The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconology

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IN the introductory chapter of his famous study, *The Romantic Agony*, "The Beauty of the Medusa," Mario Praz lays the foundations for the entire work that follows--a learned and demonstrative complaint against the radically aberrant quality of much Romantic art. Praz is a compelling critic of his subject, not because his moral judgments are the same as Eliot's (though they are), but because his methodology--to collect and compare the images, themes and motifs which preoccupied Romantic minds--is both unimpeachable and highly suggestive. The genius of his book is in its categories, the chapter headings.

Sympathetic theorizers on things Romantic tend to avoid the uncomfortable revelations of the Italian professor, who constantly records suicidal, sadistic, and otherwise perverted aspects of Romanticism. Even the most respected writers of the period do not escape his severe and meticulous scrutiny. Thus Praz's thesis poses certain fundamental difficulties for most current estimates of the Romantic Revival, which is now commonly regarded in a distinctly less critical light. Since Praz's discussion of the Romantic Medusa epitomizes what he has to say about the movement as a whole, we shall take his own initiating category as the framework for the present analysis. Given the Medusa as a key Romantic iconograph, we must try to understand precisely how and why this should be.

The easiest place to begin is with Praz himself, who opens his discussion of Romanticism with passages from Shelley and Goethe that illustrate his Medusan theme. Romanticism is the fascination with the abominable:

> This glassy-eyed, severed female head, this horrible, fascinating Medusa, was to be the object of the dark loves of the Romantics and the Decadents throughout the whole of the century. [1]

The fact of this statement is quite true; the problem arises in the rhetoric and all those wonderfully contemptuous judgments. Praz complicates the issue by implying that the Medusa is universally a symbol of horror. This is by no means the case. Classical writers, for example, were themselves divided in their opinions about her petrifying powers, most holding that the horror of her looks turned the viewer into stone, but some that her beauty caused the transformation.[2] As Ovid tells us through Perseus, Medusa was originally a famous beauty eagerly pursued by numbers of suitors. Indeed, her beauty was the cause of her sad fate.[3]

Even the attitude of Romantic artists to the Medusa has to be carefully interpreted. In Goethe, Shelley, Pater, and Swinburne we can see Praz's idea best illustrated: Pater finds "the fascination of corruption" in the painting of the Medusa ascribed to Leonardo, Shelley "the tempestuous loveliness of terror." Goethe also picks up this theme when he describes the Rondanini Medusa as "a wonderful work which, expressing the discord between death and life, between pain and pleasure, exerts an inexplicable fascination over us as no other ambiguous figure does."[4] Unlike Praz, however, none of these writers saw anything wicked in their fascination with this representation of equivocal beauty. In a real sense, by preserving the double aspect of the Medusa's appearance, they were keeping alive the equivocal mythology of the ancient figure. In addition, although Romantic

artists were all aware that she was, in some sense, a focus of evil, they generally agreed that she was innocent of the horror she generated, and that their own fascination was with her betrayed power and innocence. Finally, they all respected her power when it was manifested; in it they saw a symbol of cultural, sometimes revolutionary, change.

But if one might call the Medusas of Shelley, Goethe, Pater, and Swinburne "dark loves," other Medusas of the period clearly will not qualify for the title. One of the finest sections of *The Earthly Paradise* finds William Morris not pursuing Medusa as his black art's ideal, but treating her history to a subtle Romantic reinterpretation that is entirely Apollonian. Minerva herself, who initiated our and Medusa's problems by turning the girl's famous golden hair into a swarm of monsters, could not have been more pleased with the morality of Morris' story.

I

But if it is important to realize that the Medusa's beauty is a much more complicated phenomenon than Praz has suggested, we should also see that her various transformations in Romantic and post-Romantic literature make up a set of coherent and interrelated notions about art and its function in the world. Shelley's justly celebrated fragment "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" is probably the best point of departure in an investigation of this sort.

This seminal fragment explains, in a somewhat enigmatic way to be sure, one important reason for the Romantic fascination with the Medusa. Praz might have found the lines somewhat less objectionable had he been aware of the poem's additional stanza, unpublished until recently:[6]

It is a woman's countenance divine
  With everlasting beauty breathing there
Which from a stormy mountain's peak, supine
  Gazes into the night's trembling air.
It is a trunkless head, and on its feature
  Death has met life, but there is life in death,
The blood is frozen--but unconquered Nature
  Seems struggling to the last--without a breath
The fragment of an uncreated creature.

The entire fragment was composed in the autumn of 1819, just when the "Ode to the West Wind" was also written. Fundamentally both poems treat "the tempestuous loveliness of terror" and the intimate connection in nature of death and life. The West Wind of the ode brings death and the chill of winter. Like the Medusa, the wind is a terrifying apparition, implicitly striking fear into the lazy palaces of a summer life. When we read how Shelley compares his wind to a Maenad we can hardly avoid the recollection of the Medusa's similar quality of "tempestuous loveliness":

  there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aery surge,

Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge

Of the horizon to the zeniths height,

The locks of the approaching storm. (18-23)

In one sense, then, both of these poems are about the terrible vigor of "unconquered Nature,"[7] which can bring life out of death, spring out of winter. But neither the Medusa fragment nor the ode is merely a symbolic transcription of natural processes. Both poems are terrible, threatening. The ode is "the trumpet of a prophecy which Shelley uttered on a grand scale in *Prometheus Unbound* : the death of tyranny and the rebirth of freedom. In the autumn of 1819 his thoughts were very much occupied with English political tyranny. The Peterloo Massacre had triggered a series of fiery political prophecies whose relation to both the ode and the Medusa fragment is highlighted by the concluding couplet of his "Sonnet: England in 1819," composed about the same time. For twelve lines the sonnet lists a series of horrible images of political repressions which are ultimately called "graves, from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day."

