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More of Talk: “Julian and Maddalo”

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ABSTRACT

“Julian and Maddalo” is concerned to the point of preoccupation with the content, tone, and form of talk. Critics who have noted the importance of dialogue to the poem have done so by viewing it as a means of postulating abstract ideas or outlining the biographical features of the poem’s supposed alter egos. We should be wary of thinking of these exchanges in such coded ways, especially if we recall that Julian is unsure of his memory (“I recall / The sense of what he said, although I mar / The force of his expressions”), that Maddalo is aware of speech’s deceptions (“I think you might / Make such a system refutation- tight / As far as words go”), and that the maniac’s first symptom is his “ever talking.” The opening of *Paradise Lost*, book 9—“No more of talk where God or Angel Guest / With Man, as with his Friend familiar used, / To sit indulgent”—marks the moment epic turns into tragedy (a tragedy brought about in part by a couple’s inability to talk it over). Shelley conceives of “Julian and Maddalo” in Miltonic terms, and contrives a talk between friends familiar to judge the value of conversation.

The opening salvo of Hazlitt’s “Mr. Coleridge” (1825)—“The present is an age of talkers, and not of doers” (11. 28)—is both a dig at a Lake Poet’s failure to deliver on his revolutionary promise and a fit summation of the Romantic obsession with evaluating conversation. Hazlitt’s comment, and Coleridge’s futile poetic attempts to communicate with nightingales, sleeping infants, and far-away friends, might suggest an age in which talk makes nothing happen. And yet, the Romantic period also gave us Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) and Spence’s *Observations, Anecdotes and Characters of Books and Men* (1820) (both essentially diaries of bookish conversation), as well the best-known versions of one of literature’s most talkative forms, the closet drama, in Goethe’s *Faust Part 1* (1808) and Byron’s *Manfred* (1817). Shelley contributed much to the Romantic interest in printed speech, as the author of prose declarations and numerous dramas and dramatic poems, but he also tests the virtues and limitations of literary talk in two works begun in autumn 1818: *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and “Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation” (1819). For someone bound by decree, Prometheus is surprisingly doubtful of the performative power of speech. In the first act the Titan wonders what might happen “If then my words had power” (1.69), claims “words are quick and vain” (1.303), remonstrates “But mine own words, I pray, deny

me not" (1.190), and chides his questioners that words come too easily ("How vain is talk!" [1.431]).¹ Julian, Maddalo, and (to some extent) the Maniac are of a different opinion: they speak aloud to be sociable, debate views, and perform selfhood. This is not to ignore that "Julian and Maddalo" leaves us with much ambivalence about the value of conversation, indeed this seems to be the poem's primary objective, but rather to show that it and *Prometheus* are set out in alternative keys, as Shelley observes in a letter of May 1820:

If I had even intended to publish 'Julian and Maddalo' with my name, yet I would not print it with 'Prometheus'. It would not harmonize. It is an attempt in a different style, in which I am not yet sure of myself, a *sermo pedestris* way of treating human nature quite opposed to the idealism of that drama[.] (*Letters* 2: 196)

The difference rests on sound. The poems will not "harmonize": they are both in the broadest sense dramatic, but the ideal nature of the debates in *Prometheus* are of another, essentially less human, tone to those of "Julian and Maddalo," a poem which keeps its feet (and hooves) on the ground. This reading begins by considering Shelley's construction of a preface and frame narrative concerned with the form rather than the content of speech, before looking at how the texts and contexts that influence "Julian and Maddalo" alert us to what is at stake in the two gentlemen's debate. The reading dissents from much of the critical tradition because of its predominant concern with the first part of the poem, and because of its resistance to viewing the poem as a biographical whodunit. The essay concludes by considering the Maniac's narrative, and argues that it should be viewed as a spoken performance for an audience—rather than the overheard ravings of a mad man—and that the whole poem can be read as a coherent weighing-up of civilized talk.

