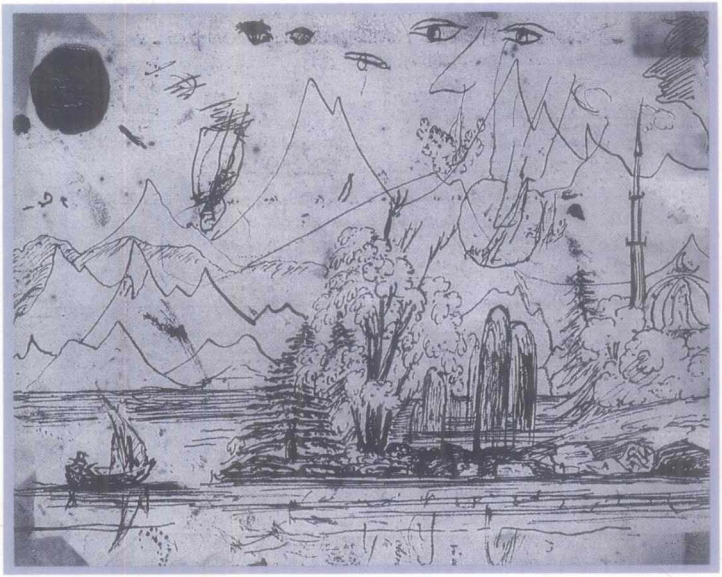
SHELLEY'S POETRY OF INVOLVEMENT



Roland A. Duerksen

MACMILLAN STUDIES IN ROMANTICISM

Shelley's Poetry of Involvement

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Shelley sensed and expressed the need for people to be daring in intellect, intelligent in recognizing love as the essence of humanity, and humane in applying a loving intellect in social situations. It is for this reason, argues the author, that Shelley's poetry is vitally alive today. Far from being an 'ineffectual angel', Shelley, from the early *Queen Mab* to the climactic *Prometheus Unbound* and the final fragmentary *Triumph of Life*, urges a brave, responsible, involved and loving confrontation of the events and questions of life. By its consistent assertion of the viability, efficacy and necessity of the triad of intellect, love and social enlightenment, Shelley's poetry defines true humanity.

For a note on the author, please see the back flap

Roland A. Duerksen is Professor of English at Miami University and was previously at Purdue University. He is the author of *Shelleyan Ideas in Victorian Literature* and editor of two books of Shelley's works, *The Cenci*, and *Political Writings*. He has also published a number of articles on Shelley and other Romantic writers.

The jacket-design reproduces a sketch by Shelley (the Bodleian Library).

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Preface

My attempt in this book is to give readers as clear and direct an account as possible of the spirit or motivation behind the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley. This motivation is, as I see it, invariably the impulse of a desire to define and enhance our humanity. And humanity, for Shelley, both originates in and is brought into practice by the human mind itself. While it is individual in its source, it immediately becomes social in its application. Not unheedful of the need for structures in society, the individuality of Shelley's humanity always gives his art itself the quality or energy to deconstruct what has come to be taken for granted and to insist upon the creatively imagined way of knowing. Although my approach to this attainment of humanity in Shelley's poetry is by three paths of emphasis, the primary import throughout centres on the synthesis of the three that is accented in the final chapter.

Though now considerably revised and extended, two segments of the book have appeared earlier in print. A part of Chapter 2 was published as an article in *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, and a part of Chapter 5 appeared in *Studies in English Literature*. I wish to thank the editors of both journals for the permission to use these materials in their revised form.

To Miami University I express my thanks for a semester's leave to work on the book, and to my colleagues in the English Department I am grateful for their taking up the slack in teaching duties during my leave as well as for their encouragement.

Oxford, Ohio R.A.D.

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Introduction

Approximately fifty years ago, Carl Grabo predicted that 'Shelley's rightful place as a thinker will not soon or readily be accorded him' (vi). That prediction has been proven essentially correct. Although critics have become increasingly aware of Shelley's emphasis on intelligent responses to what is happening in the world, the reading public continues far too pervasively to hold a distorted, obscured view of his poetry in what Grabo calls a 'haze of emotional speculation' that falsifies the essential Shelley. Grabo asserts that 'if ever a man lived the intellectual life . . . it was Shelley' (vii), and more recently Jerome McGann has declared Shelley to be 'the most intellectually probing of all the later Romantics' (118). The necessity now is to establish, as clearly and strongly as possible for the reading public, the fact of Shelley's intellectual power and to make clear and unmistakable its rightful character.

