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(Article begins on next page)

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***The Revolt of Islam*, postcolonialism and the Arab Springs: The ‘worth of human nature’ in the 20th and 21st century**

Introduction

Hope is a recurrent concept in Shelley’s poetry, and repeatedly present in *The Revolt of Islam*. Reflecting on the French Revolution and its aftermath in the ‘Preface’ to the poem, Shelley looks beyond post-revolutionary disillusionment and emphasises this very state of mind through one of his many sea metaphors:

It has ceased to be believed that whole generations of mankind ought to consign themselves to a *hopeless* inheritance of ignorance and misery [...] There is a reflux in the tide of human things which bears the shipwrecked *hopes* of men into a secure haven after the storms are past. Methinks, those who now live have survived an age of despair.
(35)¹

This cyclical vision of history is part and parcel of his ‘historiographical inclinations’ composed of competing progressive and retrograde forces, which will be crystallised again in the more famous ‘Ode to the West Wind’ and in the closing lines of *Prometheus Unbound*.² The aim of this article is to reflect on the characteristics of Shelleyan hope, on

¹ The edition used here is Jack Donovan’s *Laon and Cythna; Or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century*, in *The Poems of Shelley, Volume Two 1817–1819*, ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 10–265. In this article, the poem will be cited parenthetically in the text, with canto, stanza and line(s) number, or by page number for Shelley’s ‘Preface’.

² See Greg Kucich, ‘Eternity and the Ruins of Time: Shelley and the Construction of Cultural History’, in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), passim.

its potential relevance for contemporary forms of revolt/revolution (and for the aftermath of such political movements). *The Revolt of Islam*'s original subtitle included the phrase *A Vision of the 19th Century*: how far can it be considered as a vision for the 20th and 21st century, too?

Shelley's poetry, including *Revolt*, has often had an impact on the political realm, starting from early 19th-century radicalism. The working-class radical press from the 1820s, the Owenite movement, Chartists and Christian Democrats all referred to the poem in their publications.³ Friedrich Engels mentions unexpurgated editions of Shelley's poems as part of 1840s working-class literary culture.⁴ Shelley's relevance for political hope towards change surfaced again in June 2017: when Jeremy Corbyn closed his electoral campaign in Islington re-asserting his goals of democratic equality, pacifism and third-worldism (in the face of divisive events such as Brexit), he read some lines from *The Mask of Anarchy* that inspired his campaign slogan: 'For the many, not the few'.

As a postcolonialist, my main interest is to focus on *Revolt*'s relevance for the colonial and postcolonial (or, better, neocolonial) world, characterised by a severe 'background of repression' not so dissimilar from the 1817 political context in which Shelley wrote *Revolt*.⁵ Many areas are today scarred by civil war and/or liberticidal terror which are often allied with the financial interests of neoliberal globalisation – a modernised version of the 'confederacy of the Rulers of the World' (34) coming to the help of the tyrant Othman in Shelley's poem.⁶ *The Revolt* exalts values that have been the basis for recent progressive and revolutionary movements in neocolonial areas, which attempt to recover free thought, equality and freedom of expression. In what ways may *Revolt* be seen as describing their

³ David Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 214; Bouthaina Shabaan, 'Shelley and the Chartists', in Bennett and Curran, *Shelley: Poet and Legislator*, 114–25. As to the influence of *Revolt* on the 'sub-genres of workers' propaganda poems', see also Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Flamingo, 1995 (1974)), 402.

⁴ Horst Höhne, 'Shelley's "Socialism" Revisited', in Bennett and Curran, *Shelley: Poet and Legislator*, 203.

⁵ Kyle Grimes, 'Censorship, Violence, and Political Rhetoric: *The Revolt of Islam* in Its Time', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 43 (1994), 98–9.

⁶ Shelley's 'confederacy', in turn, was an 'unmistakable allusion to the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty in France [...] by a coalition of European powers'; Donovan, footnotes to *Laon and Cythna*, 34.

colonial history, their suffering present, their attempts at revolting and what remains after their revolutions have seemingly failed? How can ‘the worth / Of human nature win [...] a second birth’ (V, xxxiii, 2015–16) in these contexts?

