Commerce Unbound: 
A Modern Promethean Story

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I claim in what follows that neither left nor right, neither the Department of English nor the country club—nor the center, eyeless in Starbucks, uneasily ruminating on morsels taken from both sides—is seeing bourgeois life whole.

~Deirdre N. McCloskey, The Bourgeois Virtues

Preface

Like the Greek tragic writers before him, the Romantic poet Percy Shelley unbinds his version of the Promethean myth from the common interpretation of his ancient predecessors. With no interest in the “supposed” reconciliation of Jupiter and Prometheus in the second play of Aeschylus’ trilogy, Shelley argues that the “moral interest of the fable” would be “annihilated” if Prometheus were to shrink before the great oppressor of humankind (Shelley, Percy “Preface” 80-81). For Shelley, “Prometheus is, as it were, the highest type of perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends” (81). If that sounds idealized, that’s because it unabashedly is. As Northrup Frye explains in his study of Romanticism, “The arts illustrate the form of the world that man is trying to create out of the world he is in” (125). Frye argues that the Romantics have a strong “moral force” in

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their work, an attempt to express an ideal. “Everybody needs a sense of reality about the world out there,” he says, “but, for the Romantics, everybody also needs some kind of vision for a better world that man can create” (126). Mary Shelley explains further in her notes to *Prometheus Unbound*: “More popular poets clothe the ideal with familiar and sensible imagery. Shelley loved to idealize the real—to gift the mechanism of the material universe with a soul and a voice, and to bestow such also on the most delicate and abstract emotions and thoughts of the mind” (421). In Shelley’s version, Prometheus is the “Champion” of humankind, the idealization of real human beings, a soul and a voice for an imperfect race.

We presume to exercise a similar discretion in being unbound as we lead a contemporary audience back to Shelley’s 19th century Romantic drama; for the questions—to what? to whom? for what? by whom are we bound?—persist. And what freedoms, what possibilities, abound for humankind if we are, indeed, unbound? What is the moral interest of the Promethean story in the 21st century? Modern readers may take the word *commerce* in our title to mean what the Oxford English Dictionary defines in sense (1a) as “buying and selling together; trading; exchange of merchandise.” We certainly mean that, and all of what that entails. But we also mean it equally in the less familiar, distinctly uncommercial, social sense of definition (2a): “intercourse in the affairs of life.”

By the second definition, humans have always lived in a Condition of Commerce. A defining characteristic of all primates is that we live together in social groups and take pleasure in being in each other’s company. Kith and kin are a primary affair of human life. Early in the 1800’s, though, a New Age of Commerce—one marked by an exponential growth of commerce (1a)—emerged in conjunction with the original Condition of Commerce. Prior to the 19th century, the average person lived on the modern equivalent of less than $3/day (McCloskey 2010, 1). Beginning in London and spreading throughout England and then Continental Europe, world GDP per capita began to increase slowly at first and then exponentially, such that the average person on the planet now lives on almost ten times the historical average (McCloskey 2010, 1). Many are surprised when they hear that the average Botswanan today consumes more goods and services than the average Finn in 1955 (Ridley 15), or that the average Indian has a longer life expectancy today than the average Scot in 1945 (Deaton 101). And yet, despite living on an average $120/day (or over four times the world average), many Americans on both the left and the right, including U.S. Senators who live on at least $476/day, feel oppressed in the New Age of Commerce. For those on
the left, it is the Jupiter of commerce (1a), more commonly known by the un-
fortunate epithet “Capitalism,” that binds their commerce (2a), and for those on
the right, it is the Jupiter of Government—with a capital “G”—that binds their
commerce (1a). And both are fuming at their oppression.

