

**Medusan Figures:  
Reading Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin**

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Abstract:

The myth of the Medusa has always occupied a prominent position in thinking about art and its relation to life. Medusa's petrifying power performs a shift from motion and mobility to rigidity and permanence: this passage resembles the process by which living images and thoughts are turned into artistic representations. Since Medusa cannot be seen directly, but only through her reflection – be it on Athena's shield or in words – she poses questions of representation that are central to artistic production. This paper seeks to explore some of the theoretical implications of the Medusan myth in the context of the writings of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin. My primary focus is Shelley's poem 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, In the Florentine Gallery' (1819) and the Medusan themes running through Benjamin's thought on literary criticism and on history. This paper grows out of a thesis that traces motifs and images that appear in the work of both writers in order to both reveal affinities between them and to investigate the significance of their writings in the formation of twentieth century literary theory. I am particularly interested in how the Medusan scenario turns into an image of critical self-reflection; one where the boundary between literary and critical representation is negotiated by means of a Medusan interchange of gazing and imagining, petrification and insightful reading. The paper is not in pursuit of proving or disproving a hypothesis nor in creating a coherent narrative. Instead it looks at a number of different facets of its title – Medusan Figures – to investigate the role that this myth can play in thinking and writing about literature from a theoretical point of view.

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As is well known, Medusa's gaze petrifies, although the myth never tells us whether it is being seen by her or seeing her that is deadly. Perseus, the only man to have survived looking at Medusa, overcomes the Gorgon by cunningly capturing her reflection in a shield given to him by the goddess Athena. Afterwards Perseus fastens Medusa's decapitated head onto this shield, which is thenceforth known as the *Gorgoneion* and is used as

Athena's aegis in the victorious march of Greek civilisation. Since the *Gorgoneion* retains Medusa's petrifying power, the replacement of her petrified reflection in the shield by the head it reflects yet again makes looking at Medusa deadly. W. J. T. Mitchell suggests that 'Medusa is the image that turns the tables on the spectator and turns the spectator into an image: she must be seen through the mediation of mirrors (Perseus's shield) or paintings or descriptions'.<sup>1</sup> If the poet or painter were to actually meet her gaze, he would be petrified before he could pick up the tools of his trade. Therefore, any representation of Medusa is inherently anti-mimetic: rather than documenting the Gorgon's features, it testifies that the artist has not beheld Medusa directly, but only her reflection in the shield. Thus, reflection itself functions like a shield that protects the beholder from Medusa's petrifying gaze. Throughout the history of artistic representations of Medusa, the *Gorgoneion* often takes the place of Medusa's face, for instance, as in Caravaggio's *Shield with Medusa's Head* (1597).



Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi), Italian, 1571-1610  
*Shield with Medusa's Head*, 1597  
Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 60 x 55 cm  
Collection Uffizi Galleries, Florence  
Inventory number: 1351

<sup>1</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 172.

The classicist Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux classifies Medusan self-petrification as the ‘condition of her visibility, her forbidden face is accessible only in the form of images’.<sup>2</sup> Medusa’s visibility remains a problem also when her reflected image is transferred into the medium of words. According to James A.W. Heffernan, what is at stake in ekphrasis, the literary description of a visual work of art, is not simply a convergence of visual art and literature, but, rather, ekphrasis ‘explicitly represents representation itself.’<sup>3</sup> This is heightened in the Medusan scenario, as the impossibility of beholding Medusa underscores how the words we read make us visualise something invisible: they are a verbal presentation of an impossible visual representation. The words are a substitute for looking at Medusa directly, functioning in the same way as Perseus’ shield does. In a reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ekphrastic poem ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, In the Florentine Gallery’ (1819), Mitchell suggests that the Medusan scenario is the ‘primal scene’ of ekphrasis.<sup>4</sup> Rainer Nägele’s reading of Walter Benjamin’s Medusan moments goes even further and presents this scenario as ‘the primal scene of the aesthetic’ itself.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, the primal quality of the scene resides precisely in the passage from life to image to words that it contains. This passage is no less crucial to Shelley’s conception of poetry than to Benjamin’s work on aesthetics and on modernity.