Recent critics have occasionally had difficulty recognizing the coalescent and comprehensive quality of Shelley's emphasis on mental awareness in poetry. In his article, 'Shelley as Philosophical and Social Thinker', Kenneth Neill Cameron, while making a strong case for Shelley as clear-eyed and incisive in his political thought, down-plays the views of those critics who have focused on Shelley's increasing emphasis on the role of love and imagination as constituents of intellect. More recently Harry White has argued that Shelley came to see politics and morality as incompatible but that he remained mendaciously dedicated to both. White, it seems to me, forces Shelley's works into a materialistic box of rationalism that makes no allowance for the mental process (both individual and social) that, united with love, can in Shelley's view be the essence of creative revolution.[1] My intention in the present study is to show, simply and with only the requisite analysis, that Shelley emphatically asserted responsible thought, love and socio-political action to be, if not synonymous, at least indissolubly linked in a continuum.

The mind is, indeed, for Shelley the locale of essential revolution – as it is of all genuinely imaginative productions. And there is for

him no discrepancy between the role of the mind in responding to moral urgings toward liberty and its role in creating new means of achieving on the actual political level the ends thus engendered. Shelley is the first creative artist writing in the English language to propose the method of civil disobedience (non-violent resistance) as the way to deal in a revolutionary manner with immediate despotic conditions while the mind is already and concomitantly working toward higher levels of social existence that would make despotism itself obsolete.

Not that these concepts of the mind and of its elemental power in the world were entirely original with Shelley. Though indeed highly original, he is among the most assimilating and judiciously eclectic thinkers and writers of our literary heritage. Of particular importance to his thought were the mental giants of ancient Greece, among them Socrates, Plato, Aeschylus, Homer, Pindar, Sophocles and Euripides. Of these, although Aeschylus provided a particular inspiration for *Prometheus Unbound*, Socrates may be singled out as the ancient Greek whom Shelley honoured most for his mental power and for what he taught concerning the human mind. In a letter Shelley says of Socrates, 'I conceive him personally to have presented a grand & simple model of much of what we can conceive, & more than in any other instance we have seen realized, of all that is eminent & excellent in man', and goes on to laud 'the fountain of his profound yet overflowing mind' (*Letters*, 2. 145–6). Summing up an analysis of Greek literary influence on Shelley, Timothy Webb asserts that 'behind it all was the figure of Socrates, whom Shelley often associated with Christ as the most perfect of men, an example by which we might learn to live our own lives with courage, clarity of mind and self-controul'.[2]

From among modern thinkers whose works Shelley assimilated into his own thought with varying degrees of enthusiasm and critical response, there may again be singled out one person in particular: William Godwin. Others of the moderns who must be acknowledged as having an important bearing on Shelley's thinking are Francis Bacon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, David Hume, Sir William Drummond, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine and Leigh Hunt,[3] not to mention the considerable influence of two older-generation Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Early in the process of his assimilation of insights from these various sources, Shelley was introduced to Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), a work whose

influence on his thought and art it would be hard to overestimate. P. M. S. Dawson devotes the major part of a lengthy chapter to a perceptive analysis of Shelley's debt to and affinity for Godwin and makes the important point that Shelley responded with enthusiasm to Godwin's ideas because most of them were already aspirations of his own (77). Godwin, Socrates, and the many other creative thinkers whom Shelley read should be kept in mind throughout the present study as forming an important base upon which Shelley develops his own view of mind and individual imaginative responsibility.

As John W. Wright points out, Shelley maintained that we know only what our minds attend to (22). Holding this definition of knowledge, Shelley is aware that attentiveness of the poet's mind is the prime determinant of great poetry. He realizes that to know what is happening to people and what the happenings mean is the essence of all poetry that matters. Convinced that, as thinkers, poets need to attend to the events of life as they observe them, he recognizes that they have a responsibility to tell of these events as imaginatively and insightfully as they can. For him the primary aim of poetry is to awaken people to their situation, both individually and collectively, and to enable them to discover tendencies and potential consequences in what is happening to them and around them.