A candid word is due to the degree in which a particular contemporary schol-
ar suffuses our essay, for she has been a topic of censure in prior work. Deirdre
McCloskey’s trilogy on “The Bourgeois Era” is unfashionable and contrarian, and
she’s not shy to tell anyone and everyone—left, right, and center—in uncom-
promising terms that what they think about economics and the modern world is
wrong (McCloskey 2006, 2010, 2016). Well, “wrong” is how we read it in our
heads. In each of the three volumes she actually asks us to politely “consider” that
we “might be mistaken.” But it’s easy for nearly everyone to forget the difference
after being told:

Anyone who after the twentieth century still thinks that
thoroughgoing socialism, nationalism, imperialism, mobiliza-
tion, central planning, regulation, zoning, price controls, tax
policy, labor unions, business cartels, government spending, in-
trusive policing, adventurism in foreign policy, faith in entan-
gling religion and politics, or most of the other thoroughgoing
nineteenth-century proposals for governmental action are still
neat, harmless ideas for improving our lives is not paying atten-

Economists, reviewers of our prior work in particular, often take issue with
her “iconoclastic,” “dogmatic,” and “sloppy rhetoric” of what she calls Max U,
the self-interested person who maximizes his or her own utility.4 Or as another
reviewer puts it, “anyone that quotes McCloskey (2006) as anything less than
muddled and embarrassing is not really opening the covers of the book.”5 We
have indeed read the books, two of them several times in courses, and wethinks
thou dost anonymously protest too much. McCloskey’s project is to overturn the
century-and-a-half assumption that economics and ethics are two distinct disci-
plines and never the twain shall meet. That’s not going to come about without a
little resistance, but that precisely is the project with which we are engaging. Mc-
Closkey argues that not only do we make prudent, Max U decisions in commerce,

4 Publisher correspondence to Wilson dated August 3, 2016.
but we also practice in both types, OED (1a) and (2a), the virtues of faith, hope, love, courage, justice, and temperance. But the greatest of these is love.

Permit us the opportunity to acknowledge that we are experimenting with integrating economics and ethics in a form that could be described as literary-critical economic nonfiction. Orthodoxy for the sake of orthodoxy is our aversion. We map our economic subject matter into an interpretation of Prometheus Unbound to revivify commerce as Shelley revivifies the Promethean story in his lyrical drama. In doing so we make Shelley’s purpose our own, “to familiarize” our readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness. (85)

This entails choosing subject matter, unrepentantly, from the world as we see it, as we comprehend it, but with verifiable and recognizable features. For our own part, we would rather be damned with McCloskey, than go to heaven with reviewers cloaked in robes of anonymity. With the fallen world lay spread before us, we now set out to explore where Shelley’s idealisms take us.

An Interpretation

In Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound we meet our hero bound for three thousand years to the cliff of the Indian Caucasus. Here, in the opening of the first act, Shelley makes clear that he is breaking with the Aeschylean trilogy, for even the setting has been changed, moved from the European to the Indian Caucasus, the birthplace of humankind. Humans are living as “slaves” (Shelley, I, 5) with “fear and self-contempt and barren hope” (I, 8). Yet Prometheus (the Titan who inhabited Earth before humans) does not “share the shame” (I, 18-19) of Jupiter’s tyranny. He hangs on the rock punished for checking “The falsehood and the force of him who reigns/Supreme” (I, 127-128). Jupiter punished Prometheus for giving gifts to mortals, gifts far beyond the fire of the gods: intelligence and reason, speech, memory, medicine, divination: “All useful arts on earth spring from Prometheus!” (Aeschylus, 51) or as added in Shelley’s telling, “He gave man speech, and speech created thought/Which is the measure of the universe” (II, iv, 72-73).

Shelley’s version of the myth makes clear the agreement Prometheus made to help Jupiter overthrow Saturn, the god who refused humans their birthright:

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6 With thanks to Lilian Steichen in her 1904 study of Prometheus Unbound.
The birthright of their being, knowledge, power,
The skill which wields the elements, the thought
Which pierces this dim universe like light,
Self-empire, and the majesty of love. (Shelley, II, iv, 39-42)

Shelley’s Prometheus also gave “wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter” (II, iv, 44), helping him defeat Saturn with one stipulation, “Let man be free” (II, iv, 45). But the stipulation is not met. Jupiter breaks the deal, depriving humanity of liberty and binding Prometheus, representative of humanity, to the rock of humankind’s very birthplace.7

Jupiter remains the tyrant of Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound, “wreck[ing] his utmost hate” on Prometheus, “Loosing all his stores of wrath” (Aeschylus, 77). But while the stipulation looms over the opening of Shelley’s play, Jupiter and Prometheus are connected beyond the broken agreement. This “Monarch of Gods,” this Jupiter who did not let humankind be free, still rules all but Prometheus, all “But One.” Shelley connects the tyrant and the bound Prometheus in hate: both behold the world with “sleepless eyes” (Shelley I, 1-4); Jupiter, a tyrant, ruling humans through fear and lack of hope, and Prometheus, “eyeless in hate” (I, 9), ruling over “torture and solitude/Scorn and despair” (I, 14-15).