Shelley's fragment on the Medusa's head is, like the ode, an allegory about the prophetic office of the poet and the humanizing power of poetry. The fragment's evident similarities to other poems with these themes suggest this, of course, but the symbols in the Medusa poem are somewhat enigmatic because the central image is so rare in Shelley. The significance which he attached to this classical myth becomes more clear when we recall certain facts about Medusa's history. Originally a beautiful maiden, she was raped by Neptune in the temple of Minerva. That goddess of culture and society, outraged, transformed Medusa's famous golden hair into a nest of serpents and decreed that anyone looking on her would be turned to stone. Medusa was then banished to an ambiguous place in the west, where Perseus later went to slay her with the help and encouragement of Minerva especially. Perseus gained immortality from Minerva and the other grateful gods for killing the Medusa while she was sleeping.

Now, clearly, for a poet inclined to interpret, in a radical way, certain traditional myths like the fall of the angels and the binding of Prometheus, this story of Medusa was likely to ignite a series of unusual reactions. Shelley would not have been able to see her as anything but a victim of the tyranny and cowardice of established power. Moreover--and again the parallel with the Prometheus myth is evident--certain received facts in the myth of Medusa suggest her association with poetry and the earthly paradise. Some traditions assert that when she was cursed by Minerva she became the guardian of the golden apples of the Hesperides, the fabulous western islands of the earthly paradise. All the legends agree, moreover, that at her death the winged horse Pegasus, traditional symbol of poetic inspiration and energy, sprang forth from her body.

In the seventeenth-century Flemish painting which inspired Shelley and which he (like many others) mistakenly thought the work of Leonardo, the head of the Medusa is inverted and hence the mass of writhing snakes is in the foreground. The eyes, half-closed, gaze upwards, and the head is surrounded by a mist in which can be faintly seen a variety of bats, mice, and other more ambiguous and sinister creatures. Several other bats and toads are clearly delineated, looking at the Gorgon head from the ground or the air. Out of the half-open mouth issues a whitish cloud of breath, the "thrilling vapour" referred to by Shelley.

Before we interpret these details in terms of the mythological background, we should look again at some of Shelley's own interpretative assertions in the poem. This unusual Medusa, as the second stanza tells us, is not murderous but humanizing. The fascination she arouses has been translated into a sympathetic process because she is the symbol of victimization, of a beauty cursed through no fault of her own anywhere evident in the myth, the painting, or the poem. Moreover, she impresses forever upon the sympathetic observer the very essence and source of her dazzling beauty: her image is sculptured on the gazer's soul, which is turned to receptive stone; or, alternatively, the melody of her musical beauty, the painted hues of her exquisitely rendered likeness, both become part of the gazer's now humanized and harmonized life. The stanza asserts, in other words, the transference of the creative power of the imagination from the Medusa to the sympathizing gazer.

The "grace" of the Medusa is her most important source of astonishment. But her "horror" is also important, and not only because at emphasizes her victimization. The second time Medusa's petrifying energies are evoked is in stanza four, where Shelley suggests the imminent destruction of a "ghastly bat" and a "poisonous eft." Such creatures appear elsewhere in Shelley's poetry as symbols of corrupted forms of civilization. This aspect of the Medusan gaze is not a grace or beauty but death and destruction, as the image of the moth and the taper reminds us.[8] In fact, if her gaze is in one sense beneficent, a "preserver," it also represents the complementary destructive aspect of all creative energy. Such a duality in the imagination's function was always a fundamental part of Shelley's thought in both politics and art, and he must have been pleased to find that classical authorities sanctioned a similar view of the Medusa. Apollodorus tells us that she had two blood systems and that the physician Asclepius collected some of each after her death. The one he used to revive the dead, the other to destroy his enemies. What the Medusa does, then, at least in its destructive aspect, is to represent the horror which has been laid upon man and his world as a curse. Prometheus will not curse the tyrant who has put him in chains; to do so would be to perpetuate the initial curse denounced to the world by Jupiter. What the Medusa does is what Prometheus does: present an image of suffering and horror which is the reflex of the cursed heart which has caused that suffering. Swinburne will tell us later that she is another divinity grown diabolic in ages that would not accept her as divine. To Shelley, a corruption has invaded the beauty of the Medusa's original form, but his poem turns her death into an apocalyptic event distinguishing the forces of light and darkness. Her impassive gaze upon heaven is at once a triumphant rebuke of the powers of the air, an image of the undying vitality of "unconquered Nature," and her definitively petrifying and defiant gesture: the gods of death will not survive this stony glance.

Thus the "mailed radiance" and "brazen glare" of the serpents, forces alike "Of all the beauty and the terror there," are meant to suggest the tone of defiance which we see again in the Medusa's full face, and which Shelley explicitly calls to our attention in the additional fragment. Further, the swarm of snakes as well as the Medusa's whole threatening attitude derive their power (are "kindled") from an "inextricable error." Whatever else Shelley may have had in mind,[9] it seems clear enough that this phrase refers to Medusa's original "sin," punished so harshly by Minerva (a powerful if complicated trope, the words suggest a fatal entrapment in snaky coils). All these details Shelley properly subordinates to the central image in the painting: the weird "thrilling vapour" which issues from the Medusa's beautiful dead mouth.

This too is a powerful if complex image, for Shelley clearly wishes to suggest both the soul escaping the body at death and the condensed vapour of breath in cold air. (Shelley sets the head high up on a mountain and specifically refers to its "frozen" blood.) The strange vapour truly mirrors the entire scene since it captures at once a whole set of ambiguities related to cold and warmth, death and life. The vapour is a central image because it suggests that "Death has met life, but there is life in death."