The preface to "Julian and Maddalo" introduces each speaker paragraph by paragraph in a manner which resembles the start of an academic conference panel, and which is a far cry from the philosophical musings that precede *Alastor* and *Prometheus*. First Maddalo, "a Venetian Nobleman of ancient family" with "an intense apprehension of the nothingness of human life ... [I]n social life no human being can be more gentle, patient and unassuming ... He is cheerful, frank, and witty. His more serious conversation is a sort of intoxication" (1, 6–7, 15–18); then Julian, "an Englishman of good family" who is "for ever speculating how good may be made superior" and is "a scoffer at all things reputed holy" (20, 24, 25); and, finally, our last speaker, the Maniac, "who was evidently a very cultivated and amiable person when in his right senses" and is now subject to "unconnected exclamations" (31–32, 34). The preface's ostensible function is to establish that our interlocutors are of good birth and to anticipate their philosophical disagreement, but its exposition based on sociability also introduces the poem's preoccupation with talk. The extent to which this characterization occurs through the prism of conversation is curious: Maddalo is from "social life," moving between cheerful and serious talk; Julian's politics are linked to him "for ever speculating" and being a "scoffer." Even the Maniac was once thought to have been "amiable," and the most recognizable symptom of his current madness is a change to his speech.

The meticulous preface shows what G. M. Matthews calls the "careful structural planning" (63) of "Julian and Maddalo," whereby apparently easy conversations emerge from frustrated drafts, and in which the Maniac's speeches are written after the framing

narratives and then “subordinated to a preconceived overall design” (63). The poem proper begins with a leisurely and sociable outing of the men at play, as Julian and Maddalo ride on the Lido:

... from the waves, sound like delight broke forth
 Harmonizing with solitude, and sent
 Into our hearts aërial merriment.
 So, as we rode, we talked; and the swift thought,
 Winging itself with laughter, lingered not,
 But flew from brain to brain, – such glee was ours –
 Charged with light memories of remembered hours,
 None slow enough for sadness; till we came
 Homeward, which always makes the spirit tame.
 This day had been cheerful but cold, and now
 The sun was sinking, and the wind also.
 Our talk grew somewhat serious (25–36)

The concern is with the friends’ manner rather than what they are saying—as Julian describes the dynamism of gleeful reminiscence, with winged words that fly in a long clause punctuated to mimic the to-and-fro of easy talk. These reminiscences are of conversations past—“those light memories of remembered hours” which provide the charge for present “merriment”—as this talk is tied to that before it. (The chain extends into the future when Julian opens his conversation with Maddalo the next morning with a recollection of “The words you spoke last night” [159].) The holistic nature of the conversation is furthered by its reciprocity with the world around it. “So” makes the harmonizing sound of crashing waves impel the two to rapid talk, while the move to serious subjects, signaled by the tolling “Homeward,” is a consequence of the setting sun and the dying wind. In the lines that follow we are given some idea of what Julian and Maddalo are saying, but this is mostly paraphrase until the quoted speech from lines 111–30. As this debate on providence, damnation, and mortality (the first proper conversation we have been party to) ends, Julian makes a startling admission: “I recall / The sense of what he said, although I mar / The force of his expressions” (130–32). The placement of this aside causes more than a little bathos: we have now heard some of the conversation promised by the title, only to learn of its inaccuracy. Shelley reminds us, as he will do again at lines 298–99 and 543–44, that talk is ephemeral, and that recalling it (especially in printed verse), is subject to the distortions of memory and the transpositions of form. Over and above the topics being discussed by the two men, these considerations of how we record speech—whether we remember content (“sense”) over form (“force”), and how (as the Maniac shows) certain ways of speaking can make both the manner and matter of speech memorable—get at the poem’s fundamental concerns. I am not the first to argue that the substance of the discussion between Julian and Maddalo is not really what matters here: long ago, Bernard Hirsch claimed “I seriously doubt that Shelley is very much concerned in this poem with his characters’ debate *per se*” (14). For Hirsch, as for many others, the true subject of “Julian and Maddalo” is “Shelley himself” (14), but might a poem that Shelley wanted to be published anonymously explicitly to avoid the taint of “*self*, that burr that will stick to one” (*Letters* 2: 109–10), and that puts under constant interrogation the ways and means of debate, instead have as its subject more universal questions regarding the purpose of printed and spoken

communication? In 1963, Matthews claimed that new interpretations of “Julian and Maddalo” might be possible “when critics no longer felt the compulsion to treat Shelley as monotonously self-regarding” (60). In the last sixty years a few critics have shown that such readings are possible, notably Michael O’Neill’s appreciation of the Maniac as an expression of a poet’s creative dilemma (138–41), William Keach’s study of Shelley’s oppositional couplets (84–93), and more recently, Merrilees Roberts’s brilliant unraveling of the poem from its final couplet (121–49). I follow the anti-biographical bent of their interpretations in my reading of the poem, which sees it as far more concerned with the problems of dialogue than with the biographical quirks of Shelley or Byron.