While Jupiter needs Prometheus because he alone knows, “a secret. . . /Which may transfer the scepter of wide Heaven,/The fear of which perplexes the Supreme”; Prometheus is filled with hatred for Jupiter’s betrayal of humanity (I, 371-374). He has endured the torture; he has refused to bend his will to Jupiter’s; and he has refused to divulge the secret, the prophecy. But he is bound to the tyrant as clearly as to the rock. In defying the tyrant, he perpetuates his pain but also Jupiter’s power. His defiance, his enduring pain is evidence of “No change, no pause, no hope!” (I, 24). In Shelley’s drama, humankind, represented by Prometheus, empowers a hateful god with its own hate, resulting in no change, no pause, no hope.8 A vulture tears at Prometheus’ heart, as opposed to his liver in Aeschylus’ version. In Shelley’s Romantic sensibility, humans without heart, without love, cannot imagine a world beyond the order of the tyrant.

With a malignant spirit, endurance is all. Prometheus must endure “pain, pain ever, for ever” (I, 24). Yet as he endures for three thousand years, Prometheus

7 As Northrop Frye suggests, “liberty, for Shelley, is what man wants and what the gods he invents. . . oppose his getting” (14).
8 “[Hum]ankind is treated as a single gigantic individual, which Prometheus represents” (Frye 1968, 38).
can greet his morning with the knowledge of the prophecy, that at one hour Ju-
piter will fall. From his misery, Prometheus has become wise and in that wisdom,  
“The curse/Once breathed on thee I would recall” (I, 58-59).

It seems, though, that Prometheus does not recall the curse in either sense of the word: to remember—“What was the curse?” (I, 73); “How cursed I him” (I, 137); “Were these my words?” (I, 300)—or to withdraw—telling Mercury, Jupiter’s messenger, “Enduring thus, the retributive hour/Which since we spake is even nearer now” (I, 405-407). Although Prometheus wishes “no living thing to suffer pain” (I, 305), he does not recall the part of the curse where Jupiter will “fall through boundless space and time” (I, 301). The prophecy will hold though Prometheus says he is “changed so that aught evil wish/Is dead within” (I, 70-71). He calls upon Mother Earth to remember who he is to have the spirits repeat the curse. But the spirits fear the tyrant and dare not speak. Earth tells Prometheus he will have to call upon the spirits of the underworld, even Jupiter’s own Phan-
tasm. The Phantasm of Jupiter recalls his curse for him:

Fiend, I defy thee! With a calm, fixed mind.  
All that thou canst inflict I bid thee do;  
Foul Tyrant both of Gods and Humankind,  
One only being shalt thou not subdue  
. . . Thou art omnipotent  
O’er all things but thyself I gave thee power,  
And my own will. . .  
Let thy malignant spirit move  
In darkness over those I love:  
On me and mine I imprecate  
The utmost torture of thy hate;  
. . . I curse thee! . . .  
Though now thou sittest, let the hour  
Come, when thou must appear to be  
That which thou art internally;  
And after many a false and fruitless crime  
Scorn track thy lagging fall through boundless space  

To learn the secret, Jupiter sends Mercury and the Furies “to execute a doom of new revenge” upon Prometheus (I, 355). Mercury stays the Furies to praise Prometheus but still calls his stand against Jupiter vain because Jupiter is omnip-
otent. Although Prometheus claims that he now pities Jupiter, that he “hate[s] no more,” he is still bitter and vengeful (I, 57). When the Furies are unleashed to escalate his mental torture, Prometheus cries, “While I behold such execrable shapes,/Methinks I grow like what I contemplate,” for he knows hate is their element (I, 449-450, 477). Even as he denies hate, he contemplates hate.9