Anne Pippin Burnett has pointed out to me that Shelley's description of the Medusa seems a deliberate recollection of a famous passage in the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, where Prometheus expresses his sympathy for another snaky figure, Typhon, who was confined beneath a mountain after being struck with the thunderbolts of Zeus. Typhon continued to breathe out defiance and resistance. Shelley's description of the head and the vapour it is exhaling particularly recalls lines 372-74. It might also be remarked of Shelley's vapour that he is deliberately making it an analogue for the mirror of Perseus, thus placing *us* in the position of Athena's champion.

In any case, this breath is the equivalent of the "Phantom" in Shelley's political sonnet (quoted above), the Pegasus in the traditional legend, the new life prophesied in the ode. It represents some undying force in the Medusa, an energy which Perseus was able to count on later to slay numbers of his enemies and win his love-ideal, Andromeda. Minerva as well recognized this deathless Medusan force and sought to appropriate it for herself: the aegis of her power, represented on her famous shield, is the Medusa's head. Thus, Shelley's poem aims to suggest that even in death the Medusa turns to stone–attracts or slays with beauty or fear. Shelley's Medusa seeks to terrorize whatever in the observer is still committed to evil and to invigorate in him everything that strives for life.

In either case the aim is sensational, literally, "thrilling." To say this is not to suggest a subordination of didactic purposes to mere nervous titillation. Shelley is always a poet with a severe moral program. The point is that he, like an increasing member of writers since the mid-eighteenth century, had come to glimpse the truth inherent in the aggressive maxim of Antonin Artaud: "In our present state of degeneration, it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter the mind."[10] Shelley, of course, does not refine this method the way Artaud, or many other artists influenced by surrealist ideas, have done. A member of the earlier movement which did much to generate surrealism, the Romantic Shelley yet anticipates Artaud's positions as Mario Praz clearly recognizes when he denounces at length the works and days of Romantic anarchism, sensuality, and anti-rationalism.

Pater and Swinburne, for example, who, though both professed Apollonians, become through Praz's glasses a pair of sybaritic threats to good order. Both writers were marked with Shelley's influence, so we should not be surprised to find them trailing after him to Florence and the Uffizi Medusa.

II

The English inheritance of Shelley's Medusa is dispersed in various directions. The prophetic power of fear and horror is Swinburne's special province, as we shall see in a moment, but Pater follows Shelley to the Uffizi Medusa for purposes more equivocal and searching. Pater's description of the painting has none of the definitiveness we find in the Shelley passage, though the latter is a fragment and Pater's translation an example of the most exquisitely finished prose. Yet we see Pater's essential point very clearly. He praises the picture for uniting, in a series of tense collisions, various symbols of permanence and transience.

> The subject has been treated in various ways; Leonardo alone cuts to its centre; he alone realises it as the head of a corpse, exercising its powers through all the circumstances of death. What may be called the fascination of corruption penetrates in every touch its exquisitely finished beauty. About the dainty lines off the cheek the bat flits unheeded. The delicate snakes seem literally strangling each other in terrified struggle to escape from the Medusa brain. The hue which violent death always brings with it is in the features: features singularly massive and grand, as we catch them inverted, in a dexterous fore-shortening, sloping upwards, almost sliding down upon us, crown foremost, like a great calm stone against which the wave of serpents breaks. But it is a subject that may well be left to the beautiful verses of Shelley.[11]

Shelley's poem is, in a way, enigmatic; once the basic symbol system is clearly apprehended, however, one has no difficulty putting the pieces together. Needless to say, such a criticism will not exhaust the poem's beauties; it merely allows us to respond more precisely to their large resonances. This passage from *The Renaissance*, on the other hand, is much more radically elusive than the Shelley poem. What distinguishes Pater's Medusa from Shelley's is its lack of boldness. Pater's writing, like his mind, is much more sensitive and nuanced than Shelley's poetry and intellectual ideals. Pater's response to the painting is exceedingly self-conscious, whereas Shelley seizes it and forces it to express what it stirs most deeply in himself. Their Medusas reflect the difference between an aggressive and a contemplative mind, between a Romantic who believed that a struggle was engaged to purge the world of its evils, and one who saw the same struggle as its own end.

Shelley's Medusa is another attempt to symbolize that central experience brought to perfection in *Prometheus Unbound* . Equally central to his own thought, Pater's translation of the Uffizi painting is an alternative rendering of that key Paterian experience, La Gioconda. In the Medusa Pater sees that "fascination of corruption . . in every touch [of] its exquisitely finished beauty," while of La Gioconda he can say: "like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave" (125). These women emanate an odor of death and nobility alike. But if neither the Medusa nor La Gioconda possesses the intellectual aggressiveness of Shelley's key symbols--if in Pater corruption and death are not mere appearances, but realities as strong as beauty and life--his images do not reflect the sort of moral enervation Praz constantly asserts of them. Lying behind both of these images is Pater's commitment to the intense life, to the sort of experience which, precisely because it is so transient and corruptible, remains its own end.

La Gioconda, for example, illustrates the communion of ultimate permanence and transience which Pater calls for in his famous "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*. Leonardo's ancient lady sits "at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy" (236), as Pater tells us in his interpretative remarks on the painting.

> Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. . . . All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits. . . . The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern thought has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy the symbol of the modern idea. (125-26)

The nexus of eternal death and unending life, La Gioconda sums up in her enigmatic posture the entire history of man's world as well as the full range of modern (that is, Paterian) consciousness. Thus she symbolizes not only the world of eternal process, but the Paterian mood which both confronts that spectacle and subsists at its heart.

