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Reanimation or Reversibility in "Valerius: The Reanimated Roman": Response to Elena Anastasaki "The Trials and Tribulations of the *revenants*"

Abstract: This paper is an invited response to an earlier paper by Elena Anastasaki, part of which presented a reading of Mary Shelley's short story "Valerius, the Reanimated Roman." The paper takes issue with aspects of Anastasaki's account of Shelley's story and offers a revised account of its representation of history, identity and Mary Shelley's attitude towards the Imperial and Republican periods of Roman history.

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Keywords: Mary Shelley. "Valerius, the Reanimated Roman." Literary criticism. Literary history. Romantic Studies.

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It has been a struggle to transcend the essentially biographical manner in which Romantic women writers like Mary Shelley have traditionally been read.[i] In her introduction to the Pickering edition of Mary Shelley's novels, Betty T. Bennett writes that "one of the major barriers Mary Shelley encountered in her audiences then – and now [was/is] the failure to accept that her major works are designed to address civil and domestic politics."[ii] This blindness to the political and it must be said philosophical dimensions of Mary Shelley's work often comes from an over-concentration on biographical readings. Such readings, which I have elsewhere described in terms of "biographism," involving a rather literalising equation of text and life, lack an awareness of the kinds of sophisticated disruption of the biographical and literary divide in which Mary Shelley's writing is frequently involved.[iii] They also tend to

make a too literalistic relation between literary thematics and psychoanalytical categories, reading tropes as though they were symptoms of or at least reflections on psychic conditions. Elena Anastaski's account of the relation between the figure of the *revenant* and the disruptive force of poetry in Mary Shelley's and Théophile Gautier's prose fiction is, then, in its analysis of those writers engagement with form and meaning, a very welcome contribution.[iv] In her response, Claire Raymond states:

> Anastaski refreshingly is concerned not with the apparent effects of the *revenant*, her/his role as disruptor of boundaries, but rather with the internal grief and psychic dislocation that the *revenant* bears because of his/her position as always out of bounds. In a nicely original move, Anasataski considers the fragmentation and fracture *within* the *revenant*.[v]

Dispensing with Anastaski's analysis of Gautier for now, I want to suggest that there is still, within her analysis of the *revenant* and fragmentation, a significant danger of "biographism." This danger appears most starkly in what Anastaski does with the figure of reanimation; a figure which dictates her selection for discussion of three of Mary Shelley's short stories: "Valerius: The Reanimated Roman," "Roger Dodsworth: The Reanimated Englishman" and "The Mortal Immortal."[vi] Early on in her paper, Anastaski gives a paragraph breakdown of the tragic deaths which haunted Mary Shelley's life, from birth onwards, before stating: "It is not surprising then that from her first literary attempt, *Frankenstein* (1818), the theme of reanimation is to be found at the heart of her work" (28). Anastaski remains committed to something more than a "biographist" approach to this thematics. She writes, responding to comments by Charlotte Sussman on the short stories: "Personal experience might well have been a source of inspiration in the depiction of the self-awareness of these characters, but I am arguing that what these stories are all about is, on the contrary, *internal discontinuity* as a perception of the self" (34). However, later on in the

essay we find Anastaski arguing that "[F]or Shelley, the search for wholeness is a strictly personal matter" (40).

There is clearly, as Anastaski has shown, a recurrent thematics of reanimation within Mary Shelley's work. We need to be a little careful, however. Are we always sure that what looks like reanimation is indeed reanimation? Is Frankenstein's creature reanimated? or is it created, the reanimated parts of dead humans and dead animals ultimately producing something with authentic and singular life? Is the process of reanimation that Roger Dodsworth goes through, frozen and then thawed back to life hundreds of years later, the same process that Valerius more mysteriously goes through? Anastaski recognises at times that we are not given the exact specifics of Valerius's reanimation? Given the title it might appear curious to ask the question, but still I intend to ask it: is Valerius in fact reanimated at all? As Anastaski writes: "Apart from the title, only a series of paradoxical phrases indicate Valerius's unnatural situation" (28). The care I am suggesting here ultimately impinges on the questions of "biographism" and of political meaning with which I began. It is perhaps not reanimation that we should be primarily concerned with in trying to understand the ultimate meaning of a text such as "Valerius: The Reanimated Englishman," the text I intend to focus on here. What is ultimately at stake in such a story is something we might more accurately style reversibility, a trope, and perhaps more than a trope, which can reconnect such a short story, on the periphery of the redrawn map of Mary Shelley's oeuvre, to one of the now established canonical novels, *The Last Man*. Beyond that, reversibility, in ways I will only be able to gesture towards here, might help us in a more global understanding of the nature of politics, philosophy, aesthetics and biography in both Mary Shelley and P. B. Shelley's lives and work.