The Furies attempt to bring Prometheus to despair by showing him the human condition, “famine-wasted” and “blood untasted” “where blood with gold is bought and sold” (I, 528-529, 531). When the Furies “Tear the veil!” revealing visions of human suffering, Prometheus is anguished, for the love he felt for humanity, his desire to awaken humans to consciousness, to freedom, has led to a new kind of misery (I, 537). Although people are calling for “Truth, liberty, and love!” (I, 651),10 they become tyrannical, fighting against the tyrant rather than tyranny, becoming that which they despise:11

Suddenly fierce confusion fell from heaven
Among them: there was strife, deceit, and fear:
Tyrants rushed in, and did divide the spoil.
This was the shadow of the truth I saw. (I, 652-655)

Even though there are some who “want love; . . . all best things are thus confused to ill” (I, 627-628).

In spite of his anguish at the suffering of humankind, Prometheus cries out to Jupiter, “The sights with which thou torturest gird my soul/with new endurance” (I, 643-644). The Furies showing him the woes of humanity has not compelled Prometheus to reconcile with Jupiter, to reveal the secret of the tyrant’s downfall. Prometheus will remain bound, but he will continue to control his destiny: “Yet am I king over myself” (I, 491).12

Were Prometheus to reveal the secret, it would be the “death-seal of mankind’s captivity,” for Jupiter would reign for eternity, humans destined to live where “the future is dark,” Jupiter’s “malignant spirit” ruling over those Prometheus loves (I, 397, 562, 276-278). Prometheus does not yet realize that Jupiter is ruling over humankind because they, and he, have internalized the malignant spirit of the tyrant.

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9  “Hatred narrows and distorts the soul by restricting perception” (Cantor 1985, 82).
10  An allusion to the French Revolution’s Liberté, égalité, fraternité.
11  “Methinks I grow like what I contemplate” (Shelley I, 450).
12  “[J]ust as man invents the wheel and then talks about a wheel of fate or fortune overriding everything he does, so he creates gods and then announces that the gods have created him. He makes his own creation, in short, a power to stop himself from creating” (Frye 1968, 88).
To ease Prometheus’ suffering after encountering the Furies, Mother Earth calls upon the Spirits to comfort him. While the Furies only show Prometheus the suffering and the corruption of humankind, the Spirits provide a complete view of humanity, a humanity “heaven oppressed,” to be sure, but a humanity whose thoughts “sicken not” (I, 674-675). Love still pervades humankind: a sailor sacrifices himself to give a drowning enemy his plank, a sage dreams of inspired wisdom written long ago, and a solitary poet finds love in the tender kisses of nature.

And only here, at the end of Act I, does Prometheus invoke hope in the form of love: “I feel/Most vain all hope but love” (807-808). In embracing love, Prometheus can transcend the bondage: “There is no agony, and no solace left;/Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more” (819-820). Prometheus, through love, is willed to “Be what it is my destiny to be,/The savior and the strength of suffering man” (815-817). He calls upon Asia and her “transforming presence,” for “all hope was vain but love” (824). The solution to the degradation of humankind is a correspondence and community with others, a solidarity with one another that is love, but one that nevertheless importantly “begins and ends in thee” (707).

Shelley's second act furthers the Promethean call for love. The transformation for humankind is not complete, for the tyrant reigns even though Prometheus has transcended torment. Panthea sets out to bring Asia’s transforming presence to mingle with the transcendent Prometheus, a commerce uniting those in exile. Like Prometheus in the first act, Asia thinks it is Jupiter who reigns and that “curses shall drag him down” (II, iv, 30). She is looking for something outside humankind to explain humanity’s destiny. In recounting the story of Prometheus, she recalls Prometheus’ stipulation to “Let man be free” (II, iv, 45). Asia calls upon the Demogorgon to declare who rules the ruler: “Declare/Who is his master?” (II, iv, 109). In Demogorgon’s response, “All spirits are enslaved which serve things evil,” Asia begins to realize that even the master is enslaved if bound by hate and that “Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change,” are all subject to he who reigns (II, iv, 110, 119). Asia furthers begins to realize that it is Love that doesn’t change, that she—not a god, not an external order—must be the medium, that “Each to itself must be the oracle” (II, iv, 123). Only “sympathy,” common as “light” can set the spirit free. Asia’s heart gives the response she wanted from the Demogorgon. It is only in “Realms where the air we breathe is love” where humankind can be free (II, v, 95).

