

SHELLEY'S HUMAN SPIRITS  
OF  
LANGUAGE

by

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## ABSTRACT

For romantic criticism since the Victorian age, the symbolism of Shelley's poetry has often been an object of reverence; Shelley's symbols enact, incorporate or invoke rather than simply signify and, for some, they can constitute a world. Modern theorists who have supported such ideas, (Wasserman, Bloom, Perkins) are, today, very much on the defensive, and one of their most fervent critics is Paul de Man. My dissertation argues that de Man's criticism of Shelley, based in Saussurian linguistics, Derridean notions of textuality, and Sartrean philosophy, seems able to deal with the symbolic forms and modes of Shelley's poetry only through a complete erasure. I argue, further, that this erasure, an ultimate form of reductionism, ignores Shelley's own ideas about symbolism and their philosophical influences.

My thesis approaches the semiotics of Shelley's symbolism through its chronology. The developmental perspective shows that de Man's criticism replaces a very complex series of influences with the singular name of Rousseau. Rousseau is an influential figure, but, as I hope to show, Godwin is more important when it comes to Shelley's understandings of the basic categories and dynamics of language.

In Shelley, I argue, we are dealing with a poet who is very conscious of the theoretical side of language and who, throughout this career, varies his use of signs along a number of dimensions. If we are to capture some of the richness of this experimentation, we cannot narrow our approach to de Man's dualism in which the two perspectives of symbol and sign work themselves out in ambiguities of dominance, a struggle in which sign eventually wins. In the thesis I argue that a semiotic criticism based in Godwin's theory of opinion is the more accurate, compelling and productive notion with which to explain Shelley's symbolism.

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## CHAPTER I

### SHELLEY CRITICISM AND THE POST-STRUCTURALIST CRITIQUE

In recent years, a number of critical works have applied deconstructionist and semiotic ideas to Shelley's poetry: William Keach's Shelley's Style (1984), Tilottama Rajan's chapter on Shelley in her Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism (1980), Frances Ferguson's "Shelley's Mont Blanc: What the Mountain Said" (1984) and Angela Leighton's "Deconstruction Criticism and Shelley's Adonais" (1983), are examples.<sup>1</sup> These readings of Shelley have a common thread: they are all, in varying degrees and orientations, responses to a new, critical view of Romanticism. The basis for this re-evaluation has been a fertile blending of structuralist linguistics with disciplines like philosophy, theories of history, psychoanalysis and rhetoric and is the product of such seminal thinkers as Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, and Foucault.

The first, definitive application of deconstructionist ideas to Shelley appeared in an article by Paul de Man called "Shelley Disfigured" (1979). In it de Man concludes that in his last major poem, The Triumph of Life (1822), Shelley has become so enmeshed in his own procedure of disruption as to disrupt his own progressive faiths and belief in the privileged nature of poetry. De Man discovers



a deconstructionist consciousness in the poem which goes far beyond the degree and range of skepticism usually allowed Shelley and which achieves a progressive 'erasure' of faith, certainty and symbolism as the poem's chariot progresses through its various stages. This undoing culminates in the aporias of the "shape all light" which de Man sees as a figure for 'the figurality of all signification' and an ultimate instance of the illusoriness of romantic symbolism. The essay, a brilliant and provocative tour de force, has set the tone of the current debate about Shelley's language. To show what I think is at stake in this critique, I will, first, relate de Man's view of Shelley to earlier critical work on Shelley's imagery. Seen from the perspective of this previous criticism, we can begin to find the limits, and the basic critical values, of de Man's theory. As my thesis will counter many of these values, we need first to see them clearly. I hope to show that De Man's provocative analysis is limited to a certain aspect of Shelley's poetry and is thus less compelling than might at first be supposed.

The criticism of Shelley that appeared just before literary structuralism made its debut often includes a type of language analysis. Harold Bloom's Shelley's Mythmaking (1959), David Perkins' The Quest for Permanence (1959) and especially Earl Wasserman's The Subtler Language (1959) are well known works which devote a lot of attention to the problem of Shelley's orientation to words as such. They were given us by a critical generation that saw its task as

the defense of Shelley's meaning in the face of the New Critics' negative judgements. These first attempts to ground Shelley criticism in a wider theory of signs argued that Shelley's poetry, like Blake's work, rearranged the basic referential category of words and that this, in turn, required a particular form of reading. In this chapter I will attempt to clarify the issues in de Man's analysis of Shelley by briefly showing how two, representative, Shelley critics used the notion of verbal reference against the concerted attack on Shelley forwarded by the New Critics and by linking de Man's critique of Shelley's 'aesthetic ideology' to this older debate.<sup>2</sup> I will then propose an alternative method of studying Shelley's semiotics which is less reductive than de Man's and which can show us what I hope is the true scope of Shelley's struggle with symbolism.

### Linguistic Reference and the New Critics

There is a general recognition among Shelley critics that his imagery is difficult and sometimes poses insuperable problems on the level of language. William Keach captures some of this difficulty in the titles of his chapters: one is called, "Evanescence: Melting, Dissolving, Erasing," another "Shelley's Speed." But once stated, this recognition usually gives rise to positive and systematic responses. Frederick Pottle's defense will serve as an introduction to the problem.

[Shelley] imposes his will on the object of experience: he does not explore 'reality', he flies away from it. He seldom takes a gross, palpable, near-at-hand object from the world of ordinary perception and holds it for contemplation: his gaze goes up to the sky, he starts with objects that are just on the verge of becoming invisible or inaudible or intangible and he strains away even from these.<sup>3</sup>

Pottle also saw other disturbing and not altogether acceptable qualities in Shelley's figures like their 'evanescence,' their speed or their 'intoxicating and hypnotic' effects. These are not unusual reactions to Shelley's images; but Pottle's tone appears so frustrated and negative that, as Keach tells us, it takes some effort to remember he is an admirer and that this series of qualifications appears in what is essentially a positive, supportive study of Shelley's reputation.<sup>4</sup> This part of Pottle's article draws a contrast between New Critical precepts which applauded concrete detail, and Shelley's more evanescent practice and he has begun to approach the problem in terms of figures of speech and Shelley's approach to words. But one can feel in the ambiguities of Pottle's reaction, the necessity for a more comprehensive view of Shelley's language. This necessity was recognized, first, by critics who were not altogether friendly to Shelley's style.

William Empson's analysis of ambiguities in Shelley's imagery is consistently lukewarm. Shelley's images are an ambiguity of the 'self-inwoven' type because "when not being able to think of a comparison fast enough [Shelley]. . .

compares the thing to a vaguer or more abstract notion of itself, or points out that it is its own nature, or that it sustains itself by supporting itself."<sup>5</sup> Empson's example is drawn from the appearance of the "two visions of strange radiance" (one the chariot and the other the sphere) in the consummations of Prometheus Unbound's Act IV. The similes come thick and fast in this passage until the sphere is seen to carry the Spirit of the Earth, which, according to Empson, is likened ambiguously to itself:

Like to a child o'erwearied with sweet toil,  
On its own folded wings and wavy hair  
The Spirit of the Earth is laid asleep,  
And you can see its little lips are moving  
Within the changing light of their own smiles  
Like one who talks of what he loves in dream. (IV, 263-68)

For Empson, such ambiguities show that Shelley is simply in too much of a hurry to find an adequate comparison and his poetry suffers for it, although "even with so limited an instrument as the short-circuited comparison, he could do great things."<sup>6</sup> But for a critic like F.R. Leavis, whose rejection was almost total, Shelley's imagery presented a standing target. The confusion he felt at reading Shelley's poetry was simply a very bad fault and qualifications are not necessary. In "Mont Blanc," for instance, "The metaphorical and the actual, the real and the imagined, the inner and the outer, could hardly be more unsortably and indistinguishably confused."<sup>7</sup> Against Leavis' notions of accurate language and clear distinctions between imaginary and objec-

tive reference, an Asia, Prometheus, or Cythna do not stand up well.

David Perkins: Shelley as Symbolist

For the more positively inclined critic of Shelley, a key to answering such negative readings was to be found in less restrictive approaches to the basic categories of language. One strong line of counter-argument involved a theory of symbolism. David Perkins' The Quest for Permanence (1959) was, among other things, an apologia for Shelley's imagery which gave him a very different understanding of figures than the concretely rendered images favored by Leavis and later by the New Critics. Shelley's symbolism derived from a particular intersection of language and Idealist philosophy.

For Perkins, basic categories of language like 'reference' were an important means of connecting Shelley's philosophy and his imagery. Shelley had been misread because the Idealist and millennial tenor of his poetry ran counter to a prevailing objectivity and 'instrumentalist' understanding of language that had infected the modern critic (as well as Eliot or the protagonists of Imagism like Pound, who helped begin the movement for 'intensity' and concrete language and against romantic prolixity).<sup>8</sup> Perkins is often quite pointed in his awareness of this context: "The X-ray of our contemporary criticism may penetrate only

to some things; but it is nevertheless very penetrating, and what it is equipped to disclose, it does not find in Shelley."<sup>9</sup> We can be quite sure that the allusion here is to the New Critics and their notion that poetic imagery should be concrete and present 'particular fact'. Leavis' study of Shelley in Revaluation: Tradition & Development in English Poetry (1947) can be heard in the background of Perkins' remark, a position Leavis took in many of the Shelley studies of the time.<sup>10</sup> Beyond the idea that Shelley's images are often borrowed and confusing, the thrust of Leavis' critique is that Shelley's imagery communicates egoism and adolescent emotionalism because it is not referred to a steady object that is exterior to Shelley, ". . . there is nothing grasped in the poetry--no object offered for contemplation, no realized presence to persuade or move us by what it is."<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Wordsworth's poetry had the kind of imagery Leavis could admire. His careful, concretely rendered characters and the images of mountain crags and alpine scenery we find in The Prelude present an exterior and show Shelley's lack of care for anything outside himself and some easily held ideas. For Perkins, though, this supposed lack of awareness of a graspable, objective world was the result of a particular and conscious decision about language.

There is no Wordsworthian concern for concrete landscape and situation in Shelley because Shelley is developing a system of neo-Platonic ideas through imagery, that is, an

idealist symbolism. His stars, plants, eagles, towers, suns and intellectual winds represent the dynamic of a transcendent realm intersecting with our own, everyday world. "What seems to take place, as Shelley speaks of it, is a sudden jump or transference of consciousness to another realm or, alternately, an invasion from the transcendent into human life."<sup>12</sup> Cythna, Asia or the 'shape all light' of "The Triumph of Life" are analogues for a visitation from this realm and Shelley's imagery of children figures man's hope of an achieved innocence. Obviously these cannot be realistically 'fleshed out' characters. They are used to forward an immanent ideal, to project a world in which social oppression in all of its disguises has been overcome; Shelley's poetic imagery presents the brightest outline of human potential freed from the oppressions of religious and social custom. Accurate, painstaking descriptions of landscape or action are irrelevant to this kind of poetry because Shelley is consciously building up a series of new symbols which, under the guidance of his Godwinian and Platonic beliefs, will reform and replace older, authoritarian and religious icons.

But there is another meaning in Leavis' criticism that Shelley's poetry lacked a 'steady object' exterior to himself. Leavis has also raised the problem of origin. His query about the lack of exterior reference asked for the guarantee of Shelley's figures. What credible, impersonal source can save this poetry of ideals from being simply the

expression of a religion of personality? Again, symbolism affords an answer. Shelley's imagery is distanced from the poet's creating ego by what Perkins calls the symbolic 'method,' and here we see him cutting cleanly against the New Critic's theory of objective reference:

When society with the intellectual syntheses it supports is more diverse than homogeneous, those writers uncommitted to a creed can be sure of little more than their own personal experience . . . . Thus the problem becomes to put a large nexus of relatively personal concern in a way that is condensed, concrete, and referred to something objective; and the method of symbolism offers an answer.<sup>13</sup>

This passage, as part of the general introduction to Perkins' study, is meant to apply to a number of romantic poets, and thus necessarily neglects Shelley's passionate attachment to various definite philosophical positions, if not to creeds. But, according to Perkins, Shelley is saved from egoism through a different kind of denial of the self: this symbolism of a transcendent, ideal sphere is the crucial 'objectivity' in Shelley. In this poetry, perception is the 'raw nature' or the resource of symbolism, not its anchor and the symbolic image is Shelley's transcendent weapon against a corrupted world. But we can see that Perkins' usage is almost an exact reversal of what Leavis means by a reference to something 'objective' and we can begin to detect the tenor and depth of the problem in language that Shelley's imagery poses.

Perkins takes pains to show us how Shelley's symbolism



keeps him from the confusion of categories which so upset Leavis. As he develops this view of Shelley's symbolic reference, the inversion of Leavis' view of Wordsworth is also notable.

. . . a symbol can be so apt and fully satisfying that the person who employs it may seem to lose his grip. He may, that is, fail to remember or realize that he is speaking in symbolic terms and confuse his symbol with the reality for which it stands. Wordsworth, as we said, was especially prone to this type of literalism. Shelley was not.<sup>14</sup>

There is, then, no confusion of categories in Shelley's poems; Shelley is very conscious that his symbols are analogues, not realities, and he maintains a clear distinction between language and the other world which it can invoke.<sup>15</sup> Of the two, Wordsworth is the more likely to confuse or blend the concrete image and the transcendent. For Shelley, it is only through the tensions of a symbolism fully aware of its status as sign, that the fallen world of custom will be lifted back into a progressive life of the mind and spirit.

Perkins' response shows us the relativity of the notion of reference. He has put his theory of the idealistic symbol to a specific, rhetorical use and has shown that the New Critic's theory of 'objective' reference was simply inadequate to Shelley's images. Both a sensory and an idealist (symbolic) kind of reference can occur in poetry, and by enclosing Shelley's images within a wider frame of values (social idealism), Perkins has called the New Crit-

ics' own claims to 'objectivity' into question. Seen in the light of Perkins' analysis of Shelley, Leavis' notion of figurative language now seems based in conservative values. After reading Perkins' analysis, we become suspicious that Leavis is against Shelley not simply because he thinks he is a bad poet technically or because Shelley uses abstract or non-object oriented language; he might be bad because his images forward neo-Platonic, revolutionary, progressive, feminist or other egalitarian ideals. Apart from his explanation of Shelley's symbolism, Perkins has shown us how seemingly neutral notions of language like 'reference' can be affected by a wider evaluative framework, especially in the criticism of Shelley. Perkins' analysis also implies, uneasily, some degree of tolerance of a transcendent 'realm' which Shelley's symbols in some way communicate.

Earl Wasserman: Shelley and Constitutive Syntax

Although their views of Shelley seem based in different theories of reference, Perkins and Leavis have a great deal in common in their views on language. They both believe in a relation between words and their referents that makes language an accurate medium for some kind of content, whether it be the image of an ideal, an object or a presence. Perkins' symbols 'stand for' a transcendent world, and Leavis' metaphors adequately 'refer to' objects.

A very different language analysis can be found in Earl R. Wasserman's energetic defense of Shelley in The Subtler Language. This work also came out in 1959, (its general approach is less discernible, though present, in Wasserman's later, Shelley: A Critical Reading, (1971)). In the earlier work, language is clearly Wasserman's major category. Taking his title from a key passage in The Revolt of Islam, he attempts his rescue of Shelley's imagery by proposing that it was another kind of language, a language within language, which, as Cythna tells us in the poem, might be a hermetic "key of truths which once were dimly taught."<sup>16</sup> Wasserman proposes a new model of symbolism that does not rely on notions of 'standing for'. His notion of how words signify in poetry seems particularly directed to the New Critical explanation of a poem's unity. According to this view, the poem should be a 'self-sustaining cosmos,'<sup>17</sup> and in order to see the distinctiveness of Wasserman's model, we will first have to explore one New Critic's ideas about this unity.

Cleanth Brooks held that great poetry stands in no need of exterior forms of analysis or interpretation (other than aesthetic modes) because such poetry is self-referring, or adequate to itself, "the poem is not to be conceived of as a statement, 'clear,' 'beautiful,' or 'eloquent,' of some truth imposed upon the poem from without."<sup>18</sup> For Brooks, poetic adequacy meant something like self-containment. Political interpretation, or theories of poetry based in history and communication, applied too narrow an angle of

vision to the complex and rich message of the poem and could say nothing about its art; philosophical analysis again left out too much of the dramatic, emotional or paradoxical elements of good poetry and was thus also an inadequate mode of analysis.<sup>19</sup> In The Well Wrought Urn we find that a good poem does not 'make statements' or flesh out abstract propositions exterior to itself, rather it, 'tests propositions' by putting them into dramatic action and a good poem is judged by assessing "the relative complexity of the unifying attitude--the power of tensions involved in it, the scope of the reconciliation which it is able to make . . . ." <sup>20</sup> Evidently criticism should at no point confuse a poem's meaning with its philosophy; its unities are of a different order. Brooks would "take the poem out of competition with scientific, historical, and philosophical propositions"<sup>21</sup> and make it a free-standing, aesthetic object.

Wasserman counters these ideas by first shifting the ground of the argument to language and away from aesthetics: he translates the idea of unity into a notion of completed, consistent symbolism. In contrast to Perkins' transcendent kind of symbolic reference, however, a much wider definition is intended for this word. Firstly, for Wasserman, the word 'symbol' means a new kind of organization of the elements within a language. Like mathematical systems,

A poem also abstracts from the outside reality, transforms what it abstracts into the symbols of language, and becomes 'true' not in so far as it is transferable to nonartistic events but when the symbolic organization struck out has fulfilled itself so as to be experienced as a self-sufficient world.<sup>22</sup>

For Wasserman, the notion of 'symbol' thus refers not to a language of fixed, otherworldly reference, but to a new kind of word usage that, like the signs of algebra or mathematics, has an integrity or an internal logic of its own; it is a self-sufficient world in the sense of being consistent or systematic and its newness is its principle of organisation, its syntax. As we shall see this kind of self-sufficiency does not outlaw philosophic analysis; it requires it. The second new meaning that Wasserman attaches to the unity of a symbolic structure is a more radical departure from Brooks's definition of coherence. In order to see it clearly we will again have to summarize Brooks.

Shelley seems to mark an important boundary for New Critical thought about poetry. The example used by Brooks to show a failed unity is Shelley's "The Indian Serenade" and he brings in T. S. Eliot's general difficulty with Shelley's beliefs to show where he thinks Shelley's fault lies. For Eliot, Shelley's poetry allowed in philosophical interpretation because the ideas in his poetry were neither coherent nor mature; his imagery, again, is not 'objective' or "founded on the facts of experience."<sup>23</sup> Brooks explained that this reaction was possible because the poem was too abstract: "Certain statements, explicit or implied, because they are not properly assimilated to a total context, wrench themselves free from the context, and demand to be judged on ethical or religious grounds."<sup>24</sup> Brooks would ask Eliot to go a step further in his criticism and take out the philo-

sophical test and leave only a dramatic or aesthetic test. If he would do this, then he would not be judging the poem from a philosophical point of view but "regard as acceptable any poem whose unifying attitude is one which really achieves unity ("coherence"), but which unifies, not by ignoring but by taking into account the complexities and apparent contradictions of the situation concerned. . . ."25

For both Brooks and Eliot, Shelley's Godwinian or Platonic beliefs were too obvious and were immature. But for Brooks, there is not enough art, irony or paradox in his poetry. The philosophical or political argument was too near the surface and too recognizable; it had not been 'tested,' or placed adequately against an opposite which would qualify its dogmatism and allow in the paradoxes and ambiguities upon which great art is based. Shelley's poem was sentimental; he had not fully assimilated his progressive ideas and beliefs into the self-contained, autotelic world that, for Brooks, marked great poetry.

Wasserman seem to have taken on precisely this idea of a smoothly fashioned yet paradoxical unity in his defense of Shelley. For him, the essential nature of poetry lies precisely in the 'wrenching' of meaning and its ability to disrupt and replace accepted unities of language. Poetry, for Wasserman, is an experiment with a new philosophical proposition and the development of this proposition into a symbol system impossible for prose or everyday language. In order to obtain self-consistency, this new system of ideas

will have to break accepted syntactical rules through its use of figures and its rhetoric.

By calling upon syntactical means beyond those of grammar, poetry creates a new syntax and hence establishes a new set of presuppositions in its language. If a given vocabulary structures reality, poetry charges words with new references and, by engaging them earnestly in an intra-referential system within the poem, wrenches them out of the given vocabulary. If a given syntactical system contains preconceptions that limit thought and expression, the extraordinary syntactical possibilities of poetry create a new syntactical order and therefore a new organization of reality.<sup>26</sup>

This last phrase is crucial. For Wasserman, the poet, through the syntactical means of rhetorical functions like metaphor, alliteration, or rhyme, folds language back upon itself and this opaque presence of words reflecting on themselves takes on Orphic power. Great poetry does not render an objective experience or suspend experience within ambiguity and paradox so that we can see the complexities of life; it takes the conditions of experience into itself and remakes them. This means that poetic language can now make manifest for us what was once a purely abstract or imaginative cosmos; it can give birth, through syntactic patterns which have a conscious epistemological bias, to new myths.<sup>27</sup>

In The Subtler Language, we find Wasserman developing the full implications of this view of language. A poem like Mont Blanc cannot be read simply as the arguing of a philosophical position, nor is it the placing of a new set of ideas in dramatic confrontation with their opposites. The New Critics' judgement simplifies something that is very

much more complex. Wasserman's orientation makes for an almost atomistic reading of the epistemology of figures, word usage and syntax in a poem. The close readings of poetry that the New Critics preached and practiced are outdone, for instance, by Wasserman's reading of Mont Blanc. I cannot do justice to its depth and complexity here, but in order to place de Man's theory, we need to see, roughly, what one comes up with when this constitutive theory of poetic language is applied to a specific poem.

Wasserman finds a crux in the first sentence of the opening stanza which begins, "The everlasting universe of things/ Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,/ Now dark--now glittering--now reflecting gloom-- Now lending splendour." (l 1-4) A close look at this sentence reveals that it has gone severely against the usual grain of English grammar which, when it is describing minds and their effects, tends toward having a mind or actor predicate something about a separate, external world (or matter). For Wasserman this is the usual, materialist, bias of English with its syntax based on a dualism of mind and matter. Shelley has inverted this bias in a syntax in which objects seem to 'move through' a mind and the strangeness we feel upon reading these lines comes from our perception of an attempt to fuse idealist and materialist notions of our relation to an exterior.

. . . . in defining the universe of things as that which passes through the mind the opening lines carefully skirt both the materialistic and subjectively



idealistic extremes. Both this definition and the description of the darkness and brilliance allude to an objective reality; but, nevertheless what they both assert about that reality is its existence in the mind.<sup>28</sup>

Wasserman's prose shows the difficulty of translating into discursive language what the wrenched syntax of the first stanza of "Mont Blanc" seems to present as fact. Shelley is using his new philosophy, drawn here from both Berkeley and the "Intellectual Philosophy" of William Drummond, to create a new syntax. According to Drummond's doctrine, the world is an undifferentiated unity of subject and object; neither thought nor thing, it is a synthesis of both. Shelley's opening sentence, from which the whole poem unfolds, enacts this philosophy in its syntax: "The true unity of reality requires as a linguistic approximation that thing and thought be assimilated into each other by one constituting the subject and the other the predicate of the same sentence . . . ." <sup>29</sup> Instead of following the usual syntactical pattern which could differentiate a subject as mind, and a predicate as some matter on which it is having an effect or vice versa, Shelley's poem assimilates them in the same sentence; thus, the universe flows through a mind which both objectifies it and creates it, simultaneously. What Leavis thought of as hopelessly confused metaphor is an example of the power of language to create new dimensions of being through its syntax, that is, through the deliberate, philosophically aware, manipulation of signification--of the way in which language refers.

This approach, particularly, broke new ground in that its interpretation of Shelley drew from categories in grammar and the newer theories of language and used these against notions of poetry as ornamented philosophy and equally against the notion that philosophy should not appear in poetry. Wasserman's idea of constitutive syntax answered New Critical attacks precisely through the philosophical analysis of poetry that the New Critics did not favour. A poem was 'adequate statement' in a very different sense than intended by Brooks: it is philosophy put in practice in the theory of grammar and syntax it enacts and the newness of its statement bends and disrupts everyday language and requires painstaking philosophical interpretation to be understood.

Wasserman has also found a strategy for the defense of Shelley that does not rely on a notion of transcendent reference. Shelley, for Wasserman, practiced a philosophical skepticism; he could not, then, take a firm stand on the existence of a transcendent realm. Shelley's difference lies in his use of transformative syntax and the locus of the controversy over Shelley has now been shifted away from the question of egoism and away from the problematic question of another world to which poetry, as medium, can legitimately refer. It does not 'refer' to this world; it puts a new world together, word by word, element by element as it is written. The new focus is now on that moment when poetry is not simply a medium reflecting a complex world through

paradox and ambiguity, it is on that moment when it constitutes a new one.

The New Critics seemed to have used Shelley as their crux; he was the poet who, of all the Romantics, broke their aesthetic rules most thoroughly and who had been unjustly placed in the front rank. Shelley scholars like Perkins and Wasserman, interested in rescuing their poet from this judgement sought linguistic criteria on which to build their case; and the constitutive function of syntax, theories of symbolism, and reference were some of the categories and terms drawn from the theoretical side of language that they used to do this.<sup>30</sup>

We will next turn to the post-structuralist analysis of Shelley and see that de Man's linguistic analysis is clearly a response to the theories of symbolism and reference generated in this debate with the New Critics. A symbolism which refers to another realm and a syntax of symbols which transforms the world are precisely the targets of Paul de Man's sharpest satire.

### De Man and Symbolism

Paul de Man is perhaps the most well known North American proponent of deconstruction and his method is as rigorously anti-romantic and anti-mystic as that of any modern linguist. His writings cover a wide range of both continental and English romantic writers, and he has written one

long, complex article on Shelley. Because this article relies for its effect on a number of submerged deconstructionist principles developed in other texts, we need, first, to explore his more general stance. His viewpoint can be clarified if we first recall Perkins' definition of symbolism:

. . . . one can distinguish a symbol when the image used calls for a weight of response beyond what we should ordinarily be expected to grant and, secondly, when the image is elaborated at some length without much overt metaphoric reference. In other words, the second term of the comparison is not made obvious, either because it is not fully possessed by the writer or because its metaphoric reach is too complex and many-faceted.<sup>31</sup>

The notion that the full meaning of a symbol is not 'possessed by a writer' has, today, a faintly ironic ring. The added meaning has been defined in collective terms by popular structuralist works like Roland Barthes' Mythologies or Levi Strauss' Tristes Tropiques and their analyses of the complex symbols of everyday, tribal life. For Perkins, this positive definition of symbolism was adequate and, as we have seen, a valuable defense which proved a wide-ranging coherence in Shelley's language. To Perkins, Wasserman and many other critics of the period before structuralism, the word 'symbol' had a certain pregnanz. I do not think it an overstatement to say that De Man has placed himself in profound opposition to any such legitimation of symbolism; his work is a strong, well integrated and persistent attack on this word and the awareness it presupposes or supports.

In his 1969 essay, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man contends that romantic criticism has overridden and simplified the ambiguous nature of romantic poetry and has pronounced a "supremacy of the symbol" in its criticism of this literature. Romantic poetry itself may fall into moments of symbolic mystification, but, unlike romantic criticism, its own lapses are undercut by a much more realistic use of the more limited figures of allegory and irony. Frank Lentricchia has noted the Sartrean basis of de Man's deconstruction of romantic criticism. "In the Sartrean terms which de Man favors, symbol is simply the language of bad faith, a discourse that would transform pour soi into en soi, time into space, and contingency, process, and the nonidentity of human being with itself into a condition of certitude."<sup>32</sup> If Lentricchia is correct, De Man's ideas are pointed particularly at critics like Perkins. He is much exercised by the idea that romantic poets were attempting to find surety and permanence in a self-constructed symbolism after 18th century rationalism and science had undermined religious equivalents. De Man echoes the New Critics in his understanding that the romantics have, in their quest for permanence, used a confused and immature language. He goes very much further, however, than Leavis or Brooks and grasps the essence of the symbolic mode as the creation of illusory relationships with natural entities or transcendent realms that lie outside the sphere of human consciousness. Romantic symbolism and the criticism which forwards it are mysti-

fifications and are often devious attempts to go beyond the limits of human signification.

In his analysis of Rilke in Allegories of Reading, (a book which Rajan sees as marking a change from phenomenology to a more thoroughgoing, structuralist-rhetorical approach)<sup>33</sup> we find a startling inversion and deflation of symbolic language. De Man is suspicious of Rilke's reception because it has required that we make a myth of him: the rich imagery of his poetry is 'an attractive surface' through which we are duped into giving our assent to a highly doubtful role. "Rilke assumes for poetry the furthest reaching promise conceivable."<sup>34</sup> He wants us to believe that through his poetic symbolism, salvation from life's basic existential limit, the alienation of consciousness from nature and from a transcendent domain, is possible. Rilke criticism has been seduced by this priest-like stance, and has assumed an identity between the poet's pathos and his language. For this criticism, Rilke's language is entirely medium and his symbolism fully reflective of the theme it conveys; thus, it is "entirely ancillary in its relation to a fundamental experience (the pain and pathos of being) which it merely reflects."<sup>35</sup> But, for de Man, this agreement about the fullness of Rilke's language is a mystification of something much less sublime. Rilke's mastery "is primarily phonic in kind."<sup>36</sup> Through a particular subterfuge allowed him by the sonorities of poetry, Rilke is presenting a transcendent world, (for which his suffering is

prerequisite) as a certainty; but this certainty is, really, the product of a very shaky rhetorical maneuver. The subterfuge is a "phonocentrism" that reaches an epiphany in a confusion of assonance with God. In the following excerpt, de Man has just finished a study of the alliteration in some of Rilke's early verses:

It may seem preposterous to associate such a near-mechanical procedure with the name of God. Yet, the apparent blasphemy can just as well be considered as the hyperbole of an absolute phonocentrism. A poem of The Book of Monastic Life (1:20) asserts the possibility of overcoming death itself by means of euphony, and it fulfills this prophecy in its own texture, in the 'dark interval' (im dunklen Intervall) that in its assonance both separates and unites the two words "Tod" (death) and "Ton" (sound).<sup>37</sup>

This play of sound is, according to de Man, the crucial semantic movement of Rilke's poetry. In essence, the rhetoric of such poetry asserts that if the sounds of two words are the same, their meanings or signifieds are the same. Thus, to sing Rilke's song, to utter its sad alliterations, is to make magic: through the sound of words alone, the intangible is connected to the manifest, and our limited human vision is opened to the eternal.

We can see in this study of a reclaimed Christian symbolism the use of rhetorical terms that mark a de Manian analysis. And behind this technical apparatus, we detect a very pointed critique, even an exorcism, of our current reading of Romantic texts as symbolic structures. Rilke has been accepted by the majority of his critics as a modern

romantic and as a benefactor and light giver. This acceptance is based almost entirely on his imagery and the notion that because it manages a coherent symbolism, it is a form of truth; to find that Rilke's symbols, and thus his reputation, are based on nothing other than puns shows how deeply de Man distrusts the role of vates. We begin to see that de Man is attempting not merely to explicate romantic poetry; his goal is much more far-reaching. He is attempting to find the fundamental aporias, (those moments of indecision, disjuncture or inconsistency) in this literature and his criticism is designed to expose the current, non-structuralist readings of romantic symbols as acts of bad faith. Romantic poets are often conscious of the uncertainties of their symbols (romantic irony and the doubling of values and voices in romantic imagery attest to this), but critics who have not paid attention to this level become trapped in irresolvable dilemmas of irrationality, confusion of perception and mystification.

Perkins' criticism of Shelley can, then, be faulted on similar grounds. Perkins has fallen into the seductions of 'natural language' because he has accepted an uncomplicated theory of transcendent symbols, an acceptance very similar to the faithful reception of Rilke. Perkins has also agreed to an absolute alignment between Shelley's language and his 'pathos'; thus, in his criticism, language is mere medium, accurately reflective of and ancillary to Shelley's theme. Criticism of poetry based in modern notions of the sign and



modern theories like existentialism cannot allow such easy faiths. Language cannot save us from 'a primal divorce of consciousness and nature' and any attempt at a reconciliation through symbols is simply mystification.<sup>38</sup> Perkins, to de Man, would be one of those who has helped maintain a 'supremacy of the symbol' in the critical reading of Shelley and Shelley has thereby been made into something like a salvationist or priest who has privileged modes of communication with another realm.