The Medusa is Pater's anticipatory symbol of La Gioconda. It represents that nexus which is the intense moment. The two essential features are the head and the snakes, and in Pater's final, striking portrait of their relation to each other we see the struggle between the dark, animal, "Chthonic" forces[12] (the snakes) and the cool, smooth stone of the Apollonian head. The snakes burst against that symbol of intellectual control like waves on a rocky coast, an image clearly meant to suggest perduring struggle. This basic paradox is repeated in a number of ways: if the fascination of corruption permeates the refined features of the face, the bat--another figure of "corruption"--fails to produce any noticeable effect on "the dainty lines of the check." Apollonian prerogatives, though broken in upon by Dionysian energies, yet maintain their place, though they do not subdue the

action of those anarchic forces. So, while "the hue which violent death always brings with it" pervades the Medusa's features they remain "singularly massive and grand." The final image presents the enduring perfection of these tensions, but its complex force will be missed if we fail to appreciate the central detail in the picture: "The delicate snakes seem literally strangling each other to escape from the Medusa brain." The sentence is a brilliant reassignment of symbolic values: the snakes mix delicacy and terror while the calm smooth head is now also seen as the receptacle of an animal "brain." Apollo is a god of death as well as Dionysius. These snakes, like all energic life, aspire to their peculiar Apollonian perfection, as their delicacy shows, but they seek it in a frantic flight from the cool forms which first generated their rebellious life. That the Medusa's head has a chthonic brain reminds us of her wild origins. For Pater, this painting asserts the exercise of power "through all the circumstances of death." Such power is neither Apollonian nor Dionysian, but the deathless energy released when they are held in perfect equipoise.

The eft, the toad, heaven, and all that they imply--these are negative forces which Shelley's Medusa threatens with extinction. In Pater's view, nothing in the same painting can be conceived absent without destroying the world's reality. All forces are creative in Pater's Medusa. They produce that third, higher energy: the sensational recognition in the observer of the endurance of the colliding and refining passions in one's self and in the world. But Shelley's Medusa is based upon a struggle which destroys something in order to preserve what is vital. The balance Shelley aims at is destruction and preservation. Pater suggests, on the other hand, that life exhibits no real entropy, that all is conserved. The ancient gods go under ground. Pater's Medusan women prove the "modern" idea that nothing is really destroyed, that humanity preserves its entire past in one form or another. His Medusa symbolizes not only the perpetual upsurge of life, but its inevitable possession of a perfect form. Both of these Medusas support Goethe's assertion that her attraction lies in the radical expression of certain paradoxes in life and art. Pater's Medusa represents a tense doubleness even though its energies constantly direct one toward what Shelley would regard as a wholly preservative goal. In this respect Swinburne is Pater's Shelleyan complement, for Swinburne knows how to hate, insists upon the truth and vitality of real defiance and destruction.

> But in one separate head there is more tragic attraction than in these: a woman's, three times studied, with divine and subtle care; sketched and resketched in youth and age, beautiful always beyond desire and cruel beyond words; fairer than heaven and more terrible than hell; pale with pride and weary with wrong-doing; a silent anger against God and man burns, white and repressed, through her clear features. In one drawing she wears a head-dress of eastern fashion rather than western, but in effect made out of the artist's mind only; plaited in the likeness of close]y-welded scales as of a chrysalid serpent, raised and waved and rounded in the likeness of a sea-shell. In some inexplicable way all her ornaments seem to partake of her fatal nature, to bear upon them her brand of beauty fresh from hell; and this through no vulgar machinery of symbolism, no serpentine or otherwise bestial emblem: the bracelets and rings are innocent enough in shape and workmanship; but in touching her flesh they have become infected with deadly and malignant meaning. Broad bracelets divide the shapely splendour of her arms; over the nakedness of her firm and luminous breasts, just below the neck, there is passed a band as of metal. Her eyes are full of proud and passionless lust after gold and blood; her hair, close and curled, seems ready to shudder in sunder and divide into snakes. Her throat, full and fresh, round and hard to the eye as her bosom and arms, is erect and stately the head set firm on it without any droop or lift of the chin; her mouth crueller than a tiger's, colder than a snake's, and beautiful beyond a woman's. She is the deadlier Venus incarnate [...] for upon earth also many names might be found for her: Lamia re-transformed, invested now with a fuller beauty, but divested of all feminine attributes not native to the snake--a Lamia loveless and unassailable by the sophist, readier to drain life out of her lover than to fade for his sake at his side.[13]

We know that Pater studied Swinburne's "Notes on the Designs of the Old Masters at Florence" when he was writing *The Renaissance* and we can surmise how much the La Gioconda owes to this passage. Pater removed the peculiarly Swinburnian quality of savagery and defiance, however, which is one reason why the Swinburne portrait is so important, as we shall see.

Yet Swinburne's lady evokes other ophidian images besides the Medusa, as he says ("for upon earth also many names might be found for her"). Thus, to consider her in a context so specifically Medusan may seem an arbitrary extension of the limits of the analysis. Ye she cannot be omitted, if only because she illustrates one of Praz main ideas: that a specific image (for example, the Medusa) can generate a complex set of further analogues and relations (snake ladies as a dominant form of La Belle Dame Sans Merci). Nearly all of Swinburne's ladies are Medusan in one way or another: the Venus of "Laus Veneris" for example, whose lovers "sleeping with her lips upon their eyes, / Heard sudden serpents hiss across her hair." It is, in fact, the Medusan element in all such portraits which astonishes us (like Tannhauser) with "all the beauty and the terror there." Indeed, it is not unlikely that Shelley's Medusa specifically influenced Swinburne's portrait of Venus, and that both were again recalled when he composed the portrait in his prose "Notes." The analogues, in any case, are quite clear.