In the next morning’s scene, we are privy to much more of what is said between Julian and Maddalo, but their conversation is focused again on the manner of speech. Our interlocutors remain at homosocial leisure, as although there is a female present (Maddalo’s daughter) she is seemingly too young to speak. Moreover, the daughter’s appropriation by Julian as an example of humankind’s potential (“See / This lovely child, blithe, innocent and free; / She spends a happy time with little care” [166–68]) relies on her being unable to talk back and contradict him—she must be seen but not heard. Julian louchely plays billiards with the daughter while using her as part of an argument on freewill and destiny, to which Maddalo brusquely responds with a retort which ends in the damning “You talk Utopia” (179). An earlier draft read “This is Utopia” (Bodleian MS Shelley adds e. 11, p. 84), but Shelley’s revision makes the insult more personal and more pointedly concerned with the ever-speculating verbal manner of Julian. It is an attack on the oral medium of the argument that Maddalo continues in his rejoinder to Julian’s next speech:

‘My dear friend,’
Said Maddalo, ‘my judgement will not bend
To your opinion, though I think you might
Make such a system refutation-tight
As far as words go. I knew one like you
Who to this city came some months ago
With whom I argued in this sort, and he
Is now gone mad, — and so he answered me, —
Poor fellow! but if you would like to go
We’ll visit him, and his wild talk will show
How vain are such aspiring theories.’
‘I hope to prove the induction otherwise,[’] (191–202)

Beneath the polite carapace of “dear friend” and “Poor fellow!,” Maddalo argues in prosaic terms against his friend’s verbal utopianism. Julian is teased that he “might” be able to make a convincing argument in the bounds of speech, but his argument will fail in practice. The offer to see the Maniac—who was driven to “wild talk” by arguing like Julian—is an attempt to move beyond “system” and “theory” into a realm of material proof. Maddalo’s challenge is driven home in a final jibe which repeats his earlier mention of “aspiring” (see 177), etymologically joking about the amount of breathing-in-and-out required by the scoffing Julian. But, as Earl Wasserman has noted, Julian is “a well-trained orator” (57): he counters Maddalo’s break with the poem’s familiar style in talk of “refutation” with his own talk of proving “the induction,” exchanging

the technical diction of debate in words that appear nowhere else in Shelley's poetry. Their argument is neatly poised, and their stalemate exerts considerable structural pressure on the Maniac's role, so that, in an intentional absurdity, we find ourselves hoping for resolution in the speech of a madman.

I have called attention to three concerns in the conversations which come before the Maniac's monologue: a doubt over the accuracy of what is being relayed; an emphasis on leisure, which pervades the characters' situations, desultory manner of speaking, and the relaxed quality of Shelley's couplets; and an argument about whether talk, and specifically verbal debate, has any intrinsic value. Shelley's literary and historical inspiration for these concerns give a clearer sense of what is at stake. My sense of Shelley's approach to the influence of other texts builds on Richard Cronin's claim that in his poetry traditions "are examined and rejected, but the rejection is consistent with a genuine affection" (126), to show a playful eccentricity in which the renowned parts of texts (poetic, philosophical, and historical) are often ignored, while less remarked upon features are subtly assimilated. Shelley's appetite for reading, studying, and translating was particularly strong between his arrival in Italy in March 1818 and his writing of "Julian and Maddalo" that autumn. Shelley had spent the spring trying and failing to conceive of a drama on Torquato Tasso, and in June, only a few months before starting "Julian and Maddalo," he wrote to Peacock claiming, "I have lately found myself totally incapable of original composition" (*Letters* 2: 27). But Shelley had found himself capable of translating Greek, translations which he may have hoped would help him to form dialogue in verse. This doubtless explains why the one extant scene of the Tasso drama is an unfinished attempt at a three-way conversation, as well as Shelley's decision to translate the stichomythic and often colloquial *Cyclops* of Euripides and Plato's *Symposium*, which proceeds, as Kelvin Everest suggests, "by engaging with opposed ideas and voices through a dynamic of dramatic exchange between contrasting perspectives" (33). It is tempting to link the June's Plato translation to a poem begun in August that presents itself as a conversation-cum-debate. James Notopoulos's claim that Julian the Platonist is a version of Shelley the Platonist (232) is another reduction of the poem to biography, but he is right to see Julian's prolixity as Platonic, and we can see its roots in Apollodorus's claims that "whenever either I myself talk of philosophy, or listen to others talking of it, in addition to the improvement which I conceive there arises from such conversation, I am delighted beyond measure" (*Complete Works* [hereafter *CW*] 7: 166). But such links are complicated by the reluctance of Maddalo to allow us to hear, and the reluctance of Shelley to allow us to read, much philosophical talk.