#### De Man, Cratylism and Paronomasis

In Wasserman's theory there is a phase in the creation of a poem when language is no longer simply a medium through which the poet sends or receives messages, transcendent or otherwise. During this phase, through the special syntactic potential of poetry, the poet manipulates and changes the referential dimension (signification) of words to express a new ontology and creates a new possibility of being, first in language, then (presumably) in perception and social life. De Man has been quite explicit about his disagreement with critical approaches which accept a romantic poetry able to transform the basic referential categories of language.<sup>39</sup> The distrust appeared first in phenomenological terms. In an early essay, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," (1960) we find that "poetic language is merely constitutive;

while it can 'originate,' it cannot give a foundation to what it originates and remains only an intent of consciousness."<sup>40</sup> If language cannot 'give a foundation' to what it posits, then constitutive language remains always an illusion. No matter how syntactically shaped or symbolically coherent, it cannot change the way words operate as secondary constructs of a consciousness whose existential plight is to be always and ultimately alone and divorced from the natural world. When poetic language attempts to be more than hypothesis or figure it is "essentially paradoxical and condemned in advance to failure. There can be flowers that 'are' and poetic words that 'originate,' but no poetic words that 'originate' as if they 'were'."<sup>41</sup> This essay forwards a Sartrean perspective, but later essays add Saussurian categories of language to the critique of the false consciousness, (the reified intentions), of romantic symbolism.

According to Lentricchia, de Man merely uses structuralist terms as a mask for a basically existentialist stance toward literary fictions.<sup>42</sup> But the structuralist tenor of his argument is clearly apparent in a more recent article: "The Resistance to Theory" (1981).<sup>43</sup> The article comes close to defining modern literary theory as based in Saussurian linguistics: "Contemporary literary theory comes into its own in such events as the application of Saussurian linguistics to literary texts."<sup>44</sup> De Man has now added a new structuralist scientism to his theory of literature and this is particularly relevant to the kind of constitutive

reference proposed by Wasserman. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man faults both Wasserman and Meyer Abrams for having Coleridge's or Wordsworth's poetry attempt a grand synthesis which merges subjective and objective realms. The texts of these poets are much more ambiguous and this forces the two critics "into a persistent contradiction" which leads to an interpretive impasse: either the romantic text is solipsistic, confusing nature and mind, or it forwards an unrealizable naturalism.<sup>45</sup> We come to the essence of this idea in the analysis of Rilke criticism. A poet may try to re-invent language by deliberately and consciously reforming its own referential base, but this is now not simply the working out of a psychological impossibility; it is a deliberate rhetorical maneuver operating only on the level of language and thus never to be taken as affecting an extra-textual reality. Poetry, no matter what philosophical perspective it is manifesting, cannot change the fundamental significative structures of signs. To see the Saussurian edge now given to his critique of constitutive language, we will have to go into the allusions in this article in some depth; there is an important de Manian gist to be found in them.

The relevant passage occurs in De Man's skeptical review of Barthes' study, "Proust et les noms" (1967). De Man forwards a double commentary, directed both to Proust's text and his critic. Barthes would like to take the game Proust is playing with words seriously. Proust would see

"the relationship between signifier and signified as motivated, the one copying the other and representing in its material form the signified essence of the thing (and not the thing itself) . . . . This realism (in the scholastic sense of the word), which conceives of names as the 'copy' of the ideas, has taken, in Proust, a radical form. But one may well ask whether it is possible to be a writer without some sort of belief in the natural relationship between names and essences."<sup>46</sup> De Man cuts across this idea that constitutive language can, in the case of a highly self-conscious writer like Proust, be tolerated; the motivated relation Proust plays with is simply a mystification, a 'virtual image' having no power to change basic structures of consciousness, perception or language. In his response, De Man now clearly echoes the Saussurian theory that language is anonymous and outside the powers of both the collective and the individual to change its structures.

For Saussure, as for de Man, the sign is autonomous and a deliberate change in its structure or its basic orientation is impossible. "The signifier, though to all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other . . . . No individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice that has been made."<sup>47</sup> The connection between signifier and signified is

always conventional and for de Man any constitutive relation which seems to appear between them is the effect of a specific trope. We next hear de Man slipping into a language which is almost a Saussurian legalism:

For the convergence of sound and meaning celebrated by Barthes in Proust and, as Gerard Genette has decisively shown, later dismantled by Proust himself as a seductive temptation to mystified minds, is also considered here to be a mere effect which language can perfectly well achieve, but which bears no substantial relationship, by analogy or by ontologically grounded imitation, to anything beyond that particular effect. It is a rhetorical rather than an aesthetic function of language, an identifiable trope (paronomasis) that operates on the level of the signifier and contains no responsible pronouncement on the nature of the world--despite its powerful potential to create the opposite illusion.<sup>48</sup>

De Man has then formulated the category of 'phonocentrism' we found in his analysis of Rilke more precisely along Saussurian lines. 'Paronomasis' is related to the pun and is the trope which relies on a play on words with the same pronunciation but different meanings, like Ulysses' 'Noman' or 'Adam missed his missus.'<sup>49</sup> The idea that names copy essences (Cratylism) is too dangerous even to be played with. If language is given this capability then the whole romantic error is allowed; Wordsworth's connection with God through landscape, Rilke's 'salvationist stance,' perhaps even Dostoevsky's belief that he had created prototypes of real minds in his novels, would be possible. A privileged language which has the potential to re-create or alter its basis as a sign is now exposed by de Man as a rhetorical

seduction. The idea of the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified becomes unwaveringly constant in de Man's work and we now see it flickering like a metaphysical truth within the rhetorical analysis he favours.

The interweaving of moral and technical terms in this passage about Barthes is reminiscent of the New Critics' denunciation of Shelley on grounds of his immaturity and lack of objective reference, though now 'language,' and specifically Saussurian linguistics is the critical objectivity, the touchstone, which allows his perspective.<sup>50</sup> Barthes' tentative wish for motivated signs is 'irresponsible,' a way of spreading the powerful illusion that language can create, magically and directly, a kind of reality while the basis of the illusion is nothing more important than a sonority and pun. We can also see that de Man's critiques of Rilke and Barthes again place Wasserman's argument about Shelley's language in the depths of a contradiction.

Wasserman's attempt to show a coherence of symbols in Shelley's poetry was the result of an analysis grounded in a 'syntactical' or 'non-referential' perspective. Shelley's imagery is consistent and plausible if it is looked at as a new philosophy of language which attempts to rearrange the referential relation of signs to the world. For de Man, Wasserman's notion that a coherent symbol system, and a new world, can arise from an intra-referential function, means that he has also been seduced by a 'Cratylism,' a language theory which, like Barthes' tentative acceptance of Proust,

allows a confusing of signs and signifieds; through it, fiction is forced into reality and poetic signs are distorted into acquiring the presence and wholeness of a natural object, or, in the case of Shelley, objects have come to have the expressivity of signs. To the degree that his criticism follows from a constitutive theory of words, Wasserman is also, then, a sentimentalist and mystifier of romantic language.

De Man's critique of this kind of reading can be taken as the newest development in the critical struggle over the legitimacy of romantic symbolism. Having found the general outline of de Man's views on reference we can now study its particular application to Shelley.

#### De Man and Shelley's "The Triumph of Life"

This is not the place to give a full account of de Man's analysis of Shelley's poem; I will save this for a later chapter devoted to The Triumph of Life. It will suffice here to sketch an outline of his study in order to bring our comparison of de Man and the debate over romantic symbolism to its most problematic instance and the instance with which my thesis will be most concerned.

In de Man's complex analysis of Shelley's poem, we see an alliance with a romantic mind that is unusual for him; we must remember, however, that de Man is a superb rhetorician and that a temporary alliance with poetry can often be the

most effective strategy for decentering a critical reading. In "Shelley Disfigured" de Man argues that the primary theme of The Triumph of Life, is language itself. Criticism like Wasserman's or Perkins' which is based in the acceptance of symbolic modes obscures this theme. The poem itself attempts to divert its own language from a prevailing tendency toward 'monumentalization' and romantic criticism has inverted the text. In one sense de Man means the term 'monumentalism' to refer to the cultural hermeneutic by which romanticism is continuously revived as an identifier of contemporary faiths. But it can also be read as a coded term for motivated language or constitutive symbolism. While contemporary critics like Perkins and Wasserman might monumentalize Shelley, he did not use symbols as a new kind of reference, nor did he use language to create new worlds; his ambiguous text qualifies both these questionable modes. For de Man, because the Shelley of "The Triumph of Life" is clearly aware of the symbol as a problem, he has partly overcome his own blindness and constructed a proto-deconstructionist text.<sup>51</sup> While the article may seem to be in agreement with a romantic attitude, de Man's analysis is based, as Wasserman found in the New Critics, on a remarkable omission.

According to de Man, in "The Triumph of Life," Shelley finally comes to doubt literature and its project of building up a progression of literary or philosophical masterpieces. The poem enacts a gesture opposite to mastery.



Through its persistent interlocution of philosophers, artists and the powers of the world about 'the meaning of life,' it performs a series of erasures and 'forgettings' (each question is unanswered), and the series reaches its negative peak in the notion that just as Shelley will inevitably 'erase' Rousseau from his memory after writing the poem, so "The Social Contract can be said to erase Julie from the canon of Rousseau's works, or The Triumph of Life can be said to reduce all of Shelley's previous work to nought."<sup>52</sup> The terminus of this procedure is, for Shelley, the erasure of the language of poetry itself. These irrevocable and unforgiving nullifications of previous texts and master-works lead to a stage when the poet questions the basis of all texts and their relation to life. Once started in this direction, Shelley must then reach the point where he will begin to deconstruct his own poetic intention in the very text he is creating.

De Man concludes that the "shape all light" of lines 343 - 352 is the paramount act of this deconstruction.<sup>53</sup> The specular being which Rousseau sees hovering above a natural well-spring is a pure analogy of language, an image of Rousseau's notion that words originated around social foci like the well. We can no longer see the shining figure who holds a "chrystal glass / Mantling with bright Nepenthe" (358) as a symbol of social progress, or of platonic love. According to de Man, by this time in the poem, Shelley had bracketed all the other possibilities of signification. The

interplay he sees in this image between idyllic beauty and disruption echoes an earlier reading of Rousseau where "The first register [in Rousseau's works] is one of delicacy of feeling, whereas a curious brand of cunning and violence pervades the other."<sup>54</sup> This shining shape in The Triumph of Life represents the subtle, and violent, imposition of symbolic language itself. Paradoxically, because it is a symbol of symbolism, the shape also represents Shelley's final abandonment of symbolism, (the reification of figures) and of known literary structures like the quest ("Prometheus Unbound") or the elegy ("Adonais") and a settling on language itself as the final form and problem. The text arouses the suspicion that its negations are a "Verneinung, an intended exorcism,"<sup>55</sup> based in Shelley's realization of the madness at the heart of his own symbolic gestures. This then is Shelley's very late mea culpa; his recognition of the limits of his own mind and of language, a final confession that symbolism is a crossing between signifier and signified which 'disfigures' the real and infects the reader with a specular vision of something which is not yet, presented in such a way that it appears to be.

The analysis is deliberately provocative and quite in keeping with the line we have seen de Man has taken generally with romantic literature. In addition, his analysis is not simply a reading of Shelley's last major poem--a number of other critics have seen The Triumph of Life as a giving up of outworn faiths.<sup>56</sup> He differs from this criticism

because he clearly agrees with Shelley's deconstruction of his own aesthetic. The scope of the analysis forces one to agree, partly, with Lentricchia's idea that De Man's use of structuralist terms is a mask for a thematic criticism.<sup>57</sup> I would, however, go further than seeing it as a cover for an existentialist critique of Marxism. There is also a theological streak in his approach. One senses that for de Man, writers like Shelley, Rilke, Wordsworth and Rousseau (and the critics who forward their figures) are playing with sacred fires and breaking ancient rules of language. De Man's reading of Shelley has something of the puritan about it; his reading of The Triumph of Life as a text which undoes its own logocentrism reasserts primary limits and boundaries of the sign and recalls us from an idolatry of the figure to more proper, quietistic modes which like prayer and worship confess our uncertainty and our lostness even within the spaces of our own language. This quietistic tone can be more clearly recognized when we realize that his disavowal of symbolic modes and motivated language is also a retreat from any language of relationship.

A deconstructionist approach which relies so heavily on Saussurian linguistics runs the risk of reducing the text's psychology to an abstract model of language alone, or a kind of linguistic formalism which denies the text's humanity. Thus, De Man's reading of Shelley can be countered through an approach to semiotics which firstly allows symbolism as a problem Shelley is aware of, and, secondly, does not use a

linguistic model but a relational, discourse model of language.

### De Man and Social Reference

The more one thinks of de Man's theory in relation to what is actually done with words in life, the more strange his views become as an analysis of literature. A little thought about verbal reference shows us that his combination of existentialism, Derridian post-structuralism, rhetoric and Saussure denies a very basic aspect of textual 'signification.' Lentricchia and others have noticed the apolitical, and ahistorical bias in de Man's theory, but I think there are other lacunae. To begin at the simplest level: What is the structuration of a whispered word of love, a conversation, a command to get something done, an appeal for more just treatment, a bill, a written law or a contract? Are all these, in their essence, acts of bad faith, reified intentions, mere misuses of language? These uses assume, (and our lives are spent in them), that words and texts are always more than mere arbitrary signs, more than 'language' in de Man's sense; words used with another being in mind are forms of action, patterns of persuasive energy, gestures of sociality, bindings and releasings, a creation and maintenance of relation. This aspect of language has, of course,

been recognized long before deconstruction. Jurgen Habermas has developed a profound theory of social life based on a 'communicative competence' which is the prior condition of both reasoning and linguistic structures.<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor places this relational kind of reference at the origin of language, "Language is fashioned and grows not principally in monologue, but in dialogue, or better, in the life of the speech community"<sup>59</sup>

But there is growing awareness within the deconstruction movement itself of the decontextualization involved in de Man's approach. Rajan, for instance, would maintain a deconstructive approach but correct the problem of an alienated theory through the "insertion of the reader into the literary equation" and would replace the contextual lacunae with the study of how the text incorporates a "reader as someone who gives a body to the intentional text by applying it within his or her own life."<sup>60</sup> To take another, quite different, example from within the group of critics who are allied with structuralism or modern semiotics, Tvtzan Todorov has shown the scope of the particular excision performed through de Man's use of Saussurian terms. The category that has been simply ignored in de Man's theory of literature is discourse. For Todorov, there is a series of classifications that begins with a distinction between discourse and language and which ends in the indirect meanings of symbolism.

Language exists in the abstract; it has a lexicon and grammatical rules as its input and sentences as its output. Discourse is a concrete manifestation of language, and it is produced, necessarily, in a specific context that involves not only linguistic elements but also the circumstances of their production: the interlocuters, the time and place, the relations prevailing among these extralinguistic elements.

For Todorov, the object of linguistics and the object studied when one studies discourse are so different, they cannot be approached in the same framework. De Man collapses this difference through implying that the systemic of texts, their nature as signs, makes a fiction out of this other meaning of 'significance.' He seem to imply that texts cannot forward their strategies of relation with any hope of making a significant difference in a reader/listener; thus that there is no 'communicative competence' of writers which allows them to understand, engage, manipulate and effect an audience.<sup>61</sup>

This seems to be the thrust of "Semiology and Rhetoric" (1973) where the certainties of communication and response we usually give to figures and tropes is deconstructed. In one example, de Man draws on Archie Bunker's response to his wife's query about whether he wants his bowling shoes laced over or under. Bunker replies with a frustrated "What's the difference?" and his wife proceeds, patiently as with a child, to show him. In de Man's analysis of this response we find that one of the most common forms of rhetoric, the rhetorical question, is not 'persuasive' because its essence is a core of interpretative uncertainty, "it reveals his

[Bunker's] despair when confronted with a structure of linguistic meaning that he cannot control and holds the discouraging prospect of an infinity of similar future confusions, all of them potentially catastrophic in their consequences." <sup>62</sup> The wit is somewhat inflated because it is improbable that Bunker could have felt the range of uncertainty de Man seems to give him, an area of doubt that is, to use Lentricchia's appositions, 'existentialist, secular, dualistic, tragic, fearful and agonized.' But this analysis does show us that for de Man the communality of speech would not work as a model for texts; his emphasis on the abstract and formal notions of language, figure, and trope imply that seeing a text as discourse, is, like symbolism, an illusion, and writing is really a one-sided, existential struggle with an a-human system of signs that makes writers always in essential doubt about their project. In light of Todorov's distinction between discourse and abstract structures we can see that the viewpoint acts like an absolute minimalism. It raises the possibility of stripping literature rather completely bare of every claim it has to affect us, relate to us, appeal to us, challenge, help or change us and we can begin to see why de Man has raised so much response.

As we have seen, there are a number of possible counter-positions to de Man's reading of romantic literature. I would like to propose that his application of Saussurian 'structuralist hygiene' to Shelley itself breeds a form of

illusion or blindness; it is, firstly, the illusion that interpreting the last action in the drama 'disproves' all the play that precedes it; it is also the illusion that the averting of critical consciousness from a dimension of literary meaning makes this meaning disappear. De Man's view of Shelley obscures something important to literature and our understanding of Shelley: the long, hard struggle of a poet to come to terms with his own practice in terms of the relation of consciousness to language, poetic symbol and to a community. I think that semiotics can be a fruitful approach to Shelley; his work is a highly conscious experiment with symbolism, but a more just use of the semiotic perspective must include and allow both a semiotic awareness and a social relation in his texts. Rajan notes that the rigorous exclusion of these dimensions on the basis of a rhetoric supported by Saussurian linguistics denies the depth of the 'linguistic-critical' aspects of romantic literature itself. It thus obscures Shelley's connection to a line of philosophical thought about language which was itself very critical of the relation of discourse to symbols, self, and society. I would like to borrow one term from Todorov's vocabulary which can help show the depths of Shelley's awareness of semiotics.<sup>63</sup> The term is actually a derivation from Bakhtin's heteroglossia and is an attempt to allow its ranges into the vocabulary of semiotics whereby symbolism is not seen a distorted form of the signified-signifier relation. For Todorov, structuralist analysis of



literature like de Man's reduces all of romantic language to the sign. He would allow an interplay between the two modes of symbol and sign. Symbolism is a form of signification in its own right.

We are prepared today to affirm heterology: the modes of signifying are multiple, and each is irreducible to any other; their difference lends itself to no value judgments whatsoever; each one, as A.W. Schlegel would say, may be exemplary in its kind.<sup>64</sup>

There is a tolerance of difference here that we do not find in De Man's texts and it allows us the possibility of a more accurate mapping of the relation between symbolism and language, utterance and sign in Shelley's text, (its semiotics). The de Manian exorcism of symbolism flattens signification to one type, and in its quest to demystify, it has ignored Shelley's lifelong struggle with a language of relation, the problematic and often fractured consciousness of 'otherness' built into most of his poetry and the tentative, hypothetical nature of his use of the symbolic mode to further his ideals. Demystification by itself is a limited way of life, something Shelley, a very astute demystifier, realized. His understanding of language seems built on the ruins of a rhetoric of religion, a patristic symbolism, which for him prevented human relation and produced alienation. For our understanding of a poet so firmly committed to a social viewpoint and a poet so aware of the social forces of the symbol, any use of a model which ignores this

relational-social dimension as its method of judgement must raise questions of adequacy.

De Man and the Chronology of Shelley's Poetry

Heterology, then, with its acceptance of symbolism, is a more fruitful notion with which to study Shelley's semiotics. It brings us quickly to the idea that de Man's interpretation can also be judged on grounds of its generality. His article on Shelley implies something about Shelley's previous poetry and it asserts something about influences, and these implications and assertions need questioning.

De Man sees a deconstruction of the idea of a 'monumentalism' (constitutive or symbolic language) in "The Triumph of Life," but what evidence do we have for a faith in a 'monumental language' of Literature or philosophy in Shelley's poetry prior to this very late poem? If the aporias of the symbolic mode are so close to the surface in this last poem, is there evidence that the poetry preceding the "The Triumph of Life" is more heavily marked by the mystifications of symbolism? Is, then, the chronology de Man seems to suggest correct? Does Shelley come to this doubled language so late in his career? Is there counter-evidence that would suggest that a skepticism about symbolism and allegory is one of the essential marks of Shelley's style almost from the very beginning?

Secondly, de Man has placed Rousseau as the essential philosophical touchstone for language in the poem. What evidence do we have for the centrality of Rousseau in Shelley's notions of language? Are other philosophical influences also germane to his semiotics? A great deal of Shelley criticism seems to think that Godwin, Drummond, Berkeley, Paine, Plato, Wollstonecraft and Hume, among others, are also important influences. Godwin, especially, has some well developed ideas about language and Shelley seems to have absorbed them very early. These ideas are part of a conscious, very deliberate revision of Rousseauian theory and Godwin is not mentioned in de Man's article.

The attempt to answer these questions will form the core of my thesis and they inform its chronological approach. I will be analysing each of the major phases in Shelley's work in order to see if we can detect something like the semiotic consciousness de Man analyses only in the last phase. In Chapter II, I will deal with the semiotics of Shelley's Gothic novels and show the birth of the question de Man uncovers in the last phase. Chapter III will deal with the conceptions of language derived from Godwin that we can find in "Queen Mab," and "Alastor." In Chapter IV, I will attempt to show how the sophisticated, 'skeptical' sense of symbolism he has developed in "Alastor" is complicated in "Mont Blanc" and continued in the mature achievement of "Prometheus Unbound." In the last chapter, V, I will have gathered together enough evidence to read

"The Triumph of Life" as a final use of a liberated symbolism so precariously put together in the previous poetry. I hope to show, in this last chapter, how de Man's reading has left out the true focus of the poem's thought about language. In "The Triumph of Life" we will find a highly refined but discernible use of Godwin's theory of opinion, rather than a final giving up of a Rousseauian symbol. As my answer develops, I hope to show a very different kind of semiotics in the curve of Shelley's development than is implied by de Man.

In his early work, Shelley seems to have wanted to call attention to the powers and dynamics of communication in a number of ways. The characters in his two Gothic novels theorize at some length about the nature of their language and the ways in which they communicate with one another. There are complex reflections on and uses of sign, symbol, signification, gesture, facial expression, and religious and occult iconography by characters and personae within the horizon of these works; they are fruitful places to find the seeds of Shelley's later ideas. In addition, the world of these early novels and poems is animated and orphic: cryptic 'signs' like the flaming cross of "Ghastly; Or the Avenging Demon" appear seemingly from nowhere and there is much attention paid by Shelley to the way in which they appear. The Gothic afforded Shelley a rich and exciting area in which to experiment with esoteric modes of signification and once seen, it is not difficult to link this

experimental, semiotic mode to the major verse. I will begin with Shelley's notions about expression as they emerge from a number of very unsystematic areas: a highly charged field of adolescent rejection, philosophical conflict, eroticism and Gothic sensibility that informs the texture of Shelley's first works.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>William Keach, Shelley's Style (New York: Methuen, 1984). Tilottama Rajan, Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 13-96. Frances Ferguson, "Shelley's Mont Blanc: What the Mountain Said" in Romanticism and Language, ed. Arden Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 202-214. Angela Leighton, "Deconstruction criticism and Shelley's Adonais in Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Greynog Conference, ed. Kelvin Everest (Leicester: Leicester university Press, 1983), pp. 147-164.

<sup>2</sup>I am indebted to Christopher Norris for his use of the phrase 'aesthetic ideology' in relation to de Man. See his, Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology, (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Pottle, "The Case of Shelley." PMLA, 67, 1952, 601.

<sup>4</sup>See Keach, p. xii.

<sup>5</sup>William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity 1930; rpt. (New York: New Directions, nd.), p. 160.

<sup>6</sup>Empson, *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>7</sup>F. R. Leavis, Revaluation: Tradition & Development in English Poetry (1947; rpt. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1963), p. 212.

<sup>8</sup>Pound's anthology, Confucius to Cummings, representative of the best in English Literature, contains one High Romantic poem.

<sup>9</sup>Perkins, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup>We find him used as something like a critical backstop in Bloom's reading of "Mont Blanc" see Bloom, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>Leavis, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup>Perkins, p. 138.

<sup>13</sup>Perkins, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>Perkins, p. 188.

<sup>15</sup>In the analogue of earthly, sexual love and union with the ideal, Perkins finds Shelley a bit more ambiguous in his categories, "Platonists, particularly when they are also poets, have rarely been able to keep the categories [of intellectual and earthly beauty] distinct. They have tended, instead, to see their earthly loves as a direct union with the ideal rather than a step in the ascent to it. Shelley was especially prone to this type of confusion . . . ." See Perkins, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup>The whole canto is as follows:

'And on the sand would I make signs to range  
 These woofs, as they were woven, of my thought;  
 Clear elemental shapes, whose smallest change  
 A subtler language with in language wrought--  
 The key of truths which once were dimly taught  
 In old Crotona; and sweet melodies  
 Of love in that lorn solitude I caught  
 From mine own voice in dream, when thy dear eyes  
 Shone through my sleep, and did that utterance  
harmonize.'  
 (The Revolt of Islam, Canto 7, stanza xxxii)

<sup>17</sup>Earl R. Wasserman, The Subtler Language: Critical Readings of Neoclassic and Romantic Poems (1959; rpt. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup>Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry (1947; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1975), p. 265.

<sup>19</sup>See Brooks' essay, "What Does A Poem Communicate" and the Preface to The Well Wrought Urn.

<sup>20</sup>Brooks, p. 256.

<sup>21</sup>Brooks, p. 252.

<sup>22</sup>Wasserman, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup>Brooks, p. 254. Pottle reflected back the criticism with: "There has always been a numerous and respectable body of anti-Shelleyans . . . . Opposed to every Eliot who decried his thought would have been a Bradley or a C.S. Lewis to argue eloquently that his thought is coherent, mature and founded on the facts of experience." See Pottle, "The Case of Shelley" PMLA, 67 (1952), 597.

<sup>24</sup>Brooks, p. 253.

<sup>25</sup>Brooks, p. 255.

<sup>26</sup>Wasserman, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup>Wasserman's theory of poetic syntax is drawn from language

philosophers like Urban, Whorf, and Langer and their constitutive theories. With these philosophers, the range of words used to communicate perceptual events was an index, for instance, of the degrees and ranges of seeing or hearing; the addition of new words to someone's vocabulary increases perception. For Urban, "In a very real sense, the limits of my language are the limits of my world." (See Wilbur, Marshall Urban, Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1961), p. 21.) And, on the level of culture, to take a favorite example of Whorf's, if Hopi syntax allowed certain temporal, or metaphysical dimensions not allowed in English, these dimensions yet existed but were opaque to English native speakers; the abstract, English categories of space and time were, also, 'exotica' to the Hopi. The tribe lived in a different perceptual world and this difference was demarked and created by language. For Whorf, the grammatical and syntactical orientations of English were not universals and every language or language family allowed a different 'metaphysics.' (See Benjamin Lee Whorf, "An American Indian model of the universe" in Language Thought and Reality ed. John B. Carroll (1956 rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1962), pp. 57-64. If grammar is this powerful in moulding our assumptions about the world, then poetry, in Wasserman's view, can, be the crucible of not merely verbal change. Changes in syntax can move us out of fixed cultural patterns and conventions; they 'transform facts' and poetry especially uses this transformative function which is found in the syntactical ordering of language. Wasserman's notion of syntax thus entails a notion of constitutive, as opposed to notions of mimetic or arbitrary, reference.

<sup>28</sup>Wasserman, p. 201.

<sup>29</sup>Wasserman, p. 204.

<sup>30</sup>Harold Bloom's Shelley's Mythmaking is another example of a defense of Shelley on 'communicative' grounds. Shelley is converting a world composed of things and rational concepts into a myth-poetry based in Buber's I-Thou relation. Shelley is, then, using language to 'speak' to the world as if it were a human or social entity.

<sup>31</sup>David Perkins, The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats (1959; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 7.

<sup>32</sup>Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 291.

<sup>33</sup>Rajan sees de Man's work as falling into an early and late phase. The early phase is phenomenological, "in treating rhetorical figures as expressions of states of consciousness." The late phase, signaled by the appearance of Allegories of Reading is 'post-structuralist' and more rigorously concerned with text as language. Allegories of Reading influenced a second generation of deconstruction critics to see "categories like 'self' and



'history' as figures produced by language rather than as forces complicated by language. The result was a radical, sometimes claustrophobic concentration on rhetoric divorced from psychology." See Tilottama Rajan, "The Future of Deconstruction in Romantic Studies," in Nineteenth-Century Contexts 11:2 (Fall 1987) pp. 131, 132, 137.

<sup>34</sup>Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading, p. 23

<sup>35</sup>De Man, *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>37</sup>Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 31.

<sup>38</sup>See Lentricchia, p. 289.

<sup>39</sup>Lentricchia has noted that, de Man's "attacks on the interpretations of romanticism authored by Abrams, Earl Wasserman, and Wimsatt, and on the so-called mystified moments of the earlier romantics themselves, are not fuelled by the poststructuralist belief that all talk of origin is deluded, but by the notion that a certain kind of talk (transcendental, theological, monistic, untragic) is wrong: origins are acceptable, in other words, as long as we have the proper (existentialist, secular, dualistic, tragic, fearful, and agonized) view of them." Lentricchia, p. 287.

<sup>40</sup>Paul de Man, The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 6.

<sup>41</sup>De Man, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup>See Lentricchia, p. 300, 305. Rajan's article on Deconstruction, though, reminds us that the text which marks de Man's change to a more thoroughly linguistic perspective, Allegories of Reading (1980), does not appear in After the New Criticism (1979).

<sup>43</sup>I am using the version of this article found in the collection of essays titled: Paul de Man, The Resistance to Theory. Theory and History of Literature, vol. 33, eds. Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schutle-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.)

<sup>44</sup>De Man, "The Resistance to Theory," p. 8.

<sup>45</sup>De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," pp. 194-197.

<sup>46</sup>De Man, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup>Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, Tr. Wade Baskin (New York:

McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 71.

<sup>48</sup>De Man, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup>Raymond W. Barry and A. J. Wright Literary Terms: Definitions, Explanations, Examples (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1966), p. 64.

<sup>50</sup>De Man's attitude toward the New Critics ranges from the conciliatory to the condemnatory. On the one hand it is the new Critical ethos which has resisted Literary Theory, "The normative principles of such a literary ambiance are cultural and ideological rather than theoretical, oriented towards the integrity of a social and historical self rather than towards the impersonal consistency that theory requires." (Resistance to Theory, p. 6.) On the other hand, "very little has happened in American criticism since the innovative works of New Criticism." (Allegories of Reading, p. 4.)

<sup>51</sup>Text as monument is de Man's ironic image for motivated language, that is for any poetic procedure that attempts to substitute sign for the signified. See the introductory material to his essay on Shelley.

<sup>52</sup>Paul de Man, "Shelley Disfigured" in Modern Critical Views: Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), p. 142.

<sup>53</sup>He finds in it a figure for an idea borrowed from Rousseau's text on the origin of speech. Found in the "Essay on the Origin of Languages" of 1749, the idea has words, as distinguished from gesture, originating around central social foci like the well or oasis.

<sup>54</sup>De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," p. 127.

<sup>55</sup>De Man, p. 143.

<sup>56</sup>This is the essence of Bloom's reading of the poem in Shelley's Mythmaking and Abbey sees it as "the palinode of his poetic career," and "the poetic portrayal of a skeptic's failed quest for ultimate certainty." See Lloyd Abbey, Destroyer and Preserver: Shelley's Poetic Skepticism, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 128 n., 128. Ross Woodman's reading is more complex, but in the poem Shelley recognizes, "that his radical hopes for a renovated society are a delusion." See Ross Woodman, The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 188.

<sup>57</sup>Lentricchia, p. 300.

<sup>58</sup>See, for an introduction to Habermas's thought, Rick Roderick, Habermas and the Foundation of Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 75-87.

<sup>59</sup>Charles Taylor, "Language and Human Nature," Lecture given for the 1978 Alan B. Plaunt Memorial Lectures, Carleton University 1978.

<sup>60</sup>Rajan, "The Future of Deconstruction in Romantic Studies" pp. 137, 138.

<sup>61</sup>De Man also seems very doubtful of the application of a concept like "speech community" to texts. In a short study of the critical reception of Bakhtin we find that he is suspicious of the exegesis of a text with the hidden code of persecuted speech, "What in the context of our topic interests us primarily in this situation is that it is bound to engender a community tied together by the common task of decrypting the repressed message hidden in the public utterance. As the sole detainers of an esoteric knowledge, this community is bound to be small, self-selective, and likely to consider itself as a chosen elite. To the extent, however, that the process of understanding becomes constitutively linked to the elaboration and the life of a society, fact and fiction are brought together by the mediation of shared communal labor." See "Dialogue and Dialogism," in The Resistance to Theory p. 108.