Swinburne himself underlines the importance of the Medusan iconography in his portrait by explicitly recalling the other key tradition of Romantic snake ladies. His "deadlier Venus incarnate" might have traced her origins back through a host of Romantic lamias, undines, and melusines except that such figures were, as Swinburne reminds us, universally sympathetic to man in the Romantic tradition up to Swinburne's time. But if this woman is a lamia, she has been radically transformed under the less benevolent influence of the Romantic Medusa.

Indeed, here is Shelley's destroyer resurrected with a vengeance. "Not gratitude, not delight, not sympathy, is the first sense excited in one" by such a vision; "fear, rather, oppressive reverence and well-nigh intolerable adoration." This frightful Medusan presence is another Venus "grown diabolic in ages that would not accept her as divine." She is no benevolent and sympathetic Christian deity or Pieta, but a rough beast come to exorcise the world of its pale Christian phantoms. Artaud's cruel maxim is fully expressed in England for the first time by Swinburne, the true English inheritor of the father of all such Romantic ideas, de Sade.

But it would be wrong to regard Swinburne's position as nihilistic or anarchic, at least if we mean something negative by those terms. Like Shelley, Swinburne is a didactic poet, even in the notorious *Poems and Ballads, First Series*. His Medusan women rise up to challenge the morals of society; their cruelty and radical disrespect petrify us with fear. His portraiture assures us that they entertain nothing but contempt or indifference for all human and divine values: even that most sacred of all western civilized values, love, is casually dismissed by this extraordinary Medusa. Let de la Motte Fouque's Undine and Keats's Lamia meekly offer their devotion to cruel and unworthy lovers, and in the end fade away when their despicable men abandon their faith and lose their nerve. Swinburne's Medusa scorns the weakness that will submit to such moral hypocrisy. Similarly, her "lust after gold and blood" is as severely "proud and passionless" as her love is deadly. Just as she acquires lovers in order to expose the degeneracy of the love contract, so she exercises those other social lusts--money getting and exploitation--with a cruel candour entirely worthy of the most apocalyptic Sadean hero. Thus she annihilates all possible gratitude or delight or sympathy, those social emotions which sanction the continuance of every sort of human and divine wickedness.

Instead she produces, first, fear, a natural enough response given the fundamental character of her refusals. She will serve none of the gods, not one. But if one's own moral character can survive this radically consuming fire, Swinburne suggests a further insight and response: reverence. Partly, this acknowledges the honesty of her negations, the purity of their logic: the Medusa will not sanction the worlds corruptions even though she may know that they are ineradicable, that nature will always betray the heart that loves her. But to respect those refusals is to respect the energies which made them possible. At this point the reverence begins to shade into "well-nigh intolerable adoration," for

the Medusa lays waste the entire natural and civilized world. She demands a total *contemptus mundi* and insists that we place our faith in that unknown god, our own buried lives.

Nor will she compromise on this demand by encouraging us toward it, thereby placing us in a position of dependency upon her, a position that can only generate cycles of exploitation. Our respect is for her solitary splendour, her absolute self-possession. Worship of her is well-nigh intolerable because it demands that we never swerve in our faith, though the goal of that faith is singularly fearful and barren. We can only trust to ourselves, even in our adoration and reverence. To worship such a woman, to remain unceasingly faithful to her despite her absence and indifference, is the only way to make ourselves worthy of what she represents. In the end we must become what she is--noble, impassive, cold, a stone image self-petrified by her own fearful energies and self-created by her lone faith in the hidden human god.

Pater and Swinburne each emphasize one of the aspects which Shelley sees in the Florentine Medusa. Moreover, they each drive the Shelleyan position to a clarifying extreme. We may not realize--Shelley may not have realized--just how much preserving energy was generated by his tempestuous Medusa. Pater does, just as Swinburne calls back the deep truths in Shelley's passion for destruction and death. Swinburne's is a particularly interesting case because out of his attachment to the Medusa's horror comes, fatally it would seem, the very real Medusan beauty which Shelley announced.

The natural extension of Swinburne's attitudes occurs not in England but in Italy, where Gabriele d'Annunzio develops a Medusan ideal of sensuous and aesthetic intoxication. The confessed apostle of Swinburne's position, d'Annunzio inherits the two paradoxical bases of the Englishman's poetic credo: an extreme care for matters of poetic craft, and an emphatic commitment to irrational, or perhaps supra-rational, goals. On these grounds Praz will pronounce him doubly damned--as both a Decadent and a Barbarian.[14]

Meanwhile, Swinburne became, for English poetry, an extreme beyond which is was scarcely possible to proceed. This line from Swinburne to d'Annunzio to C. G. Jung's fascinating Medusan speculations is in fact direct,[15] but in England that direction would be refused for a Romantic conclusion and summing up. Thus, the next figure we have to consider, William Morris, approaches the whole matter of Medusan imagery with a Romantic stability and self-consciousness we have scarcely seen before. The fact that he is the first of our poets to present a Medusa who will actually speak for herself illustrates very well the sort of change involved here. We are no longer dealing with beautiful severed heads. Morris is not a poet who throws open the doors of an imprisoned perception but an artist who explains to an already visionary company what precisely the new revelations entail. Despite so much in his work which is fantastic, even surreal, his is a Romanticism not of surprise, but of calculation.

III

Morris' Medusa is the symbolic center of "The Doom of King Acrisius," one of the finest of the narratives in *The Earthly Paradise*. The theme of this long and neglected Romantic epic Morris states in his "Epilogue."