I will begin my brief reading of "Valerius: The Reanimated Roman" by quoting a greater portion of the passage from Anastaski to which I have just referred. It contains most of the issues I wish to illuminate.

> Apart from the title, only a series of paradoxical phrases indicate Valerius's unnatural situation. Phrases like "my sensations of my revival" (332), "when I lived before" (333), "since my return to earth" (337), or again "before I again die" (339) make explicit his revival, but without giving the slightest hint concerning the way it came about. This silencing is supported by an external third person narrator, and the second by a character in the story, Isabel Harley – the woman who helps Valerius to cope with his new situation. The first part also incorporates the narration of Valerius himself, so that we have three different points of view concerning the reanimated character: Valerius is thus viewed by the external narrator (frame narrative), through his own narration (first fragment), and through another character's narration (second fragment). (28)

I will return to the questions of narrative structure and fragmentation later on. To begin our reading of those apparently enigmatic silences in "Valerius" I will remind readers of the story's initial location. The third-person narrator referred to by Anastaski gives us two figures landing in "the little bay formed by the extreme point of Cape Miseno and the promontory of Bauli." The narrator makes it very clear why they have arrived at this spot: "They sought the Elysian fields, and, winding among the poplars and mulberry trees festooned by the grapes which hung in rich and ripe clusters, they seated themselves under the shade of the tombs beside the Mare Morto" (Collected Tales: 332). As Charles E. Robinson notes, dating the composition of this story is not clear (Collected Tales: 397). What can be said is that the entire opening scene is a trial run or rerun of the opening of Mary Shelley's 1826 novel, *The Last Man*, in which a narrative voice describes how she and her now dead companion visited

Naples in 1818 and on the "8th of December of that year … crossed the Bay, to visit the antiquities which are scattered on the shores of Baiæ."[vii] The narrator goes on: "We visited the so called Elysian Fields and Avernus; and wandered through various ruined temples, baths, and classic spots; at length we entered the gloomy cavern of the Cumæan Sibyl" (Last Man: 5).[viii] It is here that the two travelling companions will find the Sibylline leaves within which the female traveller will eventually decipher the story of the end of the human race and the fate of the last man.

The opening setting for "Valerius" is, thus, crucial, and provides all the clues we need to unlock what appears to Anastaski such an enigmatic form of reanimation. As Valerius states of the Elysian Fields to his companion:

> This is the spot which was chosen by our antient and venerable religion, as that which best represented the idea oracles had given or diviners received of the seats of the happy after death. These are the tombs of Romans. This place is much changed by the sacrilegious hand of man since those times, but still it bears the name of the Elysian fields. Avernus is but a short distance from us, and this sea which we perceive is the blue Mediterranean, unchanged while all else bears the marks of servitude and degradation. (Collected Tales: 332-3)

Valerius's rhetoric of natural permanence and cultural-historical degradation will be important in the latter stages of this analysis. What is crucial here is Mary Shelley's interest in the idea of the Elysian Fields. Glossing the mythological reference for her readers, Jane Blumberg writes: "The Elysian Fields were, in classical myth, that region of the Underworld reserved for the just and those favoured by the gods. Lake Avernus, perfectly circular, was believed by the Romans to be one of the portals to the Underworld" (Last Man: 5). Whether Mary Shelley saw the Elysian Fields as a last resting place for the great and the good is

questionable, however. Certainly her text, *The Fields of Fancy*, first version of what was to become her unpublished novella, *Mathilda*, gives us an account of the Elysian Fields in which a long process of mourning and philosophical enlightenment leads to a transition to a spiritually more advanced realm. As the figure of Fantasia explains to the mourning figure who she repeatedly carries to the Elysian Fields and then back to earth:

> When a soul longing for knowledge & pining at its narrow conceptions escapes from your earth many spirits wait to receive it and to open its eyes to the mysteries of the universe – many centuries are often consumed in these travels and they at last retire here to digest their knowledge & to become still wiser by thought and imagination working upon memory – When the fitting period is accomplished they leave this garden to inhabit another world fitted for the reception of beings almost infinitely wise – but what this world is neither can you conceive or I teach you ….[ix]

When we remember all these contexts it becomes clear that Valerius has returned to earth from the Elysian Fields. This is the meaning of such apparently enigmatic statements as: "when I lived before" (333), "since my return to earth" (337), and "before I again die" (339). Valerius is not reanimated so much as reborn into the world of the living. He appears to me to have returned to the earth in order to gain or perhaps test some form of knowledge not yet completely achieved or assimilated. If read in the mythologically rich manner we have been reading the story, the story appears to provoke this question within its readers: what lesson has Valerius still to learn?