<sup>62</sup>Purely in theory, this particular confusion could be solved if Bunker were to be able to explain the rhetorical question to Mrs. Bunker. While this might raise more humour than consciousness, de Man's query is itself proof that such discussion can go on and lead to understandings about language. See Paul de Man, "Semiotics and Rhetoric," in Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism ed. Josue V. Harari (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 129.

<sup>63</sup>I am not sure that Todorov's historicist view of the symbol in Theories of the Symbol can be made to apply to Shelley because it seems derived principally from a study of the theorists of German romanticism like A.W. Schlegel, Moritz and Goethe. However, the grounding of verbal symbolism in the 'implied meanings' given in discourse is very much to the point of my thesis. Shelley's major dilemma seems to have been the attempt to find a symbolism adequate to a discourse model of poetry.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER II

### EXPERIMENTS WITH THE SYMBOL IN SHELLEY'S GOTHIC NOVELS

The notion that Shelley realized the "positional power" and arbitrary, disruptive nature of symbolism only at the end of his career is not borne out if we study his first entry into literature. It is not hard to find a fledgling semiotic awareness, and a critical distance towards symbolism, in the earliest Shelley texts we have. In the Gothic novels Shelley wrote at Eton and in the very early poetry,<sup>1</sup> we find a conflict between religious faith and atheism that gives rise precisely to a conflict between symbolists and anti-symbolists. The symbolic pattern is enmeshed in what Condillac called 'natural language' or gesture in which, for instance, a lover's eyes open to disclose a transcendent realm. The arbitrary pattern, (of the signified-signifier relation) is given in the lies and machinations of a rebellious anti-hero who manipulates the religious symbol and destroys its advocates. The concentration on sign, symbol and other communicative means is so marked in these early Gothic novels and poems that it is not unreasonable to call them semiotic experiments. These experiments, however, are not altogether successful. It is in the failed attempt to reformulate symbolism along Godwinian lines at the end of St. Irvyne that we can see a neutral moment, a moment when Shelley begins to grasp the depths of the problem that confronts him.

Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne; Or, The Rosicrucian (written when Shelley was seventeen and eighteen respectively)<sup>2</sup> are also first experiments in writing fiction. Their bravado, overdone intensities and hyperbole warn us of parody; but these works also have moments of fine landscape description and some serious psychological analysis. The question of language and signs in Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne is an integral part of experiments with Gothic sensibility, with readings in science, and a stance against religion and authority that gave Shelley his nickname "Mad Shelley" and "The Atheist" at Eton. We can detect the sensitivities of this young mind to the world of signs in the picture Hughes paints of him from his Eton days:

He was innocent, excitable, recluse. He wore no hat and neglected his shoelaces. He was 'no good at games', would 'go out duck-spearing and spear his own legs'. . . . He would summon spirits by holding skulls over running water or by some ritual performed in churchyards at dead of night, night being 'his jubilee', we are told. . . . He was 'Mad Shelley', and he was 'The Atheist'; 'The Atheist' perhaps because he fell in love with Pliny's chapter De Deo and talked of it at large; or because the name was given conventionally, as Hogg tells us, to the arch-defier of ruling powers.<sup>3</sup>

In this comment we can trace something of the depth of Shelley's adolescent conflicts and see how they might entail a conflict in language: we find De Deo and the summoning of spirits, 'Atheism' and rituals done at the dead of night, an isolate and a heroic rebel almost in the same breath. Shelley's use of the word 'Atheism' is certainly not today's usage; for this young 'arch-defier' it has a range of per-

sonal and philosophical connotations, and he will sometimes blend it with supernaturalism and necromancy in his quest not to be seen as 'Religious'. The adolescent identification with such an exciting label and the exploration, through his early reading of Godwin, Pliny, and the philosophes<sup>4</sup> of the philosophical stance it might imply, is merged with his reading of Gothic novels, thus with their panoply of spirits, haunted hallways, ghosts and a 'flesh creeping' mysticism. Both Atheist and Religious doctrines were magnetic to him and these twin poles are dramatized in the conflict between hero and anti-hero that forms the theme of the works that make up his first published writing. These novels and poems, though juvenile in their love of sensationalism, confront the reader with a dramatic problem of ideas: the question of whether Religion can withstand the power of Atheism. Zastrozzi is the first and clearest statement of this conflict, and it is here that we can first detect the theme of symbolism which, as the novel progresses, will engulf the action.

## ZASTROZZI

Zastrozzi as anti-Symbolist: The Sign as Lie

In order to assess the semiotics of Zastrozzi, we will first need to clarify the ideas that make up the novel's thematic opposition. Zastrozzi, the anti-hero, is a very articulate and committed Atheist; of all the novel's characters, he is the one with a worked out and articulated stance, a set of carefully derived beliefs. Zastrozzi may be wrong in his system of ideas,<sup>5</sup> but he puts them forward in well rounded periods, and in a thoughtful, academic diction. When, for instance, he attempts to persuade Matilda to continue with her plans for capturing Verezzi's love even if she must use corrupted means, his argument stands out against the hectic pace and violence of the first few chapters. Carefully derived from his Atheist position, he projects a morality of utilitarian hedonism:

I am alive to nothing but revenge. But even did I desire to persuade you from the purpose on which your heart is fixed, I should not say it was wrong to attempt it; for whatever procures pleasure is right, and consonant to the dignity of man, who was created for no other purpose but to obtain happiness; else, why were passions given us? . . . As for the confused hope of a future state, why should we debar ourselves of the delights of this, even though purchased by what the misguided multitude calls immorality.<sup>6</sup>

This is not quite what we would expect from the leader of a band of robbers and kidnapers. Zastrozzi first seems true to form, he seeks 'nothing but revenge', but with a surprising shift of diction we are suddenly in the heady regions of questions about morality, fate, the existence of God and the certainty of an afterlife. This elevated speech produces a debate between Matilda and Zastrozzi about the nature of immortality and how it might best be achieved even by a non-believer. Matilda asks him whether he thinks "the soul decays with the body," and if not then perhaps in Zastrozzi's version of an after-life, "it wastes its fervent energies in tasteless apathy, or lingering torments."<sup>7</sup> Zastrozzi's response shows us that he has thought through his answer to the problem of holding both to a belief in an after-life and to a disbelief in God. He again indicates an academic background as he presents the remarkable idea of an individual or anarchic immortality:

"think not so; rather suppose that, by its own innate and energetical exertions, this soul must endure for ever, that no fortuitous occurrences, no incidental events, can affect its happiness; but by daring boldly, by striving to verge from the beaten path, whilst yet trammelled in the chains of mortality, it will gain superior advantages in a future state."<sup>8</sup>

This, then, is more than a gesture to cultivation and the level of ideas; it appears to have a touch of Godwin's early notion about a potential immortality on earth, and the stress on pleasure and pain as the prime motivation for thought and action favored by the philosophes.<sup>9</sup> His



strategy is not the kind of lure to crime we find in the Gothic formulas of Lewis or Radcliffe. Zastrozzi is not a daemonic sexual tempter who has otherworldly powers; he is putting himself forward as a persuasive, revisionist philosopher who, proposes an alternate morality. Immortality is won in a very different way than through a life of Christian piety; it is not gained through careful adherence to an orthodox moral code, or through prayer, grace, divine intervention, good deeds, or through any other means that indicate the mediation of a divine being; rather the future state can be won on individual terms, through bold enterprise, even criminality. Zastrozzi, then, has thought through the problem enough to construct a 'revisionist' version of Christian eternity.

On the surface, the abstract, erudite diction seems to be the convincing element; the argument's underlying logic appears specious. The more 'energetical' these exertions of the soul, the more risks it takes, the greater the likelihood of an adventuresome after-life. But, towards the end of the novel, we find that Zastrozzi's speeches are part of a consistent struggle with the idea of an omnipotent deity. In the final courtroom scene, when Matilda attempts to persuade him to repent, he completes his argument:

"Matilda," replied Zastrozzi, whilst a smile of contemptuous atheism played over his features-- "Matilda, fear not: fate wills us to die: and I intend to meet death, to encounter annihilation, with tranquility. Am I not convinced of the non-existence of a Deity? am I not convinced that death will but render this soul more free, more unfettered? Why need I then shudder at

death? why need any one, whose mind has risen above the shackles of prejudice, the errors of a false and injurious superstition.<sup>10</sup>

This kind of integrity, wrong-headed and anarchic as it may be in relation to the novel's outcome, has been emphasised enough that it produces a symmetry of moral systems. Zastrozzi's outlook is a condensation of the 'new philosophy' and seems coloured by Godwin's early views on the potential of a timeless utopia released by the overthrow of established religion or perhaps by Rousseau's skeptical notion that religion upheld the state when reason could not.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the narrator's judgement of its 'sophistical' turns and its results, in the end Zastrozzi's destructive Atheism is as strongly maintained as the religious piety evidenced by Julia and Verezzi. It has Promethean overtones; right up to his death, we are not really sure that he will not find his particular brand of after-life. Zastrozzi has at least the credibility of a man willing to die for his beliefs rather than recanting under threat, and he forwards them, in a darkly erudite diction, to his last moment. This strain of anti-mystic, atheist thought, drawn from Shelley's version of the new philosophy, appears as the counter-theme of the novel: sometimes glimpsed just below the surface, sometimes brazenly exposed, it motivates action and character until we see that it has been placed as the crucial causative agent of the action.

We begin to find Zastrozzi's strength, and the emergence of the theme of language, when we watch the effect of

his 'philosophy' on Matilda. Matilda's subsequent actions and the strategy of her attack on Verezzi's love for Julia, are to a large extent the result of this convincing statement of Atheist-Immortalist principles. After Zastrozzi's first atheist speech, she steps entirely out of the light of Christian morality and becomes something like "Will" or "Lust," a 'Scarlet Woman' driven by her passion. Evidently, this philosophy also entailed something like free love, or at least allowed women the right to erotic rather than Platonic desires. Although the understanding of sexual nuance and relationship might stem from Shelley's sources here,<sup>12</sup> the emphasis on the dramatic power of philosophic words to liberate seems an original theme. Contaminated by Zastrozzi's 'sophistical' rhetoric, Matilda is startlingly changed. Before Zastrozzi's speech, she burns openly but unsuccessfully for Verezzi but, afterward, she has been given a method. She dissembles and masks her real feelings, and becomes, in fact, a consummate actress, skillfully mimicking a moralist position for the indirectly expressed, but, for the reader, quite decipherable purpose of bringing Verezzi to bed. We have the feeling that, while Zastrozzi's persuasive speech may seem rational, academic, at times even disinterested, this is very much a surface.

For one thing, Zastrozzi is a daemonic genius in the way he guesses his moment. He has calculated Matilda's weakness for Verezzi precisely and his argument catches her at the high-point of her frustration with Verezzi's attach-

ment to Julia; she readily grasps the import of Zastrozzi's atheism for her goal of overcoming this symbol of celestial love and the last vestiges of her orthodox faith quickly leave her. But while Zastrozzi's words, "extinguish the faint spark of religion which yet gleamed in Matilda's bosom,"<sup>13</sup> La Contessa di Laurentini, possessed by her passion, has become Zastrozzi's unwitting weapon. Triggered by this apt application of Atheism that allows her passion and gives her a method of fulfilling it, she will gradually supplant the celestial Julia in Verezzi's affections and, through her new 'intellectual' principles, first destroy Verezzi morally then unconsciously bring about the events, planned by Zastrozzi, that will destroy him physically.

Shelley in large part derived the plot and characters of both Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne from another Gothic romancer, Mrs. Bryne, (variously Charlotte Dacre, and 'Rosa Matilda'). The villain of Zofloya, or The Moor, A Romance of the Fifteenth Century (1806) is the model for both Zastrozzi and the Ginotti of St. Irvyne and Zofloya turns out to be none other than Satan himself.<sup>14</sup> Like his predecessor, Zastrozzi has a hidden motive for converting Matilda to Atheism. Fulfilling the Italianate Gothic requirement for ornate plots, we find that Verezzi's father seduced Zastrozzi's mother, sired Zastrozzi then deserted his mother to marry someone else, (Verezzi is the offspring of this second union); Zastrozzi's mother died as a direct result of this neglect. To get back at his father for this murderous treat-

ment, he has killed him (before the novel opens) and will now kill his half-brother. His persuasive Atheist argument is then part of a wider revenge strategy; it is well worked out and based on saying just the right word at the right time. Manipulating Matilda's ideas at the height of her frustration will lead to the killing of Verezzi and this will compensate him for the earlier crime. We can begin to see that Zastrozzi's real skill lies not in disinterested academic argument, it lies in the arts of verbal masking and manipulation. Shelley has revised Dacre's satanic corrupter along a certain dimension: he is now presented to us as the consummate rhetorician of the new philosophy and his power lies particularly in his insights about words. The skill of this voice is so marked in relation to other characters like Verezzi, who does not speak very much, that he can be said to enact an identifiable philosophical position in language.

Zastrozzi is using a materialist system of signs; he is a dogmatist of the new way and close to de Man's 'arbitrary' pole of language. For him, words are simply tools, instruments, signs, means towards an end and as such their meaning or connotative horizon does not stretch beyond his need for revenge. The theoretical parallel for Zastrozzi's ability to manipulate language masks or levels of language is Rousseau's idea that civilized, abstract discourse is an institutionalized overgrowth covering a deeper level. Rousseau, although well within the Enlightenment camp in his notions

about speech origins, argues against the empiricist idea, forwarded primarily by Locke, that words originated in reason. For Rousseau, verbal signification does not have a rational basis; it originates in the expression of emotions:

It seems then that need dictated the first gestures, while the passions stimulated the first words. . . . Whence then this origin of verbal signs? From moral needs, passions. All the passions tend to bring people back together again, but the necessity of seeking a livelihood forces them apart. It is neither hunger nor thirst but love, hatred, pity, anger, which drew from them the first words . . . . One stalks in silence the prey on which one would feast. But for moving a young heart, or repelling an unjust aggressor, nature dictates accents, cries, lamentations.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, for Rousseau, verbal signs are born in the need to persuasively express feelings and not, as in Locke's system, in the need to communicate accurate concepts about the world. Zastrozzi has shown Matilda a language that allows untrammelled exercise of passion and beneath his academic diction, we find his own depths, an intensity that is quite like Rousseau's notion of an emotion that was the origin of words. Language for Zastrozzi is not merely denotative, it furthers a will to power, its reference is primarily social or, better, anti-social and it plays with the ideology of convention; we are already in the field of discourse and levels of implied meaning. Shelley, then, while perhaps not aware of Rousseau's precise position, does seem conscious of some of the implications of the new 'Atheist' or materialist philosophy when it is applied to language. Shelley knows that the layers of abstraction in philosophy can hide deeply

seated, 'anti-institutional' emotions, a kind of surface and depth, which, as de Man notes, can mix the idyllic and a quest for power.<sup>16</sup>

Zastrozzi's duplicity is of course the hallmark of Gothic novels. The gradual uncovering of a hidden (usually occult) motive lurking beneath a tempting, attractive surface is the essence of Dacre's and Lewis' plots. Dacre's Count Ardolph is a good example of such expressive opposites yoked together in the same character, "Endowed with a form cast in nature's finest mould, blest, or rather curst, with abilities to astonish and enslave . . . he employed these rare and fascinating qualities, as a demon would put on the semblance of an angel."<sup>17</sup> But in Shelley's first novel, there is a consciousness of language which undercuts an occultist motive. While Dacre's combination of opposites prefigures the mystical appearance of Satan from hidden depths, Zastrozzi's words are simply given a 'dark brilliance'; the supernatural element has been qualified and becomes a skill in manipulating convincing, higher levels of language for hidden ends. Thus while Zastrozzi's diction is abstract, seemingly of the mind, disinterested and philosophical, it is motivated by the simmering emotions of his private, familial situation. His erudite revision of the orthodox spiritual world forwards a deep sense of paternal injustice; propelling his 'Atheism' we find the earthy, passionate accents of a social revenge which uses a mixture of Rousseauian ideals and Atheism as its rationale.<sup>18</sup>

The dark and saturnine Zastrozzi is thus already an agent of demystification. We next see that he has realized something about the Christian symbol; its figures of transcendence may only be an illusion created by words. He seems to have guessed, to use de Man's vocabulary, that the power of symbolic language "is both entirely arbitrary, in having a strength that cannot be reduced to necessity, and entirely inexorable in that there is no alternative to it."<sup>19</sup> But his words have the feel of a new discovery about them. Like any origin, they are set against an old way and seem the prototype of a new kind of word which is separating from prevailing religious categories. We watch as, like a fire through dry tinder, everything is threatened then incorporated into this new, secular, sense of language. Caught by Zastrozzi's words, Matilda changes her ideas and breaks, quickly, from Christian morality; she then inflames even the virtuous Verezzi through her own subtle use of the same discourse. Zastrozzi has initiated Matilda both in a revolutionary philosophy and a new way of speaking. Unlike Rousseau's liberating views, however, Zastrozzi's revengeful Atheism is no preliminary stage to a better, non-hierarchical society; destruction is his only goal and at the end of the novel, the transcendent world of Julia and Verezzi has been burned out and shattered. For Shelley, Zastrozzi's new, 'revolutionary' language is a powerful but dangerous lie.



True Symbol, True Gesture and Desire in Zastrozzi

As the novel progresses, the contrast between Atheist sign and Religious symbol becomes highly marked, and the new way of thinking is definitely the villain. Chapters VII through XIII, where the seriously ill Verezzi recuperates under the baneful influence of Matilda, form a gestalt or whole of their own. Here the other concerns of the novel are bracketed off and we concentrate on the means Matilda uses to convince the resistant Verezzi of her particular kind of love. Zastrozzi, the verbal power, hovers about the edges of this new stage in the argument and a symbolic-gestural system of eyes, facial features, the various expressive parts of the anatomy of each character becomes the new ground for the struggle between Religion and Atheism. Atheism now vies with Religion for dominance over a new medium of gesture and symbols. For Verezzi, gesture becomes a battleground, a complex field of surface and depth torn and broken up under the action from a distance of these opposing forces.

Shelley seems to have been much taken with the possibilities of symbolic gesture in both his novels. As we approach this section of Zastrozzi, the eye language becomes particularly prolific, though it can yet be a sign of truth. When Matilda and Zastrozzi first construct their plot to dupe Verezzi, "a pause ensued, during which the eyes of Zastrozzi and Matilda spoke volumes of each guilty soul."<sup>20</sup>

At the end of their conference, Zastrozzi almost confesses his design on Verezzi's life to Matilda, but catches himself in time: "Zastrozzi paused; his eye gleamed with a peculiar expression, and Matilda thought he meant more than he had said--she raised her eyes--they encountered his. The guilt-bronzed cheek of Zastrozzi was tinged with a momentary blush, but it quickly passed away, and his countenance recovered its wonted firm and determined expression."<sup>21</sup>

Zastrozzi's cheek has become bronzed by guilt but even this revengeful Atheist, it seems, must at some time show his real feelings and this truth is known through the softening of a hardened cheek: a delicate blush wells to the surface of his 'countenance'. And here is Matilda, before she has learned her discipline from Zastrozzi, losing her control, and confessing her ardent wish to the cool and preoccupied Verezzi:

"Unkind Verezzi! is it thus that you will ever slight me? is it for this that I have laid aside the delicacy of my sex, and owned to you a passion which was but too violent to be concealed? Ah! at least pity me! I love you: Oh! I adore you to madness!"

She paused--the peculiar expression which beamed in her dark eye, told the tumultuous wishes of her bosom.<sup>22</sup>

Shelley is playing with the heated diction and conventions of his sources here and this parodistic tone is shown in his sensitive awareness of the required gestures. He seems to have discovered, for one thing, that gestures can, like words, lie. Although Matilda's eye is dark and like Zas-

trozzi's 'peculiar', it yet beams outward; one can yet read her 'tumultuous wishes' in its depths. Zastrozzi's eye, however, cannot be read fully and accurately; it 'gleamed with a peculiar expression' and Matilda has a hard time interpreting this gleam. While she may have thought that Zastrozzi was blushing because of a desire for her, he was actually only worried that she may have guessed his plans for Verezzi.

This system of gestures is, noticeably, the important part of Verezzi's expressive repertoire. At one point, he even articulates his awareness of its effects, recognizing eye language as either a sign of celestial or earthly love. At his first meeting with Matilda he compares her eyes to Julia's:

But still he could not help observing a comparison between her [Matilda] and Julia, whose feminine delicacy shrunk from the slightest suspicion, even, of indecorum. Her fragile form, her mild, heavenly countenance, was contrasted with all the partiality of love, to the scintillating eye, the commanding countenance, the bold expressive gaze, of Matilda.<sup>23</sup>

For Verezzi, Julia's gestures evoke a transcendent world. We are reminded through her eye language, facial expression and movement that she is pure and virtuous in relation to Matilda. Julia exists in another realm; she has an "ethereal form" which "presses on" Verezzi's "aching sense" and has an "unspotted soul."<sup>24</sup> This glimpse of a transcendent dimension, shown by a lover's clear, (thus pure) eyes, again shows Shelley's very early understanding of the symbol.

Julia's eyes, face and form fulfill most of the requirements for symbols; they express the inexpressible, yet they speak to perception; they do not represent directly but are 'indirectly examples of something more general'.<sup>25</sup> This extra level of significance counterpoints the other Gothic convention of passionate glances, swoons, fiery brows, and flushed cheeks. In Zastrozzi, a transcendent world is maintained through verbal reticence, mild eyes, radiant faces and ethereal forms; through these gestures we can just make out a celestial dimension of love hovering above the events, invisible, indirectly present, but affecting all action. Shelley is quite aware of the religious symbolism wedded to gesture in his genre.

This battle between symbols and Atheist sign is to gradually become the central theme of the novel. The conflict between Atheism and Religion soon spreads throughout the whole system and Atheism almost takes over the symbolic realm. The opening maneuver from the atheist side is to forward a lie about Julia. But there is an irony here; in stating that 'Julia is dead', Zastrozzi and Matilda are also saying something about the 'death' of a symbol, and Verrezzi's reaction shows the depth of the threat: immediately upon hearing the lie that his beloved is dead, he almost dies on the spot himself. The response is inappropriate, even laughable, in terms of the common sense world of a 'realist' like Zastrozzi with his skill in manipulating

discourse. For Zastrozzi, Verezzi's faith in symbolism is a weakness to be exploited.

Shelley gives us some very clearly rendered, almost analytical, pictures of a Platonic lover's brush with a verbal lie. It is taken into Verezzi's body like a poison. At the first reception of the false news we witness something like an epileptic fit: "His eyes rolled horribly, and seemed as if starting from their sockets. . . . Again overpowered by the acuteness of his sensations, he sank on the floor, and, in violent convulsions, he remained bereft of sense. . . . One fit rapidly followed another, and at last, in a state of the wildest delirium, he was conveyed to bed.<sup>26</sup> After this attack, "A thick film overspread his eye, and he seemed sunk in insensibility."<sup>27</sup> There is, again, more than a note of parody here, but the parody underscores Verezzi's verbal naivete. He is blind to Zastrozzi's deceptions and his physiology is so upset by these words that he goes through a period where he is drained of all his strength and elan vital. We are not sure whether he is to survive such verbal abuse and for a long period he hovers on the edge of death as Matilda tries everything she can to win him back. His recovery will require some six chapters of gentle ministrations.

This intense physical reaction comes about because Verezzi is a Christian Idealist in both love and language. Love, for him, is the direct expression of transcendent truth and this means that his talk with and about Julia must

be almost unmediated in its expression. It must be communicated in what Todorov calls an intransitive language, a language of pure subjectivity that needs the absolute minimum of sensuous medium for its reception. This symbolic language realizes pure ideas in themselves; it is a system of religious icons like Julia's mildly beaming eyes and her celestial form.<sup>28</sup> A goddess inhabits these images and the mere mention of them is enough to invoke an unmediated presence. In this world of symbolic gestures, Zastrozzi's Atheist lie, effortlessly made, has remarkable power. Zastrozzi has realized that Verezzi is a symbolist of love and, using his new utilitarian language, he can easily manipulate a symbol by treating it as a mere sign; its paragon, who is not fully in the world, is helpless against such manipulation because when it comes to Julia he speaks a language of silent, symbolic gestures and cannot understand a facile use of words about her.

That this symmetry of oppositions between 'Atheism' and 'Religion' is also a symmetry of oppositions between systems of signification is made clear in Verezzi's recovery from this false news. Verezzi's symbolic eyes are the exact counter to Zastrozzi's materialist word.<sup>29</sup> First Matilda "gazed with rapturous emotion on the countenance of Verezzi," then "a blush of animation tinged his before pallid countenance," then "She gazed upon his countenance--the film, which before had overspread his eye, disappeared; returning expression pervaded its orbit, but it was the

expression of deep, of rooted grief.<sup>30</sup> If we slow this reanimation down, we can see a careful sequence that begins with the pallid surface of the face. First there is a tinge of blood, a 'blush of animation', which wells up into this white surface as Verezzi revives. Next a film covering his eye is dissolved and then his eyes are 'pervaded' with the expression of grief. The word 'pervaded' is significant. The emotion is expressed in the same way we know of life returning through the sign of blood appearing under the white surface of the skin.<sup>31</sup> But it is a very different kind of fluid which seeps into his opaque eye. This intangible liquid is not like the meaning that is signified by a word, it is construed as spirit itself dissolving the film of matter and transforming it into life. Under attack by Zastrozzi's Atheism, Verezzi's eyes were thickened and opaque but as he recovers we see that he has survived the first onslaught. He is yet within the symbolic mode, where the message is spiritual and thus superior to the sensuous medium that carries it; although he has been damaged, his eyes can see an idealized Julia. Thus we have a film being dissolved, a thickened surface being liquefied, and an opacity becoming transparent.

The passages which concentrate on Verezzi's eyes show the depth of Shelley's early understanding of these different ways of looking at language; such eye gestures develop, in miniature, the struggle between an 'atheist' view of the sign and a Christian-Platonic love symbolism. Matilda's lie

about Julia's 'death' has infected Verezzi's clear, transcendent sight with a material shell, an occlusion. In the celestial world of love that hovers above the action in Zastrozzi, it is only when we lie, and to the extent that we lie, that expression becomes clouded over, is infected with a fleshy film which hides and diminishes spirit. Matilda's deceit is then represented by a material signifier, the dark film, the material husk, which overlies what, in love, should be an immediacy of 'the thing signified,' an immediacy of form and forming spirit beaming out through the eye from an inner, immaterial source. And though he has been injured, Verezzi can yet speak an opposite language to the dangerous, verbal deceptions of Zastrozzi and Matilda with their guilt-bronzed cheeks and their fiery, dark, materialist eyes.

We will see the gradual winning through of Zastrozzi's philosophy as the slow occlusion of these transcendent, non-verbal gestures. Verezzi's eyes, as they are corrupted by 'Atheism', will become confused, darken, then finally fill with an opaque fluid which blocks them from seeing and expressing the truth; and his body, when not scorched by passion, will become torpid and thickened.

#### Atheism and Gesture: Matilda's Blandishments

Victory for Zastrozzi, however, does not come as easily in this medium of symbolism as it did with abstract words.



The gestural system cannot be made to carry a lie without some lengthy preparation. The primary reason for this is that gestures do not distinguish between a sign and a signified; thus, there is no surface and depth, no place to hide a motive. For Todorov, "This language is at once natural (that is, motivated) and acquired; it is the only language that conforms to what it expresses, for it is not subject to the constraint of linearity."<sup>32</sup> This identity of sign and signified, of gesture and meaning, is of course true unless one has learned to act well. The disciples of Atheism will break the power of symbol and gesture that is Verezzi's main defense, through mimicry; they become very good at putting on a truthful, virtuous mask.

Matilda soon learns that, despite her ministrations, Verezzi is committed to Julia and to dying or 'dissolution' in order to be with her. She bends her whole will towards supplanting Julia's image in Verezzi's mind with her own. Her first step in this direction is to learn to dissemble and mask her feelings, that is to lie on the manifest or gestural level.<sup>33</sup> She learns her lesson first from Zastrozzi. Just before his persuasive Atheist speech, he tells her,

"My maxim, therefore," said Zastrozzi, "through life has been, wherever I am, whatever passions shake my inmost soul, at least to appear collected . . . . I have a spirit, ardent and as impetuous as thine; but acquaintance with the world has induced me to veil it, though it still continues to burn within my bosom."<sup>34</sup>

After this piece of advice, and no longer held in check by the twin inhibitions of "an Omnipotent power" and the hope of eternal salvation, Julia puts Zastrozzi's maxim into effect. As Verezzi begins to mend, at least physically, Matilda now wages war on Julia's image, Verezzi's symbol of truth, by attempting to copy it. Whenever Verezzi says anything about Julia, Matilda now covers up her own intense jealousy and rage and simulates a cool and passive exterior. She takes him to her mountain castle and arranges entertainments to try to drive away his dejection. Her deceptions on this level do not achieve immediate results. Their effects are neutralized, for instance, when Matilda finds him restoring Julia's image by making pencil sketches of the landscapes he once walked through with her. By this time, though, Matilda's skill in deception, initiated by Zastrozzi, is absolute:

Matilda, meanwhile, firm in the purpose of her soul, unremittingly persevered; she calmed her mind, and though, at intervals, shook by almost superhuman emotion, before Verezzi a fixed serenity, a well-feigned sensibility, and a downcast tenderness, marked her manner.<sup>35</sup>

Her skill in deception has progressed; her eyes can now enact a 'downcast' tenderness and her serenity is 'fixed'. This kind of simulation of virtue, however, does not leave Matilda unaffected. When alone, she is often propelled by her real emotion into a fit of truthful expression. In one case, she throws herself upon the floor of her apartment where, "Outraged pride, disappointed love, and infuriate

revenge, reveled through her bosom"<sup>36</sup> and this with enough strength that she also, like Verezzi, dashes her head against the floor. Her mask of transcendent, pious love is merely a false front but it is threatening to harden and take over its creator.

In the end, Matilda's deception must be taken a step further to win Verezzi. Zastrozzi proposes her most consummate performance. She must 'save' Verezzi from an armed attack by a robber (Zastrozzi) and, 'wounded' in his defense, convince him of a transcendent, altruistic love. She and Zastrozzi bring off the false attack surrounded by a Gothic landscape of dark forests, a yawning precipice and a gigantic, blackened mountain which looms behind them. Now even blood has become corrupted, and can lie; Matilda 'saves' Verezzi by allowing herself to be stabbed in his place. After the attack,

Matilda's snowy arm was tinged with purple gore: the wound was not painful, but an expression of triumph flashed from her eyes, and excessive pleasure dilated her bosom: the blood streamed fast from her arm, and tinged the rock whereon they stood with a purple stain.

37

Verezzi, at the sight of her blood, is now convinced and it is a small step to his 'fall' into erotic love. He now forgets Julia, though this is difficult, and swears fealty to Matilda. It is interesting that unlike Zastrozzi, Verezzi's features, do not harden after this, nor are his eyes and face fixed in a deceptive mask like Matilda's. Shelley

is consistent in his use of symbolic gesture. Verezzi is a victim and has been infected against his wishes; thus, he does not fall into Atheism out of malicious intent. Shelley gives his expressivity a preliminary thickening. He becomes 'benumbed' and a "Lethean torpor" creeps over his senses before he is 'scorched' by physical passion. When he later sees a very much alive Julia in Venice, "a frigorific torpidity of despair chilled every sense, and his eyes fixedly gazed on vacancy."<sup>38</sup> Torpidity, chills and numbness place him one further step down from his 'filmed eye'; as he falls away from the transcendent immateriality signified by Julia's eyes and into Matilda's language of 'signs', he is approaching, but has not yet reached, the bronzed hardness of Zastrozzi's features.<sup>39</sup>

We can now see the outline of a quite systematic view of expressive means. With Matilda's perfection of a mask, we have the exact opposite to the type of signification we found in Verezzi's face and eye. She has managed to make the gestural system more like words. For her, eyes, facial expression and action have become signs rather than gestures; they are now a medium for hidden desire. What, in Verezzi, is absolutely immaterial and transparent, is, for her a hieroglyph, a means, the mere signifier that allows her to feign a morality she does not hold.