> What further then? Meseems
>
> Whate'er the tale may know of what befell
>
> Their lives henceforth would not have it tell;

Since each tale's ending needs must be the same:

And we men call it Death. Howe'er it came

To those, whose bitter hope has made this book,

With other eyes, I think, they needs must look

0n its real face, than when so long agone

They thought that every good thing would be won,

If they might win a refuge from it.[16]

Morris' most direct reference here is to the Wanderers and the Elders of the city, those who tell the twenty-four tales of *The Earthly Paradise* and whose own lives, like their stories, illustrate "the bitter hope [that] made this book." The Wanderers, Medieval Norsemen, had set out from their plague-ridden homeland to find the earthly paradise; they discover instead a western island populated by a remnant of ancient Greek heroes (Odysseus on his last voyage?) who had, centuries before, set out on a similar adventure. The vain quest to conquer death is variously illustrated in the two groups of stories told by the Norsemen and the islanders: thus is reinforced the idea that "each tale's ending needs must be the same."

The significance of the passage is extended somewhat when we realize that both the Wanderers and the Elders are changed by their experience of telling and hearing these stories. As the paradisal expectations of the Wanderers and the Elders were chastened during their own laborious voyagings so after the experience of the twenty-four stories "they needs must look" on the "real face" of Death with a new understanding altogether. Not that death is now made to seem beautiful or even acceptable--throughout the poem we never doubt that death and misery are outrageous, even if they are human and necessary as well--but in the end no one is able to believe "that every good thing [could] be won" if man were only free of his mortality. Whatever happiness is--and *The Earthly Paradise* suggests that there are indefinite varieties of this precious bane--we realize finally that it in no way depends upon being free of misery or death.

This central meaning in *The Earthly Paradise* is epitomized in "The Doom of King Acrisius," and specifically in Morris' treatment of the Medusa. The argument prefixed to the poem outlines the action of a story which is essentially the myth of Perseus. Unlike Ovid, Morris spins out a balanced and consecutive narrative whose moral dimensions are clearly articulated. The genesis of the story is one man's vain attempt to avoid his mortal fate.

Now of the King Acrisius shall ye hear,

Who thinking he could free his life from fear,

Did that which brought but death on him at last.[17]

The double-meaning in a later remark by Danae emphasizes one important aspect of the king's fear: Acrisius is, she says, "Of thine own flesh and blood too much afraid."

Like other Romantic writers, Morris is attracted to Medusa because she is beautiful and she is suffering. Poe speaks for all Romantics when he says that "the death of a beautiful woman is,

unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."[18] Medusa's misery stands at the symbolic center of the narrative because of its peculiar character:

> O, was it not enough to take away
>
> The flowery meadows and the light of day?
>
> Or not enough to take away from me
>
> The once-loved faces that I used to see;
>
> To take away sweet sounds and melodies . . .
>
> And wrap my soul in shadowy hollow peace,
>
> Devoid of longing? Ah, no, not for me!
>
> For those who die your friends this rest shall be;
>
> For me no rest from shame and sore distress,
>
> For me no moment of forgetfulness;
>
> For me a soul that still might love and hate,
>
> Shut in this fearful land and desolate,
>
> Changed by mine eyes to horror and to stone;
>
> For me perpetual anguish all alone,
>
> Midst many a tormenting misery,
>
> Because I know not if I e'er shall die.[19]

This in Morris's version of the story, not Medusa herself but Medusa's circumstances are the focus of our horror. She is in no sense whatsover an object of loathing; quite the contrary, in fact, as we see from Perseus's reluctance to slay her.

> So there awhile unseen did Perseus stand,
>
> With softening heart, and doubtful trembling hand
>
> Laid on his sword-hilt, muttering, "Would that she
>
> Had never turned her woful face to me!"

Yet the woefulness of her undying face is the image not of her own heart--her deepest wish is for death--but of all those who see fear in a handful of dust. Like the other Romantic Medusas we have met. Morris' wretched lady is not suffering a moral death but, as in Shelley especially, revealing the very meaning of such an event. All her passion is hurled against the unmeaning of her fate, which is, in her case, her immortality. Morris' Medusa has been cursed with an eternal, inhuman life whose persistence has been ensured, paradoxically by her lethal tresses. No one will release her from her death-in-life because all men are, like Acrisius, themselves afraid of dying.

All men except Perseus, that is. Yet the most prominent sign of his virtue--the pity he feels for Medusa--is the occasion of his essential heroic struggle. For whereas his own indiscriminate feelings would save Medusa, he must finally choose to give her the gift she most wants: death. Perseus is, for Morris, Medusa's first real lover, who instead of raping her with a cruel selfishness, like Neptune, kills her out of a wonderful love.

The Medusa of William Morris is, then, in a purely descriptive sense, a sentimental figure. All the earlier Romantic Medusas threaten in one way or another, are hostile to something which they presuppose in their observing audience. This Medusa does not threaten with a death, she begs for her own. But her defenseless posture is intended to produce a moral revolution in her audience just as much as Swinburne's or Shelley's Medusas are. By killing Medusa Perseus conquers the fear of death, and our sympathy for his act reifies that conquest in the audience. To kill an enemy is relatively simple: the impersonality of the relationship blunts our fear of the act. To be ready to kill what we love, however, is to have removed any subservience to the instinctive possessiveness which all these Romantics are attacking.

It also raises again the central question for which the Romantic Medusa is a persistent symbolic focus: what should be the precise relation of death and life, indeed, what are the meanings of death and life? Just as Shelley's fragmentary lyric and the poetic prose of Pater and Swinburne had aimed to distinguish these ideas and experiences, so Morris is aiming to reveal how life and death can be made either a blessing or a curse. Specifically, Morris' story forces the reader to see that human values are not a function of life or death as such, indeed, that value and happiness are not strictly a life and death issue at all. Acrisius, among others in the story, conceives happiness and the earthly paradise in such terms, but because the tale forces us to see that the love of life can be evil and the love of death just and necessary, we are driven to throw aside commonplace evaluations of these ideas. A tale like "The Doom of King Acrisius" reminds us that life and death should not be the objects of men's desire on the one hand and fear on the other. In this story and the whole of *The Earthly Paradise*, death and life are presented as the terms within which all human adventures take place. They are existential postulates, not values, and hence neither can nor should be the object of pursuit or flight. In Morris' story, when Perseus slays the Medusa a hero is born who, disdaining these futilities, sets his highest desires within the framework of his own human creativity: love, integrity, civilization. Like all Romantic heroes, Morris' Perseus aims to create his own values.