The first part of this article focuses on those sections of the poem which might be seen as prefiguring contemporary phenomena such as the dynamics of neocolonialism and their ensuing wide-scale conflicts. The second part concentrates on the possible strategies to rekindle hope and utopian visions of society that are evoked by Shelley’s imagery seems to hint at: the highly problematic Godwinian liberating truth, underground forces, symbolic locations and the spread and endurance of culture and education. If Saglia describes Shelley’s orient as a zone of clash and exchange between the idea of empire and revolution, half-way between localisation and abstraction,⁷ I intend to direct attention towards some localised specificities related to colonialism, neo-colonialism and the so-called Arab Springs across the MENA region in 2010-2012, centred on three basic concepts: dignity (*karama*), freedom (*hurriya*) and social justice (*‘adala ijtima‘iyya*).⁸ Significantly, the word ‘revolution’ was – and still is – widely employed in media and academic debates around these events, just as in their literary and artistic representations:⁹ a connection with the original subtitle of *Laon and Cythna*, which included *The Revolution of the Golden City*. With regard to the specific occurrences that recently took place in Egypt and Syria, I will make reference to both theoretical analyses and creative works.

Revolt in colonial and postcolonial societies

⁷ Diego Saglia, *I discorsi dell’esotico: L’oriente nel romanticismo britannico 1780–1830* (Naples: Liguori, 2002), 157.

⁸ Marina Calculli, ‘Il respiro breve di una modernità non elitaria’, in *Rivoluzioni violate. Cinque anni dopo: Attivismo e diritti umani in Medio Oriente e Nord Africa*, ed. Osservatorio Iraq e Un ponte per... (Rome: edizioni dell’asino, 2016), 13.

⁹ Marta Cariello, ‘La produzione discorsiva della rivoluzione: I luoghi dell’immaginazione’, in *Ritorni critici: La sfida degli studi culturali e postcoloniali*, ed. Iain Chambers, Lidia Curti, Michaela Quadraro (Milan: Meltemi, 2018), 87–90.

In their seminal book on the relationship between Romanticism and colonialism, Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson consider the Romantic Age as a watershed, contemporaneous with a key phase in colonial history toward the realisation of ‘a free-trade empire with a political and moral agenda.’¹⁰ Placed on this transitional cusp, Shelley’s *Revolt* and its imagery point to the history and present times of the colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial world. One case in point is constituted by so-called postcolonial disillusionment: ‘Can he who the day before was a trampled slave suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing and independent?’, Shelley’s ‘Preface’ asks when pondering on the failure of the French Revolution (36). The historical phenomena of decolonisation and independence gave rise to reflections akin to Shelley’s question, centred on the necessity of going beyond Western economic, political and cultural models, for a real liberation from oppressive colonial standards – exemplified, amongst other works, by Ngugi’s *Decolonising the Mind*.¹¹ When Shelley mentions the ‘want of bread’, the ‘atrocities of demagogues’ and the ‘successive tyrannies’ in France (36), he seems to be prophetically gesturing at the social injustice and at the forms of power imbalance which exploded and grotesquely embodied this postcolonial disillusionment.

The psychopathologist and psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama depicts an analogous situation with regard to decolonisation in Islamic countries, where the generation who led the fight against colonial oppressors quickly reproduced systems of power founded on the same colonial models, degenerating into infamous systematic repression of progressive movements which were silenced by a combination of new monarchs, religious

¹⁰ Fulford and Kitson, ‘Romanticism and Colonialism: Texts, Contexts, Issues’, in *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire 1780-1830*, ed. Idem (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

¹¹ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational, 1986), passim.

intransigence and the external support of Western governments.¹² Benslama describes a conjunction of retrograde forces that, in *Revolt*, are conflated in Laon and Cythna's arch-enemy, the Iberian Priest. He deeply despises, and would destroy, every faith other than his own, including Islam:

But more he loathed and hated the clear light
Of wisdom and free thought, and more did fear,
Lest, kindled once, its beams might pierce the night,
Even where his Idol stood;

(X, xxxiii, 4081–4)

[...] Islam's creed

Might crush for him those deadlier enemies;

(X, xxxiv, 4095–6)

Socio-political anomie and indiscriminate violence

Many parts of Shelley's poem have maintained their topicality, with regards to the situations of violent oppression and anomie characterising modernity ever since its colonial times – tragedies listed by Laon as his main source of inspiration:

[...] from groans of crowds made pale

By famine, from a mother's desolate wail

O'er her polluted child, from innocent blood

Poured on the earth, and brows anxious and pale

¹² Benslama, *Dichiarazione di non sottomissione: A uso dei musulmani e di coloro che non lo sono*, trans. from French by Angelo Villa (Alberobello: Poiesis, 2014), 30–3.