The Semiotics of Shelley's Zastrozzi

In the dialogue between these votaries of two opposing world views, Zastrozzi and Matilda on one side, Verezzi and Julia on the other, we glimpse the careful symmetries of Shelley's earliest ideas about expression and his interest in symbol, sign and gesture. On Verezzi's side there is the fresh discovery that words can be an intimate index of the psyche: faces are the true manifestation of an inner state, eyes are the sensitive registers of feeling and at critical moments they open on another, 'religious' dimension. On Matilda's side, gesture, faces, eyes and words are mere surface and deliberately occlude this other state of being. Under the pressure of Zastrozzi's atheist rhetoric, expression gradually shifts from manifesting an ideal union of souls to separating them through veiling and obscurity. Zastrozzi is an experiment with the powers of expression to both consecrate and to destroy. When it is spiritually informed, even physical movement can become pure gesture and symbol as Verezzi collapses at the mere news of Julia's death; or, under the opposite Atheist spell, words can condense spirit into a violent materiality as Matilda finally does act out the real implication of her lie, 'Julia is dead' and, having killed her in words, kills her physically. We are led to the conclusion that Shelley was aware of an antagonistic relation between sign and symbol from the start. In this parodistic novel, although Religion and a

celestial symbolism are given the victory, the anti-symbolists, the Atheists, the users of the new language of revolt, Eros and disruption have been given a great deal of power. This demystifying language of mediation and the lie has all but destroyed a transcendent symbolism by the end of Zastrozzi.

At least, the level and scope of attention that Shelley has spent on symbolism and sign in Zastrozzi should by now be clear. It is a crucial element of the plot and is a theme of its own. De Man's claim about Shelley's final understanding--that the Rousseauian view of figurative language was disruptive and violent--can no longer be restricted to The Triumph of Life. For the young Shelley, the materialism represented by his earliest readings in the philosophes was disruptive of religious symbols and he seems well aware of their potential for violent 'erasures' from the start. Zastrozzi and Matilda threaten to overthrow the social order itself through a carefully construed symbolic deception. In the overall values of Zastrozzi, these two may have held some fascination for Shelley, but this liaison of symbol and atheism leads to the death of the representatives of celestial love; an outcome which is also deeply felt.

This figure of an expressive mask has now, though, become volatile, weighted with possibilities. Zastrozzi inevitably brings up the potential that religion may only be a mask. Shelley has left us in that queasy area in which a

lie has been so successful that it has thrown light on, and questioned, the truth. Zastrozzi's Atheism has shown that the gestures of Religion, Spirit, transcendent love, and piety can be acted so well that perhaps religion has been emptied of its meaning; perhaps the religious world with all of its symbolic powers is hollow. Only a slight shift in orientation is necessary to find this possibility and it will become explicit in St. Irvyne.<sup>40</sup>

## ST IRVYNE; OR, THE ROSICRUCIAN

In St. Irvyne we see Shelley continuing his dramatic opposition between the powers of religious symbolism and the powers of the new philosophy he is discovering in Rousseau and Godwin. Now, however, he takes a decisive step toward Godwin and thus becomes engaged in a Godwin's revision of Rousseau. He begins by borrowing a supernatural motif from Dacre's Zofloya<sup>41</sup> and transposes these materials into a conflict between opposing philosophies. His hero and heroine, Wolfstein and Megalena, are bracketed by a pair of characters who represent opposite philosophical poles: Ginotti and Olympia, associated with Atheism and Theism respectively.<sup>42</sup> Through this dramatic opposition he again explores the theme of the destruction of established religious beliefs (Megalena-Olympia) by corrosive atheist-erotic forces and the quest for power (Wolfstein-Ginotti). His agent for this process, Ginotti, is a Zastrozzi-like character who first appears to support the idyllic love relation between Megalena and Wolfstein but who gradually corrupts this relation. In St. Irvyne we find a new twist in the theme of language. Zastrozzi placed the conflict between the symbol and the atheist sign as external, represented by two separate characters and played out within a system of masks and gestures. In St. Irvyne, Shelley gradually moves



the conflict into one mind. Rather than simply opposing Religion and Atheism, then, he now tries to place religion's transcendent symbolism within a psychological, 'atheist' perspective. This change of viewpoint gives rise to a deeply conflicted vision about the nature and power of symbolic language.

The theme of symbolism is progressively associated with an historical conspiracy. Ginotti, a natural philosopher and atheist, is uncovered as an ancient, immortal antithesis to Christianity; the saturnine figure of Zastrozzi is now a Rosicrucian who is also, partly, the legendary Wandering Jew. Ginotti slowly awakens Wolfstein, the protagonist, to another version of history and thus to another set of possibilities for his own life and this change is figured as the gradual blending of his psyche with Ginotti's. This historical theme, then, allows Shelley to combine Atheism with symbolism in a more powerful fashion than by simply having Atheism mask Religion. It allows him the possibility of making his atheist, Ginotti, represent something of wider import than the individual who has been wronged by society and who seeks revenge. Ginotti has the Gothic, dark overtones we found in Zastrozzi but he is also more of a Promethean figure. Not only does he resist God's law, he begins to represent mankind's eternal struggle with divine powers. This attempt to wrestle the pregnanz of symbolic language away from a standard Christian iconography and invest it in an 'arch-defier' is not altogether successful and its fail-

ure shows the sudden influence of Shelley's early reading of Godwin and with it the waning of the Rousseauian, revolutionary contrasts of the preceding novel.

Gesture and its Doubles: Ginotti and Wolfstein

We can detect Shelley's continuing concern with distinctions between symbols and signs from the start of St Irvyne. As with Zastrozzi, when the battle between atheism and religion is joined, the gestural system becomes the central medium of the conflict. Eye contacts of various kinds are prolific. The robbers and their leader Cavigni--who is murdered by Wolfstein early in the work--are engaged in physical action; in general they exercise the lower passions of lust, greed and aggression and their gestures have correspondingly sensual meanings. The action-bound Cavigni's dark eye, "wandered wildly over the beauties of the lovely Megalena de Metastasio, as if he had secretly destined them for himself."<sup>43</sup> By contrast, Megalena and Wolfstein can perform another kind of communication with their eyes; at their first meeting, they see into each other easily and immediately. When Megalena is reviewing her first sighting of Wolfstein, "his figure majestic and lofty, and the fire which flashed from his expressive eye, indefinably to herself, penetrated the inmost soul of the isolated Megalena."<sup>44</sup> These kinds of communication thus resolve into levels of surface and depth. Ideas of surface

and depth are, in turn, associated with an expressivity that is either hardened or flexible. We come upon the idea early that people who have fallen morally have less flexible countenances. Agnes, who is assigned to take care of Megalena when she is first captured, has a "guilt-bronzed brow" which reminds us of Zastrozzi's "guilt-bronzed cheek" and this places a woman who has fallen in with robbers low on the scale of expressivity. The semiotic distinctions of Zastrozzi (of a gestural system of hardened or transparent features, of a symbolism of spiritual immediacy and a Materialist medium which can hide a hidden motive), are then, at least in the beginning stages of the novel, maintained in St. Irvyne.<sup>45</sup>

As the plot progresses, though, we notice a marked redistribution of values in comparison with Zastrozzi. If Zastrozzi represents a materialist position on language because he can manipulate language masks to forward his passion for revenge, Ginotti represents another possibility of this position, the blending of atheism and occultism. We find, at the end of the novel, that he is an atheist, but when we first see him he has, or seems to have, mysterious powers. Like Dacre's satanic Zofloya or the 'bleeding nun' in Lewis's The Monk, Ginotti seems to know Wolfstein's mind in a way which goes far beyond Zastrozzi's powers to read motive and moment.<sup>46</sup> Seed has noted that ". . . Ginotti's power, like that of the Ancient Mariner, is concentrated in his eyes,"<sup>47</sup> and we can begin to detect his difference when

we recognize him as a master of eye language. Despite his position as second in command in the robber band, his powers of perception go far beyond those granted the leader Cavigni (a name drawn from a minor character in The Monk). Cavigni has failed in his first attempt to seduce Megalena, but orders a feast to celebrate their 'marriage' much against her will. Wolfstein, who has also fallen in love with Megalena, (though with her celestial side) will prevent this by attempting to poison Cavigni's wine with a 'white powder'. But Ginotti seems to have guessed his intention and dashes the goblet to the floor before Cavigni can drink. Afterward, "the dark and mysterious gaze of Ginotti arrested his wandering eyeball; its expression was too marked to be misunderstood:--he trembled in his inmost soul, but his countenance yet retained its unchangeable expression."<sup>48</sup> The 'objectified' eye, the eye as seen by the other, has a felt expressive surface which can usually be relied on to hide a suspect motive but, for Wolfstein, this boundary is becoming tenuous. We are not told how Ginotti knew of Wolfstein's intention--he does not have any direct knowledge of Wolfstein's feeling for Megalena--and we are left in an ambiguous position: he has either pieced things together through an intelligent connecting of situation, character and opportunity or he has mysterious sight beyond normal ken.

The problem of how Ginotti knows Wolfstein turns out to be the central theme of this episode. When we next see this eye language it comes to have a definitely eerie or occult

quality. It occurs after Steindolph's 'spectre tale' at the feast thrown to celebrate the second attempt of Cavigni to force Megalena to marry him. The consummation of their 'union' is planned for midnight and Wolfstein again resolves to poison Cavigni before this can occur. Here, though, Ginotti's gaze does not stop Wolfstein; on the contrary, it now allows him to murder the robber chief. Wolfstein once again awaits the moment which will allow him to drop the white powder, 'unobserved', into Cavigni's goblet. The action is triggered by eyes; Ginotti allows Wolfstein to poison Cavigni's drink by simply averting his gaze at the appropriate moment. But, Shelley has so positioned us that we begin to realize that Ginotti may not be quite earthly in his ability to read psychic events, especially the precise nature of Wolfstein's intentions and when they will be carried through. After Cavigni has died in appropriate agonies, Wolfstein, even though his life is at stake, admits to the assembled robber band that he has killed him. And next we see another, more tantalizing, example of the kind of knowing that seems to pass rational understanding, a silent, pre-experiential symbol system of eyes. It is yet mediated, though minimally, through an 'eye-beam'. Wolfstein, "who had shrunk not at death, had shrunk not to avow himself guilty of murder, and had prepared to meet his reward, started from Ginotti's eye-beam as from the emanation of some superior and preter-human being."<sup>49</sup> The reaction may appear inappropriate until we see that Ginotti

might have the power to see through Wolfstein's bravado and into a corrupted interior.

When we first meet Wolfstein, alone and lost in the wildernesses of the Alps during an appropriate Gothic storm of 'scintillating' flashes of lightning and great crashes of thunder, he is contemplating suicide for crimes we are only allowed to guess. His confession to the robbers seems to be part of the same motive. Wolfstein's fear of this preternatural quality of Ginotti's eyes seems, then, to be the reaction of a guilty man to a being who has somehow glimpsed his innermost wish.

But Shelley does not allow us to abandon reason and revel unequivocally in Ginotti's occult powers; we have been given just enough physical evidence to suggest a commonsense explanation: either Ginotti may know Wolfstein, perhaps from experiences they had together before the novel opens, or Wolfstein is seeing things in Ginotti that may not be there. Critical thought about St. Irvyne reflects this ambiguity in the sources of Ginotti's knowledge: For Murphy, Ginotti is a straightforward piece of the Gothic convention: he is a supernatural being, 'The Rosicrucian', and he has powers of occult insight.<sup>50</sup> But David Seed recognizes the possibility that he might also be a projection of Wolfstein's mind: "Partly we could say that Ginotti becomes a personification of Wolfstein's conscience" and he hovers, "literally and metaphysically, just on the edge of Wolfstein's vision."<sup>51</sup> The insight is, in part, revealing.

Ginotti may be a haunted part of Wolfstein's mind but this is no more than saying he is a psychological symbol; the 'preter-natural' communication between the two is then really intra-psychic, a dramatic figuration of the intercourse between the internal spectator, Wolfstein's own conscience, and his ego. Shelley has, in this view, an acute understanding of the psychology of moral corruption and its relation to symbols: Ginotti is a screen for Wolfstein's conscience and these strange, unmediated interactions can be explained as taking place in Wolfstein's overheated imagination; as he slips morally and murders Cavigni, his conscience is divorced from him, projected onto Ginotti, and appears to watch him from a distance. Ginotti is then a symbol of his moral fall.

Up to a certain point in the novel, we find other instances which seem to bear out this line of interpretation. When Ginotti is first seen by Wolfstein after his escape from the robber band, he is "convulsed with involuntary horror"<sup>52</sup> and somehow Ginotti forces him to swear an oath that when he dies, Wolfstein will first listen to his tale and then give him a Christian burial. Ginotti, here, seems a violent, impulsive criminal who is threatening Wolfstein physically if he does not comply with his strange wish for a Christian redemption. But Shelley allows us a glimpse of Wolfstein's mind and we see that he has his own problematic. The words 'convulsion' and 'involuntary' suggest a force within the psyche that appears as if it were

being controlled invisibly by another or from a distance; that is, the control is felt to be unmediated. When Ginotti leaves, this compulsive force goes with him, and "a weight seemed to have been taken from the breast of Wolfstein,"<sup>53</sup> though it is soon replaced when he remembers Ginotti's injunction which presses "like a load of ice, upon his breast."<sup>54</sup> To Wolfstein, Ginotti appears to have intrapsychic effects, his presence brings an unbearable 'inner' pressure, he seems even to cross the inter-subjective threshold and take over functions of Wolfstein's ego. It is yet possible, then, to see Ginotti, as a 'symbolic projection' whose powers are really those of Wolfstein's conscience as it acts to cause him inner anguish for his wish for suicide and for his past crimes.

But, as the novel progresses, this line of interpretation, (also noted by Seed), begins to break down. This is because Shelley now begins to undercut the mediation occurring in the communication between Wolfstein and Ginotti. If we study the next few interchanges between these two, we see that a system of symbolic gestures, similar to the one we found in Verezzi's transcendent, unmediated, communication with Julia, is now beginning to dominate the action, though this system is also carefully balanced with a commonsense, world of mediated discourse. It is this variance between everyday signs and occult forces and symbols which keeps our interest and keeps our interpretations off balance.



The communicative structure of Ginotti's next appearance is so ambiguously placed we cannot tell if we have an objective judgement of his character or if we are seeing the haunted effects of the occult on Wolfstein's mind. At the party held by the Duca di Thice at Genoa, Wolfstein can now feel an intense gaze emanating from the crowd. He tries desperately to avoid these eyes and does not recognize them; the narrator must now tell us that they belong to Ginotti, "for it was Ginotti--from whose scrutinizing glance Wolfstein turned appalled;--it was Ginotti, of whose strangely and fearfully gleaming eyeball Wolfstein endeavoured to evade the fascination in vain."<sup>55</sup> We can detect the note of parody of the Gothic we found in Zastrozzi but, more importantly, the inter-subjective boundary has now been breached. Wolfstein cannot prevent these eyes from 'seeing' him and a feeling of absolute exposure forces him to retire from the gathering. As this occurs just after he has produced a passionate, Atheist rationale for his seduction of Megale-na, we might construe that he is rapidly slipping into a moral vacuum. The morally sensitive narrator has warned us that, "yet did he love her now; at least if heated admiration of her person and accomplishments, independently of mind, be love."<sup>56</sup> The reading that Ginotti's powers are mere projection seems borne out; as Wolfstein sinks into erotic and other materialist pleasures, he becomes the victim of a guilty conscience. The eyes symbolize his knowledge of his own state and the sense of being watched is illusory; these

magical 'eye-beams' do not really see through him. They show us that he is suffering the necessary moral penalty of his crimes; but his penalty is a delusion and Shelley is showing us the psychological basis of an active religious conscience.

But there are now a number of practical questions that can be raised. What is Ginotti doing in the crowd at this precise moment? How does he know that Wolfstein has seduced Megalena? If Ginotti's motive is to gain some reward from Wolfstein for supporting him against the robber band, why did he not come forward before this instead of hovering about the edges of Wolfstein's vision? The coincidences of Wolfstein's crimes with Ginotti's appearances are now too pat to be explained as chance, (or as the result of Shelley's lack of attention to continuity). Shelley is drawing us into an area of deep uncertainty about the mind's abilities to communicate: Are we watching a gradual dismemberment of Wolfstein's mental powers, caused by his 'immorality', or are these true 'occult forces' emanating from Ginotti's eyes? Is Ginotti a psychological symbol, thus explainable in rational terms, or is he a true symbol of religious or occult import?<sup>57</sup>

### Ginotti as Symbol

Ginotti does appear to have a fully separate existence. As if to underscore this physical independence, Shelley

emphasises his size; he has a "gigantic form" and "a superior and towering figure." But this separation does not really solve the problem of how we are to interpret Ginotti; it adds to our malaise. Ginotti's size would make him a very good screen for symbolic projections. Rousseau can again be used as an authority here. The notion that Ginotti is a projection, (a quite legitimate reading given Shelley's description of Wolfstein's' inner states), is remarkably close to Rousseau's notion that verbal signs were originally figurative; their birth in the passions first gave rise to a kind of language different than signs based in arbitrary signification. In Rousseau's The Origin of Language, we find that symbolism itself stems from just such fearsome projections onto an enemy,

Upon meeting others, a savage man will initially be frightened. Because of his fear he sees the others as bigger and stronger than himself. He calls them giants. After many experiences, he recognizes that these so-called giants are neither bigger nor stronger than he. Their stature does not approach the idea he had initially attached to the word giant. So he invents another name common to them, and to him, such as the name man, for example, and leaves giant to the fictitious object that had impressed him during his illusion. That is how the figurative word is born before the literal word, when our gaze is held in passionate fascination . . . .<sup>58</sup>

The dynamics of Wolfstein's perception of Ginotti are remarkably close to this first paranoid birth of figures of speech. In Rousseau's notion, a stranger of equal stature has been imagined as a giant; perceived physical size corresponds exactly to the intensity of fear about this strange-

ness. Symbolism, then, in Rousseau's view, is reduced to psychology; it is based in illusory ideas and perceptions. The important difference is that in St. Irvyne the narrator intercedes and has told us that Ginotti is gigantic and does seem to know Wolfstein's mind exactly and with no obvious means; Shelley has brought the uncertainty of mediation to the point that we realize Ginotti may very well have the titanic powers ascribed to him. Thus, instead of traveling forward from the source of symbols in 'the passions' to the conventional sign, we are traveling in a direction opposite to Rousseau's. In St. Irvyne the 'literal word' is gradually being overtaken by symbolic significances; we are uncovering the figurative roots in Wolfstein's 'conventional', mediated discourse.

This increase in symbolisation and the 'backward' motion toward origins becomes progressively emphasised. Wolfstein is rapidly sinking into a moral abyss and Shelley conjures up Ginotti as he passes each stage of this downward movement. Just as he is about to gamble away a huge sum of money, Ginotti suddenly appears and Wolfstein "gazed on the mysterious scrutineer who stood before him."<sup>59</sup> By now, Wolfstein himself has become aware of this unnerving play between exterior and interior, by a figure who seems to be both inside and outside himself; he seeks to find out how "a fellow-mortal might be able to gain so strong, though sightless, an empire over him. He felt that he was no longer independent."<sup>60</sup> The contrast of strength with 'sightless' is

important; in context, 'sightless' means 'extra sensory', that is, without mediation. Wolfstein is now conscious that Ginotti can see into and control him without a material means to do so. The subtle use of perspective allowed by these terms for mediation, thus allows us the possibility that Wolfstein is not simply becoming deluded into thinking that a 'fellow-mortal' has magical powers over him. Wolfstein is too aware of the problem, and of its basis in unmediated communication, to be deluded. Our suspicion that Ginotti may very well have these powers has been given an added bit of proof.

Shelley has then used this double mystery in Ginotti's ability to 'know' Wolfstein to its fullest and has gradually revealed to us that he is not simply a psychological projection. An ambiguity in figuration is being played out here, one we can also find in Rousseau's essay on language. The first sighting of Rousseau's 'giant' engulfed perception; it is only later that the word 'giant' is realized as a figurative word which can be corrected by the literal word. But what happens in this first moment of signification? If it can be 'explained' and seen as a mistaken projection of fear only in hindsight, what are the semiotics of this first imaginative use of words? At this first moment of significance, the speaker is convinced that he is seeing a mythic, fabulous, titanic being; there can be no figurative play during this moment. Shelley seems to play with the possibility that the notion of psychological projection does not

fully explain symbols. There is more to Ginotti's powers than could be given him by an error in perception. The felt sensing of his reality, what de Man would call his 'presence'<sup>61</sup>, cannot, in this text, be explained away by simply stating that he is a distortion of signs that are in essence 'arbitrary' or conventional, (Rousseau's 'literal word') because Shelley seems fully aware of the notion of 'projection' and is seeking to go beyond it.

In Ginotti's next appearance we can clearly detect this awareness. Now sick of Megalena, Wolfstein

retraced, in mental review, the past events of his life, and shuddered at the darkness of his future destiny. He strove to repent of his crimes; but, though conscious of the connexion which existed between the ideas, as often as repentance presented itself to his mind, Ginotti rushed upon his troubled imagination, and a dark veil seemed to separate him for ever from contrition.<sup>62</sup>

This is the psychological view of conscience. Ginotti is an image in Wolfstein's mind which has now taken up residence where his conscience should be. He is thus a projection and symbol of Wolfstein's inner state. However, perfectly balancing what would seem to be a psychological explanation, Ginotti now appears, quite in the flesh, from behind a portal. As Wolfstein turns to enter the portal, "a grasp of iron arrested his arm, and, turning round, he recognized the tall figure of Ginotti, which, enveloped in a mantle, had leaned against a jutting buttress."<sup>63</sup> We have been shown, decisively, that there is no exterior motive for

Ginotti's appearance. No obvious means, no mediations, are present here; Ginotti is able to read Wolfstein's moral and mental state directly and his objective existence is completely linked to this interior state. He comes to life just after a moment of introspection in which his figure has obscured Wolfstein's conscience. Ginotti, then, has both a separate existence within Wolfstein's mind, and he has a separate existence outside this mind. We can see that Shelley is quite aware of the conditions of symbolism; symbols are, precisely, more than subjective projections. He knows very well that to be effective they should have a life of their own and appear to us as arbitrary presences beyond human psychology.

Ginotti is taking on more far reaching resonances; he is now 'omniscient' and able to move inside and outside Wolfstein with ease. The distinction between "inside" and "outside" has become obscure. As a separate being, thus 'outside', Ginotti has taken on the power of a double who knows Wolfstein's every thought and he can, disturbingly, be felt 'inside' because he now blocks, (very much like the film over Verezzi's eye), the light of religious morality. It is this well developed uncertainty of location that increases Wolfstein's terror and the reader's awareness that Shelley is exploring a double pattern in signification. Shelley will concede that there are projections, based in terror or guilty conscience, but Ginotti is not one of them. Ginotti is not an illusion of language, he is a symbol

because Shelley has, deliberately, made him 'hover' in a medial position between the mind and an exterior existence.

The statement from Rousseau should remind us, however, that this indecisive existence of location and control also aligns well with the interactions between symbolic and conventional modes of expression we found in Zastrozzi. Ginotti has taken over some of the symbolic functions accorded to Julia but this, as Shelley would have known, is close to idolatry; one senses a struggle here similar to the atheist-symbolist struggle we found in Verezzi's eye. While he seems to be taking on miraculous, seemingly divine, powers of unmediated knowledge, we must remember that this is an atheist who is 'coming to life' as a symbol. As such Shelley cannot rely on any of the customary religious iconography and understandings to give his symbol credibility. Ginotti cannot be 'daemonic', nor can he be divine nor can he be a demi-urge. For Seed he appears to "possess knowledge and powers reserved for God,"<sup>64</sup> yet later when we are told he is the Wandering Jew, there is no "direct reference to the religious origin of the legend, so that the image now suggests a quasi-heroic resistance to the forces of adversity."<sup>65</sup> Seed has mapped the range between theist, occultist and atheist (psychological) interpretations of Ginotti.

We can begin to detect Shelley's recognition of this problem in the development of Ginotti's 'eye beams' or 'radiations'. After Wolfstein runs away from the gambling salon to finally corner his persecutor and demand an expla-



nation, "the eyes of Ginotti flashed with coruscations of inexpressible fire"<sup>66</sup> and after he has found him in place of his conscience by the portal, "the pale ray of the moon fell upon his (Ginotti's) dark features, and his coruscating eye fixed on his trembling victim's countenance, flashed with almost intolerable brilliancy."<sup>67</sup> And just as he is about to solve the mystery and tell Wolfstein of his origins, "A pause ensued; during which the eyes of Ginotti, glaring with demoniacal scintillations, spoke tenfold terrors to the soul of Wolfstein."<sup>68</sup> These are dramatic, evocations of 'other-worldliness', but they have become clearly parodistic. Despite the pyrotechnics, the effect is to leave Wolfstein on the outside. There is no contact with or sensing of a transcendent or occult world here; Wolfstein's terror is reflected back to him in Ginotti's eyes. He actually sees a surface, the flash of the eye-beam, a manifestation of light that is very close to fire; there is no distinct informative content. The beam is also much more 'material' than Julia's; it remains a medium and its symbolic import undefined. This, then, is a very conscious attempt to go beyond mediated discourse into symbolic language without the means to do so. The light may hurt because of its brilliance but, as yet, it has no real, general import; to Wolfstein it remains a sign and communicates nothing concrete beyond a suggestion of relationship. At this point Wolfstein intensely wishes to know who Ginotti is, and it is with an equal intensity that Ginotti's material eye-ball flares and

flames. Shelley is trying hard to cross the limits of rational mediation but these flashes and scintillations are mere gestures towards symbolism. For Wolfstein to know who Ginotti is, and how he came to have his strange powers, would require that Shelley either collapse the illusion of the double into some normal human relation, (thus come down on the side of Ginotti as a psychological symbol or 'projection') or present us with a coherent, supernatural explanation which transcends the mediated language they have been using. He will have to present Ginotti as new kind of otherworldly being who is known through symbols, or he will have to make him talk in a conventional way, perhaps as a Faustian-scientist.

#### Ginotti and the Potential Unities of Mind

For Murphy, Ginotti's strange powers are adequately explained as Shelley's exploration of Rosicrucianism; he has found his way into Wolfstein's mind through a religious ritual which is unorthodox but yet within the world of spirits and a transcendent divinity. Shelley is exploring the 'areas of the mind yet haunted by religion'.<sup>69</sup> To Seed he is a much more ambiguous character, and he is not so easily explained: "Shelley carefully maintains a margin of mystery which prevents attributing any categorical identity to Ginotti."<sup>70</sup> Seed ascribes this uncertainty to a falling off of interest in the Gothic as Shelley comes under the

influence of Godwin's own Gothic novel, St. Leon, and the rational philosophy of Political Justice. In Shelley's introductory, 1812, letter to Godwin we find "it is now a period of more than two years since first I saw your inestimable book on 'Political Justice'"<sup>71</sup> which would date the first reading at about the same time that he was attempting to finish St. Irvyne (late 1810). A Godwinian rationalism<sup>72</sup>, then, could very well be undercutting the occult symbolism of flashing eyes and mysterious knowledge and effects. The uncertainty, reflected in the kinds of signification Shelley uses, now becomes more intense as Ginotti tries to explain his powers to Wolfstein. In chapter VIII, Wolfstein is finally allowed into Ginotti's history, and the problem of mediation is immediately raised.

He begins with an account of Wolfstein's own past, "Let it be sufficient for you to know, that every event in your life has not only been known to me, but has occurred under my particular machinations."<sup>73</sup> He confesses, further, to having known every "opening idea" which marked Wolfstein's destiny and "even when far, far away, when the ocean perhaps has roared between us, have I known your thoughts, Wolfstein; yet have I known them neither by conjecture nor inspiration."<sup>74</sup> This would appear to solve the problem; Ginotti has omniscient powers. In another sentence that almost states the case directly, Ginotti claims to have been the formative influence of the 'excellent' part of Wolfstein's mind. In the web of influences that has made up

Wolfstein's character and abilities, Ginotti is claiming the god-like power of an occult source. With this knowledge imparted we seem to be coming to a resolution, now Ginotti's "expressive eye, diverted of its fierceness and mystery rested on Wolfstein's countenance with a mild benignity."<sup>75</sup>

Given the way in which Shelley has used ambiguities in mediation to keep us off balance, the notion of the 'double' could easily collapse here. And it first appears to do this. We are dragged through a long digression and a new sub-plot involving Wolfstein's sister, Eloise, and a new set of characters, one of whom is called Nempere. Nempere, at the end of this chapter, is killed by Eloise's protector, Mountfort, and--to add to the confusion--we are informed later that Nempere is a disguise for Ginotti. This would seem the Godwinian, rational solution; Nempere-Ginotti gets his just, rational, punishment for his treatment of Eloise. But the occult aspect of Ginotti's character has been stressed throughout the novel and it also must, somehow, be explained. When we finally return to the problem in communication between a very much alive Ginotti and Wolfstein, Shelley has radically changed his tactics. The dilemma in mediation invoked by Ginotti is now cast on a very abstract level. Ginotti's hovering, ambiguous identity--half divine, half atheist; half symbol, half sign; half inside, half outside Wolfstein's mind--is now restated as the wavering threshold between God's omniscient powers and the knowledge limits of man's science that Ginotti explored as a universi-

ty student. The emphasis on science and atheism in this 'explanation' might mean that Godwin may be having an effect here as well, but the problem of Ginotti's knowledge of Wolfstein remains, though it has been restated on another, higher, level of discourse.

Though he provides no explanation of Ginotti's omniscience, Shelley does, eventually, make a decision about his immortality. At the end of the long tale of Ginotti's past we are finally introduced to him as "The Rosicrucian." Ginotti then promises to impart the secret of immortal life to Wolfstein, he gives him directions on how to mix a certain potion and then he is to meet him at St. Irvyne. Before this last injunction he adds a highly significant qualification,

"Needless were it for me,' continued Ginotti, 'to expatiate further upon the means which I have used to become master over your every action; that will be sufficiently explained when you have followed my directions.'"76

The problem is that this knowledge is never imparted. In the final scene in the grave-yard of the church of St. Irvyne, Ginotti is taken down into hell by Satan himself and Wolfstein dies--a very problematic ending as Ginotti/Nempere has been killed prior to this. However, Ginotti, true to his Promethean nature, has managed, briefly, to capture and hold one divine power, omniscience, the ability to read minds without mediation, and loses thereby any possibility of salvation. Shelley never tells us how it was all done.

Although we have a rather hurried reinstatement of Christian orthodoxy, the problem of mediation remains unresolved. The line of division between materialist conceptions of symbolic language as projections and occult conceptions of symbols as openings to a mysterious realm is maintained, strictly, to the end. Ginotti is an eerie double who knows everything about Wolfstein and all of human history, and he is also a very specific, Godwinian character with all of the limits of individual humanity; how these two beings are related, is left, finally, to the reader's imagination.

#### The Semiotics of Ginotti as Symbol

The intermediate state which Ginotti inhabits is a prototype for figures like Prometheus, for the doubling of perspective in "Alastor" and "Mont Blanc," and for the 'shape all light' of the Triumph of Life, as it whispers across the pool billowing out the water without touching it. De Man maintains that this last image is the 'figure for all figuration' in Shelley's works but we can now see the possibility of a very different reading. The signficatory 'place' inhabited by Ginotti is gradually won from two separate language systems; they cluster at the edges of each description we are given of him and he is related to them as a figure is defined by its background. Ginotti is the first of Shelley's 'figures for all figuration'; and, for all of

his unsatisfactory powers, he marks Shelley's first awareness of the depth of the problem of symbolism.

At the end of Shelley's 'Gothic' phase, truncated by his reading of Godwin, we can glimpse the outline of a new mode in language, a kind of language that will attempt a co-existence of the materialist sign and the symbolic language of celestial love or the occult, a heterological viewpoint which problematically allows both. Between the poles of a materialism which cannot allow transcendent powers and an equally problematic religion that cannot allow a humanly made immortality, we can just glimpse the outline of a figure as old as man, as far reaching as human culture, as full of potential as reason and science linked to social progress and morality. Ginotti, the Rosicrucian, The Wandering Jew, hovers in a curious middle state between symbol and sign and thus between spirit and matter, mortality and immortality, mediation and intransitivity, pure communality and an infinite, empty aloneness. He speaks both languages and projects the impossible phantasm of a lyrical dialogue, the lyrical 'I' who remains an enclosed self and yet who is also the fullest representative, the symbol, of humankind.

In these two 'gothic monstrosities' we have found some of the outline of the problem that will engage Shelley a great deal in future works. In the poetry written within and just after the same period, we find poems that explore the same themes as have Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne. Some of these early efforts use traditional poetic forms like the ode and

are not overtly concerned with language or 'semiotics'. The kind of address found in the many lyrics or songs to either Harriet Grove, Shelley's first cousin, or to Harriet Westbrook written during their fate laden courtship and marriage do not rise above the sentimental lyric, though the context in which they were written shows them as affronts to familial authority. We also do not find comments on language in the early Godwinian polemics against Kingship, Religion and 'Interest' as in the "Letter to Edward Fergus Graham, " (May 4, 1811) "Falsehood and Vice" or the two versions of "The Devil's Walk" (1812). But there are also a large number of poems that do not fit into these categories of political polemic or lyric. When satirizing kings or making love in words, typically, Shelley has a real human recipient in mind, but there is another kind of poem in which the auditor is fictional or spiritual, in another plane of existence altogether. In the irregular Odes like "Love," "To a Star," or in the various experiments with the Gothic genre in poetry like "Sadak the Wanderer" and "Ghastly; or, The Avenging Demon" we find a heightened, idealized or mystical kind of discourse and often along with it, explicit commentary on language and the dilemmas of these poems are very similar to those of the two Gothic novels.

