victims of injustice on the grounds that those others do not suffer pain in the first place. They thereby abjure the power of love.

By 1816, Shelley had determined that Wordsworth had, in effect, taken the lead in this rarefied but unfortunate group, having compromised his extraordinary powers of imagination by turning to opinions unworthy of those powers. It was precisely the capacity for sympathetic imagination – for love – that Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third*, a satire of Wordsworth in the Byronic mode, would find lacking in Wordsworth:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

> He had as much imagination
> As a pint-pot—he never could
> Fancy another situation
> From which to dart his contemplation,
> Than that wherein he stood. (298–302 [*SPP* 351])

At the same time, *Peter Bell the Third* would also complicate the picture, for in staging this censure of Wordsworth in Lord Byron's satiric mode, Shelley also suggests that Byron – like Shelley in his Byronic mode – is incapable of putting himself in *Wordsworth's* place. Though himself a celebrated contemporary Promethean, the author of a famous poem on the subject the year before Shelley's, Byron could not bring himself to pity Wordsworth, as Shelley ultimately could, and, more to the point, as Shelley's Prometheus could pity all those who "would be good" but had ceased to be sensible to the suffering generated by an unjust society.

Wordsworth's insensibility, carried out as it is precisely in the name of "widening the sphere of human sensibility," is something for which Byron had no patience: he could not, as it were, suffer it. He could not even feel, as Shelley did, what Wordsworth suffered in having his genius so neglected and misunderstood by the critical establishment of his moment. The mode of satire in which Byron was so deeply invested, in other words, was itself for Shelley a performance of insensibility. Indeed, it was nothing other than a modern iteration of older ecclesiastical modes of retribution, ways of inflicting pain and suffering on those judged to be sinners – as Shelley made explicit in his fragment of a satire on satire.[32]

Notwithstanding Shelley's meta-critique of Byronic satire, he saw in Wordsworth's late theory of poetry and suffering a terrible falling away from what Wordsworth might have been. Wordsworth's disappointments and resulting capitulations had perverted his great powers of imagination and feeling, and they did so, tragically, at the expense of a larger vision of radical suffering that could have been put in the service of political and social transformation.[33] The result was a skewed model of the poet's relation to his readers, who, on his 1815 accounting, needed to feel what *he* felt, and suffer what *he* suffered, even as he required their active collaboration in this process by "the exertion of a co-operating *power*" in their minds. It is a model that came to dominate theories of reading through Matthew Arnold and into the massively influential program in "practical criticism" launched by I. A. Richards at Cambridge in the 1920s. In breaking with it, decades later, Raymond Williams critiqued it explicitly as Richards's "Passsive-Active theory of reading," though he never explicitly connected it with Wordsworth's

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

1815 polemic.[34] Shelley may have been the first to offer such a critique, and in doing so he worked out a poetics of suffering in the context of nonviolent revolution.

V

In tracing the formation of this poetics, in its cultural and political contexts, I have implicitly been answering some lingering questions about why Shelley's views have not had the recognition they might deserve in twentieth-century discussions and beyond. One answer surely has to do with a fact that the Shelley of these mature writings, unlike the Shelley who had distributed pamphlets in Dublin and organized workers in Wales, was no longer himself an on-the-ground activist. His prescribing dangerous courses of action from an Italian villa a thousand miles away from the scenes of lethal confrontation might well not have led activist leaders like Gandhi and Lewis to acknowledge his example. Shelley was an engaged writer, in a sense, but he was also sensitive to the limits of *poésie engagée*: "Didactic poetry is my abhorrence," he wrote in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (*SPP* 209). I have also argued that Shelley's concern with any such engagement tends to be mediated by his sophisticated work with genre. Northrop Frye long ago pointed out that "the basis of generic criticism is [...] rhetorical, in the sense that the genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and the public."[35] Shelley's experiments with genre gauge that relationship at various distances to a variety of occasions. His play with various genres thus enables rhetorical variations on his signature practice of producing a literature of immanent critique. And to compound the difficulty, the immanent critique often has a specific target in his own moment: a Wordsworth, a Byron, or a Bentham. To appreciate what he is doing requires some understanding of how, as he warns in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, "the study of contemporary writings might have tinged [his] composition" (*SPP* 207).