While Shelley was often inspired by visual impressions when writing, ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, in the Florentine Gallery’ is his only explicitly ekphrastic poem.<sup>6</sup> It describes a painting formerly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, although now believed to be by an unknown sixteenth century Flemish painter. Shelley encountered the work during his visits to the Uffizi Galleries in Florence in the winter of 1819.<sup>7</sup> While his notes from the galleries mostly focus on sculpture, it is the fragment on the Medusa painting that reaches

<sup>2</sup> Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, ‘The Gorgon: Paradigm of Image Creation,’ in *The Medusa Reader*, ed. by Nancy J. Vickers and Marjorie Garber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 262-266 (p. 262).

<sup>3</sup> James A.W. Heffernan, ‘Ekphrasis and Representation,’ *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 297-316 (p. 300)

<sup>4</sup> After quoting Shelley’s ‘On the Medusa’ in full, Mitchell comments: ‘If ekphrastic poetry has a “primal scene,” this is it.’ Mitchell, p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> Rainer Nägele, *Theatre, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Shelley’s visual imagination is most vividly manifest in depictions of natural phenomena in poems such as ‘Mont Blanc,’ ‘Ode to the West Wind,’ and ‘The Cloud.’ In this context one may also recall ‘Ozymandias,’ another work inspired by a work of art (a bust of Ramses acquired by the British Museum in 1817). However, rather than being concerned with describing the museum piece, the poem’s narrative frame transports the statue back to its original location: ‘I met a traveller from an antique land | Who said –’ the poem opens. The traveller’s narration asserts that ‘its sculptor well those passions read | Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,’ emphasising a transition from lived passion to lifeless stone that is also at stake in the Medusa poem; ‘Ozymandias,’ in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Neil Freistat and Donald H. Reiman (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co, 2002), p. 109-10, (l. 6-7). Hereafter cited as *SPP*. Sophie Thomas contrasts ‘the lack of “fix” and “unfixing” of Medusa and the fixity of Ozymandias in a reading that turns on ‘the effects of tyranny, and [...] the (im)permanence of art’. ‘Ekphrasis and Terror: Shelley, Medusa, and the Phantasmagoria,’ in *Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures*, ed. by Luisa Calè and Patrizia di Bello (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 25-43 (p. 36).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Flamingo, 1995), p. 565.

us as the most ‘completed’ poetic result of these visits.<sup>8</sup> Shelley chose an unusual image for his ekphrastic poem. Most classical portraits of Medusa favour a frontal representation: her face was usually painted on shields to invoke the apotropaic power of Athena’s aegis. Caravaggio’s Medusa-shield, which Shelley is also likely to have seen in the Uffizi Galleries, is a much more typical depiction of Medusa than the anonymous work that Shelley writes on. This painting foregrounds the head of snakes, rather than Medusa’s face – a shift of perspective that allows both the anonymous artist and Shelley to probe the themes commonly associated with representing Medusa. In a move that eschews the conventions of ekphrastic writing, Shelley’s poem opens with the words ‘It lieth, gazing...’ as if we were standing straight in front of the head of Medusa, rather than in front of a painting of Medusa’s head.<sup>9</sup> Shelley does away with the framing devices common in contemporary ekphrastic texts, and the only generic reminder that this is an ekphrastic work is consigned to the poem’s title. Furthermore, Shelley destabilises the gazer’s position within the poem and it is gazing, rather than describing, that becomes the core of the poem’s action. Thus, while the poem tells us that ‘it is less the horror than the grace | Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone,’ it is not clear who this petrified gazer actually is: the lyric mode would suggest that Shelley is speaking of the petrification of the poem’s ‘I’, whereas the ekphrastic mode suggests it is the reader who is beholding Medusa through the poem’s words that petrifies.<sup>10</sup> Perseus is not mentioned, but the myth makes him a likely candidate, whereas the third person inanimate pronoun of the poem’s opening – ‘It lieth, gazing...’ – suggest that it is Medusa’s head which is the gazer and that it is consequently her own spirit that turns to stone.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Frederic S. Colwell has documented Shelley’s visits to the Uffizi in ‘Shelley on Sculpture: The Uffizi Notes’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 28 (1979), 59-77 and ‘Shelley and Italian Painting’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 29 (1980), 43-66.