In Act III, the stage is set for the prophecy to come true, for the tyrant to
fall. Both Prometheus and Asia have come to realize that the tyrants’ power come
from their own internalization of his malignant spirit. Now the Demogorgon
can confront Jupiter on his Throne, the tyrant thinking that humans still “burn
toward heaven with fierce reproach, and doubt,” their faith in the god creating
their fear (III, i, 5-6). When this is not the case, these abstractions will “dwell
together/Henceforth in darkness” (III, i, 54-55). Humans, “with the low voice of
love, almost unheard” are “now free” (III, iii, 45, 48). Of course, Prometheus,
representative of humanity, is unbound as well, Hercules releasing him from the
rock. Asia and Prometheus are together again where they can “sit and talk of time
and change” in a cave illuminated by “love, which is as fire” (III, iii, 23, 151). For
humanity, there is liberty:

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself . . . . (III, iv, 193–197)

The play ends with the chorus of spirits and hours, the chorus “from the
mind/Of human kind” which had been blind is now a chorus of unity, a chorus
of human love “Which makes all it gazes on Paradise” (IV, 93, 127). The spirits
rejoice in building a “world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield,” a world where
humanity is unbound, not by hate, not by an unyielding will against the tyrant,
but, rather, unbound by transcending tyranny itself, unbound through love:

We will take our plan
From the new world of man,
And our work shall be called Promethean. (IV, 156 – 158)

It is this Promethean work that is a unity of thought and love: “a chain of
linked thought,/Of love and might to be divided not” (IV, 394-395). No longer
can the tyrant control humanity, for its very nature is its own divine control:
“Man, one harmonious soul of many a soul/Whose nature is its own divine con-
trol,/Where all things flow to all, a rivers to the sea” (IV, 400–402).

A Regeneration

Shelley’s lyrical drama, we claim, has something to say for all readers—left,
right, and center—as we think about commerce in the modern world. McClos-
key (2006) argues that without the virtues, including transcendent love, neither
the market nor the government works for our good. To this we add from Shelley,
that nor with hate will the market or the government ever change, pause, and
hope to do good. For out of a fuming hatred toward either, a new tyrant will rush in amidst the strife, deceit, and fear.

Consider the new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) created in 2010 in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-08 (speaking of strife, deceit, and fear). The CFPB is responsible for regulating consumer protection in the financial sector, including banks, payday lenders, debt collectors, and mortgage servicing operations. Unlike other independent agencies, like the Federal Trade Commission or the Securities and Exchange Commission, the CFPB has no board members, directors, or commissioners to check the head of the bureau, and can spend its money with no oversight from Congress, the President, or the Federal Reserve from whom it receives its budget. Moreover, the Director of the CFPB can only be removed for cause, and only by the President. In response to the widespread fraudulent representation of mortgage-backed securities that led to the Great Recession, a distinct disdain for Wall Street led Congress to create a new independent agency with a head that has the most unchecked power in the federal regulatory apparatus.

Or consider, the numerous calls in 2016 to deport 11 million undocumented immigrants in response to “a government failure to protect the border.” What kind of inhumane, unchecked power in the name of enforcing the law would actually be required to find and physically remove 11 million people against their will? What kind of human and economic repercussions would such an order entail? What kind of commerce in both senses of the word would be bound? In the history of humanity, millions upon millions have never forcefully migrated without pain, suffering, and a trail of tears.