"Julian and Maddalo" is influenced as much by the manner as by the philosophy of Plato. The *Symposium* is itself a work of translation which converts Socrates's oral teaching into written form, and therefore, as Ross Wilson has argued, Plato problematizes the act of recording conversation by making his "many narrative frames have fuzzy rather than sharp edges" (346). Plato's frame narrative—a pedestrian conversation between Apollodorus and a friend—is a relaxed introduction that casts some doubt on the longer and more structured debate that follows. The opening worries about recollection—was Apollodorus present? Is he "a faithful reporter" (*CW* 7: 166)? How long ago did the event take place?—culminate in the absurd admission that the story comes from "a little man who always went around without sandals" (*CW* 7: 166). The moment chimes with Shelley's ever-present insecurity over recalling

speech, but it is the manner of this part of the *Symposium*, and Shelley's style of translating it, that is most germane to "Julian and Maddalo." The opening of *The Symposium*, with two men questioning, digressing, and interrupting one another, reveals Shelley's attitude towards translating Greek speech, an attitude which pitted him against Thomas Taylor, whose Plato translation Mary Shelley describes as "so harsh and un-English in its style, as universally to repel" (vi). By removing this artificiality, Shelley hoped to see the Greeks as they were. In an essay probably intended to preface the Plato translation ("Discourse on the Manners of the Antient Greeks"), he writes of hoping to capture "their weaknesses, their daily actions, their familiar conversation, and catch the tone of their society" (CW 7: 226). Shelley attempts to soften Taylor's Plato—names are often anglicized; he does away with the archaic "thou" and "ye"—but there is a more pervasive change of tone, which we can catch in a comparison of a reply by Apollodorus:

"Your informant," I replied, "seems to have given you no very clear idea of what you wish to hear, if he thinks that these discussions took place so lately as that I could have been of the party."—"Indeed I thought so," replied he.—"For how," said I, "O Glauco! could I have been present?" (CW 5: 165)

It appears plainly, said I, indeed, that your author by no means gave you an exact account of the circumstances of that conversation, if you suppose it passed so lately as to admit a possibility of my being of the company.—Really I imagined so, replied he.—How could it be, said I, Glauco? (Taylor 3: 440)

Shelley gets rid of the needless inversions ("said I," "by no means gave you"), and the legalistic diction of supposing and admitting possibility, in favor of a familiar style, which delights in the banter ("O Glauco") of good friends. Shelley's rendering is still polite, but it translates the tone of a real conversation to the page in a similar way to that which he discussed with Hunt regarding "Julian and Maddalo":

I have employed a certain familiar style of language to express the actual way in which people talk with each other whom education and a certain refinement of sentiment have placed above the use of vulgar idioms. (*Letters* 2: 109)

This is the manner of the chatter flying from brain to brain in Julian and Maddalo's first conversation, but it is also that of the more charged dialogue at the madhouse about the Maniac's history (232–70). Like the conversation between Apollodorus and his friend, the exchange constitutes a passing of information from one character (Maddalo) to another (Julian), and Shelley refuses to allow the weighty subject of a man's fall into madness to break his resolution to catch "the actual way in which people talk": the pithy questions, spontaneous interruptions broken by dashes and unhindered by line breaks, and the knowing clarifications in parenthesis—all this remains. Shelley did not come to this "familiar style" by studying the structured philosophical speeches of the *Symposium* proper, for that kind of longer speech is only seen in the pastiche of it by the Maniac. The traces of the *Symposium* in "Julian and Maddalo" are not from the speeches of Socrates and Aristophanes, but come instead from the familiar talk which qualifies and casts doubt on the philosophy it precedes, and from working through a translation which attempts to transpose the "actual way in which people talk" (with all the shiftiness and miscommunication this entails).