As we have seen in the novels, the driving motive behind it all is the power Shelley has found in symbolism. In this fascination with this type of significance in itself



we find the beginnings of a sensitivity which will mark Shelley's later style. We can now see that de Man's post-structuralist critique of Shelley has uncovered an insight at the terminus of Shelley's career which is the very motive for its beginning. The early gothic works show an intense awareness of the problem of symbols. Their religious import, their relation to gesture, how they figure in the disruptive world view of the new philosophy, the essential problematic of their construction, form the central theme of Shelley's gothic phase. Shelley as 'arch-defier' knew that both materialism and the occult were disruptive of conventional religious symbolism. By the time he wrote St. Irvyne, he also seemed to have known that his tendency toward occult, otherworldly symbolism went against Godwin and if it were to be used, it must now be thought through within the Godwinian framework of social forces, ideals and utopia. This relocating of an acute understanding of both the psychological and occultist sides of symbolism makes all the difference in our evaluation of Shelley's major works. We can no longer assign all the work prior to The Triumph of Life to the category of a less sophisticated romanticism based in ignorance of rhetoric and the way in which language can be reified. Shelley's project will now be marked as the overcoming of the dilemma of the 'constructed symbol'.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>These included Zastrozzi, St. Irvyne; or The Rosicrucian, Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson, Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire (1810) and the poems which make up the The Esdaile Notebook. The critics have been somewhat divided as to the value of these works. The first critics I could find who took Shelley's gothic seriously were A. B. Young, in "Shelley and M. G. Lewis," Modern Language Review, i (1906), 322-324 and A. M. D. Hughes in "Shelley's Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne," Modern Language Review vii (1912), 54-63. Young thought that Shelley had become infected by cheap Gothicism and could not see how he could have known so much about women. This doubt led to a search for sources. Hughes', The Nascent Mind of Shelley (1947) and Cameron's The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical (1962) both devoted a reasonable amount of space to this phase of Shelley's writing. Hughes is more positive than Cameron. Hughes saw an early form of the later titanic heroes in such figures as Zastrozzi and Ginotti whereas Cameron classed them as 'gothic monstrosities' and used them as a backdrop to show his conversion to Godwin's philosophy. Later critics have also relegated the gothic works to a very far and dark reach of Shelley's past. For Harold Bloom, using Buber's distinction, "The myth of the I-Thou relationship does not precede the 1816 Hymns" (see Shelley's Mythmaking, p. 8. For Wasserman they, along with all of his early work, show a much too facile synthesis of Godwin's 'perfectibility of man on earth' and a belief in an after world, see Wasserman, Shelley: A Critical Reading, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>See David Seed, "Shelley's 'Gothick' in St. Irvyne and after," in Essays on Shelley, ed. Miriam Allott (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>A. M. D. Hughes, The Nascent Mind of Shelley, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Holmes has Shelley 'glimpsing' Godwin's work during his first tutelage under Dr. Lind at Eton beginning in 1808. Shelley would then have been sixteen. See Richard Holmes, Shelley: The Pursuit, (1974; rpt. Viking Penguin: Elisabeth Sifton Books Penguin Books, 1987), p. 26. A.M.D. Hughes places the actual reading of Political Justice closer to 1810, yet while Shelley was at Eton and under the guiding hand of Lind. See A.M.D. Hughes, The Nascent Mind of Shelley, pp. 26-29, p. 25 n.

Cameron has Rousseau as part of his Republican phase at Oxford, but admits "just how early he had entered this republican phase, how long he remained in it (before passing over to Godwinism), or how much or what reading in republican literature he did at this time, we cannot accurately tell." Cameron admits, though that Rousseau's "Discours sur l'origine . . . de l'inegalite parmi les hommes," was on his reading list at Oxford which would have placed its influence in 1810. See Cameron, Young Shelley, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup>The narrator often comments on the 'sophistical' nature of Zastrozzi's arguments. See Shelley, "Zastrozzi" in The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley From The Original Editions, ed. Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883), II, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup>Shelley, *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Priestley situates Godwin in relation to the French tradition in the following way, "The attitude of the French school towards moral values, as towards truth, tends to be relativist and subjectivist. The only absolute good and evil are my pleasant or unpleasant sensations. What gives me pleasure is my good; it may not be your good or the general good. The essence of good, as well as the criterion, is utility . . . . The end of all actions is pleasure. If my good, or pleasure, does not coincide with the general good, i.e., help to produce the maximum quantity of pleasurable sensations, it can be changed to my evil by the adding of pain as punishment.

The whole of this doctrine, based upon a hedonist psychology, is remote from Godwin's main system of thought, to which absolute values are as necessary as absolute truths. But the language of utility was almost inescapable for a writer of Godwin's generation. Consequently, we find Godwin accepting the doctrine that pleasure and pain are the only absolute good and evil, and from time to time subordinating various virtues to utility, insisting that they have value only as means to pleasure." See Priestley Introduction to Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice III (1946; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), pp. 14-27.

<sup>10</sup>Shelley, *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>11</sup>For Godwin, established religion was repressive because it prevented the flow and forward progress of opinion, "the system of religious conformity, is a system of blind submission" and "the tendency of a code of religious conformity, is to make men hypocrites." See Godwin, Political Justice, II, pp. 233-239. We find Rousseau's view in the "Second Discourse" where he is studying the irrationality and instability of the legal power of the state, "But the frightful dissensions, the infinite disorders that this dangerous power would necessarily entail demonstrate

more than anything else how much human governments needed a basis more solid than reason alone, and how necessary it was for public repose that divine will intervened to give sovereign authority a sacred and inviolable character which took from the subjects the fatal right of disposing of it." See Rousseau, Second Discourse, p. 170.

<sup>12</sup>In 1906 A. B. Young noted the prevailing critical belief that the "repeated accounts of Matilda's violent passions are beyond the probabilities of so youthful an imagination as Shelley's at that time." It was this disbelief that Shelley could have known anything about sex at his age that led to the hunt for sources in Monk Lewis, Radcliffe and Dacre. See A. B. Young, "Shelley and M. G. Lewis," Modern Language Review, i (1906), pp. 322-324.

<sup>13</sup>Shelley, *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup>Hughes lists at least three influences: Lewis, Radcliffe and Dacre; but Zastrozzi's name is obviously derived from the "Strozzi" given as Megalena's surname in Zofloya and he has a number of the features of the arch sinner of Dacre's novel; see Hughes p. 32.

<sup>15</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay On the Origin of Languages" in On the Origin of Language ed. and trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1966), p. 11. De Man has also extensively analyzed this essay and most of Rousseau's oeuvre. He uses the same metaphor of 'disfigurement' to describe Rousseau's theory that he has used with Shelley; Rousseau's language is also fundamentally and problematically metaphorical-figurative. See Allegories of Reading p. 151.

<sup>16</sup>De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," p. 127.

<sup>17</sup>Charlotte Dacre, Zofloya; or, the Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century I (New York: Arno Press, 1974), p. 15.

<sup>18</sup>See, for the relation of this mixture of 'corruptibility' and 'perfectibility' to Rousseau's theory of language origin, James H. Stam, Inquiries into the Origin of Language: The Fate of A Question, (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 80-93.

<sup>19</sup>De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," p. 139.

<sup>20</sup>Shelley, Zastrozzi, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup>See p. 34 and p. 40 of Zastrozzi

<sup>25</sup> See Todorov, Theories of the Symbol, pp. 189-194.

<sup>26</sup> Shelley, *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Todorov, pp. 173-176.

<sup>29</sup> Lord Monboddo's view seems a theoretical parallel for Verezzi's gestures. Monboddo, an ardent popularizer of ancient metaphysics and its application to the study of language, held that the material side of verbal signification is its least essential, weakest, worst part: ". . . language consists of two things; namely, sounds, and the conceptions of the mind signified by those sounds. The first is . . . called the material part of language, and the other the formal part. . . Of these two parts of language, it is evident, that the formal is by far the more excellent, by how much the thing signified is more excellent than the sign, and the mind than the body: for this part of language belongs altogether to the mind; whereas the other is no more than the operation of certain organs of the body."

<sup>30</sup> Shelley, *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>31</sup> It is thus guaranteed as credible both because of its similarity to blood--blood is the classical symbol of true emotion and passion and cannot lie, even Zastrozzi has blushed once--and because he comes back to consciousness exactly as he left it--grief-stricken; from this close look at his eye we can see that Verezzi could not be deceiving us.

<sup>32</sup> Todorov, Theories of the Symbol, p. 234.

<sup>33</sup> I am relying here on Charles Taylor's distinction between 'designative' meaning and 'manifest' meaning. See reprint of Taylor's 1978 Alan B. Plaunk Memorial Lecture, Carlton University, Language and Human Nature, pp. 5-10.

<sup>34</sup> Shelley, *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>39</sup> Descriptions of Julia also include 'airy', 'air-built vision of delight', 'the ideal being of another world' (p. 92); she also has 'mildly-beaming eyes' (p. 94.)

<sup>40</sup> The metaphor of fixity and fluidity is, of course, central to Godwin's social critique. Social institutions, like marriage, church and government, are intrinsically bad because they

tend toward self maintenance, toward a conservative permanence and they fix individual thought and judgement; they thus prevent the forward progress of individuals towards improved and ever happier lives. (See F.E.L. Priestly in the Critical Introduction to William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its influence on Morals And Happiness, (1946; rpt. University of Toronto Press, 1962), III, p. 28.)

<sup>41</sup>Along with materials from Godwin's St.Irvyne and Lewis' The Monk.

<sup>42</sup>Olympia only appears late in the novel but she, like Julia, is a virginal innocent murdered by a jealous rival.

<sup>43</sup>Shelley, St.Irvyne, p. 124.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>45</sup>Note that I am not using the notion of 'motivated language' in the same sense as the phrase 'non-mediation'. My usage of immediate or non-mediated language is closer to Todorov's notion of 'intransitive' language.

<sup>46</sup>Dacre's phantom has the uncanny ability to appear just when Victoria is thinking about ways to destroy her various rivals.

<sup>47</sup>Seed, p. 46.

<sup>48</sup>Shelley, p. 129.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>50</sup>See Murphy, The Dark Angel, pp. 30-32.

<sup>51</sup>Seed, p. 146, 147.

<sup>52</sup>Shelley, p. 144.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>57</sup>De Man, along with Barthes, would think of Ginotti as a 'distorted sign' as a bit of signification that had become layered with presence and thus reified.

<sup>58</sup>Rousseau, Essay on the Origin of Language which Treats of Melody and Musical Imitation, p. 13.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>61</sup>See De Man's essay on Derrida's reading of Rousseau in Blindness and Insight, pp. 103-141; and his own readings of Rousseau in Allegories of Reading, pp. 135-159 and "The Image of Rousseau in the Poetry of Holderlin" in The Rhetoric of Romanticism, pp. 18-45.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>64</sup>Seed, p. 48.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>69</sup>  
Murphy, p. 30.

<sup>70</sup>Seed, p. 48.

<sup>71</sup>In Seed, p. 63. Hughes says this about the first meeting between Shelley and Godwin, "He [Godwin] was now to take in hand a neophyte than whom none could be more ardent, but rather to temper his zeal and to apprise him of wants and weaknesses that no other friend or monitor discerned more clearly; and much of Shelley's intellectual, and much more of his personal history begins on the day when these two were first in contact." Hughes, The Nascent Mind of Shelley, p. 124.

<sup>72</sup>See, for instance, Mark Philips, Godwin's Political Justice, (London: Duckworth, 1986), pp. 15-57.

<sup>73</sup>Shelley, p. 187.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

## CHAPTER III

### THEORY OF OPINION IN "QUEEN MAB" AND "ALASTOR"

If an angel or a heavenly spirit had invented language how could its entire structure fail to bear the imprint of the manner of thinking of that spirit, for through what could I know the picture of an angel in a painting if not through its angelic and supernatural features? But where does the like occur in our language? Structure and design and even the earliest cornerstone of this palace reveals humanity.<sup>1</sup>

The texts that mark Shelley's first serious steps into poetry on an epic scale are deeply concerned with a variation of Herder's idea. Queen Mab, (1811-13) Alastor, (1815-16) and the other poetry of this period all show a vigorous struggle with the question of how to place poetic language in relation to the traditional figures of transcendence.<sup>2</sup> Whether poetry can bear the 'imprint of spirit' or whether it is a human construction whose translucence bodies forth the more limited but rational human quest for moral perfection and social progress is very much within the complex of theory, influences, criticisms, questions and doubts which make up these poems.<sup>3</sup> In its essence, the problem is the social relevance of the figures of allegory and symbol.



We have already seen Shelley's first struggles with the question of transcendence and language in the Gothic novels, Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne. Playing with Gothic occultism and the dangerous implications of social disruption Shelley found in Godwin, Rousseau and the philosophes, he has discovered that religious symbols can mask deep seated motives like revenge or, at least in theory, sexual passion. But, in St. Irvyne, he has foundered on the question of whether symbolism can be adequately explained as a psychological aberration caused by guilt. The problem of an 'atheist symbol' posed by Ginotti is now grappled with in a more serious philosophical manner and Godwin figures seriously in the equation. Shelley's problem is to find a way of situating the older figurative language of allegory and symbol, deeply tied to religious iconographies, within the framework of a philosophical discourse about social oppression and social renewal. In the first major poem written under the new dispensation, Queen Mab, we find Shelley invoking the triumvirate of symbol, allegory and discourse as more or less equals. But his first approach is abstract and formulaic: Shelley is attempting to flesh out a theory and often the discourse model of poetry appears simply as an idea, an inclusion of philosophical terminology yet very close to its source in Godwin's Political Justice. In "Alastor" we begin to see a more fully realized version of the theory in the ironic account of a visionary life dedicated to a symbol, "the dream maiden." It is, then, not until Alastor that the

idea of poetry as a weapon poised against established social forces begins to affect Shelley's use of allegory and symbol and to take its place as the overriding category of language in his poetry.

In the poetry written between 1812 and 1816, and now fully under the influence of Godwin,<sup>4</sup> Shelley begins to realize that religious symbolism fixed human thought and language in rigid moulds. But this insight left open the question of whether a form of symbolism could be found which would liberate rather than oppress the revolutionary spirit of humanity. He begins, in Queen Mab with a relatively clear question: Is the symbol merely an expression of orthodoxy, the projection of institutional custom at war with progressive social forces, or can symbolic language be legitimately used to further the ideal image of humanity he has learned, principally, from Godwin? We shall see that in trying to answer this question, he seems to think through a series of ideas about figures that is very much like the antagonism between allegory and symbol analyzed by de Man.

For de Man, there is a constitutive relation between time and allegory which makes it more acceptable than the irrational claims of symbolism. In contrast to the symbol with its confusion of spatial simultaneity and identification between poet and nature, allegory stresses sequence.

. . . . in the world of allegory, time is the originary constitutive category. The relationship between allegorical sign and its meaning (signife) is not decreed by dogma . . . . We have, instead a relationship be-

tween signs in which the reference to their respective meanings has become of secondary importance. But this relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it.<sup>5</sup>

There is an interesting equation in this view of allegory. While time and language have been bound together in a spectral relation, there is a distinct weighting in favour of language. De Man appears to be saying that, in the imaginative world of allegory, an illusion of time's passage is created or constituted by language through the pure sequence of signs it requires. Further, the temporal dimension 'created' by allegory is in essence unreal and the maker of allegory is aware of this illusion. Symbolism, on the other hand requires the kind of identifications which deny poetry as an act of language; thus, denying that these identities are illusions. This throws an interesting light on the figurative language of Queen Mab. As Queen Mab ushers in the final, glowing point of human perfection, she loses her status as an allegorical figure and takes on more of the simultaneities and identifications of a symbol. She does this because time has become contingent. Although the text makes both matter and time functions of 'all-pervading wisdom' or mind, Shelley actually makes this transformation through a figurative illusion that is similar to the specular identifications of symbolism de Man has shown. By the end of the poem, Time itself has also become constituted as a symbol and it is now wholly dependent on language.

Except for the problem of time, Shelley's rhetorical practice in these two poems does, however, show a much more acute awareness of the issues of identification, rationality and mystification than de Man would give him credit for. The limits of de Man's analysis of Shelley become apparent as the philosophical background of these poems is uncovered. Godwin's ideas of social change are based on a concept of social opinion and of the way in which social enlightenment can be disseminated. As we will see, it is within this kind of understanding of language, not an abstract sense of figures as breaking or conforming to the laws of signs, that Shelley's poetry must be studied.

Queen Mab and the General Principles of Allegory.

Queen Mab has called forth deep divisions in criticism and the divisions are often related to Godwin's influence in the poem. Priestley finds this influence absolute, though it is not a "simple exposition of Godwinism" because "the poem displays its immaturity in the confusion of its thought, a confusion which tends to obscure the underlying principles."<sup>6</sup> Wasserman dismisses the poem as 'unguardedly optimistic' and an example of 'optimistic utopianism.'<sup>7</sup> According to Ross Woodman, the poem's philosophy shows a gradual movement from a unified, thoroughgoing materialism to a Godwinian position which allowed a progressive spiritu-

ality and moral progress. Shelley becomes a disciple only when Godwin is closest to Berkeley and Platonism.<sup>8</sup> A.M.D. Hughes, on the other hand, sees Queen Mab beginning a variation of Godwin's views along Neo-Platonist lines:

Godwinism was his first home, and he began from the outset adjusting it to his own instincts and spiritually underpinning it . . . . Godwin gave him politics and ethics; Plato the Intellectual Beauty and its flying and beckoning light.<sup>9</sup>

These critics show us the major sources for the poem and have touched on one of its fundamental difficulties.<sup>10</sup>

Shelley attempts to keep the powers of mystical transcendence and immortality usually ascribed to Platonism or Neo-Platonic Christianity within a Godwinian framework of atheism and evolutionary social progress.

Godwin's philosophy is notable for its revision of Rousseau on the point of the means of social change. For Mark Philip, Godwin "decisively breaks away from the basic contractarian framework within which the philosophes [especially Rousseau] constructed their arguments," and "Godwin's account of revolution is fully consistent with his basic principles, and these principles are much more those of liberalism than of revolutionary republicanism. Indeed he provides us with an account of non-violent change and transition which is in many ways more conservative than Locke in its implications for the justification of violent political action."<sup>11</sup> Although, as Priestley shows, there is a leaning toward Berkeley in Godwin's thought at this

time, its essential social dogma is a rational evolutionism.<sup>12</sup> In Godwin's view, republicanism and revolutionary action are errors; Necessity will gradually and more surely refine social morality and this will lead to the atrophy of the aristocracy, all economic injustice and the traditional religion. This bloodless revolution is to be fought in the field of opinion. For Godwin,

There is no conduct which can be shown to be reasonable, the reasons of which may not sooner or later be made impressive, irresistible, and matter of habitual recollection. Lastly, there is no conduct, the reasons of which are thus conclusive and thus communicated, which will not infallibly and uniformly be adopted by the man to whom they are communicated.<sup>13</sup>

This action of an informed public opinion liberated from fear and conventional thought will continually refine human institutions like government and religion until they are no longer necessary. We see that the viewpoint places a great deal of stress on language, reason, and the dissemination of ideas; men, at base rational beings, will inevitably be won from their oppressive attitudes through rational argument, talk or discourse.

In Queen Mab, Shelley takes this notion of perfection through liberated opinion very seriously. For him, Godwin's system implies utopia, a realization of an ideal form of existence as spirit and the eventual end of all change, evolution or history; in Queen Mab, his goal is no less than the construction of an image of perfected humanity. But Shelley's language mirrors a double vision: he demystifies

standard religious stories and imagery as a forced symbolism of transcendence and shows them as allegories of illegitimate power. At the same time he uses an allegory of the revolutionary spirit which gradually becomes transformed into a symbolism of Utopia modeled on the eternal present of Heaven. Shelley wants to produce symbols of utopia that are copies of the very symbols of heaven he so effectively destroys. Allegorical diction and symbolic diction vie for dominance throughout Queen Mab.

In the opening, a rational kind of allegory is strongly stressed. Queen Mab uses a system of personifications which will help us to picture morality and philosophical abstractions in delightful and entertaining, as well as instructive, ways.<sup>14</sup> We realize that we are not in a world of concrete detail and action, but are worrying over Ianthe's awakening as a figure of revolutionary idealism.<sup>15</sup> The material world, at this stage, is very much present but it has been made background so that these evolutionary Spirits can begin the restructuring of the world as it is. But we know from the beginning that we are not to take Queen Mab or Ianthe with the same seriousness as we take such established manifestations of spirit as angels, ghosts or devils. This light, allegorical world of fictions prevents reification, the taking of figures in themselves literally, or too seriously. The progressive, political ideas to which they point are the serious part. With such a Godwinian allegory, social conditions--poverty, kingship, wealth,

slavery, custom--and ideas about how to change them, are the ultimate reference of Queen Mab and Ianthe. Queen Mab's allegorical diction does not, then, create a poetry of concrete situation; it does not have the loving attention to physical detail for its own sake we find in Wordsworth or Keats. In this mode, detail is consciously poetized and not given overly elaborate attention.

Shelley delights in this kind of language for its own sake. In describing a sleeping Ianthe, he has "Her golden tresses shade / The bosom's stainless pride, / Curling like tendrils of the parasite / Around a marble column," (I. 42-44) and Queen Mab's horses are "Celestial Coursers" which "paw the unyielding air." This almost rococo diction with its distinctions between body and mind is made, then, to play off against the dogmatic spirits of the religious world. There is, though, a serious meaning to the light which ushers in Queen Mab:

Those lines of rainbow light  
Are like the moonbeams when they fall  
Through some cathedral window, but the tints  
Are such as may not find  
Comparison on earth. (I. 54-58)

This is an invocation of a true world of spirit and also a backward irony; Mab's 'tints' of light are the real thing, whereas the cathedral's tints are part of the established Christian symbols and are earthly and corrupted. Ianthe has been chosen to receive Queen Mab's message (in distinction to those who attend cathedrals) because she has "burst the



icy chains of custom"; she is a natural rather than an institutional spirit. Queen Mab herself is allegorical of the total, unfettered human imagination and its potential. She will show Ianthe, "the wonders of the human world" and is able to "discern the secrets of the immeasurable past in the unfailing consciences of men." From this she can divine the future and show Ianthe, "how soonest to accomplish the great end," (I, 168-187) which means the completion of such serious projects as bringing about the downfall of religion and the complete realization of humanity's, now repressed, potential.

Up to this point, we can recognize Queen Mab as a conscious, allegorical construction. Ianthe and Queen Mab are, without doubt, charming and fanciful. They are interesting, provocative, but insubstantial as dreams, displays of the imagination as Shelley paints up Godwin's abstractions. Inasmuch as this is the case, this is a sign system yet within the mode of reason and intellect. It is the point by point building up of a gradually more complex system of significance based on simple transpositions of meaning: image "A", [say Queen Mab] will equal idea "B", [Godwin's notion of humanity's true moral imagination]; image "C", [say Ianthe] will equal idea "D", the free revolutionary spirit. These images will carry their significance best, as in all allegory, when there is no surplus meaning left to the reader, no ambiguity or possibility of polysemy. As de Man puts it, the allegory is "a sign that

refers to one specific meaning and thus exhausts its suggestive potentialities once it has been deciphered."<sup>16</sup> At this level, Queen Mab is imaginative, neatly turned, philosophical propaganda and Shelley has underlined this possibility in his title, "A Philosophical Poem." Once, however, Queen Mab and Ianthe enter "The Hall of Spells," (l. 42), and Shelley begins to take on the problem of Religion squarely, his allegory begins to falter.

Here, "below lay stretched the universe" and in this aerial mansion, "matter, space and time . . . . cease to act; / and all-prevailing wisdom, when it reaps / the harvest of its excellence, o'erbounds / Those obstacles, of which an earthly soul / Fears to attempt the conquest." (ll 91-96) These lines usher in the attempt by Queen Mab and Ianthe to surpass the limits of the physical world more or less unaided and this places serious strains on the allegory of a revolutionary spirit with which Shelley began. This allegory required an interplay between aspects of material life, like Ianthe's sleeping body, 'stains of earthliness' (135) or 'the cold heart of a conqueror' (36) and the potentials for moral progress Shelley has found in Godwin's philosophy. But in the "Hall of Spells" the material world is fast disappearing altogether and the spiritual potential of humankind is about to be shown as realized. Queen Mab is, then, beginning to have religious scale; she has become the final cause of the whole domain of human achievement in imagination and thought. Shelley is no longer simply indi-

cating the future; he is so rearranging things that we begin to feel the future as present. And if 'matter, space and time' are to be challenged, we are close to a participation mystique; Shelley is leaving didactic allegory for the more risky heights of a revolutionary symbolism.

Queen Mab and Godwin's Perfectibility of Man

The philosophy of Queen Mab seems, then, to combine two distinct and incompatible streams of thought. In Shelley's Notes to the poem, he states, with both surety and equivocation, "There is no God. This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken."<sup>17</sup> The critics we have canvassed on Godwin's influence have interpreted this double vision in a number of ways. According to Woodman, it is in Queen Mab that Shelley shifts his philosophy and tries to reconcile the deterministic materialism of the philosophes (Helvetius, d'Holbach); Thomas Taylor and John Frank Newton's Orphism; and Godwin's more disinterested, higher faculties of philanthropy and an instinctive human altruism or collective sense.<sup>18</sup> The Godwin Shelley met in 1812 was, "an immaterialist and an admirer of Berkeley."<sup>19</sup> This attempt to harmonize and clarify competing philosophical influences is not however successful though it points the way to the synthesis he will find in Adonais and Prometheus Unbound. C.E. Pulos keeps

the Godwinism and the Platonism on an equal footing and claims a Humean skepticism in Shelley's outlook which refuses any dogmatic assertion whether it be materialist or spiritualist.<sup>20</sup> The two viewpoints present are regarded as phases of a change or as a healthy sort of self-doubt necessary for growth. This doubling of viewpoints is the cause of Shelley's ambiguous approach to poetic language, and towards the end of the poem, a straightforward conflict between modes develops.<sup>21</sup>

The recognition by these critics of a Platonic dimension in the poem indicates that its symbolism is more than an attempt to simply image Godwin's utopia. For Godwin, social progress is to be realized through the liberation of communication and the dissemination of ideas, but this is an historical process waged against an antagonist. The force which prevents this dissemination is government control of opinion and religious orthodoxy.<sup>22</sup> The institutions of government and religion have repressed mankind's profession of a natural altruism. "Opinion is the castle, or rather the temple of human nature," and "Whatever instructions a code of religious uniformity may fail to convey, there is one that it always communicates, the wisdom of sacrificing our understandings, and maintaining a perpetual discord between our professions and our sentiments."<sup>23</sup> Institutional religion had forced its practitioners, unwillingly, into one universal mode of expression which goes against their real opinions. If opinion were freed from all institutional

blockage, progress would be natural and inevitable; a non-violent dissolution of authority would follow the dissemination of morally enlightened ideas. We can see Godwin's notions of the revolutionary effects of free speech clearly in Shelley's poem; but in his attempted symbolism we see a realization of these ideals that erases the historical dimension.

Despite his professed Atheism, the scope of his faith in Godwin's idea is immense. The world we see as matter is really a kind of being from which we have been cut off by custom. According to Shelley, even the most substantial, massive examples of this world are actually Spirit:

Throughout this varied and eternal world  
Soul is the only element; the block  
that for uncounted ages has remained  
The moveless pillar of a mountain's weight  
Is Active, living spirit. Every grain  
Is sentient both in unity and part,  
And the minutest atom comprehends  
A world of loves and hatreds; these beget  
Evil and good: hence truth and falsehood spring;  
Hence will and thought and action, all the germs  
Of pain or pleasure, sympathy or hate,  
That variegated the eternal universe. (ll 139-153)

This is the first of Shelley's philosophical mountains and it is a massive inversion of commonsense perception. We are within a Platonic or Berkeleyan universe shaped by Godwinian notions of Necessity and opinion. There is no matter as insensate substance, but there is a consciousness everywhere and it seems to work just like our own. Everything that we have been taught to believe as material is, in reality,

Mind. And in the 'begetting of evil and good' we see that these grains of mind-matter also seem able to interact and communicate. As illustrated even more clearly in the next example, Godwin's principle of freedom of opinion now inheres even in the smallest particle of this universal awareness:

I tell thee that those viewless beings,  
 Whose mansion is the smallest particle  
 Of the impassive atmosphere  
 Think, feel and live like man,  
 That their affections and antipathies  
 Like his, produce the laws  
 Ruling their moral state. (II ll. 231-37)

This conscious world that surrounds us is, like man's, determined by 'affections' and 'antipathies', that is by microscopic loves and hates; these in turn produce the natural laws that result in a moral condition. Shelley has humanized the Newtonian laws of attraction and repulsion between elements. The shock to modern sensibility comes from a vocabulary of physics that is very close to describing social behaviour or human relations. One has affection or antipathy for other beings, moral states control actions in society and ruling laws bind individuals within a group. Shelley has socialized an indifferent and ahuman nature; even atomic relations seem based on 'freedom of opinion.' This is, then, a marvelous rendering of Godwin's idea projected as the very structure of the universe. Free opinion is at the centre of perfect, natural laws. When left alone, the workings of Necessity produce the best and most just of

orders; social interference is against nature. This orientation is not then ontological, its fundamental categories are communicative. Shelley is projecting Godwin's idea as a realized platonic heaven which has come about through the perfect communication allowed in nature, a heaven of complete freedom of opinion and desire which was either hidden from us or which is awaiting our discovery.

Here, then is the semiotic base for Shelley's Godwinian symbolism. If man is like the atoms and, oppositely, these are 'beings' like us, then the two worlds of nature and man are, in truth, one. On the level of signs, this so redistributes reference that man cannot differentiate his own language from nature's. If there is no real distinction between mind and matter, if all is mind, then human signs which seem to refer to nature are actually referring to the signs or 'opinions' of another subject. This implies that all natural entities, now broken off from one another, could communicate; man could conceivably contact the world of atoms and mountains as one subject to another. It is this possibility which is creating havoc with Shelley's allegory. The allegorical mode relies on clear, stable distinctions between such entities as subject and object, spirit and matter, referent and sign, man and God, time and eternity. The newer way, being transcribed in the poem, now means that figures of liberation like Queen Mab and Ianthe, hover between a figural, playful status and a life as symbols--at one moment they are spectral products of language, at another

er they seem mythic, living spirits who are leading us into an utterly new universe.<sup>24</sup>

De Man's general notions about the complex interplay between symbol and allegory in romantic poetry seem then an accurate rendition of this figurative element in the poem. The general figurative structure of Queen Mab shifts from a rationalist, allegorical view of spiritual potential and possibility to a symbolic view in which a revolution in spirit is about to be realized in the poem itself. But, de Man's perspective becomes less comprehensive when we realize another aspect of the discourse model now deeply in effect in the poem. This intermediate, shifting status of figures is not really played out 'in itself'; it is the product of an antagonist. Preventing this force for change, and the Godwinian utopia, we find religious orthodoxy. By the time we reach the critique of religion, Shelley seems to know that language is the key to overcoming its powers: he discovers that religion is both false and a symbolism, a very human construction masquerading as Spirit. This kind of awareness again complicates any neat judgement of the early Shelley as entirely enmeshed in a mystification of symbols.

Queen Mab: Religion As An Allegory of the Lie

For Shelley, as for Godwin, religion manufactures a false spirituality designed to keep an oppressive political



system in place. It is a language of stasis, weight and fixity. We begin the critique of religious symbolism, appropriately enough for Shelley, with a vocabulary of fraud and disease. There is, for instance, the Mayan priesthood which used animism to collect wealth: The Mayan ruins are an example of the curse of overabundance, where ". . . wealth, that curse of man, / Blighted the bud of its prosperity." (II. ll 205-6) The priests of the various established religions are criminal and associated with slavery, or the trade in blood, ". . . what was he who taught them that one God / of nature and benevolence had given / A special sanction to the trade of blood." (II ll 155-7). In the world of Queen Mab, everything heavy, substantial, material or sensual is connected with this corrupting, oppressive system of faith. Kings kill themselves through heaviness. The accumulation of wealth and the slavery needed to amass it enervates until they can no longer feel, think or imagine unless it is to sting themselves with a conscience that also looks diseased:

Behold him now  
 Stretched on the gorgeous couch; his fevered brain  
 Reels dizzily awhile: but ah! too soon  
 The slumber of intemperance subsides,  
 And conscience, that undying serpent, calls  
 Her venomous brood to their nocturnal task. (ll 58-63)

This King, like the commercialist or the priest, is a 'withered soul' who will pass unremembered into a material oblivion. The virtuous man or woman, however, will "never

pass away." (ll 169) The king is another manifestation of a misshapen human will that would block an inevitable progress towards spirit working its way beneath, and beyond the current political and social state.