Like Prometheus, we can be woefully unaware of how hate and despair permeate thoughts on our own Jupiters of commerce. Pick your topic—raising the minimum wage, health insurance coverage, payday lending, prescription drug pricing, education financing—and below the surface you will see the elements with which Shelley shapes his story. He first portrays Jupiter as sublimely omnipotent and any bound resistance to him as vain. Because the life of someone who lives on the minimum wage is not a good one, the story of the left evokes the looming tyrant of a megacorporation, say Walmart, strong with bargaining power and flush with cash, who can bend vendors to its demands and drive competitors out of business. For many, Walmart is omnipotent. It can do what it wants, which is to pay poor people poorly and inflict misery on local mom and pop stores. The name of the god Walmart cannot be uttered without a tinge of
hate below the surface. And while there are many companies, both large and small, that do what Walmart does—pay their employees the minimum wage and deliver a product or service better and cheaper than a competitor who ultimately doesn’t survive—Walmart is the god of choice for censure on deplorably low wages. Why? Because the name itself is Jovian and we can hate it.

Or when health care costs increase by 6.5% and health insurance premiums increase by an average of 25% per year but as much as 150%, many on the right direct curses toward the ill tyranny of Obamacare. For many, the Affordable Care Act is the all-prevailing foe. With the force of law the country has been shackled to purchase health insurance each year, or suffer a penalty torn from the heart of our annual income. In canvassing for our support, Jupiter promised, “If you like your health care plan, you’ll be able to keep your health care plan. Period.” But after the overthrow of our Saturnic health care system, he did not live up to his end of deal. To that, critics decry:

“Obamacare, we defy thee! Ay, do thy worst. 
Bring on thy deliberative panels
To blast the dying, from yon government tower.
We curse thee; till thine omnipotent exchanges
Death spiral into a crown of pain.”

If these words of hate sound a bit strong, they are. But, boy, are curses fun to wield and to heap upon those whom we think have oppressed us. We thrive on censure, condemnation, and scorn; it feels good to blame and denounce Jupiter. But the bitter truth we must face is that our righteous and lefteous fury, fueled by visions of hardships and suffering, is rarely the complete picture. And moreover, such fury tempts the champion in us to despair, which only further feeds the growing disdain within our breast and tightens the blinders around our field of vision.

McCloskey’s project and ours is to show modern bourgeois life whole, and Shelley’s point and ours is that any socio-economic revolution, whether from the left or the right, will ultimately fail, like the French Revolution ultimately failed, if it is fomented by despair, anger, and hate. To see modern life whole, we politely ask you to consider that “modern capitalist life [may indeed be] love-saturated” and that our work for socio-economic change, if it is to ultimately succeed in human flourishing, must be rooted in a love that begins and ends in thee (McCloskey 2006, 138). If there is but one takeaway from this essay, it is that we wish our readers to be more attuned to the self-imposed pessimism that binds modern discourse in the New Age of Commerce, for “beyond our eyes,/The human love
lies/Which makes all it gazes on Paradise” (IV, 126-129).

How many modern cries for revolution, for social change, begin with an honest and frank assessment of the “trust, good humor, neighborliness, respectfulness, cooperativeness, [and] decent intentions” that pervade “our daily lives” of commerce (McCloskey 2006, 127)? None. And yet our daily commerce (1a) is filled with an uncountable kindnesses. Recall your activities for the past week. How many times did you entrust your wellbeing to a stranger? Every time you encountered one at the department store, grocery store, coffee shop, restaurant, discount retailer, gas station, airport check-in, Uber pickup, hotel, movie theatre, sporting event, concert, art museum, etc., etc. How many times did you thank and exchange a smile and pleasantries with a customer, clerk, client, barista, server, associate, attendant, driver, or concierge? If the answer is you didn’t or can’t remember ever doing so, it’s time to unbind yourself. They did something good for you, and you them. And while it may only have been a moment of solidarity, it was a genuine moment of fellow feeling among strangers, whether either or both of you thought so. If all you saw was the fulfillment of your own interest, you missed the beautiful sense of joint interest that made the moment possible in the first place.

