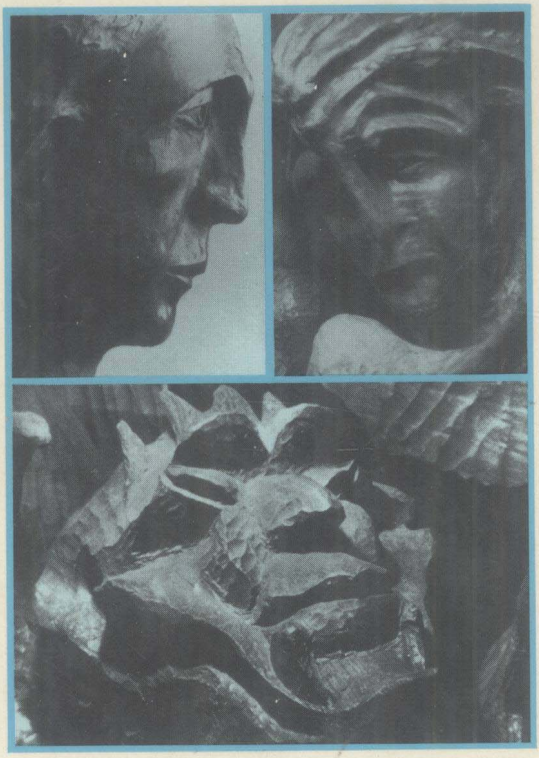
Power and Self-Consciousness in the Poetry of Shelley



Andrew J. Welburn

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POWER AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE POETRY OF SHELLEY

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Preface

This book is an attempt to sketch a new way of understanding Shelley's poetic achievement. Earlier studies have stressed the individually very different facets of Shelley's imagination, in particular drawing attention to the opposition between his scepticism and his 'visionary', idealist leanings – or simply devoting themselves, often in illuminating detail, to his political, scientific, philosophical, religious or literary interests as the case may be. The poet who emerges from these studies can easily appear an extremist; and certainly the straining after extremes was a part of Shelley's nature. But it was no more than a part, and it has been my aim to delineate the controlling central consciousness which any serious reader of Shelley soon encounters in his work, and which exists in paradoxical and vital dependence on the lure toward the heights and depths. It is only in attempting to define that consciousness, I believe, that the full integrity and value of Shelley's achievement becomes clear.

The attempt to define it involves the consideration of all Shelley's major interests; indeed it soon emerges that to discuss Shelley is to explore the great currents of art, science and myth which shaped his world – and continue to shape ours today. His project is still one where we may follow a profound mind entering into little-explored territory, and the achievement he brought back from the outer bounds of awareness, as well as his feeling for the human centre, is still an exciting subject of consideration; it is perhaps still more important for us today, in our own world of extremes, than it was in his own time.

Inevitably I have neglected some aspects of Shelley to concentrate on others. I have said little on the explicitly biographical dimension of his poetry, although it might certainly be possible to relate the dominant 'landscapes' of Shelley's imagery to his travels and experiences in Europe. The contrast between the bare mountains of the Alps and the sunny paradise of Italy or the Mediterranean isles appears to have made contact

with deep and contrary intuitions in his soul, and no doubt without his European experience that great blossoming of a lyric poet after 1815 could not have taken place. The suicide of Harriet, his first wife, too, was a blow whose submerged effect can be felt in the subsequent greater maturity of his verse, despite his new life with Mary and his brightening prospects. And for that matter, the 'daemonic' energies which figure in Shelley's thought were to be found embodied in the colourful characters who at various times thronged around him: Trelawney with his fantastic lies, the disturbing Lord Byron, the ironic and obscurantist Peacock, the occultist John Frank Newton. Yet in the end Shelley's journey was, more importantly, an inward one where we can all follow, a mental voyage still more fascinating than the restless pursuit of his external biography.

This study has had the advantage of friendly comment and criticism over a number of years. I am especially grateful to John Beer, Owen Barfield and Anne Barton, whose responses have all affected the book substantially for the better; I should like to thank also the late Sir Christopher Cox for his diligence in drawing my attention to the more intelligent commentators on Shelley and politics. Mona Bradley typed the manuscript from my jigsaw puzzle of drafts and emendations: my thanks to her for her patient wrestling with the minutiae of the text – a gift freely given and with a grace not every author has the privilege to know. Invaluable advice and help at the stage of publication came from Frances Arnold of Macmillan Press, and the text had the advantage of attention from Valery Rose, so that only the most obstinate of my own errors remain. Further thanks go to Hedley Teale for his support, and for conducting me on a memorable tour of Shelley's Italy and the Alps. My mother continued to believe in the book in what seemed to her the long time between my first talking of it and the moment of its appearance, and supported it during the several stages in-between.

The book was written during my time as a Research Fellow at New College, Oxford. It was a Fellow of New College – the Revd John Walker – who in 1811 initiated the train of events which led to the author of *The Necessity of Atheism* being promptly sent down. Moreover, an earlier member of the Shelley family, Thomas Shelley who was a Fellow of New College in the sixteenth century, was 'removed' in 1567 for

refusing to attend divine service. I am grateful to New College for enabling me to make a positive contribution to Shelley studies.