For all these reasons, it is not always easy to lift Shelley's writings out of context, and such challenges, compounded by the difficulty of his style, may have set limits for his recognition in the subsequent line of revolutionary nonviolence. Any follower of Gandhi or Lawson who did read Shelley carefully, moreover, might have encountered a further problem, for Shelley did not, in some of his writings, rule out the resort to violence in defense of the revolutionary cause. Henry Salt himself noticed this feature of Shelley's writings in some of its incarnations, especially the popular idiom of the "political songs" he composed after Peterloo. Salt pointed to

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

one, "Song to the Men of England," and particularly to the following two quatrains:

> The seed ye sow, another reaps;
> The wealth ye find, another keeps;
> The robes ye weave, another wears;
> The arms ye forge, another bears.
>
> Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:
> Find wealth—let no imposter heap:
> Weave robes—let not the idle wear:
> Forge arms—in your defence to bear.[36]

Salt acknowledges that there are moments when Shelley seems to suggest that, in the face of intransigence, "a forcible reformation would become both necessary and justifiable."[37] Over the course of the 1960s and beyond, the nonviolent movement for US civil rights would come to share the field of struggle with the Black Power movement. Over the course of the 1970s and beyond, the nonviolent movement for civil rights in Ireland would come to share the field of struggle with the Irish Republican Army. Shelley's prophetic justification of such "necessities" might not have endeared him to those who were trying to keep the nonviolent faith.

This question of faith brings us to perhaps the most significant limitation on Shelley's recognition among the leaders of the twentieth-century's nonviolent revolutions: his entrenched anti-clericalism. The great leaders with whom we began, Lawson and King, were both men of the cloth. Lewis, their disciple, was a devout Christian. Desmond Tutu was an Anglican bishop when he supported the movement in South Africa. Even a leader of the civil rights march in Derry that ended with Bloody Sunday, Ivan Cooper, remained throughout his nonviolent activism a loyal member of the Church of Ireland. Gandhi's orientation may have been syncretistic, but he was no enemy of established religions. For Shelley, by contrast, the interconnection between what he called "political and religious tyranny" is deep and strong from his early pamphlet on atheism until his death. His Prometheus is a Christ-figure scrubbed clean of institutional Christianity.

At the same time, as I have suggested throughout, it is important to acknowledge the work of those scholars who have shown how far Shelley's political imagination – precisely in its atheistic syncretism – was itself shaped by his readings in cultures beyond Europe.[38] Europe's industrial revolution may have set the conditions for Shelley to articulate his developed understanding of revolutionary nonviolence, but the expansive imagination that conceived that understanding in the first place was informed by the non-European texts and contexts to which he began to turn in earnest from

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

as early as 1811–1812. Such exposure, of course, guarantees nothing in itself. Robert Southey read many of the same non-European materials Shelley did and made widely circulated poetry out of them. But while Shelley admired Southey's epic, *The Curse of Kehama*, he was unhappy with the poem's handling of the issue Shelley explicitly named "faith." Shelley's disappointing meeting with Southey in 1811, when he is reported to have fallen asleep during Southey's reading of that poem for his benefit, may well have clarified the young poet's early commitment to the *skeptical* mode of syncretist imaginings that informed his later work, the writings that Gandhi would have encountered through Henry Salt decades later.