One thing that Valerius is quite explicit about is his "bitter disdain" for what he calls, in the first instance, "Italians" (Collected Tales: 333). In examining this aspect of the story, Anastski focuses on Valerius's alienation from the modern world within which he finds himself. She states: "His suffering is clearly the direct consequence of his experiencing a lack

of familiarity and – most importantly – continuity" (30). It is not sufficient, however, to figure a singular referent (ancient Rome) as the cause of this lack of continuity in Valerius's relation to the world. What is not registered in Anastaski's reading, but which is crucial for any real understanding of the political implications of the story, is that "Rome" is for Valerius itself a divided and contested referent. He makes this very clear early on in his narration. He states: "when the republic died, every antient Roman family became by degrees extinct and … their followers might usurp the name, but were not and are not Romans" (Collected Tales: 333). Valerius's discontinuity is not simply in finding himself in the modern world of "Italians," it is even more deeply contained in the fact that the ancient, ruined Rome he is now guided round bespeaks in part an Imperialism which for him is a betrayal of the Republican values to which he still holds. It is Imperial Rome as much as Catholic Rome that alienates Valerius, the Republican *revenant*.

The bewildering historical discontinuities experienced by Valerius are symbolically captured for him within the Coliseum, at once the great symbol of Imperialism and yet also of the aesthetic and civic dream of Roman perfectibilism. Deciding never to quit its walls, Valerius achieves a kind of panoramic vision of Rome:

> From its height, I beheld Rome sleeping under the cold rays of the moon: the dome of St Peter's and the various other domes and spires which make a second city, the inhabitants of men; the arch of Constantine at my feet; the Tiber and the great change in the situation of the city of modern times; all caught my attention, but they only awakened a vague and transitory interest. The Coliseum was to me henceforth the world, my eternal habitation …. in those hallowed precincts, I shall pour forth, before I die, my last awakening call to Romans and to Liberty …. If Rome be dead, I fly from her remains, loathsome as those of human life. It is in the Coliseum alone that I

> recognise the grandeur of my country – that is the only worthy asylum for an antient Roman (Collected Tales: 336).

Describing his time, the first century BC aftermath of Sulla's dictatorship and the rise of Julius Caesar, he speaks of how he believed "the sacred flame" of Republican Liberty was reigniting in "the souls of Camillus and Fabricius," along with "Cicero, Cato, and Lucullus." He adds, with huge irony given historical hindsight: "the younger men, the sons of my friends, Brutus, Cassius, were rising with the promise of equal virtue," before concluding:

> When I died, I was possessed by the strong persuasion that, since philosophy and letters were now joined to a virtue unparalleled upon earth, Rome was approaching that perfection from which there was no fall; and that, although men still feared, it was a wholesome fear which awoke them to action and the better secured the triumph of Good (Collected Tales: 336).

What history has subsequently shown Valerius has robbed him of this hope in perfectibility, and left him mourning a Roman Republican spirit which seems irreparably locked in the past. He agrees to go to England with Lord Harley in order to assess "if, after the great fluctuation in human affairs, man is nearer perfection than in my days" (Collected Tales: 339), however, everything Valerius says seems to imply that he has lost faith in that possibility. Isabel Harley, the woman in whom he finds his one consolation, has said to him: "You shall teach me to know all that was great and worthy in your days, and I will teach you the manners and customs of ours" (Collected Tales: 338). The last we see of Valerius, however, is on the night before he is to depart Rome and Italy for England. The narrator's description appears to leave the issue of his melancholy over the lost Roman ideal very much open to question and unavailable for any serious resolution:

> The brilliant spectacle of sunset and the soft light of the moon invited to reverie and forbade words to disturb the magic of the scene. The old Roman perhaps thought of the days he had formerly spent at Baiae, when the eternal sun had set as it now did, and he lived in other days with other men. (Collected Tales: 339)

The question of whether Valerius can ever learn to identify with the modern world he now finds himself in is connected very clearly in the story with the question of whether he can ever come to believe that the possibility of social and cultural "perfection" is still open, still alive. Valerius's discontinuity with the modern world is a psychological problem Shelley adroitedly attaches to the political and philosophical question of the fate and thus the future of Republicanism.[x] That this open question about Valerius's ability ever to understand the persistence (at least *in potentia*) of the spirit of Republicanism connects "Valerius" up to that Godwinian hermeneutical model Rajan has glossed in terms of the Romantic *supplement of reading*. The question is not resolved, since it is designed to resound within Shelley's readers. The passage I have just quoted must, therefore, been the authentic ending of the text. The fragment which follows in Robinson's edition should not, therefore, be considered as a continuation of the story but rather as an unassimilated fragment from it.