<sup>9</sup> *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington (Harlow, England: Longman, 2011), vol. 3: 1819-1820, pp. 221-3. In ‘Shelley and the Visual Arts’, *Keats-Shelley Bulletin*, 12 (1961), 8-17, Neville Rogers introduces a sixth stanza to the poem, although later critical work has concluded that Rogers assembled the stanza out of unconnected fragments found in Shelley’s notebooks; see Catherine Maxwell, ‘Shelley’s “Medusa:” The Sixth Stanza’, *Notes and Queries*, 36 (1989), 173-4 and the editorial remarks in the above edition.

<sup>10</sup> Shelley, ‘On the Medusa,’ l. 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Maxwell even goes so far as to identify Perseus with ‘Percy S[helley]’. *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 83.



Unknown Artist, Flemish, late sixteenth century  
*Head of Medusa*, ca. 1600  
Oil on wood, 49 x 74 cm  
Collection Uffizi Galleries, Florence  
Inventory number: 1470

Frontisi-Ducroux argues that the convention of representing Medusa frontally lends her a special representational status: ‘The frontal character is a figure cut off from its iconic environment. By that very fact it can come into contact with the addressee of the image.’<sup>12</sup> Medusa is not part of a group or setting: she is always looking straight at us – her beholders. However, when looking at a frontal representation of Medusa we know that the gaze that meets ours is a reflection; strictly speaking, we are not looking at Medusa but at the *Gorgoneion* and it is this reflection of Medusa’s gaze that we come into contact with, rather than the gaze itself. Louis Marin’s comment on Caravaggio’s Medusa-shield reveals something that is emblematic of all frontal representations of Medusa: ‘The singular potency of her own gaze is applied intransitively to itself, reflecting itself and thereby producing its own petrification.’<sup>13</sup> When looking the *Gorgoneion* in the eye, we see Medusa meeting her own gaze; an image of the reflected gaze that killed her but that we can meet

<sup>12</sup> Frontisi-Ducroux, p. 263.

<sup>13</sup> Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 136.

unscathed, protected by this very reflection. Walter Benjamin's ekphrastic depiction of the angel of history, based on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, does not explicitly invoke the Medusa, yet the *Angelus'* full frontal stare lends the picture a clear Medusan element. Here, too, it is a question of facing a frontal gaze:



Paul Klee, Swiss, 1879 -1940  
*Angelus Novus*, 1920  
Oil transfer and watercolor on paper, 318 x 242 cm  
Gift of Fania and Gershom Scholem, Jerusalem, John Herring,  
Marlene and Paul Herring, Jo-Carole and Ronald Lauder, New York  
Collection The Israel Museum, Jerusalem  
B87.0994  
Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating [*worauf er starrt*]. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn, (London: Collins/Fontana Books, 1973), p. 259. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte,' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974-1989), i:2 (1974), p. 697.

The verb that Harry Zohn translates as ‘contemplating,’ ‘*starren*,’ literally means ‘staring,’ but is also related to the verb ‘*erstarren*,’ to grow stiff, to petrify. What Benjamin’s ekphrasis presents us with is not only ‘how one pictures the angel of history,’ but also how artists conventionally picture Medusa. Both Benjamin’s angel of history and Klee’s *Angelus Novus* are figures ‘cut off’ from their iconic environments; figures that forcefully arrest the reading viewer’s gaze. Benjamin invites us to view history as its angel sees it, what he elsewhere calls ‘in terms of the concept of catastrophe’.<sup>15</sup> But we are not only observers of the angel of history, we are also subjects of history; accordingly, the ‘petrified, primordial landscape’ seen through the angel’s gaze includes us within its horizon.<sup>16</sup> The angel’s gaze, like Medusa’s, is intransitive, by coming into contact with it, we are in fact faced with a reflection. However, it is we ourselves that are reflected amongst the wreckage that makes up the catastrophe of human history.

In his posthumous ‘Portrait of Benjamin,’ Theodor W. Adorno asserts that the ‘glance’ of Benjamin’s ‘philosophy is Medusan. [...] Before his Medusan glance man turns into the stage on which an objective process unfolds.’<sup>17</sup> The petrification performed by Benjamin’s angel of history immobilises the subject and, so doing, enables a view of history as ‘objective process’ rather than as subjective experience.<sup>18</sup> This objective process stands in contrast to the multi-subjected gazing of Shelley’s poem ‘On the Medusa,’ where the moment of petrification is mediated by the difficulty of determining the identity of the poem’s multiple gazers:

Yet it is less the horror than the grace  
Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone  
Whereon the lineaments of that dead face  
Are graven, till the characters be grown  
Into itself, and thought no more can trace<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> ‘Central Park’, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1996-2006), iv (2006), p. 164; hereafter cited as *SW* and volume number.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 2009), p. 166. The angel’s mode of seeing history recalls the historical outlook of the German baroque tragedians that Benjamin explores in his habilitation thesis on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928). The full passage reads: ‘in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape.’ *Facies hippocratica* denotes a sickly, worn-out, dying face.