The real category of analysis here and throughout this section is clearly language: freeing oneself from religion is, in essence, no more than freeing oneself from a lie. Although religious imagery claims spiritual connection, it operates solely on the plane of words and is not connected with anything more soul like than a few key terms: "They have three words:--well tyrants know their use, / Well pay them for the loan, with usury / Torn from a bleeding world! / God, Hell, and Heaven." (ll 208-10) There is a world of sensitivity to figuration bound up in this metaphor of the misuse of money. The metaphor is used by Shelley consistently throughout the poem to refer to the way in which oppressive power is maintained. These three words, "God," "Hell," and "Heaven" are 'loaned', and if the tyrants pay well for this loan, with usury 'torn from a bleeding world', they do not pay it back at all; they instead reloan the words back to the original lender and charge their own interest for the reinvestment. If this is the case, then these words have been given back with a twist--a new relationship to the true spirit; humanity is now robbed through them rather than aided by them.

We are, once again, analysing the same ability of language to mask and hide the truth that we noticed in

Zastrozzi. Now, however, Religion is a false front for venality.<sup>25</sup> We see another emphasis on the powers of language, and another link to religion, in the metaphor of currency used in Shelley's description of the corrupting effects of tyranny on youth: "Red glows the tyrant's stamp-mark on its bloom, / Withering and cankering deep its passive prime. He has invented lying words and modes, / Empty and vain as his own coreless heart" (IV 230-233). This stamp mark exemplifies the language of institutions that is so much the object of Godwin's scorn.<sup>26</sup> But there is a complex interaction between the mark and the blight. With 'stamp' the notion of a heavy handed force is contrasted with the more delicate spirit of youth, but the metaphor curiously works against any overtly violent effect: Even though these effects are deadly, what could be a lighter and more delicate action than to inscribe a petal? We see this duality at work in the other metaphors Shelley uses for the dynamics of established orthodoxy. In another instance, Religion is compared with selfishness and 'shuns the light': "Twin sister of religion, selfishness! . . . / Shunning the light, and owning not its name; / Compelled, by its deformity, to screen / With flimsy veil of justice and of right, / Its unattractive lineaments" (V 22-29). Shelley has exposed religion as based in the most delicate, airy of acts, naming; it is a violence of words, words are the subtle force that can stamp flowers and veil selfishness. We have not really left the understanding of figuration that we began

with Ianthé and Mab, though the mood is different. The various examples we have been given of kingship, commerce and religion show the veiled and dangerous counterpart to the first section's language of double meaning, and are, then, exposing, negative, corrupted forms of allegory.

Shelley, in this critique, has an awareness of the two, distinct dimensions that de Man has found necessary for the allegorical mode, an awareness of language as such and time.<sup>27</sup> The religious allegory, then, for de Man recognizes human limits and would require a recognition of transcendence, or a spiritual plane unapproachable in human terms. Two planes are present in Shelley's critique of religion but their order is reversed. Instead of an opposition between a false, earthly plane and a real, spiritual plane, we have a false, spiritual front and a 'lower,' hidden, and very earthly, motive. The images of this oppressive language all show an exterior (cathedral windows, piety, teints, signets, stamp-marks, seals and words) which has a hidden, interior signification of greed, selfishness and the quest for absolute power. This double language of allegory, so curiously ephemeral, and so curiously powerful comes out again in the study of commerce: "Commerce has set the mask of selfishness / The signet of its all-enslaving power / Upon a shining ore, and called it gold" (V 53-55). Shelley is again saying that a system of signification (money) has been humanly and deliberately constructed to enslave; it only appears to have an absolute value, and its tempting shine veils its allegor-

ical structure, it deceives through an exterior presence which hides a malign and very human motive.

In all of these instances, we are being shown the emptiness of an established, practiced symbolism. Symbolism itself seems the target; Shelley is telling us that the presences and powers of religion, and its sub-orders of money and kingship, are really allegories that have been made into oppressive forces and presences. They must be read critically in order to be uncovered as reified, very human, structures of signs, words, opinion. Although the poor (and thus virtuous) man does not accept or laughs at this "rhetoric of tyranny," (V 113) the liberal, the "man of ease" is duped by its "cold sophistry." In fact, this form of religious language has become the absolute method of the enforcement of the world as it is:

"All things are sold: the very light of heaven  
Is venal . . . .  
  that sets /  
On each its price, the stamp-mark of her reign." (V  
177-188).

Here, again, is the curious potential of the most insubstantial things, a 'light', and a 'stamp-mark' to hold all things in place. But, we can now see that this power is illusory; it is really something which is, in essence, weightless as a word, ephemeral as an allegory. We prepare for the final insight, but first the ideas of Religion must be connected with social power:

How powerless were the mightiest monarch's arm,  
 Vain his loud threat, and impotent his frown!  
 How ludicrous the priest's dogmatic roar!  
 The weight of his exterminating curse,  
 How light! and his affected charity,  
 To suit the pressure of the changing times,  
 What palpable deceit!--but for thy aid,  
 Religion!" (VI 62-69)

We are a step away from an ultimate unveiling. Following Shelley to his conclusion, we find that the ultimate Power is nothing but an empty word. God himself now becomes vacancy under the pressure of semantic analysis. "There is no God! / . . . . The name of God / Has fenced about all crime with holiness, / Himself the creature of his worshippers . . . ." (VII 13, 27-29). Shelley has recognized that the essential anchor of social power lies in allegory; the Christian God is a very human construction which has become, through force and sanction, reified as a presence or symbol.

In this tightly controlled analysis of religion, revolving around the allegory of signs used as commerce and money, we thus get a backward glimpse of both the power and the limits of language. This religious system of doubling, veiling, and mirroring continues in infinite regress; it explains the world. Shelley has seen a split between words and their real meaning and this is the key to understanding how the current system is maintained. We can see, then, a clear-headed analysis of religious symbolism here that uses allegory not as ironic self-commentary (de Man) but as a means of unveiling and demystifying a false system of figures quite exterior to the poet.

But another, less credible, dialogue emerges from within this critical discourse with religion--the conversation Shelley is having with the true Other; the one who will piece together his various allegories (fractures) and how they converge at another level of meaning. This broken sign system of religion is a mirror in which we can catch the implication of true Spirit and the true sign. We see and hear it faintly, from some height, as a third meaning: the understanding that this description of the 'cold sophistry' of religion is itself true and is based in the true essence of words. True opinions will not be substantive force nor will they borrow only in order to reloan what they borrow at criminal rates of interest; free speech has the power to undo this fallen, material world.

Queen Mab: The Paradoxical Symbol

Although Shelley shows an acute awareness of the nature of symbolic language as a mystification, toward the end of the poem we see him trying, paradoxically, to reinstate it. Having destroyed the credibility of an institutionalized heaven, he now claims it as the wish of everyone for an ideal, "O happy Earth! reality of Heaven! / To which those restless souls that ceaselessly / Throng through the human universe, aspire; / Thou consummation of all mortal hope!" (IX, 1-4). He is then close to a Godwinian Utopia, but there is a one more hurdle to overcome. Now we see Queen

Mab forwarding the idea that language is part of a more general ability to realize things of the mind. At the end of his Promethean story of Ahasuerus's resistance to an oppressive deity, Shelley emphasises the semantic point. The mists and shades in a twilight grove are, "The matter of which dreams are made / Not more endowed with actual life / than this phantasmal portraiture / Of wandering human thought." (VII 272-275) Presumably, then, Ahasuerus, Queen Mab and God are, all alike, allegories; they are human constructions, projections of the mind to be "endowed with matter, being and reality" in instances like these that require a moral, never, however, to be mistaken for reality. But there is a distinct danger in this view of language when it is reapplied to a social Utopia. The danger is its conversion into a symbolism and this becomes most apparent when Shelley applies the same kind of rhetorical analysis to time.

In the last Canto, we see that time has been placed in the same category as religion and commerce; it has almost lost an absolute status and become another aspect of the allegory of oppression.

"Even Time, the conqueror, fled thee in his fear;  
That hoary giant, who, in lonely pride,  
So long had ruled the world, that nations fell  
Beneath his silent footstep . . . . "

"Time", then, is composed of the same semantic stuff as God. 'He' is now a personification, thus simply a figure to be handled in the same way as God: demystified as an illusion



of language. Although Time has the ability to undo tyranny, its tyranny is, in turn, undone by an unstated mediator that looks suspiciously like language: "Time was the king of earth: all things gave way / Before him, but the fixed and virtuous will, / The sacred sympathies of soul and sense, / that mocked his fury and prepared his fall." (IX, 34)

Shelley indeed seems to be saying that a virtuous humanity would have the ability to stop time in the same way that it can destroy religion, and this is accomplished by some harmony between inner and outer being that 'mocks' it. In light of the understanding that God is a mere name, we can see the implication that a change in opinion is all that is required for Time's downfall.<sup>28</sup>

Propelled by the success of his critique of religion, Shelley nowhere seems conscious of the danger in the direction he is now taking. After humanity has surpassed religion's 'reign of crime', we find that duration now begins to have an ephemeral existence. We know it, after all, only through the same type of blighting sign that we knew of the false Christian God, "How vigorous then the athletic form of age! / How clear its open and unwrinkled brow! / Where neither avarice, cunning, pride, or care, / Had stamped the seal of grey deformity / On all the mingling lineaments of time." We now see Shelley's 'stamp mark'--his primary metaphor for oppressive language in Queen Mab--beginning to oscillate between two poles. On the one side we see the stamp as a human construction (allegory) and on the other it

becomes a figure which in its absence allows divine powers (symbolism). If the stamp is removed, the signs of aging are, miraculously, no longer present in 'all the mingling lineaments of time'. Aging is no longer present in aging. Finally, at the end, the paradoxes of trying to present human perfection and a state without time and space in the limited, mortal language of allegory become only too apparent. Shelley is now describing the aftermath of the reign of Religion and the eventual dismemberment of all the churches, cathedrals and monuments:

These ruins soon left not a wreck behind:  
 Their elements, wide scattered o'er the globe,  
 To happier shapes were moulded, and became  
 Ministrant to all blissful impulses:  
 Thus human things were perfected, and earth,  
 Even as a child beneath its mother's love,  
 Was strengthened in all excellence, and grew  
 Fairer and nobler with each passing year.(IX, 130)

Because Shelley has not come down on the side of either symbol or allegory, he is caught at the end in a very unsatisfactory middle ground between the two ways. He is using a rationalist, time-bound allegory while at the same time he is projecting the spiritual range and atemporal dimension of the symbol. Wasserman notes the depth of the ambiguity between time and eternity here: "On the one side, he has rational confidence in a Spirit of Nature that, operating in the same manner on nature and man, can impel them interminably toward perfection; on the other, he aspires to a perfect eternal afterlife, sanctioned not by divine revelation and a transcendent deity but only by his feeling and wishes."<sup>29</sup>

Shelley has become mired in a paradoxical system of figures which both symbolizes a final state of humanity as a perfection and is an allegory of an 'excellence' which is fairer and nobler with each passing year.

In Shelley's defense, we can say that Queen Mab shows a skillful critique of the role played by allegory in the creation of Religious beliefs, although he seems inconsistent in his attitude towards symbolism. We can also see that his critique of religion and the fanciful creations upon which the poem depend are part of a potentially consistent theory. In Queen Mab, religious symbolism is reified or hypostatized imagery and uncovered as force and trickery; the language used by tyrants is infused with a violent form of disruption, a projection of an imagined world that is held to be real. But this symbolism is really an allegory, imagery that is humanly made. Shelley's flawed Utopian vision in Books VIII and IX is brought about by the attempt to lift off the oppressive weight of religious symbolism along with such basic categories of human experience as time and space as if they also were mere words.

For de Man, our view of romantic literature has been distorted by a 'supremacy of the symbol' in romantic criticism. We have seen the value of this view in relation to Queen Mab and also its limits. Shelley, at twenty, seems often conscious of some of the specific relations between symbol and allegory to which de Man points. Queen Mab is a rather complete deconstructing of the language of pride as it

is present in religion, politics, commerce, and marriage through the use of allegory. The poem also shows the depth of Godwin's influence and the revision of Rousseau that is at the heart of Godwin's theory of opinion. Shelley's first use of this theory, however, is abstract and he seems unaware that he has contained Godwin's freedom of opinion in a symbolism which accurately mirrors the symbols of Religion he has destructured. Discourse has now been made a magical force, the powers of divine symbolism have been reinstated within the field of opinion, social criticism, and its dissemination. In the next poem, "Alastor" we will see this paradoxical symbolism of liberation take on a more conscious and highly defined shape.

"Alastor": Discourse and Silence

Queen Mab when it convinces, convinces through its passionate dedication to change and its fiery antagonism to injustice. Yet, within this highly charged, socially aware rhetoric, we have also found another potential: an inner, constitutive dynamic of symbolism and presence. With "Alastor," written two years later in the fall and early winter of 1815, Shelley begins to develop and clarify this symbolic dimension by placing it in dramatic conflict to his language of social activism. At first sight the poem's argument seems weighted against the symbolic mode, but gradually we see that Shelley is quite sympathetic to the

visionary quest for truth and its figures. The question of whether he demystifies or believes in the symbols of transcendence forms the core of the critical debate about the poem, and critics who have taken time with "Alastor" seem themselves at war about which of the two ways wins in the end.

Evan K. Gibson, one of the first to sound the depth of the poem's philosophy, believed that despite a structural looseness, "Alastor" contains, "a unity of thought throughout."<sup>30</sup> Shelley is showing us that ideals must be applied to earthly, social problems. The visionary symbolism in the poem is carefully bracketed so that there is no question of identification. In the end, the poem teaches us that faith in a transcendent symbolism is illusory and leads to vacancy and an unfulfilled life. If this is the case, then Shelley has now chosen to deny a transcendent dimension in poetry and to turn away, forthrightly, from the possibility he began to uncover in Queen Mab. Ross Woodman has taken the opposite position. He proposes that by the time Shelley had come to write "Alastor," he was dissatisfied with the limits of materialism and Godwin's philosophy and was reopening the occultism and spiritualism we saw in the Esdaile poems and his Gothic phase. The poem is a plea for a spiritual dimension in existence and in the slow, tortured demise of the visionary poet, Shelley shows the tragedy of attempting to live a life of spirit in a Godwinian universe. According to Woodman, this materialist-spiritualist ambiguity was the

index of Shelley's poetry. He was "governed by two powerful passions: a desire to reform the world and a desire to transcend it."<sup>31</sup> The poem, seen from this perspective, forwards the shift from materialism toward a neo-Platonic spiritualism that Woodman detects first in Queen Mab.

Earl Wasserman, developing ideas found in Pulos' The Deep Truth about Hume's influence on Shelley, sees the poem as thoroughly skeptical. In "Alastor," according to Wasserman, Shelley becomes a poet rather than an apologist for Godwin. The attempt at a synthesis we found in Queen Mab is put aside and Shelley begins to understand that the quest for immortality and the quest for social progress are irresolvable opposites.<sup>32</sup> Shelley, according to Wasserman, now puts an idealist Visionary and a politically aware, materialist Narrator on the same level and allows each perspective to play off ironically against the other. The ironic strategy mirrors the argument between Deist and Christian Apologist found in his short, earlier tract, A Refutation of Deism, (1814). In "Alastor," neither Idealism, nor Materialism is given up, but each confronts the other and the final position is a skeptical anti-dogmatism.

While the critics of this poem might disagree on how this drama of ideas is resolved--whether Shelley in fact rejects or embraces a transcendent idealism in "Alastor"--there is very little disagreement about the essential lines of the issue: the battle in Shelley's mind between opposed philosophical perspectives. Using this more

or less agreed upon schism in ideas as a basis, I will argue that this conflict is present, unresolved, in the poem's symbols. In "Alastor" Shelley develops his insight into the problem that symbolism presents for the new, radical poetry he was beginning to write and there is an advance: the symbol has now been freed from the abstractions we found in Queen Mab and we see and feel its effects in the flesh and blood situation of an individual life. The outcome is very clear: this life becomes alienated then wasted through an attempt to live in an illusory symbol world (represented by the dream-maiden) of transcendent, perfect love. However, the critical debate about this poem should warn us of the difficulty in maintaining one-sided judgments about "Alastor." Skepticism is only one voice in this poem; faith in symbolism itself is not yet rejected, only one form of its realization in poetry. To the side of the conscious, worked skepticism, very evident in the poem, there is a strong undercurrent of assent given the symbol which indicates a deeply held belief in some kind of spiritual life.<sup>33</sup> As I hope to show, it is in the struggle between the claims of a revolutionary consciousness which will not abide a transcendent power and an stubbornly held belief in the possibility of a liberated spiritualism that Shelley begins to find the tentative, experimental approach to symbols which will, after "Alastor," mark his poetic style.

In "Alastor," Shelley at first appears to have given the essential mode of truth in poetic language not to a

visionary symbolist but to an ironic, skeptical Narrator. But we are now working with a poetic voice that is much more aware of the field of its powers than was evident in Queen Mab. Wasserman comes very close to recognizing the change, though he seems to stop short at realizing its depth. The Narrator, for Wasserman, is a 'dramatic speaker'; the radical form used in "Alastor" is the "dialogue" and "the dominant motif of the Narrator's invocation is love equally reciprocated."<sup>34</sup> The narrator, then, is working within the general idea that poetic language is a higher form of 'opinion' or social discourse. His voice has its roots in the reciprocal dynamic of an informed conversation, the struggle of a language of social criticism against an opposition, of speech to and from others. The narrator might be skeptical but he is Godwinian in his belief in the effectiveness of right opinion. The basis for the Narrator's argument is, again, Godwin's engaged intellectualism.

For the Narrator, as for Godwin, language is a means of conveying essential truths to other minds and the object of such language is social change.<sup>35</sup> It is, further, (like Wordsworth's early view in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads), opposed to a static or formal structure of rhetorical figures as a means of accomplishing this aim. In order to see the influence of Godwin's view on "Alastor" and its implications for reading the figures in the poem, we must look first at the Preface.



The Preface introduces us to the three categories in language with which "Alastor" will be concerned: allegory, symbol and a strongly engaged, social voice which can develop and hold to a sympathetic human relation. The poem is, firstly, "allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind," namely of an virtuous intellectual who attempts to transcend the social problems that surround him. The method of this transcendence is the contemplation and wish to be at one with an idealized, fictional woman; thus the visionary is, secondly, a symbolist who "images to himself the [non-existent] Being whom he loves" and he is, thirdly, distinguished from those who "loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind, rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief . . . . They languish, because none feel with them their common nature." The visionary is different from this last group because he seeks another community of like-minded spirits, though it is a community impossible to find on this earth. "Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit makes itself felt."<sup>36</sup> The last category of language used to describe the visionary shows a more poetic use of Godwin's free 'profession of opinion'.<sup>37</sup> The visionary, despite his understanding of "all that is excellent and majestic," has not learned to forward his ideas through the

liberating discourses of reason, love, Eros, politics, or a poetry of social criticism. He is a solitary, neither 'friend, lover, father or benefactor of his country' and has no community. His is a poetry not simply of intention, but of pure potential; and this poetry is impotent because it does not affect the flow of life around it nor does it alter the wider course of social opinion and, ultimately, history.

This last category of discourse is weighted as the most important of the three. We have noted its abstract presence in Queen Mab as the potential of 'pan-communication' among all spirits of nature. Here, though, we find it taking the preeminent place in an ordering, or valuation, of the basic elements of poetry. Shelley, in the Preface, has clearly begun to distinguish between a poetry seen as a liberating discourse with others and the two types of rhetorical appeal (allegory and symbol). This sense of a poetry as a language which can engage social forces is now the framework in which he can place the older religious modes. The evidence for this is that when allegory and symbol are next used, they come enfolded within the frame of the discourse model and through contrasts between these modes we detect a very subtle, very clear, note of irony.

The poem begins with a strong claim to human sympathy in the form of an address to the great Mother, the "Spirit of Nature." And the resources of this new dramatic voice, begun with the Narrator, are formidable. Shelley has found a poetic form, the odic address, that can carry his new

notion of opinion. We find a voice that is concerned, generous, charming, open, formally correct, elegant, profoundly careful, engaging, fully aware of another:

Favour my solemn song, for I have loved  
Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched  
Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,  
And my heart ever gazes on the depth  
Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed  
In charnels and on coffins, where black death  
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee.  
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings  
Of thee and thine . . . . (19 - 26).

This sudden, dramatic claim for recognition is so intense that one is caught and wonders whether she could have known where and when he waited for her response. It is, further, a sensitive and fluent voice, not concerned whether its allegorical tableau are rational, but how effective they are in winning a gesture in return. The speaker next catches his own tendency to self-aggrandizement and mutes it with a quick change in tone and tactic; there is a slight lowering of sights: "In lone and silent hours . . . Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks/ With my most innocent love," (33-35). Her resources must also be formidable; he is reminding her of his devotion and wants some sign, some signal which he could win, he thinks, with his voice alone. All he has received, though, are hints, gestures, veiled movements in dreams and daytime fantasies. The speech ends its appeal by asking only that the speaker be allowed to 'modulate' with 'voice of living beings . . . the deep heart of man'; thus, that he be guided away from unreal language and remain

in tune with the voices of human love and sympathy. It seems, however, that only one burst of such an address can be sustained though it is enough to serve as a basis for comparison with other modes of poetry: As we turn to the parable of the Visionary, we will see that his allegories are now not quite believable.

For Wasserman, the Narrator is a strict materialist who, "conceives of himself as a serene and equal member of the entire earthly community."<sup>38</sup> This may be true, but he is no Wordsworthian dalesman; he is much too practiced in the subtleties of figurative speech. The Great Parent, Nature, is talked to with such elegant and odic fervor that she seems to have an existence; we see the outline of a recipient. The narrator knows that the Visionary's kind of 'muted' language also has such potential. He states it, however, within a delicately wrought, irony of personification.

He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude.  
 Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes,  
 And virgins, as unknown he past, have pined  
 And wasted for fond love of his wild eyes.  
 The fire of those soft orbs has ceased to burn  
 And Silence, too enamoured of that voice,  
 Locks its mute music in her rugged cell.  
 (60 - 66)

There is a subtle interplay between discourse and allegory here and the limit of the allegorical mode is very much in view. The visionary sings and his song is ultimately compelling. He also sings to a transcendent spirit, not an earthly one, thus his song must be limited, allegorical. But his

singing has been ironically figured by the Narrator through the primary resource of allegory--the personification--as directed to a woman called "Silence." Within this telling figure we hear another message. Even the silent allegory of transcendence, if read correctly, is an attempt at discourse; it is really an address to a very human being. We have been shown in these virgins and this 'too enamoured' figure what the visionary poet cannot see, the outline of his true recipient. His music is so amorously beautiful that, nun-like, she (Silence) must cancel it out. And in the silent songs of transcendence we now hear the sad music of a one-sided, erotic rhetoric that would convince on a very different level than the transcendent, though the singer is unaware of the depths of his intent.

The force which is producing this complex irony is the awareness that language is always, at all points, discourse, some kind of exchange or telling to another of earthly, human things. The same subtle, overriding view is found in Shelley's description of the visionary's anti-type, the vision of a perfect companion:

He dreamed a veiled maid  
 Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.  
 Her voice was like the voice of his own soul  
 Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,  
 Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held  
 His inmost sense suspended in its web  
 Of many-coloured woof and shifting hues . . .  
 Herself a poet. (150 - 160)

Male and female sides of the persona are bound together here in a Platonic vision of inspiration, but their connection is ironic. The solitary Visionary's anti-type<sup>39</sup> is, indeed, himself; caught in a mirror world, he, through 'her', sends his poetry to himself, and it is truly 'the voice of his own soul' he is hearing. This alienated voice is trapped in a world of pure allegory, a solipsistic world in which the speaker only thinks he is talking to a transcendent being; in actuality, both speaker and listener exist in a self-enclosed conversation which we hear only as overtone. The error has developed to the point that a conversation with the self has replaced a conversation the poet should be having with a real woman. Once again, the irony is allowed us through the framework of the narrator's use of language. His is the voice that speaks to others, the voice that has not lost its sympathies with life, love, society, Eros--the Spirit of Nature.

But, the beauty and 'generosity' of this error prevents Shelley from outright condemnation. This maiden is a variation of the Julia, Mab, Ianthe figures we have seen in preceding works. She is "a dream of hopes that never yet / Had flushed his cheeks." (150) The music of her voice is "Like woven sounds of stream and breezes" (154) and "knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme / and lofty hopes of divine liberty." (159). She has then the potential to be a timely, stirring image of progress, or perhaps the model of and guide to a real lover. As the next lines show,

however, this potential is not realized; all the energy of human improvement she represents is turned inward and her potency is progressively diffused as she is taken further and further into the mind; she becomes merely a mental event. Her song takes on strange overtones, "sweeping from some strange harp / Strange symphony, and in their branching veins / The eloquent blood told an ineffable tale." We begin to see the direction in which she is being taken, "at the sound he turned, / And saw by the warm light of their own life, / her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil / Of woven wind" (174). She has been reduced from a potential symbol of liberation with all of its external reference to an erotic fantasy and the visionary's quest is now shading into pathos. The poem ends on the same, subtle ironic note. The ideal maiden is reduced to a pair of eyes and seen as a projection on the points of a crescent moon; the visionary, even at the moment of death, insists on seeing what is not there. He projects an image of perfect eyes and he is blind to the end. At the last, he "Upon an ivied stone/ Reclined his languid head . . . ." (634) and he dies in the rocky arms of a mountain nook, thinking them the transcendent arms of a perfect epipsyche.

In this delicate picture of the deluded visionary, the figure of allegory has, however, been quite clearly and thoroughly contained within the higher, more generalized category of discourse, of poetry seen as a "concrete manifestation of language."<sup>40</sup> Poetry, Shelley is saying, becomes

fruitful only in the transference of the ideal into a context where it can modulate and energize life. Allegory, here, is a dead language, a silent prayer to an perfect object and a wasteful turning away from humanity.

### Alastor's Symbolism

As we have seen, though, there is more than a hint of positive feeling toward the visionary quest in "Alastor." Shelley's use of a discourse mode as a form of ironic comment on a 'mute poetry' of allegory is not brought to an ultimate, Godwinian denial. The ironic mode breaks down further as the visionary begins to approach the Caucasus. Before this, the descriptions of landscape have been abstract, fleshed out when necessary for an allegorical point. But, now, the narrator seems to get caught in the sheer scale of the details required for his commentary on the visionary's plight. Mountains, as we have seen, have some crucial significance for Shelley and here they seem to have awakened another possibility for his notion of a poetry of 'human sympathy.' As we reach the location of the birth of civilization (as Shelley's times knew it), another layer of symbolism becomes apparent.<sup>41</sup> The swan that the visionary frightens into flight reminds him of his absolute alienation from lover, friend or family, and, when he pushes out in the little shallop from the "lone Chorasman shore," he seems aware that he is leaving behind all possibility of human



community. It is at this moment that he sights the mountains:

At midnight  
 The moon arose: and lo! the etherial cliffs  
 Of Caucasus, whose icy summits shone  
 Among the stars like sunlight, and around  
 Whose cavern'd base the whirlpools and the waves  
 Bursting and eddying irresistibly  
 Rage and resound for ever. --Who shall save?--  
 42

At this precise moment of utter alienation, there is a strong concentration on the landscape itself. The cliffs seem to beckon but we are not given an ironic version of Jerusalem or an eternal city, only, with the epithet 'etherial,' a hint of allegory. We are shown, with much clearer focus, the exterior details of a forbidding mountain chain. At this lonely sighting, the close relation between allegorical instance and ironic meaning begins to break down and the poem's images come to have a life of their own.

Gibson calls this part of the poem an instance of 'natural allegory.'<sup>43</sup> But as we have seen, the allegory begins before this and it is ironic. And if the ironic attitude which produced an enamoured 'Silence' is being maintained, these 'jagged arms,' 'eddies' and 'whirlpools' should also have precise, second meanings but it is not easy to find them. The shallop could, perhaps, fit in with a seriously taken quest motif: "It had been long abandoned, for its sides/Gaped wide with many a rift, and its frail joints /Swayed with the undulations of the tide." (310-303)

For Gibson, this section is strongly allegorical, "may not this setting represent the end of mortal existence when the stream of life enters the ocean of eternity? . . . . Certainly the little boat with its gaping sides and frail joints is suggestive of the bodily condition of the poet."<sup>44</sup> We can hear the other meaning quite clearly once the allegorical key is presented, but even here there is also a peculiar slippage between image and significance. We realize, for instance, that such a vessel could not, in reality, carry anyone with such speed through the storm that is next presented. Could this be the meaning? The boat would then represent the frail body of the visionary as he goes through the wrack and agony of dying. The problem is that the visionary survives the storm. Gibson again assigns this kind of slippage to the allegory, everything here is figurative and thus not intended to be plausible. "Shelley, intends to conduct the poet into the realms of death, how else but by allegory may the material be presented?"<sup>45</sup> Again, though, the poet does not actually die until quite some time after this, and the course up to the mountain is complicated by passages of sublime descriptions of nature. The disjunction between detail and allegorical significance reaches its widest point when the shallop has been carried by the storm into a cavern.

The boat pursued  
 The winding of the cavern. Day-light shone  
 At length upon that gloomy river's flow;  
 Now, where the fiercest war among the waves  
 Is calm, on the unfathomable stream

The boat moved slowly. Where the mountains, riven,  
 Exposed those black depths to the azure sky,  
 Ere yet the flood's enormous volume fell  
 Even to the base of the Caucasus, with sound  
 That shook the everlasting rocks, the mass  
 Filled with one whirlpool all that ample chasm;  
 Stair above stair the eddying waters rose,  
 Circling immeasurably fast and laved  
 With alternating dash the knarled roots  
 Of mighty trees, that stretched their giant arms  
 In darkness over it. I' the midst was left,  
 Reflecting, yet distorting every cloud,  
 A pool of treacherous and tremendous calm.  
 Seized by the sway of the ascending stream,  
 With dizzy swiftness, round, and round, and round,  
 Ridge after ridge the straining boat arose . . . . "  
 (369-389)

This is more than allegory, such images are now dream-like, haunted, and full of veiled meaning. These Wordsworthian depths and azure skies, the flood's streaming volume and the knarled roots of mighty trees are rendered with a mass of detail not necessary for irony or an effective allegory. In addition, the forces at work in water and wind are almost human in their ability to push the visionary forward, quite precisely, to his destination. The trees stretch out their 'giant arms', the river is gloomy and it is as if the whole landscape were alive with being and feeling. We are glimpsing another world and another mode of discourse than irony and allegory. There are echoes of the mountain block that was "Active, living spirit" of Queen Mab and something of the dramatic, personified motions of water and wind in the Vale of Chamonix of "Mont Blanc." Irony could not work here. If the scene were ironic, it would be heavy-handed because we are watching a passage toward death. We get, rather, a feeling of the terror of the visionary's aliena-

tion, the scope and depth of his struggle with his own deepest nature as an image of the sea smashing against mountainous cliffs, and in the current and outstretched trees, the reaction of the great Mother herself, perhaps, to his sins of omission. Underlying the allegory, the deeper figurative dimension at work in this haunted landscape is the symbol and in this mode one is never sure of the objective existence of the details that make up a scene. The narrator is stressing his perceptions and their significance is no longer simply instantaneous, direct and allegorical. In addition, these cliffs, trees and roots have a stark 'translucence'; they do not 'represent', we see through them into a dimension that hints of the direct presence of the spiritual.<sup>46</sup>

With this addition of a new figurative mode, we have come to the essentials of the languages of "Alastor." All three aspects we saw in the Preface have now been realized. The allegorical mode has been itself demystified by the discourse frame, but the language of social 'opinion' and human sympathy has now, itself, been modulated and made more complex by a partially revealed, perhaps unconscious, symbolism. The concrete details of the mountain hint of something like a potential that could be realized, a hint that the paean with which we began was not mere play or illusory; nature herself might be communicable. There are touches of presence in this landscape that remind us of Shelley's earlier fascination with the Gothic mode with its spirits

and voices of nature and the details of wind, river and tree give us a glimpse of an approach to this presence which might be a more acceptable than attempting to communicate with a perfect, unattainable, unreal, figure of love.<sup>47</sup>

But the disjunctions in "Alastor" are too noticeable to hold that it shows a 'unity of thought throughout,' and we are not quite so close to the philosophical skepticism that Wasserman claims. The skepticism is there, but the promise of the dream maiden and the symbolic potential of the Caucasus have undercut a unified irony.<sup>48</sup> Overall, however, we can say that "Alastor" is a limited experiment with the deconstruction of a certain kind of symbolism. Shelley's visionary poet believes in a transcendent symbol with an intensity that shines "As in a furnace burning secretly/ From his dark eyes alone." (253) Such language is aware at all points of the solipsism and fervor of projection that can be found in the symbolic mode; and this kind of distrust is prevalent in the poem because the symbols and faith of the visionary are, more often than not, undercut by the Narrator. This skeptical voice begins an ironic counter-discourse which shows us that the thought of the visionary is, while brilliant, alienated. He is "attempting to exist without human sympathy,"<sup>49</sup> thus with no social texture, no grounding in vital human relations and seeks to enter, somewhat like Keats' protagonist in the "Endymion" or the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a symbolic realm of perfect love directly, with no mediating history of social experience and

no physical relation with a real lover. But, perhaps, in this alienated language there is a truth. The image the visionary has 'constructed' is his intellectual equal and is 'herself a poet'; thus, she retains her potential as a sign of liberation, and is an image Shelley can ill afford to simply banish as illusory. The intellectual and poetic abilities of the dream maiden along with the animated mountain imagery show us that the dilemma of how to make symbolic figures of an ideal humanity within a Godwinian theory of opinion and discourse remains. We are to see the most conscious and most complex attempt to resolve this problem in Shelley's next major poem about high peaks, Mont Blanc.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Johann Gottfried Herder, "Essay on the Origin of Language." Trans. Alexander Gode. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1966) p. 131.