There are very similar, structurally related moments in the last chapter of *The Last Man*, moments of vision, within and around the Coliseum, which can help us understand better the not inconsiderable historical and politico-philosophical complexities being staged in "Valerius: the Reanimated Roman." Alone in Rome and on the earth, Lionel Verney, sits in the Forum, by the Coliseum, and describes a moment of imaginative repopulation:

> I strove, I resolved, to force myself to see the Plebeian multitude and lofty Patrician forms congregated around; and, as a Diorama of ages passed across my subdued fancy, they were replaced by the modern Roman; the Pope, in his white stole,

> distributing benedictions to the kneeling worshippers; the friar in his cowl; the dark-eyed girl, veiled by her mezzera …. (Last Man: 58)

The repopulating, diorama of a vision can only last so long, however, and Verney then describes how the scene collapses before the stark, depopulated reality before him:

> I roused myself – I cast off my waking dreams; and I, who just now could almost hear the shouts of the Roman throng, and was hustled by countless multitudes, now beheld the desart ruins of Rome sleeping under its own blue sky; the shadows lay tranquilly on the ground; sheep were grazing untended on the Palatine, and a buffalo stalked down the Sacred Way that led to the Capitol. I was alone in the Forum; alone in Rome; alone in the world. (Last Man: 359)

The scene ends, significantly, with what is perhaps the most important of the chapter's many pyramid images:

> The generations I had conjured up to my fancy, contrasted more strongly with the end of all – the single point in which, as a pyramid, the mighty fabric of society had ended, while I, on the giddy height, saw vacant space around me. (Last Man: 359)

As I have argued elsewhere, the pyramid is a perfect symbol for the tragic historical narrative presented by Lionel Verney, a narrative which begins with a populated world and ends with the last man, the single point of an extinguished human race.[xi] Standing on the top of the pyramid of human history, however, Verney, as its narrator, can see both its end and its beginning, its base and its apex. The pyramid image here, as throughout the novel, is in fact not one of tragic one-way entropic annihilation, but rather one of reversibility. Just as Verney in his imagination can repopulate the Forum and the Coliseum, so his narrative has demonstrated the reversible power contained in all writing and all narrative.

It is my contention, presented in the spirit of an addition to Anastaski's reading of "Valerius," that the lesson Mary Shelley's reanimated Roman must learn is that the spirit of Republican Roman can be reanimated, that an apparent historical decline of that spirit can be reversed. In a much larger work than this I might argue that Rome itself came to represent the possibility of historical and imaginative reversibility for both Mary and Percy Shelley. The proof of this interpretive argument, if we can call it that, lies in the fragment which accompanies the manuscript of "Valerius," not as Anastaski suggests in any intended way, but simply as an adjacent, related, yet to be incorporated text. This fragment text gives us the perspective of Isabell Harley, Valerius's would-be teacher. Isabel's lesson is overwhelmingly that of historical and political reversibility.

Isabell Harley's fragment text (Collected Tales: 339-44) returns us to the moment in which Valerius gives up the Coliseum. She talks about the need to reconnect him in some way to the world around him and her attempts to produce this. She gets straight down to the point, in fact, directly addressing Valerius's regret that Empire replaced Republican Rome: "You were happy in dying before the fall of your country and in not witnessing its degradation under the Emperors" (Collected Tales: 340). She argues that looking at the ruins of Imperial Rome she can still discover within them the persistence of the Republican spirit:

> When I visit the Coliseum, I do not think of Vespasian who built it or of the blood of gladiators and beasts which contaminated it, but I worship the spirit of antient Rome and of those noble heroes, who delivered their country from barbarians and who have enlightened the whole world by their miraculous virtue. I have heard you express a dislike of viewing the works of the oppressors of Rome, but visit them with me in this spirit, and you will find them strike you with that awe and reverence which power, acquired and accompanied by vice, can never give. (Collected Tales: 340)

For Isabell, Rome's Imperial ruins are reversible, the viewer has the choice to see in them either the terrors and the violence of the Empire or the resilient spirit of the Republic. The decisive power is in the mind of the modern viewer.