IV

The Medusa of William Morris all but finishes the English history of that unfortunate lady. She appears again in a few novels and poems, but by the time Morris has told her story the Romantic themes which she incorporated have been thoroughly worked out, at least in one direction. D'Annunzio and Jung represent an extension of thought which will be received, but not developed, in England. The terrible head which first threatened Goethe and Shelley becomes, in William Morris, romantically domesticated, which only shows how completely Romanticism had been assumed into the poetic culture by that time. In Morris, the fury is benevolently transformed, even if she isn't given a new name. Death has lost its sting.

Yet Rossetti's brief treatment of the Medusa graphically illustrates what is lost through this taming of the shrew.

> ANDROMEDA, by Perseus saved and wed,
>
> Hankered each day to see the Gorgon's head:

Till o'er a fount he held it, bade her lean,

And mirrored in the wave was safely seen

That death she lived by.

Let not thine eyes know

Any forbidden thing itself, although

It once should save as well as kill: but be

Its shadow upon life enough for thee.[20]

The insistence here upon the double aspect of the Medusa--for example, in the specific allusion to her two types of blood which Aesclepius preserved in his vials--is very important. Rossetti, a thorough, even atavistic Romantic, knows something that Morris has almost forgotten. The Medusa uncovers forbidden secrets and powerful, hidden spells, but such gifts are not to be won with the sort of effortlessness Morris' poem occasional suggests. The new life which she offers to those who dare to approach her is, and must be, fearful, for the knowledge she offers is, as Shelley was among the first to suggest, a self-knowledge most men do not want to face. The fact about her meaning Rossetti will not have us forget, and it is, indeed, a key element in her Romantic revival. Rossetti suggests an even further possibility, however: that in the pursuit of the ideal some sort of betrayal is inevitable. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? This is Rossetti's cautionary theme.

But Morris does not worry about mankind having to bear too much reality. In contrast to Rossetti's personal approach, Morris' generalized treatment of the subject is matched by Pater, except that the latter is able to maintain a strong sense of the emotional ambivalences involved. A man does not revolutionize his consciousness without great fear and trembling, or at least without a sense of awe in the face of his terrifying, undiscovered selves. Pater registers the sense of awe, Rossetti the fear and trembling. Thus, if Rossetti turns away from the clear insights which Shelley, Swinburne, and, in his own way, Pater, insist upon, his refusal is in certain respects more significant than Morris' assent. Rossetti reminds us again, as Morris does not, of the stakes involved.

Perhaps the best way to bring these several treatments of the Romantic Medusa into a single focus is by returning to the beginning of the nineteenth century and a passage in *Faust* finely translated by Shelley.

Faust. Seest thou not a pale,

Fair girl, standing alone, far, far away?

She drags herself now forward with slow steps,

And seems as if she moved with shackled feet:

I cannot overcome the thought that she

Is like poor Margaret.

Mephistopheles. Let it be--pass on--

No good can come of it--it is not well

To meet it--it is an enchanted phantom,

A lifeless idol; with its numbing look,

It freezes up the blood of man; and they

Who meet its ghastly stare are turned to stone,

Like those who saw Medusa.

Faust. Oh, too true!

Her eyes are like the eyes of a fresh corpse

Which no beloved hand has closed, alas!

That is the breast which Margaret yielded to me--

Those are the lovely limbs which I enjoyed![21]

Praz begins his study of Romantic agonies and Medusan horror with these lines from Goethe and the Shelley poem we have already discussed. For Praz, both excerpts suggest only a Romantic delight in sadness, pain, and abnormality. As in the case of the Shelley passage, however, Praz has clearly refused to apprehend the meaning of the *Faust* passage at its most manifest level. Mephistopheles does not want Faust to look upon this Medusan image of betrayal lest he see in it the form of his won betrayed love. But Faust cannot turn away from the awful figure of his lost love, and his compulsion is the sign that he has not abandoned his inspiration. To record the act of primal betrayal, and to offer a means of redemption, Romantic artists took the Medusa for their muse, that they might be driven toward their better selves. Her horror and her beauty are alike divine because each focuses a demand made upon every man seeking simultaneously an image of "A lifeless idol" and his own Margaret, because Faust must be at once terrified by the image of his persistent evil and consoled with the figure of his essential love.

Indeed, in the Romantic treatment of the legend the mirror borne by Perseus becomes the manifest symbol of the equivalence between the hero and his victim. For the Romantic Medusa is not only herself a *doppelganger*, she is a recurrent *figura* of that other pervasive Romantic theme. Each man kills the thing he loves, but since his attachments are divided between his highest goals and his merest possessions, he must keep himself clear about his intentions. In this matter the Medusa becomes his guide, coming to him in various guises. In Goethe, Shelley, Pater, and Swinburne she appears as his dispossessed emanation now grown terrible, or diabolic, in the eyes of her betrayer. She accuses in order to reveal what has been buried away, and thus makes possible a new life. In William Morris' explicit presentation of the full story, the death of the Medusa generates Perseus' life with Andromeda. Not by accident does Morris' poem enforce an identification between Medusa and the bride of Perseus: the new Romantic mythology is inevitably driven to assert that Andromeda *is* the Medusa now released from her imprisonment in a world ruled in Acrisius, the spectre of the Romantic hero. The Romantic inclination to see avatars of the Medusa in a variety of unexpected persons and places is already apparent in Swinburne and Pater, but it will becomes a regular device in poets like d'Annunzio and mythologists like Jung.