Shelley's skeptical syncretism rhymes with his dark view of history, and his well-nigh Voltairean recognition of the worldwide atrocities committed in the name of religion. At the end of that same year, 1812, on the advice of Godwin, the young Shelley wrote to a friend that he was "determined to apply [himself] to a study that is hateful and disgusting to [my] very soul [...] I mean that record of crimes and miseries, History" (*Letters* I: 340). His words echo Voltaire – "l'histoire n'est que le tableau des crimes et des malheurs" – but they do so by way of Southey himself, who, in his 1798 poem "History," apostrophizes his subject as "Thou chronicle of crimes" – as his admirer Shelley would have known.[39] But as against the piety of Southey in 1812, the young Shelley was already clear that the point of facing history's crimes and miseries was about overcoming them. The study of history, he explained, is not for the sake of the past. Rather, it is "above all studies necessary for him who would be listened to as a mender of antiquated abuses" (*Letters* I: 340). This "mending" required a kind of "optimism" that the anti-clerical Voltaire, for his part, famously proscribed at the conclusion of that relentless record of crimes and miseries that is *Candide*. If we still listen to Shelley today, surely it is partly because, while fully acknowledging historical atrocity and categorically refusing religious consolation, he somehow managed to find some grounds for hope – hope in the prospect of nonviolent revolution, hope in the mending of vice by way of imaginative love and in the mending of misery by way of radical suffering.

Notes

1 I wish to thank the two editors of this volume for excellent suggestions to improve and sharpen this essay, and both Amanda Jo Goldstein and Julie A. Carlson for their keen reading and penetrating comments. By no means least, I thank my research assistant Eric Powell, himself a Shelleyan, for his invaluable help in researching and revising it.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

2 King spoke these words of Lawson on the eve of his assassination, the same night he praised him in his "Mountaintop" speech in Memphis, where he had come to support Lawson's efforts in the sanitation workers' strike: Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 198. For a recent assessment of the inherent limitations and subsequent distortions of King's nonviolent movement, see Dara T. Mathis, "King's Message of Nonviolence Has Been Distorted," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 3, 2018, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/kings-message-of-nonviolence-has-been-distorted/557021/.

3 See Timothy Morton, "Receptions," in Timothy Morton, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 43–44. Gandhi is known to have quoted the poem in his later decades.

4 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, in Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, eds. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Volume 7 (London: Ernest Benn, 1926–30), 3–55, 48. Hereafter cited as *PVR* by page number in the text.

5 Richard Jackson, Joseph Llewellyn, Griffin Leonard, Aidan Groth, and Tonga Karena, eds. *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Concepts, Cases and Controversies* (London: Zed Books, 2020) and Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020).

6 James M. Lawson, Jr., "The Power of Nonviolence in the Fight for Racial Justice," in *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Organizing for Freedom* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 20.

7 In his autobiography, Gandhi wrote: "I read Salt's book [on the history of vegetarianism] from cover to cover and was very much impressed by it. From the date of reading this book, I may claim to have become a vegetarian by choice. […] My faith in vegetarianism grew on me from day to day. Salt's book whetted my appetite for dietetic studies." M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1927), 48.

8 See Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 70ff. Meena Alexander briefly notes that what Gandhi learned from Salt about Shelley extended beyond vegetarianism, but her account is somewhat skewed by its misdating of Gandhi's encounter with Salt to a decade later than its actual occurrence in the late 1880s, prior to Gandhi's inaugural nonviolent activism in South Africa. See her "Shelley's India: Territory and Text, Some Problems of Decolonization," in Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran, eds. *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 172–173. See also John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 229–284.

9 Salt's biographer notes that "Shelley's prose and poetry clearly helped introduce Salt to free thought, socialism, vegetarianism, and unconventional views on sex and marriage." See George Hendrick, *Henry Salt: Humanitarian and Man of Letters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 89. Henrick also

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

notes that George Bernard Shaw, a fellow Fabian, also declared his affiliation with Shelley on multiple related grounds: "Like Shelley, I am a Socialist, an Atheist, and a Vegetarian," 95. This declaration was made in 1887, the year before Gandhi's arrival in London.