While the influence of the *Symposium* can only be inferred from Julian's passing remark on the "kings of old philosophy" (188), *Paradise Lost* is explicitly mentioned in "Julian and Maddalo." Julian informs us which part of Milton's epic inspires his talk when he describes his conversation with Maddalo as "forlorn / Yet pleasing, such as once, so poets tell, / The devils held within the dales of Hell / Concerning God, freewill and destiny" (39–42). There is another iteration of the poem's worry about verse and verbal testimony in "so poets tell," and what follows is a reference to *Paradise Lost* (2.555–65). William D. Brewer has called this allusion a "facetious comparison between the friends' conversation and the epic debate of Milton's devils" (128), but Julian's remark is not facetious and nor is it a comparison with the epic debate (2.10–505) at which Satan and his devils resolve to bring about the Fall. Brewer's confusion is understandable. We might expect "Julian and Maddalo" to play with this council of aspirant angels, in which Satan's formal opening remarks—"We now debate: who can advise, may speak" (2.40)—compound the poem's worry about useful talk. But Shelley resists the Keatsian urge to rewrite a Miltonic set piece and the Byronic urge to send one up. Julian's reference is to a less admired scene after the formal debate, with the minds of the fallen angels "more at ease" (2.521):

Others apart sat on a hill retired,
 In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high
 Of providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate,
 Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute,
 And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.
 Of good and evil much they argued then,
 Of happiness and final misery,
 Passion and apathy, and glory and shame,
 Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy[.] (2.557–65)

This is the purposeless talk of angels retired from the fight. Like many philosophical debates, as it progresses so does the complexity of the reasoning, so that in only two lines "foreknowledge, will, and fate" becomes "*Fixed* fate, *free* will, foreknowledge *absolute*" to mimic the fruitless intricacy of angels "who found no end, in wandering mazes lost." There is fecundity in the image of angels whose talk has the leisure of a walk among the hedges of a country house, who can find no way out of their labyrinthine arguments, and of an argument itself with no end. A list of abstract topics culminates in a line which damns all before pausing to dismiss "false philosophy," which recalls those cumbersome "f" sounds of a few lines earlier, and reminds us of Hamlet's retort to Horatio. Milton is not against talk for talk's sake—wandering in a maze is fun after all—but he suggests that this kind of debate is neither especially productive nor serious, as he does again in the imperative to stop sedentary conversation that opens book 9: "No more of talk where God or angel guest / With man, as with his friend, familiar used / To sit indulgent" (9.1–3). The allusion to Milton's ambivalent lines at the start of a leisurely conversation between two gentlemen supports Shelley's exploration of the manner rather than the meaning of talk, and Milton's matter-of-fact unpicking of this pontificating recalls Maddalo's assured dissection of Julian's verbal argument. At a narrative level it also complicates our attitude to Julian. By referencing the angels' debates, Julian shows some self-awareness about the limits to his speculative cast of mind, which in turn provides a rebuke to those critics who have seen the utopia-talking Julian as a neat

parallel for, if not Shelley himself, then Shelley's intellectual position on talking philosophy. Eric Griffiths is uncharacteristically narrow in his view that Shelley describing Julian is Shelley describing himself, and his associated claim that "to be 'for ever speculating' here is a good thing; it shows a mind tirelessly alert and challenging. There seems to be no worry in the phrase that eternal speculation could be a condition of permanent intellectual disquiet" (142). Even if we ignore the Maniac's outbursts as evidence for the possible dangers of "eternal speculation," Julian's allusion to Milton's angels provides an undertow of intellectual disquiet about his own "ever speculating habits of speech" (and, by the syllogistic logic of many critics, those of Shelley himself).