Finally, the reason why the Medusa is a *peculiarly* Romantic *figura* is helpfully elucidated in the following modern poem.

Tableau Vivant

Perseus on an ornamental charger,

German work, sixteenth century,

Hovering above the slumbering Medusa

Like a buzzing fly or a mosquito

On beaten, golden wings. His head averted

From her agate gaze. In his right hand

A sword, in his left a mirror.

Helmeted by night, slipshod by darkness.

Wondering where to strike. She looks asleep

As if dreaming of petrified forests,

Monumental dryads, stone leaves, stone limbs,

Or of the mate that she will never meet

Who will look into her eyes and live.[22]

This poem is, among other things, a brief allegory about what has happened to western art between the sixteenth century and our own day. No one, two hundred years before Shelley, would have conceived a lover possible for Medusa. All that, all her romances, were ages gone, in the old time before the justice of Athena. But Romanticism came to break such laws, and as the nineteenth century was the first to take seriously so unthinkable an event as the salvation of Satan, so it raised up, against the doom assigned by Athena, a new lover for the beautiful Medusa. This was the new artist who would, if he dared, "look into her eyes and live." But as this fine poem by Daryl Hine shows, only the enemies of Medusa, Athena's champions, will regard her as horrible or her lovers as either impossible or decadent. Thus Hine's poem says to us: pictured here is the moment just before the hero Perseus will strike dead the monstrous offspring of Phorcys and Ceto. The artist knew only one way to tell the ancient story, but we now can see how equivocal it all might be, how much he is able to suggest of which he could not have been aware and would never have approved.

Hammered out in the ornamental world presided over by Athena's Perseus, Medusa can only dream of a lover. But if he is awake and threatening, she is asleep and dreaming; and her sleeping visions, all in sculpted stone, balance perfectly with the worked metal associated here with Perseus. Besides, if she is asleep, he is a mere insect come to disturb her rest; and even that suggestion is equivocal, for the most he can do, as insect, is to wake her up, which may mean that her impending death will become a true awakening into a real life. But the poem permits (indeed, as a conscious inheritor of symbolist technique, it evokes) endless speculation of this sort because it asserts perpetual equivocations in perpetual balance. No matter how they are observed in this poem, Medusa and Perseus are equal to each other. They cannot exist apart, it is a standoff, and in the theme of the

doppelganger is still working here in this new and subtle way, we are almost as far from Shelley as Shelley is from the sixteenth century. Symbolism and aestheticism have clearly intervened. For, in Hine's poem, all life is art, whether dreamed into stone images or beaten into gold, and if a metal hero can triumph over a Medusa whose death he will accomplish, she can dream herself immortal in the petrified world where she is queen forever.

NOTES

[1]*The Romantic Agony* (Meridian Books: New York, 1960), pp. 26-27.

[2] John of Antioch, for example (Frag. Hist. Graec., iv. 539, fr. 1, 8), says that "The Gorgon was a beautiful courtesan whose loveliness so astonished everyone who saw her that they seemed to be turned to stone."

[3] See Ovid, Metamorphoses , Books iv and v.

[4] Italienische Reise , Pt. II, April 1788. Quoted in Praz, p. 46.

[Note five has been replaced with a link to the Romantic Circles electronic edition of Shelley's poem.]

[6] Neville Rogers, "Shelley and the Visual Arts," KSMB , 12 (1961), 10.

[7.] Of course, Shelley's phrase refers directly to the Medusa's character. But he believed that all transcendent human qualities had their analogues, or natural metaphors, in the world of seasonal flux.

[8] Shelley was probably inspired to this image by the painting, which shows a large and gruesome moth hovering in the mist above Medusa.

[9] Neville Rogers, op. cit., p. 16, discusses the Virgilian echo in the phrase.

[10] "The Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto)," in chapter 7 of The Theatre and Its Double (New York: Grove Press, Evergreen Books, 1958).

[11] The Renaissance (London: Macmillan, 1900), p. 106. All Pater citations are to this volume and appear in the text, unless otherwise indicated.

[12] Pater expressed this favorite opposition of his, in Hellenic terms, in the following way: "Scarcely a wild or melancholy note of the medieval church but was anticipated by Greek polytheism! What should we have thought of the vertiginous prophetess at the very centre of Greek religion? . . . The Dorian worship of Apollo. . . , always opposed to the sad Christian divinities, is the aspiring element, by force and spring of which Greek religion sublimes itself. . . . It was the privilege of Greek religion to be able to transform itself into an artistic ideal" (203-04).

[13] Essays and Studies (London: Chano and Windus, 1911), pp. 319-20.

[14] Praz, op. cit., p. 387. The neglect of d'Annunzio's achievement as a poet--a very great one--is largely attributable to Praz's famous judgements upon him in The Romantic Agony, a set of partisan negative attitudes only excusable because the poet was the critic's countryman. The real basis for Praz's animus is not a pleasant one to contemplate, but is clearly set out a pp. 385-86.

[15] The crucial texts are d'Annunzio's great poem "Gorgon" and Jung's Aion (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 126-37.

[16] The Earthly Paradise (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1871), 111, 393.

[17] Ibid., 1, 142.

[18] "The Philosophy of Composition," in The Works of Edgar Allen Poe, ed. E. C. Stedman and G. E. Woodberry (New York: Scribner's, 1927), VI, 39.

[19] The Earthly Paradise, ed. cit., I, 168-69.

[20] "Aspecta Medusa," in The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti , ed. W. M. Rossetti, (London, 1890), I, 357.

[21] Complete Poetical Works, ed. cit., p. 761.

[22] Daryl Hine, Minutes (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 45.