Herder's prize winning essay on the origins of language is modern in its portrayal of language as a skill won over aeons and progressively developed from humanity's perceptual abilities to mark out specific events. It is not modern in the depth of its commitment to a non-religious view of language. The essay is formally an argument for a human source, and one feels, strongly, the beauty and weight of the adversary in each of Herder's difficult descriptions. We are here, (as in many of the essays on language that informed Herder's period), witnessing a struggle between two theories of signification and the line of conflict was more confused than it is today. As the court minister (Hofprediger) at Weimar, Herder, after all, shared many of his adversary's positions.

<sup>2</sup>I am using the term 'symbol' in a wide sense here to mean all motivated signs; thus, the cross or a cathedral could be construed as symbols as could Queen Mab herself when she begins to lose her allegorical status and body forth man's perfected state. This wider sense then accepts any figure which uses concrete for general or part for whole relations and which has a mythic or religious import as symbolic. Roland Barthes' in Mythologies uses a similarly broad definition when analysing myth; for him, the symbolic domain would be "a second order semiological system" and include any language which had language itself as its sign. The sense of 'symbol' I am attempting to get to here is that of a more general order of meaning which interpenetrates with the details of imagery and scene in a poem, and which is not necessarily constrained to single, discrete images.

<sup>3</sup>The notion of translucence is Coleridge's, and is found in the comparison between symbol and allegory in The Statesman's Manual.

<sup>4</sup>Though there are also other touchstones like Hume, Rousseau, Plato and William Drummond.

<sup>5</sup>Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," p. 207.

<sup>6</sup>See Priestley's Introduction to Political Justice, pp. 108-110.

<sup>7</sup>Earl R. Wasserman, Shelley: A Critical Reading, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup>Woodman holds that "in 1812 Shelley did not believe in a 'diviner nature.' He believed, or thought he believed, that matter in a state of motion was the only reality, that the physical universe was the only universe. Fortunately, William Godwin, among others, persuaded him otherwise. Woodman, The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>A.M.D. Hughes, The Nascent Mind of Shelley, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1947), p. 204.

<sup>10</sup>Priestley sees the poem as often confused and immature and as a complex mixture of elements taken from various philosophies. He detects Spinozist pantheism, Helvetian condemnation of institutions, d'Holbach's materialism as well as Godwin in the poem. However, "When these deviations have been noted . . . the 'underlying principles' remain" close to Godwin's thought. See Priestley, III, p. 109 - 111.

<sup>11</sup>Mark Philip, Godwin's Political Justice, (London: Duckworth, 1986), p. 48, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup>For Priestly, Shelley quickly became a disciple upon meeting Godwin. But "the Godwin whom he met was the Godwin of 1812, not of 1793, a Godwin who was an 'immaterialist' and an admirer of Berkeley. It is significant that after corresponding with him on reading, Shelley ordered Berkeley and began to move away from the French materialism so conspicuous in Queen Mab. See Priestley, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup>Godwin, Political Justice. I p. 80.

<sup>14</sup>The opening also introduces us to conscious personifications like "Dream," "Sleep", and "Death".

<sup>15</sup>According to Hughes, Ianthe is the revolutionary ideal figured as a woman emancipated from all customary roles. We find her again in Laon and Cythna. "She [Cythna] is a type that modern revolutions have made familiar, the woman in the heart of the storm, at the head of the crowd, diffusing the joy of devotion . . . . From Queen Mab to Hellas she waits and watches in unwavering hope for the good Cause." See Hughes, p. 210.

<sup>16</sup>De Man, p. 188.

<sup>17</sup>This is Note 13, VII. 13. I have taken the opening sentence from Neville Rogers, The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), I, 309.

<sup>18</sup>Ross Greig Woodman, The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley, (1964 rpt; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), p. 75, 78.

<sup>19</sup>Woodman, p. 6.



<sup>20</sup>See C.E. Pulos, The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962) pp. 24 - 66.

<sup>21</sup>Richard Holmes in Shelley: The Pursuit indicates some of the range of other influences on Shelley. For him, "the influence of Godwin is local, rather than, as usually stated, dominant." In addition, "Shelley's attitude to nature, the material universe and the functioning of natural processes is drawn from Lucretius's On the Nature of Things and Baron d'Holbach's, System de la Nature, backed up with detailed information and statistics from the new range of 'Encyclopedias.' With regard to man's role in society, its political, ethical and economic aspects, the influences are more diverse, but the most powerful shapers of Shelley's thinking are the scepticism of Hume and the militant republicanism of Tom Paine. These are supported on specific issues such as free love and labour theory by writers as different as Adam Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Lord Monboddoo, Godwin, Lawrence, and Trotter (On Nervous Diseases)." On top of this rather forbidding list, he also mentions Count Volney's The Ruins of Empire, Byron's Cain and Erasmus Darwin's 'poems of science and society.' See pp. 201-203. For some reason, Holmes has neglected William Drummond's Academical Questions which are explicitly mentioned in Shelley's Notes, (see Note 13: VII. 13, in the Rogers' edition Vol 1, p. 316.)

<sup>22</sup>See, for instance, Priestley's review of Godwin's revisions. "He had decided early in the first writing that the grand instrument of progress is not government but truth, that truth is not to be published by governmental order, but by free discussion, and that it must be communicated entire, without governmental interference." Priestley, p.83.

<sup>23</sup>Godwin, Political Justice, p. 215, 238. See also Book IV, especially the chapter, "Of Resistance". The stress would be today called "Socialist" or evolutionary anarchist rather than "Marxist" in that Godwin is convinced that "Government is founded in opinion . . . . Destroy the existing prejudice in favour of any our present institutions, and they will fall into similar disuse and contempt. Active versus verbal resistance is to used only in the worst cases of violence." (p. 251.)

<sup>24</sup>Holmes calls them, "the introductory machinery of the Fairy Queen," see Holmes, p. 201.

<sup>25</sup>Note that Shelley's financial situation may have engendered this metaphor. He is now trapped into debt through the 'estate bond' system of attaining money. He must obtain his daily expense money through promissory notes made on his future estate. A situation brought about by Timothy's refusal to pay his bills.

<sup>26</sup>". . . if opinion be rendered a topic of political superintendence, we are immediately involved in slavery, to which no imagination of man can set a termination. The hopes of our im-

provement are arrested; for government fixes the mercurialness of man to an assigned station. ' We can no longer enquire or think; for enquiry and thought are uncertain in their direction, and unshackled in their termination. We sink into motionless inactivity and the basest cowardice; for our thoughts and words are beset on every side with penalty and menace." Godwin, II, p. 216.

<sup>27</sup> For de Man, the symbol has been overstressed in romantic criticism, the allegory is the romantic's true figure. A coherent reading of any romantic text will find that rationalist allegory and irony undercut the overt symbolism. De Man goes further, these two hidden voices are never simply play and ornament, they are the honest part of the romantic attitude and are borrowed from the eighteenth century: "Far from being a mannerism inherited from the exterior aspects of the baroque and the rococo, they appear at the most original and profound moments . . . when an authentic voice becomes audible." (De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," p. 204) These are also the two modes of poetry that could prevent the romantic poet's " . . . leap out of language into faith." (Ibid., p. 222) It is a leap that is the result of the seductions of symbolism: "Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide [with features of a landscape figured as a sign of divine presence, for instance], it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self. It is this painful knowledge that we perceive at the moments when early romantic literature finds its true voice." (Ibid., p. 207) This is a radical and provocative inversion of the mytho-poetic reading of romantic poetry, but it is also evaluative in another direction. For de Man, the very structure of allegory is the mechanism of truth in poetic language. His critique of romantic symbolism rests on a normative, technical analysis of rhetorical surfaces alone or is concerned only with relations between referents, (like a particular landscape) signs and consciousness. Both directions very deliberately deny the full dimensions of the context in which such imagery is working.

<sup>28</sup>We see the same ambiguity in Shelley's long argument for vegetarianism in the Notes. The legend of Prometheus is an allegory for man's giving up of a vegetarian diet and subsequent fall into cooked food and a disease ridden existence. The ambiguity also resides in his quotation from Thomas Cadell's Return to Nature, or Defence of Vegetable Regimen where Cadell says, " Man at his creation was endowed with the gift of perpetual youth; that is, he was not formed to be a sickly suffering creature as we now see him, but to enjoy health, and to sink by slow degrees into the bosom of his parent earth without disease or pain." (Note 17: VIII. 212, 212. Rogers, I, pp. 326 - 328.)

<sup>29</sup>Wasserman, Shelley: A Critical Reading, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup>Evan K. Gibson, "Alastor: A Reinterpretation" in Shelley's Poetry and Prose, Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1977), pp. 545-69.

<sup>31</sup>Woodman, *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> The Shelley of Queen Mab is "the naively optimistic Shelley we have customarily resisted, Matthew Arnold's 'beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.' But there is another Shelley, who becomes a poet when his two aspirations, so imperfectly held together in Queen Mab and his early letters begin to fall apart into an opposition." See Earl R. Wasserman, Shelley: A Critical Reading, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971) p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> This undercurrent is manifest most clearly in the mountain imagery that comes into play late in the poem.

<sup>34</sup>Wasserman, pp. 11, 15, 16.

<sup>35</sup>For Barrell, Godwin is a Platonist in this faith that the right communication of opinion or ideas will change men's behavior, "Thus in Godwin wrong actions spring from wrong opinions, and vice is explained as error.

Now there is nothing new about this intellectualist theory of evil. It was Plato's theory. But Plato recognized that in whole classes of men the intellectual faculty is weaker than either the appetites or the emotions, and it would never have occurred to him to propose the discourses of his Academy as a panacea for evil. Godwin, though, will admit of no basic difference in the minds of men." see Joseph Barrell, Shelley and the Thought of His Time: A Study in The History of Ideas, (1947; rpt. Archon Books, 1967), p. 47.

<sup>36</sup>Reiman, Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup>Godwin, to say the least, has been figuring strongly in Shelley's life. We hear echoes of Political Justice in the famous letter to the Duke of Norfolk on May 28, 1813 which defends his stand against his father. Timothy had asked his lawyer, Whitton, to take care of Shelley's request for a reconciliation, (they were yet estranged over the expulsion from Oxford and Shelley's elopement with Harriet Westbrook). Whitton apparently suggested that Shelley "publicly disavow" his Atheism and Shelley's reply is something of a manifesto: "I was prepared to make my father every reasonable concession, but I am not so degraded & miserable a slave, as publicly to disavow an opinion which I believe to be true. Every man of common sense must plainly see that a sudden renunciation of sentiments seriously taken up is as unfortunate a test of intellectual uprightness as can possibly be devised." Cameron, Shelley and his Circle, III, p. 190.

<sup>38</sup>Wasserman, p.16.

<sup>39</sup>This concept becomes formalized in the later prose frag-

ment, "On Love" (1818) as "Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particulars of which our nature is composed: a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap. To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble or correspond with it. The discovery of its antitype: the meeting with an understanding capable of clearly estimating the deductions of our own, and imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delight to cherish and unfold in secret . . . ." Reiman, p. 474.

<sup>40</sup>Todorov, Symbolism and Interpretation, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup>Reiman has this note about the geography of Shelley's day: "If we understand the Poet to embark on the Aral Sea, his shallop, a small open boat, would be carried by a super-natural impulse up the Oxus to its headwaters in the Hindu Kush Mountains . . . . In Shelley's day the scientist Buffon and others believed that the Hindu Kush (Indian Caucasus) region was the cradle of the human race." See Reiman, Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p. 76. n.

<sup>42</sup>Shelley, "Alastor" ll. 353-360.

<sup>43</sup>Reiman, p. 546.

<sup>44</sup>See Gibson's essay in Donald H. Reiman and Sharon Powers eds., Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p. 560.

<sup>45</sup>Gibson, p. 560.

<sup>46</sup>Todorov summarizes the romantic approach to symbols as 'motivated' language: "As far as the symbol is concerned, we find the full panoply of characteristics accredited by the romantics: it is productive, intransitive, motivated; it achieves the fusion of contraries; it is and it signifies at the same time; its content eludes reason: it expresses the inexpressible. In contrast, allegory, obviously, is already made, transitive, arbitrary, pure signification, an expression of reason." Todorov, Theories of the Symbol, p. 206.

<sup>47</sup>The problem now arises of which of the three (social-communicative, symbolic-spiritual or allegorical-transcendent) modes is primary. The dilemma appears in other works of this period. In "Oh! There are Spirits of the Air . . ." written shortly before "Alastor," there is a similar conflict between the life of a solitary idealist and the life based in experience. Here though, the idealist, alone with his "mountain winds, and babbling springs, / and moonlight seas" seems favored, and it is experience that blights the pure, inner allegories of love.

<sup>48</sup>In a letter to Hogg dated November 22-23, 1813 we find

this comment on Hume: "I have examined Humes [sic] reasonings with respect to the non existence of external things. & I confess they appear to me to follow from the doctrines of Locke. What am I to think of a philosophy which conducts to such a conclusion?" Cameron, Shelley and his Circle, III, p. 260. This comment would seem to indicate some reservation about Hume, but Cameron has this gloss on the letter: "Shelley does not, of course, mean to exclude all of Hume's philosophy but only his skeptical epistemology. Hume's argument on miracles, the "infinite regress," and causation, Shelley had long supported. And later he came closer to Hume's view on matter and mind also." (p. 266.)

<sup>49</sup>Shelley's "Preface" to "Alastor", p. 69.

## CHAPTER IV

### THEORY OF OPINION IN "MONT BLANC"

#### Mont Blanc: Discourse versus Symbol.

We have so far followed the rise of Shelley's skill in fitting the figures of allegory and symbol within a Godwinian theory of rational discourse. Shelley, at twenty was profoundly struck by Godwin's philosophy and became something of a disciple. He has attempted, with some success, to construct a poetry which will engage and liberate opinion and yet remain elevated and through its beauties give pleasure.<sup>1</sup> His project during these years was to argue against conservative social forces in a form so clearly and persuasively true that it would work on the mind of its recipient and change opinion. Its ultimate categories of language are then not 'reference' or 'the signifier-signified relation' but social life and social thought, the dimension of language which connects one human being to another. Shelley's use of the symbolic mode within this field of utterance is, however, ambiguous and unstable. Imagery of transcendent reference like the visionary's dream maiden is a target for a gentle irony and traditional notions of divine being have come in for some sharp satire in Queen Mab. However, despite Godwin, Shelley persists in experimenting in the

symbolic mode. We will next turn our attention to a poem of Shelley's early maturity, "Mont Blanc," written after the first effects of Godwin, if not his philosophy, had worn off and see if we can detect the same problematic at work in a poem about one of the most asocial and 'referential' of objects.<sup>2</sup>

Mont Blanc, (at 15,781 feet, the highest of the Alpine peaks) seems, on the surface, better fitted to symbolizing eternity and a transcendent realm or God than liberation. Even the modern Encyclopedist seems caught in the spell of oppositions between man and the powers of nature:

The mountains on the west side of the valley, [Chamonix] though attaining an altitude of 8,500 feet, are not covered with snow in summer; but those on the east side, in the range of Mont Blanc, being from 10,000 to 15,000 feet high, are always snow clad, except where the peaks are too perpendicular for snow to lie. From the snowy range proceed glaciers, some approaching near the cultivated fields. The three most important are the Glacier d'Argentiere, the Glacier des Bossons, and the Mer de Glas, the last being one of the largest in the Alps. From its lower extremity the meltings of the glacier flow, in greater or less volume according to the season of the year, from under a naturally formed ice arch, the source of the Arveyron, a small stream flowing into the Arve.<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to see in this image a passage from the mountain's peak, through its seas of ice to their meltings into rivers and to follow these, in turn, downward into man's infinitesimal world. Mont Blanc lends itself to symbolic meditations on eternity and the presence of divine powers in the affairs of men. Perkins has attempted to show that such

images provided a stabilizing, religious symbolism for romantic writers in a scientific and empiricist milieu. For de Man, the romantic affinity for such imagery is also based on the difference between the permanence of the natural object and the ephemerality of consciousness. Natural objects have a comforting solidity in relation to things of the mind.

. . . The natural object, safe in its immediate being, seems to have no beginning and no end. Its permanence is carried by the stability of its being, whereas a beginning implies a negation of permanence, the discontinuity of a death in which an entity relinquishes its specificity, like an empty shell. Entities engendered by consciousness originate in this fashion.<sup>4</sup>

For de Man, the romantic symbol confuses these distinctions thereby seeming to lend to 'entities of consciousness' like poems the permanence of natural objects like mountains. But Shelley is much more aware than his predecessors of the temptations of landscape symbolism. Wordsworth's response to Mont Blanc in The Prelude, (1804-5, 1850) and Coleridge's response to an imagined 'Vale of Chamouni' (1802) are, despite their differences, both reflective of a positive theism. In the case of Wordsworth this is individualistic but essentially Christian and orthodox, 'a unique natural religion' and with Coleridge, according to Bloom, an example of complete orthodoxy, "the Hebraic sublime."<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, Shelley has a deep felt connection to 'Atheism', and to Godwin's notions about established religion, and thus could not take up the faiths of his predecessors;



in Mont Blanc we will see him challenge both that faith and its new symbol.

Bloom has shown that Wordsworth and Coleridge are very much within the horizon of Shelley's Mont Blanc, but we can see that the contrast he draws between Shelley and his predecessors is essential for a mytho-poetic reading of the poem. For Bloom, Shelley has a sense of the transcendent and the sacred, though it is very far from orthodoxy. He, in contrast to Wordsworth and Coleridge, "begins the process of compounding a new myth (partially out of older elements, in this case) by fitting the insight derived from landscape perception into a personally fabricated vision."<sup>6</sup> Bloom has emphasised the constructive, deliberate element in Shelley's approach to this new genre. However, he conceives it as a problem Shelley succeeds in solving. There is a skeptical counter-voice in Mont Blanc, but it ends in the final rejection of a Urizen-like God who is indifferent and cruel and is the result of the attempt to consciously construct poetry; unaided by the sense of divine powers and forces, the human will is only capable of making an allegory of its own tyranny. The true myth-symbol shows a beneficent, natural and liberating Power which is present in language precisely in the absence of conscious poetic construction. For Bloom, Shelley's mountain is "a firsthand account of a personal religious experience,"<sup>7</sup> and this account is, foremost, the recording of receptions rather than makings. Bloom's reading was new in its appreciation of the myth element in the

poem and was made to counter negative readers like Leavis and Butter who found Mont Blanc to be only a confused jumble of religion, metaphor, politics and metaphysics. Bloom thus emphasises a unity of attitude and Shelley's contact with a consistently presented beneficent Power. But this reading glides over Shelley's previous uses of allegory to critique the symbols of transcendence, his commitment to Godwin's notions of 'opinion' and his experimentation with highly unorthodox, liberating figures like the dream-maiden of "Alastor", Ianthe or Mab. In addition, recent critics have become less sure that any kind of symbolism of presence appears in "Mont Blanc."

Tilottama Rajan's reading of this poem furthers the deconstructionist critique of mytho-poesis and is probably the most succinct counter-voice to Bloom's reading. For Rajan, the poem is fundamentally equivocal: a search "for a language that mediates between irony and idealism."<sup>8</sup> While Shelley needs to "transcend life by positing some transcendent, form-giving fiction,"<sup>9</sup> he only finds it through an act of bad faith, which is intermittent and overridden by stanza IV in which an indifferent universe reasserts itself. I believe that the twin poles represented by a skeptical deconstruction of myth and Bloom's mytho-poesis are good guideposts with which to approach this poem, but neither critic has mentioned the current of skepticism about symbols, and the framework of discourse, operating at all points in it.

Shelley marks some clear stages of approach to his problem of how to allow the magnificent imagery of a river ravine and a mountain into poetic language in such a way that it will critique the orthodox symbol of transcendence found in previous poems about this mountain and at the same time propose an alternative.<sup>10</sup> He first proposes a theoretical idea and then applies it in the following stanzas to the mountain which stretches out in all of its sublime magnificence before him. Then he balances an almost formal illustration of his theory between twin notions of exteriority and discourse. In the first, positive, approach to nature he intuits a separate and beneficent Being who, at certain moments, can be understood but who is fundamentally beyond us: the poet is attempting to speak with the speaker of the superior language of nature. In the second, another exterior appears which is simply beyond the reach of such dialogue, and this cold a-human Power seems, in the end, to defeat mind, sociality and language, though this defeat turns out to be a victory both for mankind and language. Far from the naive confusion of landscape and mind de Man sees in such poetry, we find a very careful attempt to take apart the earlier symbolic rendition of this mountain, to test its credibility, and propose an alternative. We will look at each of these phases in turn.

Stanza I: Theory of Language

The famous first stanza of Mont Blanc is surely one of the most intriguing and perplexing puzzles of reference in poetry. Wasserman, for one, claims that the complex interweaving of epistemology and language in this stanza is an attempt to answer empiricism through Drummond's "Intellectual Philosophy":

The ultimate doctrine of the Intellectual Philosophy is that reality is an undifferentiated unity, neither thought nor thing, and yet both. From one imperfect perspective this reality is called the 'universe of things'; from another, it is the thoughts that flow through the mind. But the true unity of reality requires as a linguistic approximation that thing and thought be assimilated into each other by one constituting the subject and the other the predicate of the same sentence.

Wasserman notes, then, a new language in these lines. Taken all together, they seem to pull toward a convergence of word, mind, spirit, self and the exterior objects of nature. Yet this gravitational attraction is a tendency not a completion; the full reach of the poem equally presents a field in which these categories remain particulate and separate. Wasserman claims, however, that the prevailing impulse is toward unison: the metaphysics of the first lines leads us on to some central point of convergence between signifier and signified, mind and object, operating on us as inevitably as streams which merge into rivers which, in turn, flow into oceans. In this curious mind-world, separation and

difference of mind from object is ameliorated and we are drawn beyond separation and into the oceanic Spirit of the One Mind of nature.

According to Wasserman, then, the crucial opening lines blend epistemologies and create a new way of speaking and knowing. However, another pattern becomes evident when these lines are looked at as theoretical statements about how to construct a symbol:

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark--now glittering--now reflecting gloom--  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters--with a sound but half its own.

For Bloom, countering Leavis's charge of a confusion of metaphor and perception, these lines 'mingle' metaphoric tenor and vehicle although he finds nothing objectionable in this.<sup>12</sup> Wasserman would agree here, though he sees depths of convergence beyond 'mingling'. The sequence which begins in darkness and ends in splendour does present the tightest weaving of the arbitrary signs of allegory and the motivated language of symbolism we have yet seen. The 'weaving' is accomplished by forcing these types of language into a tight series; Shelley's political and philosophical beliefs now bind the different modes of imagery we have followed in the earlier poems tightly together: we move from a Lockean dark, bare nature, unknowable and exterior to language, through glittering hints of significance where the poet draws perceptions into an allegorical structure used by the

mind to reflect on its own states and feelings of happiness and gloom, to a final transference of splendour from nature which can symbolize a Platonic-Godwinian realm of the best and most expansive moral actions and thoughts of man. The movement seems a very conscious building up of the possibility of a libertarian symbol, almost a textbook case on how to construct one. And the progression leads us from silence to discourse: we end with a 'lending' which is worked up in a certain direction to show that the final relationship of nature to language is an exchange. This last metaphor is highly charged with meaning and we need to study it at some length before we can unravel its potential as a statement about the symbols of poetry.

Nature, in this last movement, 'loans' the poet its splendid images; they are not gifts. But, while these images are not his they are, equally, part of his construction. The metaphor of lending stresses the two sides of the creation of a poetic image; on the one side there is the activity of nature, on the other, the activity of the borrower, the poet who will endow these images with specific references. If this is a metaphor for poetry, then, his vision can never be mistaken for the real thing, as de Man would claim, nor can it represent a tyrannical God. Shelley will use these 'sublime' elements for his own purposes. Equally, however, the metaphor of 'lending' posits an active principle in nature that participates in the construction: there is the feeling of a beneficent Power which can detect the

right moment in which to 'lend' this symbol. Seen on the level of language, this string of images is a careful rendition of the achievement of linguistic interchange. At base it is a dramatic, dialogical, theory: language and world, humanity and nature, commingle as equals in the making of symbols. The image is loaned but it is also constructed; the power of Mont Blanc is absolutely forbidding but, then, poetic language also has its powers. The world of Locke and the skeptics (Hume and Drummond) and the One Mind of Berkeley and Plato, "the relationship of an individual I to a universal Thou,"<sup>13</sup> are put into social contact. At the end, the gap seen by Rajan "between representation and reality"<sup>14</sup> is closed, although the closure is momentary, a 'lending' of splendour that is very different from the kind of usury we saw in Queen Mab. This approach to poetic language stresses the momentary, fluid, ephemerality of a poet's works. At some time a loan will have to be paid back, the relationships made between scene and moral instance are temporary, words can slide back to their basic, flat level; language is always under the pressure of new contexts, it cannot be fixed in the static channels of a fixed symbolism.

In comparison with the usurious 'reloaning' of language in religious symbolism we found in Queen Mab, this last moment of transference is also spontaneous, straightforward, unrehearsed and freely done. Magnificent, sublime, examples of splendour like Mont Blanc are, at appropriate moments, allowed into a poem. These moments occur when the mind

seeks representations for true acts of sublime or intellectual heroism.<sup>15</sup> The next lines underscore the difference. The reference to a location in "where from secret springs / The source of human thought its tribute brings / Of water, --with a sound but half its own" is ambiguous. It can, however, support the notion of discourse if we think of the 'where' as meaning 'occurring on a level of mental intensity which parallels the mountain's splendour'. The splendour of a natural shape can be loaned by nature only 'where' the mental or poetic source in man also brings an equally sublime, though very much smaller, tribute. And the 'sounds' it uses, the phonic level of language, are only 'half its own'; one face of poetry is--like Mont Blanc--sensuous and thus a part of nature, only the other half, or side, is subjective, thus the poet's.

Stanza One, then, gathers together all of the elements necessary for a theory of poetic symbolism which will not damage Shelley's libertarian beliefs. We are kept on the level of general principles of poetic discourse with the metaphors of reflection, loan, river and the subsidiary spring of the mind; but all of these are, at this stage, applicable to any poetic instance. Faintly showing through these abstractions, however, we begin to sense the magnificent scale of the Arve, the Arveyron and the oppressive Power of Mont Blanc towering above us.



Stanza II: First Application of the Theory

The modern approach to Mont Blanc begins with both Bloom's and Charles Vivian's findings of a complex coherency in the poem. According to Vivian, Shelley, in Mont Blanc, is making a difficult traverse from a Materialist doctrine to an Idealist doctrine. The mountain figures the permanent ideal behind the flux of experience: "Mont Blanc symbolizes this principle of permanence of which Shelley has awareness and which he is trying to understand. I believe that this phrase, Principle of Permanence, is the best definition that we can give for the referent of the symbol."<sup>16</sup> While this might be one phase of Shelley's quest to come to terms with what he considered the Wordsworthian, orthodox use of landscape in poetry, this 'Symbol of Permanence' is by no means the whole truth of this image of the mountain, and whether it is the main 'symbol' of the poem or in what sense it is a 'symbol' at all, is precisely what must first be determined.

We do not come upon Mont Blanc itself until Stanza III and in Stanza II we pass through something like an equal and opposite 'Principle of Impermanence' which seems very much more attractive and as powerful in its symbolic overtones as the permanence of the mountain itself. Rajan has the mountain of Stanza III as "the clear, if inaccessible antithesis of the ravine,"<sup>17</sup> and I believe that this begins to give us the correct perspective on Stanza II. Following out Rajan's idea, the ravine, unlike the mountain, is accessible to

poetry or language and as such it effectively illustrates the approach to the poetic image we found in the first stanza.

When we turn to the Arve, we are presented with a scene of tremendous agitation. The ravine and its river is 'many voiced' and fast clouds and sunbeams 'sail' over it; the ravine receives the 'bursting' river of the Arve as a 'flame of lightning'; it is full of 'chainless winds', echoing caverns and 'unresting sound'. The successive glimpses of something in dancing, continual movement on the other side of the poet's words begins to coalesce into a figure as complex visually and auditorially as a procession, though it is a procession of distinct gestures flung from an infinitely creative power. As both Reimen and Wasserman suggest, the whole effect is that one contacts a rendition of the Universal Mind, an unimaginably powerful Other.<sup>18</sup> A theme of communication with this Mind takes over the act of description until by lines 47 to 48 we are quite prepared to give credence to the 'fast influencings' and an 'interchange' between the poet and the scene he is perceiving. By this time, this 'other' can be accepted as an addressable 'Thou'.

This effect is achieved on the rhetorical level through a development of successively richer, dramatic personifications; but mingled with this, as a natural part of its texture, is an odic address to these personifications. As with "Alastor," the address soon takes on the twists, turns, and excited flights of a one-sided conversation with someone

who, more and more, is showing all the signs of giving an answer. The attempt to get into the position of hearing a response is not without its resistances. We begin with the vocative address of 'thou ravine of Arve' to a someone (or something) yet merged with 'pines, crags and caverns'; the image of being who would hear and respond to this address yet hovers amongst the details which are supposedly part of it. Then, we try another tack and "Power in likeness of the Arve" comes down from "the ice gulfs that gird his secret throne." Likeness or simile softens the distinction between Other and inanimate natural process such that this tremendous water-fall is now a mask for a Necessitarian spirit of nature. But a mask also cannot speak back to us and confirm our intuition of a living power behind it and we must try again. Next, the Arve lies with "a giant brood of pines around thee clinging" who are "children of elder time." These titanic physical shapes are now not simply a simile, they are coming close to metaphor and thus to being bonded to the very nature of the scene. And with this the possibility of a response is greater.

Enmeshed in the theme of discourse and personification, then, is a figurative play which is gradually changing the substantive quality of the scene; with the image of a brood of pine-children, we begin to catch the vast difference in scale between humanity and landscape and this scale works back into the figures and we begin to pick up the size and temporal dimension of an otherness that is not human. Once

we have glimpsed this scale, and have carried over the notion of communication into it, we can let go of a precise human shape as the recipient of our message and begin to expect a difference in the form and content, perhaps the very nature of the kind of response we can expect. The vocative address, part of the odic tradition Shelley has inherited from Coleridge, Wordsworth and earlier from Collins, Thomas Gray and Southey,<sup>19</sup> has the rather unearthly ability to create the outline of a recipient, and Shelley becomes progressively more certain of the way in which this being, hovering somewhere behind or immanently within this scene, speaks. It is not a great step from this to the possibility of some vast Mind whose mode of communication is through these magnificent, sublimely beautiful gestalten of nature. The ravine in this communicative mode is now full of a significance just beyond reach; meaning and scene are woven into each other as is sign and signified and we detect the meaning when we sense its beauty. With "Thine earthly rainbows stretched across the sweep / Of the ethereal waterfall, whose veil / Robes some unsculptured image" we now leave the mode of anthropomorphism and catch one of the gestures of this otherness. What form of veil and robe is this? It is decidedly not a type of Wordsworthian God-haunted landscape; it moves between the concrete image of waterfall and graceful gesture, but the gesture is consciously metonymic of a being we are not allowed to see, we can only see its effects, and its effects are deliberately fashioned

as signs. 'Thine' and 'robes' and 'veil' present the faintest hints of opacity, of presence, just enough to give us the after-effect of another being, a ripple of spirit, not a coherent shape. And now this strange silence speaks; it is entirely a sign, entirely on its own, operating outside the limits of humanity but in a language we can, through the agency of poetry, decipher. Listening again, we enter a "strange sleep / Which when the voices of the desert fail / Wraps all in its own deep eternity." By this stage in the stanza our commitment to the frame of discourse is so intense that we are deeply in touch with this Other, so much aware of the scene as its sign that we now have turned full circle and can see ourselves from its point of view. We are now listeners: "Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange / to muse on my own separate phantasy, / My own, my human mind, which passively / Now renders and receives fast influencings . . . ."