A.J.W.

Outline Chronology of Shelley's Life and Works

1792	Percy Bysshe Shelley born (4 August).
1802–4	Attends Sion House Academy.
1804–10	Continues education at Eton.
1809	Writes *Zastrozzi* (published 1810).
1810–11	Student at University College, Oxford, with Thomas Jefferson Hogg. Writes *The Necessity of Atheism* and *St Irvyne, or The Rosicrucian*.
1811	Marries Harriet Westbrook. Meets Southey in Keswick.
1812	Involved in political activity in Ireland and philanthropic projects in Wales (Tan-yr-allt). Correspondence with Godwin. Meets Thomas Love Peacock.
1813	Publishes *Queen Mab*. Encounters the 'Tan-yr-allt assailant'.
1814	Further acquaintance with Godwin in London; elopes with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and Claire Clairmont. Visits the Continent. Writes *A Refutation of Deism* and *The Assassins* (fragment).
1815	Literary-antiquarian-occultistic circle at Marlow includes Shelley, Peacock and John Frank Newton. Writes *Speculations on Metaphysics*, *On Life*, *On Love* and *Alastor* (published 1816).
1816	Shelley and Mary join Byron at Geneva: involved in the ghost-story competition with Byron and Polidori (origins of *Frankenstein*, published 1818). Writes *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*. Suicide of Harriet; Shelley refused custody of their children because of his 'atheism' and belief in 'free love'. Writes *Mont Blanc*.

1817 Beginning of friendship with Leigh Hunt and Keats. Completes *Laon and Cythna* (later called *The Revolt of Islam*) composed in friendly rivalry with Keats' *Endymion*.

1818 Shelley *ménage* leaves for Italy. Translates Plato's *The Banquet (Symposium)*, etc. Writes 'Painted Veil' sonnet. At Venice with Byron. Starts *Prometheus Unbound*. Death of daughter Clara. Writes *Julian and Maddalo*.

1818–19 Tours Rome, Naples, Pompei and Vesuvius.

1819 Writes *Ode to the West Wind*. Completes *Prometheus Unbound* (published 1820). Writes *The Cenci*, *The Mask of Anarchy* and *Peter Bell the Third*.

1820 Engaged in alchemical and meteorological studies. Writes *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, *The Cloud*, *To a Skylark*, *Ode to Liberty*, *The Witch of Atlas*, *The Sensitive Plant* and *Swellfoot the Tyrant*. Meets Emilia Viviani. Writes *Hymns of Apollo and Pan*.

1821 Interest in 'Magnetism'. Writes *Epipsychidion*, *Adonais* and *A Defence of Poetry* (published 1840). Relationship with Jane Williams. Writes *Hellas* and *On the Devil and Devils*.

1822 Writes *The Triumph of Life* (fragment). Death of Shelley (8 July) by drowning in the Gulf of Spezia, near Lerici.

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Introduction: the Painted Veil

Fear & Hope are – Vision.
(William Blake, *The Gates of Paradise*)

Perhaps no poem from the mature body of Shelley's work comes closer to announcing the poet's central preoccupations – expounding with a directness that is almost programmatic the fundamental movements of mind he sought to articulate in his briefest impassioned lyrics, in his uniquely internalised or 'lyrical' drama, and in his sustained, reflective philosophical verse – than does the sonnet written in 1818: 'Lift not the painted veil'.

It is, as a poem, unmistakably Shelleyan. Yet it is also a poem that reveals starkly enough a number of the deep paradoxes and disquieting contradictions with which Shelley's poetic thought seems always to be hedged about, and which have done so much to call in question his reputation as a major English poet. It entangles us immediately, too, in some of the more salient difficulties thrust on us by Shelley's highly individual concept of the nature of poetry, above all in the treatment of traditional poetic forms; of which few can conceivably have been harder to recreate with new and individual interest than the historically hard-worked and internally intricate sonnet. We must concede that from all three perspectives – exemplary, philosophical and formal – the poem does not represent the pinnacle of Shelley's achievement. But it is also very far indeed from being a mere 'problem poem', and if from each of his difficulties the poet wrests a somewhat less-than-total victory, his struggle may yet be of profounder interest than an outright success on easier terms. We shall attempt to prove in the course of this book that Shelley's poetry is written on terms which (contrary to a still popular though declining myth) are well nigh the most demanding it is possible to conceive. For this reason, a brief and

idiosyncratic sonnet forms a more revealing point of departure than many a more famous climactic achievement or startling lyrical flight.

It may be as well, therefore, to allow the poet to have the first word (or almost the first word) to himself:

> Lift not the painted veil which those who live
> Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,
> And it but mimic all we would believe
> With colours idly spread, – behind, lurk Fear
> And Hope, twin Destinies; who ever weave
> Their shadows, o'er the chasm, sightless and drear.
> I knew one who had lifted it – he sought,
> For his lost heart was tender, things to love,
> But found them not, alas! nor was there aught
> The world contains, the which he could approve.
> Through the unheeding many he did move,
> A splendour among shadows, a bright blot
> Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove
> For truth, and like the Preacher found it not.