In *A Defence of Poetry*, his prose commentary on the potentiality of creative thought in society, Shelley declares that a poet

> not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretense of superstition which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry.[4]

The attribute of poetry that Shelley calls prophecy is a matter of love, of imaginative identification with people, of political concern in the best sense of the term.[5] It is an involved and caring knowledge of things that are – a perception of what constitutes the moving spirit and the tendency behind these present things.[6]

To perceive this spirit and not to reveal it for what it is would be simply unpoetic; it would be the abdication of the poet's most noble duty and most essential aspect.

At the very outset of *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley identifies imagination as the 'perception of the value of those qualities' that are identified by reason. The term *value* has an importance here that is too easily overlooked. Shelley's point, as Wright has noted, is that 'it is first and finally only about values that man thinks' (18). That this thinking about values unavoidably leads the poet to love, to identify imaginatively with others, is expressed in the *Defence* as follows:

> Poetry . . . awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. . . . The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. (487–8)

Throughout his greatest works, Shelley adheres to the simple but profound principle that poetry, the product of the responsible mind's creativity, educates the poet and others by serving as a means of reaching out, of identifying, and of responding to values newly found in thoughts, events and persons. Akin to this emphasis is Shelley's view that the human mind can reassume a simple and direct way of responding to, and of benefiting from, experience. 'Poetry', he says in the *Defence*, 'lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes the familiar objects be as if they were not familiar' (487). Dawson (217) uses the phrase 'primal immediacy of vision' to define this concept and suggests that it reflects the influence of both Wordsworth and Coleridge. Shelley's urging of both a wide scope of imaginative identification and an originality that discards reliance on mere familiarities places a primary reliance on the mind's responsibility.

Though the influence of William Godwin on the development of Shelley's view of the responsible mind is beyond question and is acknowledged as a basic premise in this study, the limit of its extent needs to be noted. Dawson suggests that, by the date of

the *Defence*, Shelley had already gone beyond Godwin's moral philosophy[7] – a philosophy that Dawson likens to a Benthamite balance sheet on which the plus and minus qualities of actions are evaluated according to degrees of pleasure and pain (229). His epistemology being in the empiricist tradition of Locke, and having learned from Helvetius as his immediate mentor (Dawson, 82), Godwin developed an empirical, rationalistic view of 'knowledge' that could not be accommodated to the wisdom of Shelley's 'identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own'. By his arrival at this knowledge of imaginative identification with others, Shelley, in Dawson's view, 'transforms Godwin's demand for disinterestedness into the imperative of benevolence' (228–9). Godwin's perspective, derived from that of Helvetius in linking benevolence with self-interest, cannot give satisfactory support to either disinterestedness or benevolence and thus must prove no longer satisfying to a thinker such as Shelley, who is deeply concerned about the need for benevolence.

As Dawson has shown (230, 234), William Hazlitt, like Shelley a disciple of Godwin, very likely helped Shelley toward his concept of the moral imagination. Since Shelley desired to be a moral reformer as well as a poet, he can scarcely have failed to be excited by the crucial role that Hazlitt, in his *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), assigns to the imagination.[8] Going considerably beyond both Godwin and Hazlitt, Shelley asserts the responsibility of altruistic benevolence to be identical with moral (that is to say, creative) imagination.

As has been amply reiterated by critic after critic since the publication of *The Deep Truth*, a pioneering treatise by C. E. Pulos, Shelley is a sceptic of the first order. Since, then, the values he seeks and advocates cannot be based on a belief in any ultimate, knowable truth, they must be generated in the very processes of human thought, whose subject they are. The responsibility of the individual mind is enormous, but so are the rewards of the mind's freedom from codified and imposed values. Having come to the realization that ultimate truth from some outside source is not available, the sceptic is left to his own mental resources. Shelley finds this to be an exhilarating challenge to the improvement of the human condition – especially since he recognizes thought as the essential business of the poet.

The responsible, thinking poet who necessarily deals with values

must, in Shelley's view, create poetry that concerns itself with intellect, with the realm of thought itself. As indicated by the second of the above-quoted passages from the *Defence*, genuinely creative thinking cannot remain self-centred and therefore soon leads to love. Poetry, then, that deals with intellect, will inevitably encompass the subject and express the quality of love. In so doing, it goes out and involves itself in society and its concerns, thus becoming social or political art.