With the heart's warfare; did I gather food
To feed my many thoughts: a tameless multitude!
(II, ix, 742–7)¹³

I argue that Shelley's description of Othman's 'brotherhood of ill' (X, vi, 3839) and its ruthless and wide-scale violent repression producing 'gore / stream through the city' (X, xi, 3889–90) bear evident prophetic features:

[...] the fearful glow
Of bomb flares overhead
(VI, iv, 2368–9)
[...] ships from Propontis keep
A killing rain of fire'
(VI, vii, 2395–6)
[...] then the shaft
Of the artillery from the sea was thrown
More fast and fiery, and the conquerors laughed
In pride to hear the wind our screams of torment waft.'
(VI, xi, 2430–3)

The comparison that comes immediately to mind is with the absurd scene from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where the African coastal forest is blindly shelled by the European ship transporting the protagonist Marlow, instilling in him 'a sense of lugubrious drollery'.¹⁴ Closer to our own times, the image of death raining from the sky can be found

¹³ Similar scenes had been witnessed by Shelley in his 1814 travels to post-revolutionary France: see Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, 399.

¹⁴ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1988 (1899)), 17.

in some descriptions of the Syrian civil war. See, for example, journalist Samar Yazbek's first-hand description of the forces fighting to liberate Syria from dictatorship, the anti-Assad resistance army:

They were fighting against tanks and planes, and yet had proven themselves capable of defeating heavily armed battalions on the ground, forcing them to retreat. Meanwhile, the sky was a Grim Reaper, haunting from above.¹⁵

A similar menace is expressed by the Syrian-Kurdish poet Golan Haji in his poem 'Eyes' – incidentally, Haji's lines distinguish themselves for a visionary quality not too distant from Shelley's. His association deadly sky/rape is a reference to the systematic rape carried out by the Assad regime of women from anti-government families:¹⁶

Helicopters are flying away.

Parachutists are ejected like sperm of rapists.

The present is an eye with amputated lids.

The glance is bleeding.¹⁷

Utopian optimism is sometimes seen as one of Shelley's main characteristics.¹⁸ Against this historical continuity of repressive violence, then, I identify four specific patterns which can be followed by 'those who sternly struggle to relume / The lamp of Hope o'er man's bewildered lot' (IV, vii, 1472–3).

¹⁵ Yazbek, 'Gateways to a Scorched Land', in *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, ed. Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud (London: Saqi, 2014), 7.

¹⁶ When Shelley wrote 'polluted child' (II, ix, 744, see above), the 'mother is lamenting a sexual outrage committed on her child'; Donovan, footnotes to *Laon and Cythna*, 97.

¹⁷ Haji, 'Eyes', in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 206.

¹⁸ Lilla Maria Crisafulli, *La realtà del desiderio: Saggi morali, teoria estetica e prosa politica di P.B. Shelley* (Naples: Liguori, 1999), 201.

Godwinian liberating truth

The power of both Laon and Cythna to infect the people they speak to with a sort of liberating truth appears more than once in the poem; it is so osmotically immediate that Duff sees it as a reformulation of the romance trope of enchantment.¹⁹ For example, people are said to ‘bend beneath the spell / Of that young maiden’s speech [Cythna’s], and to their chiefs rebel’ (IV, xx, 1592–3). Laon stirs Othman’s council when

[...] those warriors young,
Had on his eloquent accents fed and hung
Like bees on mountain flowers; they knew the truth,
And from their thrones in vindication sprung;
(XI, xix, 4390–3)

This stirring force obviously has some problematic aspects, and not only for its short-lived effects. Firstly, it implies a top-down attitude that hints at its own failure. In tune with Duff’s paradigm of romance, Holmes sees Laon and Cythna as ‘heroic leaders out of an ancient, aristocratic mould’, showing ‘no understanding yet of a genuinely democratic process or popular movement’.²⁰ Grimes identifies Laon’s power over the people of the Golden City with the influence on a popular reading audience of revolutionary rhetoric, which implies an attempt to gain control of them in an idolising characterisation akin to Othman’s. In spite of its widely different purposes,

¹⁹ Duff, *Romance and Revolution*, 156.