<sup>17</sup> *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1967), p. 233-5.

<sup>18</sup> In his seventh thesis ‘On the Philosophy of History,’ Benjamin rejects ‘empathy’ as a historiographical approach: the ‘historical materialist’ should not seek to ‘relive’ past eras, but to unmask ‘the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.’ (*Illuminations* p. 258) Empathising with the past implies complicity with the victors who write history, rather than the oppressed whose voices are being silenced. Benjamin’s triumphal procession evokes the Athenian march of civilisation, whose aegis is precisely the *Gorgoneion* carrying Medusa’s decapitated head. Michael Löwy discusses the Medusan resonances of this motif in *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History,”* trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> Shelley, ‘On the Medusa,’ l. 9-13.

As we have seen, the poem does not conclusively tell us who the gazer is. Accordingly, it is not Medusa's gaze but her grace that is the agent of petrification. Carol Jacobs furthermore suggests that it 'is neither the features of the onlooker, nor his spirit but rather the lineaments of the dead Gorgon's face that are graven at the point of articulation between the Medusa and the would-be Perseus'.<sup>20</sup> The petrified spirit takes on Medusa's features so that even if the gazer is not originally Medusa, the gazer's spirit receives the 'lineaments,' or 'characters' of Medusa's 'dead face'. The spirit becomes an embodied reflection of Medusa.

By interpreting Shelley's Medusan moment in terms of articulation, Jacobs reminds us that we are engaged in an act of reading. The Medusan characters that are being graven onto the spirit's face can also be read as the characters on the page that make up the poem. These characters render the poem self-reflective in the very moment that Medusa's self-reflection is at stake. Jacobs continues:

Were it possible to extricate our gaze from this scene, we might be able to contemplate its critical implications. For Shelley's poem is about nothing if not about our own interpretative predicament as readers. The 'characters' of line 12 are drawn into a process of unending involution in a notion of art that can no longer be regarded as preserving what happens to serve as the cornerstones of so much of our contemporary critical endeavor.<sup>21</sup>

That is, the inward-growing lineaments of Shelley's image correspond not only to the characters of Medusa's face, but also to the characters that we see on the page even as the lineaments of Medusa's dead face are precisely the main image depicted by these characters. The poem is Medusa's reflection in words and its mode of self-reflective reflection is no less convoluted than the 'unending involutions' of Medusa's viper-hair that it describes.<sup>22</sup> In the words of William Hildebrand, Shelley's 'Medusa replicates the process of self-involution in which subject turns to object: to gaze at is somehow suddenly to be gazed at.'<sup>23</sup> Shelley employs the moment of petrification to dissolve the reader's subjectivity, turning the reader into a gazing and gazed-at object within the poem. It is this that, in the words of Jacobs, undermines 'the cornerstones' of contemporary criticism. A comparable dynamic is latent in Benjamin's text: meeting the angel's gaze implicates the

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<sup>20</sup> Carol Jacobs, 'On Looking at Shelley's Medusa,' *Yale French Studies*, 69 (1986), 163-179 (p. 169). This paper is particularly indebted to Jacobs's close reading, which introduces the problem of ekphrastic writing in general and of viewing and representing Medusa in relation to this poem in particular.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobs, p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> Shelley, 'On the Medusa', l. 21.

<sup>23</sup> William Hildebrand, 'Self, Beauty and Horror: Shelley's Medusa Moment', in *The New Shelley: Late Twentieth-Century Views*, ed. by G. Kim Blank (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 150-65 (p. 159).



historical subject in the pile of wreckage that the ekphrastic angel is beholding. However, in Benjamin, this process of enfolding the reader within the text does not point inwards into the involuted core of poetic articulation but opens outwards onto an objective view of history.