Virtually every one of Shelley's better poems contains elements of all three emphases – intellect, love and social enlightenment – and it is often not easy to designate a given work as dealing primarily with one or the other of these emphases. Nevertheless, an aim of the present study is to do just that. Admittedly, the divisions made in this study are only critical devices. In no way intending to deny or detract from the synthesis that everywhere underlies Shelley's work, I simply find it expedient to discuss individual poems in the context of one or the other of the principal components of what Shelley saw as the poet's role and responsibility. The divisions under which I discuss the individual poems are not intended as inherent separating aspects of the poems themselves but, rather, as devices by which to emphasize elements of the synthesis that pervades Shelley's poetry. My study seeks to show that the three elements cohere in Shelley's ultimate, unified goal of putting the poet and reader in vital contact with the events of life itself, so that their minds may interact with and have an impact upon the spirit and direction of these events. And I find no discrepancy between Shelley's poetic purposes and his very practical social and political thinking.[9] In other words, the study aims to show that Shelley's poetry focuses consistently on the mind's role as creator of the kind of life that is to be lived.

Permeating and interrelating Shelley's poems are two elemental premises upon which he builds his thought: (1) The freedom of the individual mind to make its own choices and (2) the mind's responsibility to recognize and to promote the basic equality of all human beings.[10] As the element linking these two necessities, love is, for Shelley, a meaningful concept precisely because he sees it as a quality or essence generated from within the individual mind. It must not be barred, he insists, by any class, social or economic distinctions from being extended toward any and all individuals anywhere at any time. The poetry clearly reveals Shelley's awareness that the creative task is difficult in a world that considers such

thinking utopian, idealistic and even dangerous. Yet, assured in his mind that the need to improve the quality of life should be the primary aim of all thought and action, Shelley sees and unhesitatingly accepts his poetic endeavour as a means to the end of enlightening human beings to the challenges as well as the joys of responsible creativity.

Attempting not to lose sight of so important and primary an aim in Shelley's poetry, I shall, in this study, divide the discussion of the poems into the three categories of emphasis mentioned above – intellect, love and social enlightenment – and shall add a fourth category for the works that I have selected for a special focus upon the synthesis of the other three categories. This synthesis, though, as I have already noted, is an important element throughout the poetry, and the categorical designations are intended mainly to mark more clearly the elements of Shelley's thought and to facilitate discussion of the poems.

2

The Emphasis on Intellect

Shelley's short essay 'On Life' is essentially an essay on the all-importance of thinking. Twice in the course of its few pages, he asserts the fundamental philosophy of Berkeley that 'nothing exists but as it is perceived' (476, 477). Defining each individual mind not as a really separate entity but, rather, as a portion of 'the one mind', he yet, following Hume's philosophy,[1] acknowledges that 'mind, so far as we have any experience of its properties . . . , cannot create, it can only perceive'. In the light of Shelley's repeated assertion of the Berkeleyian view that to perceive is to define existence, the word *only* suggests not limitation or diminution, but rather, a precise definition or identification of function. Shelley defines the word *thing* as denoting 'any object of thought, that is, any thought upon which any other thought is employed, with any object of distinction' (478). Since, then, a thing does not have objective existence except as it is perceived, and since it is really a 'thought' useful to other or related thoughts, the question of the substantive origins of things is not nearly so important as is the role of the mind in correct perception.

An indication of the extent to which Shelley sees the mind as identified with life itself is his beginning the final paragraph of the essay with the question, 'What is the cause of life?' and answering it at the end in terms of 'the cause of mind'. Thus it appears that he is more successful than David Lee Clark (*Shelley's Prose*, 171) finds him to be in reconciling Berkeleyian idealism with the scepticism of Hume.

The problem with what people call the reality of life, says Shelley, is that it is usually premised upon the function of a mind that has been deprived of 'that freedom in which it would have acted but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation' (477). Words, images, and symbols are what the mind creates; they are the stuff of perception – which, after all, gives things objective existence for the individual. Not to be subject to mere acceptance and reiteration of handed-down words and signs but instead to respond with honesty and originality of thought to