²⁰ Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, 401.

it might instead constitute simply a tyranny of a different sort. [...] How can a revolutionary poetic discourse inspire and organize a politically effectual constituency without itself becoming just as autocratic and self-serving as the discourses of power which it seeks to overthrow?²¹

Secondly, the top-down attitude implicit in the rhetoric of *Revolt* may also be seen as having a Eurocentric bias – possibly linked with Shelley’s Hellenism through Laon’s Greek identity.²² In a move away from this Orientalist contradiction, the Arab Springs often claimed their own peculiar patterns towards social, political and cultural regeneration. Mattei reports the widespread wish, in the Tahrir Square movements, ‘to attain democracy by following one’s own tradition and costumes, without copying anyone.’²³ Literature-wise, Syrian novelist and journalist Robin Yassin-Kassab writes about an affirmation of Arabic agency:

In 2011 the Arab world exploded out of any possibility of Orientalist stereotyping. [...] the image of the Arab as a pawn, a passive victim of religion or empire, necessarily collapsed. The Arab as a subject took centre stage, and a still-greater need was felt for the novel, the one form that transmits the world as experienced by the subject and adds nuance.²⁴

²¹ Grimes, ‘Censorship, Violence’, 109

²² Saglia, *Discorsi dell’esotico*, 140–3, 157–62, and especially his reference to Shelley’s ‘ideological indecisions’ (171). On Shelley’s Hellenism, see Mark Kipperman, ‘Shelley and the Ideology of the Nation: The Authority of the Poet’, in Bennett and Curran, *Shelley: Poet and Legislator*, 49–59; E. Douka Kabitoglou, ‘“The Name of Freedom”: A Hermeneutic Reading of *Hellas*’, in *Ibid.*, 129–43 (the latter defines *Revolt* an ‘imaginary preview of the Greek revolution’, 132). Generally speaking, Romanticism both supported Britain’s imperial mission and showed anxieties and resistance against its colonial expansion – an ambivalence likened to Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial notion of hybridity (Fulford and Kitson, ‘Romanticism and Colonialism’, 10–11).

²³ Vincenzo Mattei, *Le voci di Piazza Tahrir: Scrittori, artisti, bloggers raccontano la primavera egiziana fra speranze e disillusione*, trans. mine (Alberobello: Poiesis, 2012), 70.

²⁴ Yassin-Kassab, ‘Literature of the Syrian Uprising’, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 138–9.

One example of the ways in which contemporary uprisings may be seen as re-configuring the strategies of Shelley's *Revolt* is related to Cythna's death. Donna Richardson argues that the dialectics at the heart of the poem involves common good versus self-idolatry. At the end of the poem, Cythna's unselfish sacrifice fills most of the former revolutionaries with 'horror and doubt', thus leading them to take a step towards overcoming self-idolatry, Richardson concludes. She points to how the Child describes the aftermath of Laon and Cythna's death:²⁵ 'There came a murmur from the crowd, to tell / Of deep and mighty change which suddenly befell.' (XII, xxx, 4718–19)

In Richardson's reading of the poem, it is mostly through Cythna's sacrifice that Shelley keeps the light of hope alive for future generations. Nowadays, Cythna's gesture reverberates in the many martyrs of the revolutions in the MENA region, in the way their pictures are displayed to exhort the general public to keep up the fight. Similarly to what happens in the poem to the people witnessing Cythna's sacrifice, the Syrian cartoonist Ali Ferzat writes: 'I am humbled by the culture and hearts of people who cannot draw or write, but who are sacrificing their lives for freedom.'²⁶ In this specific context, however, this inspirational humbling and awe is produced by a multiplicity of subjects, rather than by individual and solitary heroes, possibly overcoming the split between exceptional individuals and the people at large.²⁷ I am aware of the delicacy of this topic – even more so, after reading Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (London: Picador, 2007, 78) and its chilling description of the thousands of Iranian youths sacrificed by their ayatollahs in the 1980–88

²⁵ Donna Richardson, '“The Dark Idolatry of the Self”: The Dialectic of Imagination in Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 40 (1991): 76.