The ease with which ‘to gaze at’ transforms into ‘to be gazed at’ in Shelley’s *Medusa* poem points to what Benjamin would regard as the poem’s auratic element. In one of Benjamin’s early formulations of his theory of aura, the 1927 review of Gottfried Keller’s *Sämtliche Werke*, Benjamin writes: ‘Describing is sensuous pleasure because the object returns the gaze of the observer, and every good description captures the pleasure with which two gazes seek each other out and find one another.’<sup>24</sup> The interplay of gazing which is at work in the *Medusa* scenario would thus be characteristic of every descriptive text. In the following decade, Benjamin develops this idea further. In the margin of an undated fragment headed ‘What is Aura?’ Benjamin scribbles: ‘Eyes staring at one’s back | Meeting of glances | Glance up, answering a glance.’<sup>25</sup> This slightly uncanny awareness of being looked at that causes one to look up is incorporated into the notion of aura:

The experience of aura rests on the transposition of a form of reaction normal in human society to the relationship of nature to people. The one who is seen or believes himself to be seen [glances up] answers with a glance. To experience the aura of an appearance or a being means becoming aware of its ability [to pitch] to respond to a glance.<sup>26</sup>

One of Benjamin’s last finished texts, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,’ rewrites this auratic intersection of glances in terms of expectation. Aura is primarily defined as expecting that the inhuman object returns a human gaze: ‘Inherent in the gaze, however, is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met [...] there is an experience of aura in its fullness.’<sup>27</sup> Shelley’s *Medusa* can be said to carry such expectations to the extreme. When encountering a work named after the *Medusa*, we expect to be able to safely meet her gaze through the artistic reflection. However, Shelley’s poem does not represent the petrified features reflected in Perseus’ shield. Instead, he describes *Medusa*’s decapitated head, which is consistently referred to

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<sup>24</sup> *SW2*, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> *Walter Benjamin’s Archive*, ed. by Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, and Erdmut Wizisla, transl. by Esther Leslie (London and New York: Verso, 2007), p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> *Walter Benjamin’s Archive*, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> *SW4*, p. 338.

as 'it', from a vantage point above.<sup>28</sup> In the involuted structure of Shelley's poem, Medusa's head not only returns our gaze, *it* imprints *its* features onto the gazer's, and turns the latter's spirit to stone. The moment of petrification rests on a transition in which the gazer is effaced by the head that 'lieth, gazing' in the poem's opening gesture. Rather than presenting Medusa's singularly frontal gaze, Shelley's poem offers us a melee of reflections in which there is definitely gazing but no definite gazer. The poem further foregrounds its own gazing by articulating these reflections in the medium of words: we do not look at Shelley's Medusa, we read her – but reading is merely another kind of looking. Reading can thus be understood as seeing with the eye of imagination.

Any frontal representation of Medusa depicts both the last thing she saw and the petrified result of that seeing (her face reflected in Perseus' shield). Marin interprets the Medusan moment as 'a *displacement* from one temporality to another, a passage from the moving, linear time of life and history to the time of representation with its immobility and permanence'.<sup>29</sup> Medusa's reflection in the shield serves as a threshold between the living and the petrified: on one side the living Gorgon, on the other the petrified reflection which is our only means of accessing her face. Critical texts – texts describing literary texts as well as other forms of art – perform a comparable shift in temporality whereby a single meaning is fixed in a work of art whose meaning as such is never fully determinable. Great literary texts are defined by the endless number of possible interpretations that they invite. Furthermore, their meaning evolves and changes over time so that new possibilities for interpretation continuously arise, adding to this already limitless store. In 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821) Shelley captures this idea in the image of an overflowing fountain:

A great Poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight.<sup>30</sup>

The life of a literary work springs from the new readings that can be developed out of it, and there can be no eternally valid or authoritative reading: rather each new reader, no less than each new historical moment, awakens something new within each truly poetic text. Benjamin uses the word 'afterlife' to describe a text's existence amongst future ages. 'The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical

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<sup>28</sup> Shelley, 'On the Medusa,' l. 1; l. 4; l. 5; l. 17; in addition to the 'itself' of the 13<sup>th</sup> line. Not once does Shelley use 'she' or 'her' in this poem, at most he refers to a 'woman's countenance' (l. 39), but this countenance is itself a reflection within the poem's reflective structure. I develop this point below.

<sup>29</sup> Marin, p. 137.