With the image of the 'painted veil' itself in the opening line Shelley proclaims himself among the ranks of the visionary poets.[1] He is not one who can be content to celebrate the everyday world as it lies all about us. He is no observer even of the raw complexities of human life, in the inexhaustible variety of relationships that have afforded material to so many poets, dramatists and novelists. He is a poet of ultimates. He casts all the varied experiences of life as a tapestry of unreal shapes, mimicking all we would like to believe but yielding us no final truth. He appears, in the lines which follow, to resent the inconclusiveness which follows from the very diversity, the infinite multiplicity of life which makes its meaning hard, perhaps impossible, to fathom.[2] Its colours are spread before our gaze indeed, richly but idly.

To probe behind the phantom images of ordinary life-experience, the 'painted veil', however, is a dangerous undertaking. A 'veil' can be torn aside, or lifted to reveal what lies beyond. But when that veil has been identified by those who live with 'Life' itself, who can tell us what we will uncover on the other side? We might find there the grand Truth we failed to

discern in the ebb and flow of our confusing life; but we might also be made aware of ultimate absurdity, the meaninglessness of everything. Shelley poses explicitly both alternatives, of Hope and Fear, 'twin Destinies' of this dangerous and shadowy undertaking. Of a final goal he can see nothing, only an abyss – 'sightless', 'drear', inconclusive. Beginning with a warning and ending with the fate of one 'lost heart' who ignored it, Shelley's visionary and exploratory sonnet does not envisage, like Wordsworth in his own programmatic Prospectus to the projected poem *The Recluse*, passing unalarmed Jehovah's thunder and the empyreal thrones;[3] nor is Shelley a committed visionary in the mould of Blake, impatient of doubts and doubters, longing 'to converse with my friends in Eternity, See Visions, Dream Dreams & prophecy & speak Parables unobserv'd & at liberty from the Doubts of other Mortals'.[4] Shelley is of a mottled temper, and shares all the uncertainties of contemporary sceptics, so that his visionary poem is shot through with paradox. In the very act of imaginatively parting the illusory veil, he solemnly warns us not to look. None the less, the poem only exists by scorning its own admonition and, with its uncertainty confessed, it offers us a tentative but powerful vision of the forces beyond the veil.

In the 'lost heart' of the latter part of the poem we recognise, of course, Shelley himself. Less obviously, Shelley makes here an implicit comparison between his own attempt to gaze beyond mundane reality and traditional Christian mystical ecstasies, for he echoes the phraseology going back to Paul ('I know a man in Christ, fourteen years ago, whether in the body, I know not, or whether out of the body, I know not, God knoweth, such a one caught up even to the third heaven'), phraseology in which Paul is also traditionally taken to be referring indirectly to himself.[5] To Paul, his vision was deeply significant, perhaps also deeply disturbing. What is striking is how little he can say about it: he does not know whether his experience was bodily or incorporeal; he heard words in Paradise – but they cannot be repeated. All these are marks of authenticity. But to the religious outsider they emphasise how much is necessarily obscure and ambiguous, as is in a still greater degree Shelley's personal and less committed vision of transcendent possibilities. Indeed, lacking Paul's commitment to a Christian interpretation of his experience, Shelley's poem might seem to be becoming

lost in obscure and ambiguous speculations. The poet's introduction of himself into the poem, however, serves as an important counter-weight to the initial speculative tendencies. Shelley did have such tendencies, as his prose *Speculations on Metaphysics* will confirm; but in his poetry we have something different. There Shelley keeps faith with experience. His sonnet, as its personalised second part makes clear, is not concerned with realms beyond human knowledge, but with the human self in its search for truth and beauty, its hopes and fears about ultimate realities. And in its intensest form that search is the search of love for an answering love.

'Lift not the painted veil' turns upon the double nature of our response to the world we inhabit. On the one hand, we feel trapped if our experience should ever settle into a dull round, ceasing to excite our curiosity or stimulate our interest. Indeed, however wide that experience may be, the long-term evidence from poetry and art seems to be that it never will satisfy us completely. The very existence of the arts already testifies to man's need to go beyond whatever is given, to extend, to deepen and transform. If in life we ever do stand still, our world will sink down to a strange half-reality, a veil of unreal forms through which some deep and unsuppressable part of us will always long to penetrate. Shelley therefore, like other Romantic poets, undertakes to 'startle the reader from the trance of ordinary life', much as Coleridge and Wordsworth had more famously aimed 'to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom'. In that way they hoped to disperse 'the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude' from before our eyes.[6]

But at the same time Shelley is aware of dangers which the first generation of visionary Romantics only discovered through bitter disappointment and disillusion. He is profoundly aware that objectivity and practical judgement, together with the psychological stability that goes with them, is intimately bound up with human confidence in a dependable world. Our inner balance is largely built out of our reliance upon a steadfast outer world-order – that very world of custom and selfish solicitude which Coleridge mentioned to dismiss so disparagingly. So that to look beyond it, bracketing the whole of normal life together under the emblem of a 'painted veil' of unreal shapes, is to risk grave psychical disruption, perhaps permanent damage to the