²⁶ Ferzat, 'Two Cartoons', trans. from the Arabic by Anne-Marie McManus and Leen Ziyad, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 171.

²⁷ On the inevitable vulnerability of these spontaneous, from-below movements, see Calcutti, 'Il respiro breve', 9 – 11.

war against Iraq;²⁸ this novel certainly represents further evidence of the significance of *Revolt* for our present time.

Underground ways towards change

Beside the dead-end of Godwinian necessity, the imagery of *Revolt* offers other suggestions for conceiving and effecting revolutionary change. Grimes emphasises the poem's 1817 context, when the government's anti-radical repression was at its highest and Shelley had to 'struggle to find a discursive form that would allow him both to broadcast his revolutionary political vision to a popular reading audience and (simultaneously) to shield himself from the legal dangers attendant upon such radical political activity'.²⁹ This is reflected by the imagery of *Revolt*, pervaded by pictures of subterranean natural forces, be they earthquake-related, volcano-like, gas-like or liquid, defined by Donovan as 'Shelley's use of geological phenomena as poetic figures of human energy for political change'.³⁰ To mention only the most evident examples, Shelley's lines sometimes interlace these images, as in the following double metaphor-cum-simile:

[...] Hope's deep source in fullest flow,
Like earthquake did uplift the stagnant ocean
Of human thoughts
(I, xxxviii, 466–8)

²⁸ Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (London: Picador, 2007), 78. DeLillo mentions *The Revolt of Islam* at the beginning of his novel; he delivered a keynote lecture at the conference for the bicentenary of the poem which originated this special issue.

²⁹ Grimes, 'Censorship, Violence', 100.

³⁰ Footnotes to *Laon and Cythna*, 182.

What kind of shapes can this ‘wide contagion’ (IX, iv, 3503), these underground and pervasive forces take, in contemporary revolutions? One immediately thinks of the crucial role of new media in the Arab Springs movements. The anti-Assad and anti-Mubarak revolt movements gained momentum through social media networks. Given their technical peculiarity, social networks could overcome more traditional repressive systems. In the case of Syria, classified as one of the worst states in terms of Internet Freedom and information, underground movements were working behind these lines to make these networks more effective:

Another defining factor of the Syrian uprising has been the army of citizen-journalists who have posted over 300,000 videos, films and other visual material on the Internet, depicting what has been taking place in the country. They would not have been so well equipped or organised if not for the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs), a network of clandestine activist cells and groups operating across the country.³¹

[These LCCs] helped spread the tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience during the first year of the uprising. When the country was in media lockdown, the LCC documented and disseminated news from inside’, ‘procuring technical equipment – spycams, phones, laptops and software – for the then-burgeoning movement of citizen journalists in Syria.³²

The counter-information phenomenon sparked by the 2011 Syrian uprising and disseminated through the Internet was not limited to journalism, but also included, for

³¹ Malu Halasa and Zaher Omareen, introduction to Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, x. As to Egypt, see Mattei, *Voci di Piazza Tahrir*, 60.

³² Assaad Alachi, ‘Mystery Shopper: Interview with Assaad Alachi by Malu Halasa’, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 104.

example, creative literature, digital art,³³ banners and signs (such as the anonymous artists collective *Kartoneh*³⁴), cartoons and posters (such as the *Alshaab alsori aref tarekh*, ‘The Syrian people know their way’³⁵), groups of citizen-photographers united under the banner of *Lens Young*.³⁶ In the words of visual artist Khaled Barakeh, ‘We ended up creating a virtual “parallel republic”, a term I use to describe this digital, integrative approach of journalism, arts and activism taking place in the streets and virtual networks of Syria.’³⁷ Cariello describes a similar situation for Egypt, considering the narratives of ‘revolution as a discursive practice’ composed of creative literature but also of a multiplication on information through social media: ‘a form in itself, if you will, of hyper-narration, with its highly interesting volatile character, in a way akin to oral narrative, where author and authority are possibly con-fused and perhaps collectivized.’³⁸ Shelley’s imagery and its relation to underground forces are echoed in Golan Haji’s poem ‘Autumn, Here, Is Magical and Immense’, where a comparable metaphor describes a sort of counter-force to the devastation brought about by hunger and death:

A sea seethes and oozes underground,
 while a young man weeps
 at seeing bread: he’s your son.
 Get closer to this stone
 and move it away with your touch.
 A thirsty wave will flow from under the tombstone

³³ Sulafa Hijazi, ‘Ongoing: The Digital Art and Illustration of Sulafa Hijazi’, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 10–16.