<sup>30</sup> 'A Defence of Poetry', in *SPP*, pp. 510-535 (p. 528).

objectivity,' he asserts in his seminal essay 'The Task of the Translator.'<sup>31</sup> The required level of objectivity is reached by releasing the notion of life from the confines of biology. Instead, Benjamin grounds life in its historical function:

The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. [...] The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations.<sup>32</sup>

History is defined as intertextuality, and the life of the work of art consists in its afterlife amongst succeeding generations of readers. When Adorno characterises Benjamin's Medusan view of history as objective, he also invokes a conception of history that lives not merely in subjective remembrance but in the artefacts (textual and material) that constitute a culture's heritage.

In an essay that sets out to translate Shelley's last poem 'The Triumph of Life' into Maurice Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort* [*Death Sentence*], Jacques Derrida draws on Benjamin's essay on translation, particularly Benjamin's formulation of 'afterlife.' Derrida defines the posthumous life of literary texts as a 'living on':

A text lives only if it lives *on* {*sur-vit*}, and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable [...] Thus triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living on, its life after life, its life after death. The same thing will be said of what I call writing, mark, trace and so on. It neither lives nor dies; it lives *on*.<sup>33</sup>

The ambiguities of the proposition 'on' – that distinguish 'living *on*' from mere living or dying – are also present in Shelley's poem 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, In the Florentine Gallery.' In spite of its indexical tone, the 'on' of the poem's title is deceptive since there is no painting of Medusa by Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine gallery. Thus, it is a poem *on*, or about, a painting which, in fact, does not exist. Furthermore, the title is the poem's only indication of its ekphrastic status: without it, the poem would read as a direct depiction of Medusa's deathbed. That is, even though it announces itself as ekphrastic, the poem by and large substitutes for the painting it allegedly describes. The Medusan characters graven onto the gazer's spirit are the characters printed on the page, not those reflected off the painter's canvas. Not only does Shelley's poem take its life from

<sup>31</sup> In *SW1*, pp. 253-63 (p. 254).

<sup>32</sup> *SW1*, p. 255.

<sup>33</sup> 'Living On: Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman, and J Hillis Miller, transl. by James Hulbert (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 75-176 (pp. 102-03).

Medusa's death, but it is literally written *on*, or over, the painting depicting Medusa, as his words replace the canvas. This replacement ensures that the image of the dead Medusa will live on in the peculiar afterlife characteristic of literary works.

Insofar as any critical reading begins with or incorporates a description of the work criticised, it also includes an ekphrastic element that allows the reader to see what the critic has read. However, unlike the author of an ekphrasis, the critic has the benefit of working in the same medium as the work he or she describes. Rather than recreating a visual impression, the critic operates with quotation. Each quotation is a fragment of the literary work that enters the critical text as representative of the whole. By fragmenting the whole, each critical reading destroys the unity of the work, but the work's afterlife is contingent on precisely such destruction. The artwork lives on by dying. In other words, quotations tear apart the artwork's integral unity, but, by doing so, they enable it to live on in ever-new interpretations. Benjamin touches upon the role of quotation in the methodological preliminaries of his 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*:

In the canonic form of the treatise the only element of an intention [...] is the authoritative quotation. Its method is essentially representation [*Darstellung*]. Method is a digression. Representation as digression – such is the methodological nature of the treatise. The absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation.<sup>34</sup>

Quotation is essential to the representational form of a philosophical treatise. But quotation is also that which interrupts the purposeful structure of such a treatise – no less than it tears apart the structure of the original texts from which they are taken. Quotations can be viewed as mirrors in which the two texts, the citing and the cited, are reflected in one another. This reflection performs a dual interruption. And it is this mutual displacement that, for Benjamin, characterises the representational form of the treatise. 'Darstellung takes place in an intermittent, broken rhythm, as an unceasing brokenness of breath,' Jacobs writes on the passage cited above, terming this momentum 'the rhythm of interruption.'<sup>35</sup> The German word for representation, *Darstellung*, pertains to form rather than content and thus gathers up characteristics that are usually associated with literary writing, from tropological devices such as metaphor, simile and rhyme, to prosodic features such as metre, stress pattern and line and/or paragraph division. Benjamin's

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<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 28-9.

<sup>35</sup> Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 18.

insight is that philosophy cannot dispense with such literary devices: even the plainest of styles is a stylistic feature. In the quotation, which is the central element of critical practice, the theoretical text not only conjures up the original, but also mimics the interrupted rhythm of contemplation in which the representation of thought is grounded.