10 Henry S. Salt, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Monograph* (London: Swan, Sonneschein, Lawrey & Co., 1888), 152.
11 Salt, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 150.
12 Salt, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 148–149.
13 Salt, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 147.
14 Salt, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 147.
15 For a discussion on Gandhi's interest in Salt's take on Thoreau, see Hendrick, *Henry Salt*, 110–112.
16 Butler, *Force of Nonviolence*, 24.
17 I have adapted the Frankfurt School notion of "immanent critique" from the explication of the concept by my late colleague, Moishe Postone, in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 87–88, especially as that notion was extended to literary analysis in Neil Larsen, "Literature, Critique, and the Problem of Standpoint," *Mediations* 24.2 (Spring 2009), https://mediationsjournal.org/articles/literature-immanent-critique-and-the-problem-of-standpoint. I make no direct connection between immanent critique and nonviolent revolution, though it is instructive to contrast Shelley's approach to Wordsworth's "Passive-Active theory of reading." I return to this later in the chapter. One might speculate that immanent critique registers Shelley's take on Wordsworth's genius in *A Defence of Poetry* as caught between bogus conscious opinion and genuine, though unconscious, inspiration from the zeitgeist.
18 For a similar strategy to the one in the speech of the Spirit of the Hour, see the catalogue of ills in the sonnet "England in 1819," all to be overcome in the moment when they are called the "graves" from which an illuminating "glorious phantom" may burst (*SPP* 326). For Shelley's discussion of realism, see the preface to his play *The Cenci* (*SPP* 140–45).
19 John Lewis (with Michael D'Orso), *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 76–77.
20 Lewis, *Walking*, 77.
21 Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1976), 103.
22 William Empson, "Sense and Sensibility," *The Structure of Complex Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 250–269.
23 W. B. J. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, eds. *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, Volume 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 80.
24 Owen and Smyser, *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 80.
25 Owen and Smyser, *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 81, emphasis in original.
26 Owen and Smyser, *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 81, emphasis in original.
27 Owen and Smyser, *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 81–82.
28 Owen and Smyser, *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 81–82.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006

29 Owen and Smyser, *Prose Works of William Wordsworth,* 82, emphasis in original.
30 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Penguin, 1986), 124.
31 By the time Shelley wrote *Prometheus Unbound*, Wordsworth had already begun to affiliate himself more openly with the Christian church in *The Excursion*. The Shelleys read it together on its appearance, and after they did Mary Shelley summarized their response to it in a crisp four-word review featuring exactly the word that Percy used for churchgoing Christians in Act I of *Prometheus Unbound*: "He is a slave." See *The Journals of Mary Shelley: 1814–44*, eds. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), I: 25. Note that to be a slave, in the Shelleys' pejorative sense, is to refuse suffering, not to be inflicted by it – an obvious point of *mis*-alignment between the discursive contexts of post-Waterloo British struggles for "liberty" and post-1960 American struggles for racial justice.
32 Shelley develops at length this trope of satire as a neo-medieval form of punishment in his fragmentary poem "A Satire upon Satire."
33 In contrast to this charge of renegadism, Wordsworth was insistent in ways both explicit and inexplicit, on the *continuity* between his positions in 1800 and 1815 at every turn. See my "'Wordsworth' after Waterloo," in Kenneth Johnston and Gene W. Ruoff, eds. *The Age of William Wordsworth* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 84–111.
34 See my "I. A. Richards and Raymond Williams: Reading Poetry, Reading Society," *Critical Inquiry* 46.2 (2020), 325–352.
35 Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 247.
36 Salt, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 151.
37 Salt, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 153.
38 On the "paganism" of Shelley and his generation, see, for example, Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 219–252. See also Alexander, "Shelley's India," 169–173.
39 The echoes were first pointed out by R. W. King, "A Note on Shelley, Gibbon, Voltaire and Southey," *The Modern Language Review*, 51.2 (April 1956), 225–227.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 14 Nov 2026 at 11:03:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009206549.006