The leisurely arguments of *Paradise Lost* set up the charged but inconsequential dialogue of the horse-riding and billiard-playing Julian and Maddalo, and in both Milton and Shelley there is a sense of these debates as organized performance. The angels are removed from their peers, "sat on a hill retired, / In thoughts more elevate," and, despite its wandering, the methodical description of their debates suggests there is some order to their talk. Milton's was an age of formal debate—in the Long and Rump Parliaments, and at Putney in 1647—and these grand occasions have long been seen as inspiration for the parliament of Satan and the fallen angels in book 2. But, as Estelle Haan has shown, Milton had also witnessed, and possibly taken part in, debates of a more jovial bent: at Florence he visited the Accademia degli Svogliati ("Academy of the Willless") a half dozen times, and saw some of a ludicrous sixteen-year debate over what their *impresa* (seal) and motto should be, and at Naples he had seen the Accademia degli Oziosi ("Academy of the Leisurely Ones") debate the esoteric topic of "Why does the dying swan sing?" (14–15, 118–21). Haan does not connect these debates to those of the retired angels referenced by Shelley, but they were likely one of Milton's sources. "Julian and Maddalo" likewise bears the influence of the debates and debating styles of its age. In his conversations with Maddalo, Julian has in mind a structured but leisurely argument when he describes the positions each man takes:

We descanted, and I (for ever still
Is it not wise to make the best of ill?)
Argued against despondency, but pride
Made my companion take the darker side. (46–9)

The convoluted syntax reflects the fine distinctions made: Julian is not saying "I was against despondency while Maddalo was of a darker opinion," but rather that he "Argued against despondency" and that Maddalo's pride made him "take the darker side." The two gentlemen take sides and play parts in inconsequential debate. Revealingly, "Julian and Maddalo" was written as the two universities' debating Unions came into being (Cambridge, 1815; Oxford, 1823), and at a time when, as Christopher Reid has shown, boys like Shelley were given the resources of debate at public school, which provided not just training in classical oratory but in belletrist modes of talk (117–28). Furthermore, the revolutionary age Shelley was born into recalls the 1640s in the prominence of formal and informal debate. The 1790s saw a boom in London debating societies at which topics

ranged from the timelessly trivial ("Which is worse, a nagging wife or a tyrannical husband?"), to the wondrous ("Do dreams predict future events?"), to the religious ("Are

Methodists hypocrites?'), to the pertinently political ('Should the House of Commons impeach Pitt?'). (Thale 60)

The popularity of these debates may inspire Julian's language of taking sides, and the later mentions of "refutation" and "induction," while Shelley's experience of rarefied debate at Eton and Oxford likely explains the praise of conversation found in the future that Julian imagines for himself after the Maniac: a life "In Maddalo's great palace ... [where] subtle talk would cheer the winter night / And make me know myself" (559–61). In an influential reading, Donald Davie uses these lines to claim that the "conversation we have attended to in the poem is just as civilized as the intercourse of Maddalo and Julian here described" (144). It is curious that rather than citing any of the "intercourse" between Julian and Maddalo, Davie uses a description of a hypothetical conversation as the basis for his claim that the poem "civilizes the reader" (144). While Julian (and perhaps Davie too) are enamored with this dream of homosocial civility, in the actual conversations of Julian and Maddalo we see that talk does not get the poem's characters or its readers too far towards self-knowledge. The claimed urbanity of some of Julian and Maddalo's conversation has its roots in school, university, and parliament, but the lack of progress in their debate hardly endorses these civilized settings. In fact, in their conversation we might catch something of the major disruption to orderly talk of twenty or so years earlier (in debates which sometimes culminated in that strange symbol of a new civilized order, the guillotine). Julian's speculative and scoffing style is a hangover from that favored by English radicals and revolutionaries, a style Shelley knew from his reading of Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793), which claims that "conversation accustoms us to hear a variety of sentiments, obliges us to exercise patience and attention, and gives freedom and elasticity to our mental disquisitions" (118). Maddalo subtly calls out this 1790s mode of debate in their first conversation, when he tells Julian of the mad men going to Vespers:

'As much skill as need to pray
In thanks or hope for their dark lot have they
To their stern maker,' I replied. 'O ho!
You talk as in years past,' said Maddalo.
'Tis strange men change not. You were ever still
Among Christ's flock a perilous infidel,
A wolf for the meek lambs — if you can't swim
Beware of Providence.' (111–18)

The exclamation softens the insults to come, while our acceptance of these lines as a record of speech, and Shelley's skill at translating speech into couplets, comes by way of the rhyme of "O ho!" with "Maddalo" which somehow manages not to be comic. "You talk as in years past ... 'Tis strange men change not" can be read either as Maddalo claiming that Julian's spoken opinions are the same as they were years ago, and that it is strange that men do not change their opinions, or as Maddalo chiding Julian for speaking in the manner of "years past"—with the idealism and anticlericalism of the 1790s (as he suggests fifty lines later in "You talk Utopia")—before sarcastically commenting that, despite such revolutionary talk, human nature has not changed. One reading need not exclude the other, but if we privilege the second we see Shelley again exploring *how* somebody speaks. The accusation is that Julian—a believer in

“true theory,” argument in the abstract, and a “scoffer at all things reputed”—shares the verbal manner of men like Richard Price and Tom Paine, for whom, as David Simpson claims, “rational method was a liberating and demystifying energy, a way beyond the illusions of social, political, and religious conventions” (11). Maddalo does not engage with this challenge to a Christian God, but opts instead for a natural and biblical image of the wolf among sheep, an aphorism bound by the very conventions Julian rejects. Maddalo’s speech reiterates the fact that while the two men differ in their beliefs their conflict is predominantly between competing methods of talk, but Shelley’s allusion to the 1790s raises larger concerns. In “Julian and Maddalo” we hear echoes of proclamations, declarations, and national debates, and we are confronted with a post-revolutionary dilemma. Maddalo challenges Julian to learn how to swim—to find a way of speaking which bridges the divide between Julian’s paralyzing idealism and Maddalo’s own, equally paralyzing, cynicism.

My reading has seen the poem as a meditation on the utility of conversation, and in its conclusion I look for continuities between Julian and Maddalo’s talk and the Maniac’s speeches. Put another way, how well does the picture fit the frame Shelley hangs it in? When the Maniac is read alongside the frame narrative’s privileging of form over content, of manner over meaning, we witness a continuation of the poem’s interrogation of speech. We learn from Maddalo that he has witnessed the Maniac’s ravings before, and that he knows what time of day they occur (“Let us now visit him; after this strain / He ever communes with himself again” [268–69]). So, the Maniac is compelled to repeat his suffering like the Ancient Mariner (note also his “eyes lustrous and glazed” [285]), and his speeches are something of an event, one Julian is seeing for the first time, but one which Maddalo’s thinks is compelling enough to watch again. Julian describes the Maniac as a man who spoke

sometimes as one who wrote, and thought
His words might move some heart that heeded not,
If sent to distant lands: and then as one
Reproaching deeds never to be undone
With wondering self-compassion; then his speech
Was lost in grief, and then his words came each
Unmodulated, cold, expressionless ... (286–92)

The description anticipates the confused variety that follows, and suggests that the Maniac has the vocal range to speak with the control of epistolary prose, in a tone of wonder, in wild talk lost in emotion, and without any emotion at all. The Maniac is not composing letters to distant lands, or reproaching past deeds: he speaks “as one” who does such things. When this appreciation of the Maniac’s ability to voice different emotions, and the scheduled nature of Julian and Maddalo’s visit, is read alongside later claims that the men position themselves as an audience (“stood behind / Stealing his accents from the envious wind / Unseen” [296–68]) and that the Maniac’s speech was in “the wild language of his grief ... / Such as in measure were called poetry” (541–42), we begin to appreciate that his speech is being presented as a dramatic performance. Indeed, the Maniac’s loquacity, flexibility, and “measure” bear some resemblance to the contemporary Italian *improvisatore* tradition, which Byron encountered through the performances of Tommaso Sgricci in 1816, whom Percy and Mary Shelley

would see perform in 1820. These actors extemporized famous plays, poems, and speeches, and as Angela Esterhammer has claimed, they seemed “to offer a real-time, eye-witness, public display of poetic genius in action” (2). The Maniac as *improvisatore* manqué complicates the poem’s earlier sense that Julian’s idealism and Maddalo’s cynicism are a consequence of their verbal manner, that the way we talk betrays the way we think. If we can move as freely as the Maniac between styles of expression, do we then have the ability to move between opinions and morals? The Maniac provides a disturbing gloss to Maddalo’s claim that “men change not” (115): Shelley seems to advocate a mode of talk between the wildness of Julian and the cynicism of Maddalo, but this performance warns against flitting between the two.