³⁴ Kartoneh, ‘Banners in the Colour of the Euphrates’, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 60–65.

³⁵ Charlotte Bank, ‘Alshaab Alsori Aref Tarekh (The Syrian People Know Their Way): The Art of Persuasion’, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 66–83.

³⁶ No author, ‘Lens Young’, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 118–22.

³⁷ Barakeh, ‘Regarding the Pain of Others and Damascus 15 Feb 2012, 19:47:31’, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 158.

³⁸ Marta Cariello, ‘Notes on Revolution and Locality: A Focus on Egypt in 2011’, *From the European South* 2 (2017): 42.

and will stamp on the palm of your hand
a kiss quiet as this grass
delicate like the veil
you're wearing on your head.³⁹

Symbolic locations

Alongside the disseminating, centrifugal work effected by these undercurrents, the Arab Springs uprising have relied on the concrete presence of collective places charged with a powerfully symbolic significance and exercising a centripetal attraction. When open political channels are prohibited, public spaces become the places where forms of transformations converge and challenge the discipline imposed on them.⁴⁰ Spatially-speaking, the progressive message of *Revolt* finds a focus in the assembled crowds in the Golden City, described by Shelley as a ceremonial gathering of different peoples on the basis of equality:

'Twas midnight now, the eve of that great day
Whereon the many nations at whose call
The chains of earth like mist melted away,
Decreed to hold a sacred Festival,
A rite to attest the equality of all
Who live.

³⁹ Haji, *L'autunno, qui, è magico e immenso*, trans. from the Arabic by Patrizia Zanelli, my trans. into English (Fagnano Alto: Il Sirente, 2013), 7.

⁴⁰ Cariello, 'Notes on Revolution and Locality', 49–50: Cariello here refers to Navid Pourmokhtari, 'Protestation and Mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa: A Foucauldian Model', *Foucault Studies* 22 (2017): 177–207.

(V, xxxvii, 2044–9)

And on the following day Laon remembers being moved at seeing ‘Earth from her general womb / Pour forth her swarming sons to a fraternal doom.’ (V, xxxviii, 2060–1). With regard to this, Duff traces a parallel with the ‘fetes de fédération’ held on the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille.⁴¹ A corresponding phenomenon occurred in the recent Arab Springs movements. Demonstrations and sit-ins in public places characterised the beginning of the uprisings in Syria (Abbas 56),⁴² in Kasbah Square in Tunis⁴³ and Tahrir Square in Baghdad,⁴⁴ but the place which acquired an iconic significance was certainly Tahrir Square in Cairo, where a great number of people lived, loved, debated, chanted and protested, fought and risked their lives for 18 days. Tahrir Square was transformed into a permanent settlement with camp hospitals, food distribution points, toilets, a theatre and psychological support by specialists,⁴⁵ described by Mattei as erasing all class differences (37, 52), as pervaded by a long forgotten ‘communitarian spirit’ (58),⁴⁶ and composing a single, collective cry:

after the initial fears, there remain only the euphoria and exhilaration of thousands, millions of people who are a single cry. It is a cry that overwhelms, stuns [...] the will that one’s voice might count for a second, only a second, amidst the indifference of so many years of oppression. [...] There are no heroes, it is ordinary people who often make history.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Duff, *Romance and Revolution*, 158.

⁴² Hassan Abbas, ‘Between the Cultures of Sectarianism and Citizenship’, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 56.

⁴³ Debora Del Pistoia and Damiano Duchemin, ‘Tunisia: Tra aspettative di riscatto e controrivoluzione’, in Osservatorio Iraq e Un ponte per..., *Rivoluzioni violate*, 20.

⁴⁴ Joseph Zarlingo, ‘Iraq: La linea sottile tra guerre e libertà’, in Osservatorio Iraq e Un ponte per..., *Rivoluzioni violate*, 80.