The analogies that Benjamin uses to explain the function of representation in a philosophical treatise are drawn from the arts, and emphasise the temporalities inherent in visual and performing art forms. ‘Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum,’ he writes in the ‘Epistemico-Critical Prologue.’<sup>36</sup> On the next page, he offers a comparison with oral performance: ‘Whereas the speaker uses voice and gesture to support individual sentences, even where they cannot really stand up on their own, construing out of them [...] a sequence of ideas, [...] the writer must stop and restart with every new sentence.’<sup>37</sup> In an essay of 1939, written eleven years after the ‘Prologue,’ we still find Benjamin asserting that ‘interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring. It goes far beyond the sphere of art. To give only one example, it is the basis of quotation. Quoting a text entails interrupting its context.’<sup>38</sup> While the subject here is Brecht’s epic theatre, it is not lost on Benjamin that quotation is the paragon of critical practice. Nor is it a coincidence that Benjamin evokes theatrical gesture when talking about a textual practice – the interrupted tempo of Brechtian theatre is precisely what he aims for in the realm of philosophical contemplation. ‘To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts,’ Benjamin writes in one of the methodological sketches for his unfinished magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*.<sup>39</sup> The historical method that Benjamin develops is driven by arresting thought and quotation is his most important tool: ‘This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks.’<sup>40</sup> As in epic theatre, quotation performs an interruption – however, here it is history itself that is interrupted and displaced: ‘To write history is to cite history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context.’<sup>41</sup> This mode of representation – via interruptive quotations – performs a temporal shift that recalls the Medusan moment. It is through the practice of quotation that Benjamin aims to interrupt the flow of history and allow us to see history the way its angel sees it – as a ‘petrified, primordial landscape.’

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 28.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, ‘What is Epic Theater? (II)’, in *SW4*, p. 305.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, [N10a,3] in *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002). Hereafter cited as *AP* and convolute reference.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, *AP*, [N1,10].

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, *AP*, [N11,3].

In its unfinished state, Shelley's poem 'On the Medusa' contains a gap, a form of interruption in its metric pattern, in which the poem's final reflection emerges. This is found in the poem's closing stanza:

For from the serpents gleam a brazen glare  
Kindled by that inextricable error  
Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air  
Become a [ ] and ever-shifting mirror  
Of all the beauty and the terror there –  
A woman's countenance, with serpent locks,  
Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks.<sup>42</sup>

The 'ever-shifting' mirror, which forms in the blank space of the 37<sup>th</sup> line, reflects the object described in line 39: 'A woman's countenance, with serpent locks'. This mirror does not only present us with Medusa's self-reflection but also brings together the interplay of gazes that permeates the poem; thus, Shelley resolves the problem of the gazer's identity as Medusa's, the narrator's, and the reader's gazes all converge in this ever-shifting mirror. Jacobs clarifies that 'what the Medusa contemplates [...] is the evershifting image of herself gazing into a mirror formed of a vapor that arises from her own mouth'.<sup>43</sup> But since the Medusan 'lineaments' have been graven onto the reader/gazer's spirit in one of the poem's earlier moves, the self-reflection that Medusa contemplates in the mirror is also a reflection of the poem's reader/gazer. The *mise en abyme* effect is further heightened when we recall that these Medusan 'characters' are also metonymic of the written characters on the page, and, moreover, that the image seen in the mirror – 'A woman's countenance, with serpent locks...' – is the same scene as is depicted in the painting that the poem describes. This is, furthermore, the very image that the critic has to trace in writing on this poem. 'It is in this sense', Jacobs concludes, 'that criticism, too, another attempt to behold, might well be regarded as an act of the Imagination.'<sup>44</sup> The critic writing on Shelley's 'On the Medusa' must imaginatively recreate the poem much like the poem itself creates a painting not hanging in the Uffizi galleries. This re-creation also constitutes the poem's living on amongst future readers. Within Shelley's poem, this creative act takes shape in the 'ever-shifting mirror' where the poem's phantasmagoria of gazes is captured and interrupted. The pleasure of writing about Shelley's Medusa lies precisely in describing this place – where the reader meets the poem's gaze.

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<sup>42</sup> Shelley, 'On the Medusa', l. 34-40.

<sup>43</sup> Jacobs, p. 175.

<sup>44</sup> Jacobs, p. 179.