Before the Maniac begins Julian makes one last remark, “I yet remember what he said / Distinctly: such impression his words made” (298–99), to clarify that what follows is not an inexact record like that of earlier conversations. To modern ears “impression” pushes the idea of the Maniac as impersonator, but there is also a suggestion of the printing process in Julian’s claim for the distinct impressions of words. The shadow of print lies behind the monologue’s uncomfortable flitting between claims of being written (340–41, 476–81) as well as spoken, and this talk of impression emphasizes the literary conventions at play in the Maniac’s speeches, which appear like a strange anthology of lines learnt from play scripts. The Maniac’s first two paragraphs (300–37) show few signs of madness. They proceed with logical syntax, control over similes, exclamations, and rhetorical questions. There is an actor’s aside to the audience at the opening of the second speech—“What Power delights to torture us? I know / That to myself I do not wholly owe / What now I suffer, though in part I may” (320–22)—which in its measured tone has the despairing, but not necessarily mad, quality of Gloucester or Leontes. The early speeches are appropriate for the grave situation in which the Maniac finds himself, but as they continue, they become less fluent and resolved, and are interrupted by ellipses and dashes. The Maniac’s madness is enacted by the seemingly random switching of addressees—first in a soliloquy to an audience, then to “Ye few ... friends” (344–82), and mostly to a former lover (or a series of former lovers)—and the various forms they are addressed in: as a speech, as a letter being composed aloud (340–41, 476–81), and as two separate imaginary dialogues (370–74, 402–04). In their leisurely talk Julian and Maddalo disagree over how useful words are when trying to settle debates, and their stalemate is what takes us to the Maniac. But, far from making arguments “refutation-tight / As far as words go” (194–95), madness denies the Maniac the power to make words work at all. The Maniac is unable to create what J. L. Austin’s has called the “appropriate circumstances” (8; see also 13, 34–35) to do things with words: he has lost the ability to be sure of who he is communicating with and how. Therefore the Maniac’s “incommunicable woe” (343) is not because of sadness beyond words, but a loss of the ability to communicate woe appropriately. As the Maniac’s mental incapacity makes it impossible for him to be “performative” in Austin’s sense, we might see this as proof of Maddalo’s worries over the dangers of speculative talk. However, the Maniac is, or believes that he is, a victim of performative language: the curses which came from the “once eloquent” (454) lips of his former lover, which he incants (420–28) as he falls into the final and most disordered part of his monologue.

Realizing the Maniac raises more questions than answers, the men leave with their argument “quite forgot” (520), and go for a leisurely dinner. As if they had seen a

bravura stage performance, they “talked of him / And nothing else, till daylight made stars dim” (523–24). There follows a coda with Maddalo’s daughter and Julian, but the poem proper ends in this after-dinner conversation, and thus with the same bonhomie with which it began. This neat return to stasis asks us to consider what the purpose was of all the disquiet and tension in between. O’Neill has argued that “Julian and Maddalo” is a reflexive study of the task of the poet, with Shelley seeing the Maniac not as an actor but a poet, and thus reflecting on his own creative dilemma by juxtaposing “what the Maniac says is wrung from him involuntarily with the notion that he is aware of himself as a shaper of language, as a poet or failed poet” (139). My wish has been to emphasize a more universal dilemma under scrutiny—after all we are not all poets, but most of us are talkers and listeners to talk. “Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation” is a reflexive study, but one of how we converse not how we compose, and although he does not speak for either side in the debate, Shelley interrogates what we hear, what we say, and how we say it.

Note

1. Shelley’s poetry is quoted from *Poems of Shelley* and cited by line (and act where present).

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