⁴⁵ Mattei, *Voci di piazza Tahrir*, 35, 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37, 52, 58.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 50, 49.

The cry described by Mattei reverberates in Shelley's, with which it shares a sense of communion, humane accomplishment and unbounded enthusiasm:

To hear one sound of many made, the warning
Of Earth to Heaven from its free children tossed,
[...]
[...] men who must hereafter be.
[...]
To hear, to see, to live was on that morn
Lethean joy!
(V, xxxix, 2064–5 and 2070; xlii, 2089–90)

In her analysis of recent Egyptian novels, Cariello highlights the importance of place, in its materiality and imagined identity, as locations where revolutionary practice is 'deeply inscribed': 'the places of the revolution are thus at the same time physical, material, and imagined places.'⁴⁸ The role of imagination and the 'horizons of possibilities' (to quote Appadurai) that it opens, she argues, are closely connected to the places of the revolution, and their material and imaginative specificities. Tahrir Square became one such place, where 'the access to the work of the imagination was for everyone.' Similarly to Mattei, Cariello brings to the fore the idea of these revolutions as 'always in the plural'.⁴⁹ Commenting on the gathering before the Golden City and its 'fraternal doom' (V, xxxviii, 2061, see above), Donovan highlights 'the awareness that its strength [...] can now be

⁴⁸ Significantly, General al-Sisi's repressive regime manipulated Egypt's revolutionary locations for its own rewriting of recent history; Giovanni Piazzese, 'Egitto: Da esempio a scempio del sogno democratico', in Osservatorio Iraq e Un ponte per..., *Rivoluzioni violate*, 48.

⁴⁹ Cariello, 'Notes on Revolution and Locality', 43–45.

relocated in human fraternity itself [...]. The specificity of this entry to the Golden City is its egalitarianism and comprehensiveness.⁵⁰

Cultural foundations of change

Underground forces of change and symbolically-charged locations in *Revolt*, then, find their contemporary equivalents in some facets of the so-called Arab Springs. Turning from medium to message, however, the question is: what kinds of activities are to be amplified by those undercurrents and by those locations, in order to attain the progressive, nonviolent and egalitarian values shared by Shelley and by the Arab Springs uprisings? Shelley's emphasis clearly falls on culture and education. Laon's and Cythna's inspiration is often ascribed to the ancient cultures and to the burning inspiration provided by classical thinkers, as in:

With deathless minds which leave where they have passed
A path of light, my soul communion knew;
Till from that glorious intercourse, at last,
As from a mine of magic store, I drew
Words which were weapons;
(II, xx, 838–42)

To this, in his 'Preface' Shelley adds his 'accidental education', namely his life experience (39). At the same time, a very different picture is offered with regard to the general state of

⁵⁰ Footnotes to *Laon and Cythna*, 148.

the education of his time. In his 'Dedication' to Mary Shelley opening the poem, he evokes an incident which gave shape to the aims behind his poetical efforts:

[...] until there rose
From the near schoolroom, voices, that, alas!
Were but one echo from a world of woes –
The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes.
(‘Dedication’, 3, 24–27)

Shelley identifies the origin of his poetical mission (and, implicitly, of *Revolt*) in his dismay at the state of education and culture, torn between neglect and the spreading of inhuman values. A few lines later, he recalls beginning to search for forms of counter-education as a reservoir to tap for his future enterprise, depicted as a knightly romance:⁵¹

Heap knowledge from forbidden mines of lore,
Yet nothing that my tyrants knew or taught
I cared to learn, but from that secret store
Wrought linkèd armour for my soul, before
It might walk forth to war among mankind;
(‘Dedication’, 5, 38–42)

Our contemporary world is scarred by the manifold attacks of which educational premises are victims, in order to terrorise enemy groups: ‘between 2009 and 2013, some 9,600 schools were targeted around the world; and in 30 countries, violence against them was a

⁵¹ An example of how the chivalric revival was channeled towards political and revolutionary goals: Duff, *Romance and Revolution*, 4, 155.

deliberate “tactic of war”’.⁵² Moving to a specific example from the Syrian context, here is a personal memory from the film director Ossama Mohammed:

One day during the first year of secondary school, Samiha – who was known as ‘the Communist’ – got control of the school PA system, which usually played Ba’athist songs to us between classes, and interrupted the hymn *God Protect You*, replacing the word ‘God’ with a shout of ‘the people!’ So the class informers brought the *Mukhabarat* (secret police) and they arrested her on the stairs. This head teacher was a Ba’athist, but he screeched: ‘Nooooo! We are on school grounds here!’ He grabbed Samiha in a protective embrace and was struck twice by the *Mukhabarat*. Confused by the scene, the secret police left the building and later seized Samiha from the street instead. May the head teacher rest in peace.⁵³

Analogously to Shelley’s poem, then, the Arab Springs movements demand and try to put in place forms of counter-culture and counter-education which might break long histories of repressive silence, and also educate towards nation building:

creativity is not only a way of surviving violence, but of challenging it. [...] Even ordinary people with no experience of the arts started discovering their artistic natures in a country where free expression was often controlled and government regulated.⁵⁴

These movements may therefore be taken as educational, as culture-building in themselves, because ‘A culture of citizenship is not inheritable, but acquired through

⁵² James Fergusson, ‘The Garissa University Attack Reminds Us that Extremism and Education Don’t Mix’, *The Independent*, April 4, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-garissa-university-attack-reminds-us-that-extremism-and-education-dont-mix-10156153.html> (accessed 20 October 2015).

⁵³ Mohammed, ‘The Thieves’ Market’, trans. from the Arabic by Alice Guthrie, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahmoud, *Syria Speaks*, 20.

⁵⁴ Halasa and Omareen, introduction to *Syria Speaks*, vii–viii.

upbringing, education and practical experience.’⁵⁵ In his call for an Islamic world capable of dropping any a-historical millenarianism, Fethi Benslama expresses the same necessity: the demand for justice, equality, rights and democracy cannot be severed from ‘the immense work on their culture that Muslims are called to carry out.’⁵⁶ What Abbas and Benslama envisage is a long future toil (made even more difficult, in the case of Syria, by the task of liberating it from violence and arms) akin to Shelley’s ‘resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long-believing courage, and the systematic efforts of generations of men of intellect and virtue.’ (36–7)⁵⁷

Conclusion: Hope and utopia

Shelley repeatedly mentions, in *Revolt*, hope’s urn: sometimes it is called ‘immortal’ (I, lviii, 647), sometimes ‘abandoned’ (IV, xxii, 1611). As argued above, this symbolic urn is fed by culture and education, so that, as Cythna proclaims to the people assembled at the Golden City, ‘[...] Science, and her sister Poesy, / Shall clothe in light the fields and cities of the free!’ (V, li/5, 2255-6). David Duff shows that, around the time of the French Revolution, ‘history itself seemed to enter the domain of the miraculous, and romance to offer a vivid and accurate language to describe what was happening.’⁵⁸ This article has argued that some recent revolutions witnessed, albeit briefly, this closeness between the miraculous and history. This is where hope seems to reside, in the aftermath of failed revolutions or uprisings. While to Duff the ‘transmission of ideals’ between generations is

⁵⁵ Abbas, ‘Between the Cultures’, 58.

⁵⁶ Benslama, *Dichiarazione di non sottomissione*, my transl. into English, 36.

⁵⁷ ‘Shelley consistently held that a gradual improvement in political understanding and civic discipline was the precondition for a responsible exercise of power by those long denied it under a tyrannical and brutalising regime’; Donovan, footnotes to *Laon and Cythna*, 36.

⁵⁸ Duff, *Romance and Revolution*, 3.

one of Shelley's 'most cherished themes',⁵⁹ this theme is echoed in the hope expressed by the Syrian intellectual (and former political prisoner) Yassin al-Haj Saleh, who relates the concept of citizenship to all the cultural expressions which flourished after 2011.

According to him, these

will become a repository for Syrians to draw upon to confront emerging forms of oppression in post-Assad Syria. These cultural works have been a source of pride and an indication of strong feelings of freedom and individuality in the revolution, and they share an unprecedented turn towards Syria as a nation. This is why we can say the revolution has established, for the first time, a uniquely Syrian national identity.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid., 207.

⁶⁰ Al-Haj Saleh, 'On the Intellectual and the Revolution', trans. from the Arabic by Anne-Marie McManus and Leen Zyiad, in Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, *Syria Speaks*, 177.