Isabell take Valerius to a vantage-point from which they can view Rome and all he can see is destruction (Collected Tales: 341). Isabell's response is again to mix destruction with immortal beauty, decay with the persistence of Republican spirit. She says: "It seems to me that if I were overtaken by the greatest misfortunes, I should be half consoled by the recollection of having dwelt in Rome" (Collected Tales: 342). She takes him to the Patheon at night, describing it as a temple "to all the gods" built shortly after his death. Valerius is inspired by the beauty and wholeness of the temple, but this positive response is shattered on the sight of a Christian cross:

> The cross told him of change so great, so intolerable, that that one circumstance destroyed all that had arisen of love and pleasure in his heart. I tried in vain to bring him back to the deep feeling of beauty and of sacred awe with which he had been lately inspired. The spell was snapped. The moon-enlightened dome, the glittering pavement, the dim rows of lovely columns, the deep sky had lost to him their holiness. He hastened to quit the temple. (Collected Tales: 343)

Valerius is someone who cannot resist the idea of history as a destructive force eradicating all value; for him, everything of worth in the past is dead to the present.

Isabell takes Valerius to the Baths of Caracalla and to the Protestant Cemetery, which is described in terms which, if the story was composed in 1819, anticipate the poetic description of the same spot in P. B. Shelley's *Adonais* (Collected Tales: 343). It is here, "at the foot of the tomb of Cestius, that lovely spot where death appears to enjoy sunshine and the blue depth of the deep sky from which it is every where else shut out," that Isabell

describes Valerius as a ghost or *revenant*. Valerius belongs to the dead, he cannot find a connection to the modern world, Isabell's lesson of reversibility, of the persistence of hope in the face of historical destruction, is something he cannot assimilate:

> Did Valerius sympathize with me? Alas! no. There as a melancholy tint cast over all his thoughts; there was a sadness of demeanour, which the sun of Rome and the verses of Virgil could not dissipate. He felt deeply, but little joy mingled with his sentiments. With my other feelings towards him, I had joined to them an inexplicable one that my companion was not a being of the earth. I often paused anxiously to know whether he respired the air, as I did, or if his form cast a shadow at his feet. His semblance was that of life, yet he belonged to the dead. (Collected Tales: 343)

Reversibility, a vision of history which sees the possibility for rebirth alongside that of decay and destruction, and which retains a hope in a Republicanism which may seem dead and gone to the unimaginative eye, is unsuccessfully offered to Valerius, but clearly can still be recognised and adopted by the reader. There is a clear political and historical point to this short story, one which links it to a number of Mary Shelley's most important texts, including her 1823 novel concerning the fate of Florentine Republicanism, *Valperga*. Mary Shelley's short stories can, when read with care, appear closer to the tradition of the Godwinian novel than has until recently been suspected. Mary Shelley's own struggle to achieve such a positive vision of history can perhaps be registered in everything she wrote from 1819 onwards.

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[i] See Graham Allen, "Beyond Biographism": 170-84 and *Mary Shelley* London: Palgrave, 2008.

[ii] Betty T. Bennett, "Introduction" in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 1: pp.xiii-lxxiv (p.xlix).

[iii] For a recent attempt to honour such complexities see Julia A. Carlson's *England's First Family of Writers*.

[iv] Elena Anastaski, "The Trials and Tribulations of the *revenants*": pp.26-46. There are significant ways in which Anastaski's approach could be related to the ground-breaking work of Tilottama Rajan in texts such as *The Supplement of Reading* and "Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*".

[v] Claire Raymond, "Response to Alena Anastaski's 'The Trials and Tribulations of the *revenants"*": 257.

[vi] These stories are contained within Charles E. Robinson, ed. *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories*: 332-44, 43-50, 219-30.

[vii] Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*: 5.

[viii] The Shelleys had actually visited the Bay of Baiæ (nowadays the Bay of Naples) and Avernus on 8th December 1818.

[ix] Mary Shelley "The Fields of Fancy," *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 2: 353.

[x] For Mary Shelley's Republicanism see Betty T. Bennett, 'The Political Philosophy of Mary Shelley's Historical Novels"; Betty T. Bennett, *Mary Shelley: An Introduction*; Michael Rossington, 'Future Uncertain".

[xi] See Allen *Mary Shelley:* 90-116.