We expect and assume that those who serve us and those whom we serve in
our daily transactions will deliver the grande, half-caff, Ethiopian medium roast, room-for-milk, drip coffee as we ordered it. We expect and assume that the Clorox Green Works laundry detergent that we buy at Walmart, no, at the slightly-less Jovian Target, will in fact be 99% biodegradable, to say nothing of it being laundry detergent and not a container of dirt. Modern capitalist life is a beautiful system in which we expect and assume uncountable strangers to participate in mutually satisfactory exchange with uncountable interests in mind. It may not be physical _eros_, or charitable _agape_, or even friendly _philia_, but our daily commerce (1a) is a form of love that nonetheless saturates our lives. If you are not convinced that such commerce is beautiful, nor that you expect nor assume that strangers serve your interests, then you might need to explain your indignation when your grande no-foam green tea latte is not a full 16 oz. or when you learn that Volkswagen intentionally programmed its vehicles to evade emissions control detection. We are outraged when strangers do not jointly serve our interests because our minds direct our attention to a novelty in the New Age of Commerce, the novelty being that a person personally unknown to us has disappointed, deceived, or defrauded us.

Our favorite politicians and cable news hosts rely on the same novelty to
effect socio-economic change. Because so many of our own immediate experiences and life-histories do not include struggling to make ends meet, we take notice of reports that CEOs on their corporate thrones earn 950 times what they pay their minimum wage employees. “Walmart, I curse thee! How dare you oppress your workers? You can afford to pay the $5 billion necessary to pay your one million employees $5/hour more.”13 How do you know what you presume to know? And how much of what you presume to know simply depends on how you feel about Jupiter being unequal, socially classed, and from a different tribe than you? We bind ourselves with a loathsome mask.

By the same token, our favorite politicians and cable news hosts rely on eye-poppingly large numbers for us to take further notice of the increases in health care costs and health insurance premiums that we don’t likewise see in energy, food, vehicles, clothing, and well, almost everything except undergraduate education, for which there is a different favorite politician and cable news host ready to draw our attention. Notice that no critic of Obamacare opens his or her discussion with the number of people who wouldn’t have health insurance but for Obamacare (16.5 million). Why not start by acknowledging the good intentions of the legislation, that all hope is vain but love? It need not be Obamacare itself, but no outside god, no external order is going to help people get health insurance unless we ourselves become the medium for love.

Coda

Like Shelley, we believe that we need some kind of vision for a better world, a world we can create if we are not bound by a malignant spirit.

Our chains not forged in steal,

No winged hound of heaven tearing at our heart.

We, ourselves have enslaved us so.

The hawk of hate gnaws our beating heart.

The Promethean story in the 21st century is a story for the left, right, and center, a story of possibility if we can transcend the divisiveness of our furies, if we can see the world beyond the order of a tyrant.

The Furies of our world fueling our discontent,

From behind their newsroom desks

Illuminating images of our world in disarray,

13 Yes, one million employees.
Where blood with gold is bought and sold.
Each picture divides us further
Every word stoking the fire;
As a web of ropes is yanked from all sides
And no one explores the tension,
We all yank harder.

Can commerce (1a) and (2a) be unbound from hatred from the right and from the left? Can we understand *commerce* in the social sense of the definition, realizing that it includes “buying and selling together; exchange”? Can our Condition of Commerce be one of *exchange*, so beautifully linked to *change*, literally, to change away?\(^{14}\) For how can we change if we remain bound to the rock of recriminations and caustic accusation? With commerce—our social interactions (2a) and our exchanges of goods and services (1a)—human beings live both good lives and lives of goodness.

. . . for the humbled authors
Of this not so humble piece,
The marketplace and daily interaction,
Our Commerce is the instrument of choice;
Love, its tuner, perfecting its sound.
Here is where we find hope unbound.

Disagreements inevitable, conflict unavoidable,
But fellow feeling and virtue omnipresent.
Lead not with curses, but with hearts;
Allow the mind to love and admire,
To trust, hope, and endure.

Shelley’s our agent
Painting us in brighter light.
Not naïve, but hopeful.
Understanding humanity as a process,
And as a goal.

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\(^{14}\) The Greek word for “to exchange,” *katallattein*, at one time also meant “to change from enemy into friend” (Hayek 1976, 108).
Exchange goods and goodness exchange;
Let love be our Hercules,
Our work Promethean.
Oh, could it be, even,
McCloskeyan?

References