According to Bloom, we have been watching a succession of failures of symbolism in this verse. Each metaphor and simile fails to capture the religious experience Shelley is having and we need one final modulation before we can accept the final image as a true symbol. With a sudden, dramatic insight, Shelley gives up the notion that a symbol can be constructed, and he is then given a response. In the last line Shelley calls back his various abortive attempts to image the transcendent other with "till the breast / From

which they fled recalls them," and then with "thou art there!" his language, according to Bloom, is successful:

The poet tries to fit imaginative symbol ("shade," "phantom") after imaginative symbol to the "Power," only to confess his defeat (his "breast recalls" the "phantoms"). Then suddenly when he stops searching, the symbol is given him.<sup>20</sup>

The problem with Bloom's reading is that the imagery is all of a piece; we began with a 'Thou' and we end with a 'Thou'. There is no sudden stoppage or peripety here. The last appeal is a breathless reinstatement and last emphatic gesture of a deepening conversation which has been going on for some 36 lines. The whole stanza is saturated with the notion of discourse and what has been given up is precisely a static version of symbolism, or a symbolism of nature which divorces itself from the modes of discourse. The problem Shelley is working with, then, is not the constructive urge; it is how to situate this magnificent imagery, with its tendency to transcendent exteriority and objectivity, within a frame of discourse, how to keep it alive within a constitutive act of language that always includes the libertarian possibility of exchange with a listener. If this is a failed symbolism, it is a very deliberate failure.

We can see the process of conversion from static image to discourse in the whole outline of the stanza and in any of the participant images. In Shelley's rendering of the Arve we have it, "Bursting through these dark mountains like

the flame / Of lightning through the tempest." This is disruptive imagery but there is a very careful visual blending here. Lightning as flame is unusual; the metaphor erases the edge of the brilliant line of light which we usually associate with lightning. In this coalescence of flame and light we are given the intensity of the flash and at the same time the broken, irregular shape, the slower, fuller movement and flickering boundary of fire. We are, then, closer to the totality of a perceptual event, what used to be called 'apperception', thus closer to the experience of a subject. This is not a distant, rational description; it is a dangerous, disruptive burning-through that occurs closer-up. Surrounding it there is the ambience of an affect, an emotion. If we look closely we see, again, the complex layering of metaphor within a simile we noticed before. The lightning is a flame thus Shelley is using a metaphor but both flame and lightning are similes for the waterfall. This intersection of figures allows the more human, perceptual-mental event of the disruptive flame to be transferred across into nature (the waterfall) through the framing simile and thus becomes another subtle form of personification and thus another case of the model of discourse that pervades the whole stanza. We can unravel it further: this transference, in turn, works back into our knowledge of ourselves. Nature is not distant; the Arve is as close up (as potentially full of meaning) as human discourse and, as in that mode, we are co-creators (lenders and

borrowers) in what we see and understand of the signs of this other. In relation to his predecessors, Shelley has unfixed this landscape as a concrete symbol of transcendence and allowed it into the less carefully marked out boundaries and borders of 'opinion' and discourse.

### Stanza III: Counter Voice

The communicative dimension which is held strongly in place at all points in Stanza II does not technically result in an animism of the Ravine. There is no naive belief in the daemonic here. As Rajan suggests this is an example of Schiller's sentimental mode in which the naive belief is recaptured within the whole ambience of intellect, theology, reason, language and art that makes up a response from a poet working in a culture that has long surpassed a direct faith in myth. The 'presence' is allowed us only through the most sensitive registers of language and knowledge of how figuration operates on the mind. We have found a locus within language through which Nature can be understood in a very different way than either the Christian model of transcendence or the materialism of Locke, though both of these views are present within the horizon of the poem. Shelley's use of this discourse is, however, not yet complete.

The mountain has yet to be situated within this new 'open' language. We have seen a first application of the new discourse to the subsidiary and contingent perceptions



of the ravine and river; but a more massive power waits, as it does for all climbers, as the ultimate challenge. One third of the way through stanza III, we are finally presented with the peak of Mont Blanc itself: "Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky, / Mont Blanc appears,--still, snowy, and serene--." This, most crucial, aspect of the scene represents a formidable problem to the kind of address Shelley has used in the second stanza. Its pure overweening scale, its mass and the sweep of its existence in time is dangerous to the vocative he has used so brilliantly in the preceding stanza; the use of "Thou" here could easily result in the kind of obeisance to the symbol of a Urizen-like God which he is so adamantly against. 'Fast influencings' and 'interchanges' are not so available in these vertiginous slopes. Shelley's response is necessarily more complex than in the preceding stanza and here we can detect a split in the 'sacred coherencies of sense and spirit' we found in Stanza II. The mountain begins to inhabit two regions of discourse.

At the first glimpse of it, the peak, surely some ultimate instance of substance and materiality, seems to float in the landscapes of dream. "--I look on high; / Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled / The veil of life and death? Or do I lie / In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep / Spread far around and inaccessibly / Its circles?" The dualities of waking and sleeping, life and death, have been invoked here and this begins the fracture

of the unified voice so carefully maintained in Stanza II. We now begin to explore a region of double signification in which the references of Shelley's imagery swing between the mountain as part of the language of universal Mind, as an addressable "Thou," and the mountain seen as an indifferent, impersonal, uncommunicative mass of rock and snow. Bloom rejects any depth of dualism and finds an unequivocal symbol: "Here both speculation and symbol are employed to establish again how far the poet's version of Mont Blanc is from ordinary vision."<sup>21</sup> But ordinary 'empirical vision' is precisely the perspective which is used to scale the size of the mountain; it is present in the implicative structure of Shelley's descriptions and is the necessary contrast to dreaming. In addition, the doubling of viewpoints becomes successively and more strongly marked throughout the stanza.

After the implied split between human and eternal scales, between sleeping and waking, life and death, we begin to see Mont Blanc's potential to destroy the communicative mode initiated in the second stanza. It raises the possibility of an antithesis to all discourse. We are first startled at the possibility of the mountain as pure and vacant, exterior object: "For the very spirit fails, / Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep / That vanishes among the viewless gales!" After this glimpse, however, Shelley very quickly attempts to block off this possibility through another version of the exchanges we found in the beginning of Stanza II. Reiman, in a rather

magnificent amassing of categories calls this view of the mountain, a "personification of the symbol of the nonanthropomorphic, amoral Power"<sup>22</sup> and the Germanic polysyllables are in some sense necessary to capture the complex levels of object and subject in Shelley's projections of human features onto the inhuman scale of Mont Blanc: "Its subject mountains their unearthly forms / Pile around it, ice and rock . . . ." We notice that in this social paradigm, the mountain begins to come into focus as a symbol of gloom, as a tyrant who oppresses his 'subject mountains'. But this first attempt to bring the mountain into the potentials of a discourse he knows well, fails as Shelley quickly gets caught in the towering labyrinth of its precipices and glacial fields, ". . . unfathomable deeps, Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread / And wind among the accumulated steeps; / A desert peopled by the storms alone." We are in a region of doubt similar to the one we encountered in "Alastor." The slippage between a social viewpoint with its reliance on language and the pure nothingness and vacancy of an absolute inability to signify gets progressively stronger. After the recognition of this 'unpeopled desert', Shelley momentarily gives up the vocative for the weaker form of the rhetorical question. The improbability of a response seems stronger than with the ravine and he turns to a surer recipient, his audience, (or himself as audience). ". . . --Is this the scene / Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young / ruin?" There is no

response but he can now make something of this, "None can reply--all seems eternal now." This more understandable type of silence brings us sharply back to the original address to the mountain; Shelley draws a defiant, magnificent parallel between it and his audience. As with their lack of response, the very depth of the cold silence and eternal resistance is meaningful. With no transition we swing back to the mountain:

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
 Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,  
 So solemn, so serene, that man may be  
 But for such faith with nature reconciled.  
 Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
 Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
 By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
 Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

But, despite this reinstatement, the positive, benign atmosphere of the second stanza has been erased. Although the reference to a mild, solemn and serene faith may seem positive, we must remember that it is one of the human responses to the scale of negative power Shelley has detected. The massive force of the mountain, when conjoined with the potentials of communication, (in this scene the reception of silence), becomes something like an eternal, total indifference and this places everything human in perspective, especially the fraudulent (again a faint resonance of the metaphor of currency) symbolism of the biblical, anthropomorphized God. The symbols of mountains and awesome landscape which maintain Caesars, kings, queens, courtiers, priests,

and all the heavy accumulations of custom are now cut to size by the scale and weight of a truer listening.

But, there is a less certain assent given to the coalescence of exterior, mind and language here. The speaker behind Nature's surfaces has been heard again but now it has been used to expose that moment when our own social discourse is most illusory, cruel, and indifferent to its effects. By the time we have heard the mountain speak in this more directly moral tone, it is less assuredly an inhuman voice, closer to the projection of a poet's voice onto a convenient, amplifying screen. And in the next stanza Shelley draws out the underlying reason for this uncertainty.

Stanza IV: Defeat and Pessimism

In the view of Mont Blanc we have just seen, another possibility has arisen. The serene, ice covered tip of the mountain could also represent some ultimate and final abolition of the vocative. This is Shelley's real antithesis, the point that sticks and will not come free, the singular, fixed reference in the flux of discourse with its unstable ideas, emotions, contentious claims of party, sex, religion and philosophy. Finally here is an incontestable, amoral point of constancy: it is inarguable, and it is asocial. For Rajan, Shelley's hearing of a voice which can 'repeal fraud and woe' is "an essentially unreal projection of human

values into the external world."<sup>23</sup> Stanza IV, according to Rajan, begins the pessimistic deconstruction of a previously inscribed symbol of transcendence. But, as we have seen, the symbolization in the preceding stanzas is not so clear cut as this; and stanza II, with its emphasis on discourse, works against a transcendent symbolism. Another power, antithetical to language and to the idea that nature is capable of responding, is clearly present and it undercuts any symbolism. This possibility becomes fully present in stanza IV. Shelley now implies that his previous sendings and receivings, the 'fast influences' and 'interchanges' he had been experiencing, were for nothing; like Ginotti and the dream maiden of "Alastor," they were imaginary projections rather than the true sensing of some other, universal Mind, outside his own. After drawing a long list of the elements of life, he concludes,

All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
 Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell.  
 Power dwells apart in its tranquility  
 Remote serene and inaccessible:  
 And this, the naked countenance of earth,  
 On which I gaze, even these primaeval mountains  
 Teach the adverting mind.

Although there is a Power in nature here, the human power of the poet--the social, relational power of human language to connect with another, so present in the second stanza--has now collapsed in the face of it. In contrast with this Power the human voice has the smallest, most insignificant claim and it is not heard. "There are no shadows anywhere.

/ the earth, for us, is flat and bare" as Wallace Stevens was to say a century and more later.<sup>24</sup> The previous building up, the construction of otherness through social allegory, simile, and metaphor to present the singular voice of Mont Blanc are now taken apart and the language reverts to pure description:

. . . there, many a precipice,  
 frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power  
 have piled: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,  
 A city of death, distinct with many a tower  
 And wall impregnable of beaming ice.  
 Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin  
 Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky  
 Rolls its perpetual stream . . . .

With 'scorn' and 'city of death' we are yet in the mode of personification, but the constructive vision is vanishing and with it the interplay of minds Shelley felt as he looked at the Ravine. "So much of life and joy is lost. The race / Of man flies far in dread; his work and dwelling / Vanish like smoke before the tempest's stream, / And their place is not known." If their place is not known then all record of them, all language, has been erased. The sensitive, ecstatic coalescence between mind, exterior and language has been fractured; all things constructed by men, including poetry, are as smoke against this Power. De Man had the romantic poet borrowing a temporal stability from nature to shore up the felt ephemerality of the self and of human life.<sup>25</sup> But here we can see the reduction involved in this version of romantic imagery. Shelley is now fully aware of the insig-

nificance and ephemerality of his life. The fracture between language and this exterior threatens to be absolute and language has become the weaker force Locke believed it to be. But we are brought to the brink, not yet pushed over the edge. Beneath this pessimistic view, even supporting it, we can yet detect one understated figure at work. With "the glaciers creep like snakes that watch their prey" we glimpse something of a presence Shelley may yet be perceiving; at the end, the chthonic power seems to have some regard for man:

. . . Below, vast caves  
 Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,  
 Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling  
 Meet in the vale, and one majestic River,  
 The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever  
 Rolls its loud waters to the ocean waves,  
 Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.

The single epithet "Breathes" is allowed us at the end; a submerged image of some titanic Being is yet present, a being that in its muscular, hydraulic power can become 'the breath and blood' of distant lands. The empirical, rational, bare view of language that would utterly defeat the vocative has threatened but it has not yet overcome a deeper-lying faith in our ability to converse with the 'One Mind.'

Stanza V: Reassertion of The Vocative

Bloom's reading of the last problematic lines is, to my mind, the best part of his, generally too positive, reading



of the poem. Bloom, as do a number of other commentators, makes a clear distinction between the Power and physicality of the mountain. The last lines do not state that "earth, and stars, and sea" would be erased if we wished it, "only that they would cease to be emblematic of the Power behind them, if our imaginings could not accomplish the symbolic linkings."<sup>26</sup> For Bloom it is symbolism, particularly, that allows the Power to exist in human life, but, surely, we can now see that the equation is more complicated. Rajan's last, incisive note on Mont Blanc comes to a different, and I think more accurate recognition:

In the final lines the speaker wins an equivocal victory, in turning from the landscape to the perceiver and suddenly making "Mont Blanc" a poem about itself, rather than a poem bound to the mountain . . . . What is canonized in the last lines is, therefore, not the oracular control of the poetic heart over time, but the very process of poetry as the dialogue of the mind with its own nothingness.<sup>27</sup>

But we can now see that these differing interpretations are possible because the symbolism has not been placed within the theory and practice of the notion of discourse which I hope is now evident in the poem. The speaker of the last stanza is, again, strongly addressing the mountain. There is not simply an awareness of the symbolic power of poetry here, nor is Shelley simply communicating with the 'nothingness of his own mind'.<sup>28</sup> The very awareness of 'otherness', the possibility of reciprocity between human beings through

the relational abilities of language has now been strongly re-asserted against the nothingness.

In the preceding stanza, the force of social relation inherent in human language cannot contend with the chthonic forces of nature. These forces have, in this stanza, achieved some ultimate kind of exteriority in Shelley's mind and have dropped through any restraint of sign and meaning, thus any meaningful relation with humanity. But in V, Shelley strongly asserts not the power of language to symbolize, but its abilities to include and exclude. His return to the peak now strongly stresses its alienation. The power is there but it now exists in "the lone glare of day" and "none beholds" the falling of snow on its peak, the "winds contend silently there" and the lightning is "voiceless." Bloom's theory has the value of realizing the stress in the poem of the "I - Thou" relation but he has downplayed the pure sociality of this poem. In the end we have the reinstatement of the potential of language to construct a living, moral connection with another, "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" The idyllic "Silence and solitude" yet functions within the sphere of human relations and nature yet shares in this. But the mountain has disabused him of a too easy connection, and Shelley is yet under the influence of the shock. His reaction is not to the 'nothingness' of mind, but to the finding

of an absolute, telling silence in the place where he seems to have wished at least a sign of another in the wilderness.

"Mont Blanc", then, does not create a symbol of transcendence. There is no identification in de Man's sense, no crossing over from the subjectivity of the poet with all its uncertainties to an illusory, shared permanence with an object. The very opposite has occurred here. The discourse framework has interfered actively and prevented such closure. Shelley has realized the last phase in his original theory of symbols in the first stanza. The mountain has 'loaned' him some splendour in the form of knowledge. It has 'told' him simply that his language is and should remain open; he will never be able to control this and bring his symbol to completion. This essentially negative message is the ultimate Verneinung, the negation of past symbolism, the negation of theism, the negation of a faith in poetry to consecrate human pride and power. This, then, is the fruit of a liberating discourse with this scene; it is an insight that is as tentative, as ephemeral, as any human relation, or any contact we can have with another mind.

#### Variations of Godwin's Opinion in Some Later Poems

We have found that de Man's ideas fall short of an adequate description of Shelley's poetic practice prior to "The Triumph of Life." Almost from the beginning, Shelley seems well aware of most of the problems which de Man de-

lights in uncovering in the romantic image. In addition, his framework is not the disruptive Rousseauian linguistics de Man assumes, but the revolutionary potential of opinion given him by Godwin. Shelley believes with Godwin that opinion, not the breaking of a social contract, is the key to progress: For Godwin, "sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be victorious over error . . . . Truth is omnipotent: The vices and moral weaknesses of man are not invincible: Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement."<sup>29</sup> And for the Shelley of the Preface to Prometheus Unbound,

The great writers of our own age are, we have reason to suppose, the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it. The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lightning, and the equilibrium between institutions and opinions is now restoring, or is about to be restored.<sup>30</sup>

Although one may fault this view for being naive, antinomian or not taking economic or other social structures into account, at least one is now critiquing the right kind of language theory and not overlaying it with another. What we have seen emerging in our study of these early novels and the poetry to 1816 is the field or context of language and sign in which Shelley's figures can be most adequately studied.

Held within this Godwinian framework, Shelley's imagery begins to take on a consistent pattern. It is a movement that is as consistent as a heartbeat or the swing of a

pendulum. In each of the works we have so far studied, we are moved from the demystification of symbolic language to its replacement with a communicative, relational mode of the direct address. The movement is often not realized, is sometimes incomplete, or gets enmeshed in its own oppositions, but I we think we can now see its general presence. Through study of this line of Shelley's thought, we have found evidence for the suspicion that de Man's reading of Shelley is limited to an extension of his analysis of Rousseau and is thus blind to the influence of the English skeptical and radical tradition. Shelley's Godwinian sense of a social rhetoric seems to reverse de Man's categories: allegory is not come upon as some 'moment of truth' in a wasteland of egoistic and mystifying symbolism; Shelley knows its powers and history. He can use allegory in serious, ironic, and playful ways and also to demystify a religious symbolism which is the mask of false authority; but allegory in itself is not his key. Shelley distrusts religious symbolism as a form of social control, a 'cold sophistry' which hides a venal motive and short circuits the exercise of opinion. In this candid atmosphere, so concerned with language, Shelley's imagery could never become a substitute for a symbolism of divine omnipresence through a procedure of disruption and erasure. By 1816, and "Mt Blanc," the theory of opinion has become an essential part of the tenor of Shelley's poetry and it shows itself consistently after this. We can see it clearly in the revolu-

tionary poetic dramas of Laon and Cythna and Prometheus Unbound, (which Brailsford saw as the greatest of Godwin's works),<sup>31</sup> in shorter works like "The Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" or enmeshed in the attitudes of an intimate (and late) lyric like "Epipsychidion." I would next like to touch on instances drawn from some later poems to underline the continuity of this perspective in Shelley's work.

In the beginnings of "The Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1816-17) the simile is stressed, but it is quickly juxtaposed with the direct, odic address. The contrast between these modes produces something like a shock of recognition each time it is used. The 'unseen Power' is, in the first stanza, likened to clouds in starlight, the memory of music and anything that 'for its grace may be / Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.' In Stanza II, this procedure is supplanted with an address to the power itself, "Spirit of Beauty, that dost consecrate / With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon" and a question, "where art thou gone?" Following questions shade into being asked of the narrator or, with a nod of his head, his audience: "Ask why the sunlight not forever / Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain river." As the poem progresses, the address supersedes the other figurative approach. We are no longer instructed by the carefully edged boundaries of apt similes drawn from objects or exterior events. With "I vowed that I would dedicate my powers/ to thee and thine--have I not kept the vow?" we are again in the discourse frame, talking to another

er being, and the progression is subtle enough that we give it our assent. The effect is to make the Spirit almost human, just perceptible, we have been drawn into a highly seductive conversation with an idealized image of humanity. Again, our pattern is evident. The simile with its boundaries between vehicle and tenor, and its analogic structure seems to inhibit and hold the poet back and the address is then emphasised as the true mode of approach to this Being. The overall effect is to stress both the spirituality of humanity and the close connection of this spirit to humanity. Through this manner of direct address, shaped by Godwin's notion of high discourse about ideas, Shelley talks to the potential for spiritual Beauty in human beings, not to a Being who allegorizes a transcendent God.

In more directly social-critical poems like Laon and Cythna (reissued as The Revolt of Islam in 1818) and Prometheus Unbound (1819-20) we return to the theme of social utopia realized through non-violent means and a realignment and critique of traditional, religious imagery. The revolutionary figures of these poems walk in a new realm, beckoning with a coherence and focus we did not feel in Queen Mab or Alastor. This power derives, in part, from their scale, the breadth and depth of the allegory and the risks Shelley takes in humanizing the powers of religion; and the pattern from symbol to human relation in language plays a crucial role.

Prometheus Unbound, at all points, shows the influence of Godwin's theory. The lyrical drama of course stresses the relational mode of the address and the general movement of Prometheus toward Asia is seen as an overcoming of alienation within the self. Jupiter, in Prometheus Unbound, is a symbol, kept in place by the hate-filled curse of Prometheus who gradually realizes that the mind of humanity has been split by his curse. All of the ambiguities we found first in Ginotti's unstable existence in St. Irvyne apply to this symbol. After recalling Jupiter's phantasm in order to recall the curse, we find a mixed language, very similar to Shelley's handling of the symbolism of Ginotti. Now, however, it is an informed and deliberately drawn malaise, "Aye, do thy worst, Thou art Omnipotent. / O'er all things but thyself I gave thee power, / And my own will . . . ." (I, 272-274) The double vision of an Omnipotent power that has been given by a victim, and an Omnipotence that is limited, is too obviously in character to be anything but deliberate. Jupiter is a part of our imagination and he has been allowed to rule humankind as if he were existing in another realm; as he quickly falls once the curse has been rescinded we see that Shelley is again demystifying symbols as illusions--humankind is ruled by nothing more than its own tyrannical imagination.

This trickery of symbols splits Prometheus in a number of ways, he loses sight of his true ideal, Asia; he is chained to the earth thus cannot improve his state and his



own psychological functions appear around him as separate existences (Panthea, Iona, and the various spirits and furies). The poem plays out the gradual amelioration of the curse and the parallel increase in Prometheus's ability to bring all parts of the human soul into harmony. The key to this harmony is the liberation of the mind from the closures and identities of a tyrannical symbol, the Promethean recognition that symbol and curse were part of the same error. Once the curse is fully remembered and taken back, then humanity's imagination can act in this world, guided by the ideal of social and moral progress. The poem moves, again, from the deconstruction of an authoritarian symbol to a recognition of human power; thus, from a hermetic, sealed language to a language open to the world and fully engaged in improving it.

Shelley becomes progressively skillful in his application of Godwin's idea to poetry and his uses of it become progressively more refined. "Epipsychidion," written in 1820-21, achieves something like an apotheosis of his progressive variation of the odic address and at the same time comes close to a recognition of the limits of the notion that an ideal can be realized in life through adequate communication. The poem ends with a complete merging and synthesis of the minds of the lovers, the projection of an ideal place and state in which the tensions of difference between minds is utterly overcome:

"And every motion, odour, beam, and tone,  
 With that deep music is in unison:  
 Which is a soul within the soul--they seem  
 Like echoes of an antenatal dream.--  
 It is an isle 'twixt Heaven, Air, Earth, and Sea,  
 Cradled, and hung in clear tranquility" (458-58)

The poem was so deeply felt, Shelley's understanding that Emily (Teresa Viviani) realized his ideal became so clear to him, that he could not read the poem once it had been published.<sup>32</sup> The poem idealizes the theory of the universality and progressive tenor of poetry he has winnowed from Godwin, Dante, Plato, Drummond and all of his other readings. Poetry should lead us to this kind of spiritual love, the final giving up of the self in an absolute intimacy of spirit which ends all division. The problem now is that this is so obviously the communication of a wish, not its fulfillment, and the difference between this so clearly communicated wish and reality is now so present, that the stage has been set for doubt.

We can detect in these examples the persistence of Godwin's theory of opinion in Shelley's mature poetry. But we must turn now to de Man's reading of "The Triumph of Life." We are in a good position to see the distortions in this brilliant tour de force.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The "Defence of Poetry" has the giving of pleasure as one of the necessary aspects of great poetry. Universality, high moral conception, inclusion of ideals and ideas, and intensity of imagination are of course some of Shelley's other criteria. See the Reiman edition of "The Defence of Poetry" p. 482.

<sup>2</sup>Shelley's biographers give the date of Shelley's elopement with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (July 1814) as the beginning of a change in the attitude of reverence, although Shelley seems by then to have absorbed the essentials of Godwin's progressive philosophy into the texture of his life and thought. See Holmes' chapter "Bad Dreams: Kentish Town 1814" for an interesting evocation of this difficult year. Godwin seems to have severely condemned the elopement and his once star pupil, Shelley, at the same time as he was negotiating to borrow a large sum of money from him. Holmes has this comment: "For almost unbelievably, Godwin had sent word through a third party that further financial aid was acceptable, since Shelley had achieved such striking success with Ballechy. That Godwin had the cold audacity to claim money at this juncture, and even more that Shelley was prepared to recognize the claim, gives some indication of the perverse influence that the philosopher still exercised over his erstwhile pupil" Holmes, Shelley: The Pursuit, p. 269.

<sup>3</sup>"Chamoinix," Encyclopedia Americana, 1959 ed. In the article in the same edition entitled "Blanc, Mont," we find the following interesting information: "The section located in Switzerland is covered with glaciers and lies within the region of perpetual snow and ice. . . . Ascent to summit was first made by Michel Paccard of Chamonix and a guide Jacques Balmat in 1786; the following year, H. B. de Saussure likewise reached the summit."

<sup>4</sup>De Man, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," p. 135.

<sup>5</sup>Bloom, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Bloom, p. 13

<sup>7</sup>Bloom, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup>Tilottama Rajan, Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 83.

<sup>9</sup>Rajan, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup>My guide here on the level of philosophy is Wasserman's readings of the poem. His two in depth analyses, (found in The Subtler Language and Shelley: A Critical Reading) emphasize the tight relationship of the first stanza to the body of the poem and a philosophical background which includes William Drummond, Hume, Locke and Berkeley. Wasserman, however, does not mention Godwin nor does he concentrate on the communicative dimension of the poem.

<sup>11</sup>Earl. R. Wasserman, The Subtler Language, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1959), p. 204.

<sup>12</sup>Bloom, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup>Bloom, p.25.

<sup>14</sup>Rajan, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup>I have in mind Godwinian progressive acts like philanthropy, moral courage in the face of familial oppression or acts of scientific, moral or artistic progress whose scale is beyond the norm.

<sup>16</sup>Charles H. Vivian, "The One 'Mont Blanc'," in Shelley's Poetry and Prose eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 571.

<sup>17</sup>Rajan, p. 86.

<sup>18</sup>Reiman, n. p. 90.

<sup>19</sup>See G.N. Shuster, The English Ode From Milton to Keats, 1940. pp. 258-63.

<sup>20</sup>Bloom, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup>Bloom, p. 30.

<sup>22</sup>Reiman, p. 90, n.

<sup>23</sup>Rajan, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup>Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), p. 167.

<sup>25</sup>De Man, Blindness and Insight p. 200, 197.

<sup>26</sup>Bloom, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup>Rajan, p. 88.

<sup>28</sup>As a reader of Hume, Drummond and Locke he would be

well aware of the uncertainties of the mind and in "Alastor" we have seen his ability to discount the tricks the mind can play with nothingness.

<sup>29</sup>Godwin, Political Justice, I, p. 86.

<sup>30</sup>Shelley, Preface to Prometheus Unbound, p. 135.

<sup>31</sup>H.N. Brailsford, Shelley, Godwin and Their Circle (New York: Holt, 1913), p. 174.

<sup>32</sup>See Reiman's introduction to the poem in Shelley's Poetry and Prose, pp. 371-372.

## CHAPTER V

### DE MAN, ROUSSEAU AND GODWIN IN THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE

#### The Structure of "The Triumph of Life".

With some exceptions, critics of The Triumph of Life generally agree that the poem shows an erosion of Shelley's idealism.<sup>1</sup> De Man's criticism follows this trend but comes to his conclusion of loss of faith through a study of the semiotics of Shelley's figures. His rhetorical, poststructuralist approach follows mainstream, imagistic criticism in so far as it leads him to the image of "the shape all light": centering his reading on this figure, he radiates from it to show an imagistic pattern of incoherence, forgetting and imposition elsewhere in the poem. This allows him a conclusion which must be an epiphany of post-structuralism:

The Triumph of Life warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence.<sup>2</sup>

This statement is almost the dialectical opposite of the Godwinian ethic. The warning is given to Shelley, but it is really De Man's. It is based on the idea that the 'shape all light' is the essential statement about language in the

poem and that it represents a final deconstruction of Shelley's own approach to figures. De Man finds this negative consciousness in other, related images and holds that it forms the pattern of the text. I hope to show that the centre of the poem's thought about language lies elsewhere. We find it in the figures of the procession occurring after Rousseau's Vision. We will also see that Shelley's idealism is yet present in the poem though it seems to be under some pressure from 'Life'. Shelley at thirty had long lost custody of his first children by Harriet, and two of the other children he has fathered have died from disease. In addition, his poetry has not been successful in England and the promises of the revolutionary awakening he has seen prophesied in Godwin's works has not materialized. But Cameron tells us that a letter written to his friend Horace Smith while he was composing "The Triumph of Life" shows both an intact determination to persevere and a profession of faith in Godwin's freedom of opinion:

It seems to me that things have now arrived at such a crisis as requires every man plainly to utter his sentiments on the inefficacy of the existing religious, no less than political systems, for restraining and guiding mankind. Let us see the truth whatever that may be. The destiny of man can scarcely be so degraded that he was born only to die--and if such should be the case, delusions, especially the gross and preposterous ones of the existing religion, can scarcely be supposed to exalt it. If every man said what he thought, it could not subsist a day.<sup>3</sup>

The images of "The Triumph of Life" might show a diminution in Shelley's faith in an ideal, but, in the end, they do not tell us

anything new about his view of poetic language. The sense of language in the poem seems yet to be the theory of opinion and address that we have found present in most of the poems we have studied so far, although it becomes very much more complex in the section on Rousseau. De Man's idea that the poem's semiotics shows the impossibility of positing a world through symbolic language is not evident if we study the context of "the shape all light."

De Man's provocative reading of the poem rests on a belief that Rousseau's philosophy is its core and that there is an identity between Shelley's voice and Rousseau's.<sup>4</sup> In De Man's reading, the poem marks the end of Shelley's romantic faiths; we find a Shelleyan deconstruction of his own (Rousseauian) theory of the romantic symbol, (the 'shape all light'), and following from this the gradual erasure of belief in the imagination as the source and possibility of social progress. This produces a kind of text, "for which we have no name readily available among the familiar props of literary history."<sup>5</sup> De Man's reading clearly implies that Shelley has now seen through his ideas, though he does not explicitly mention the Shelleyan pantheon of the enlightenment of opinion, the poet as the legislator of humanity, natural philanthropy, Necessity, perfectibility and sexual equality and all the other ideals and ideas that have so far informed his poetry. I will make a case that this lapse is telling; de Man's reading relies on a much too complete identification of Rousseau and Shelley. Their intellectual relation, while close, was yet tempered by Shelley's skepticism about symbols and his



Godwinism. De Man has studied Rousseau's 'shape all light' in the poem as if it were unequivocally Shelley's. In fact, the symbol yet presents the problem it has presented in "Alastor" and "Mont Blanc." Shelley, right to the point at which the poem is truncated, is attempting to place Rousseau's vision within a Godwinian framework. This poem does not really "reduce all of Shelley's previous work to nought"<sup>6</sup> though Shelley now seems hard pressed by the procession of life. The notions of social evolution, progressive mind through poetry and the awakening of the spiritual promise of humankind yet figure strongly in the poem but they now appear as lights flickering in a deeper darkness.

#### The Plane of the Ideal

The Triumph of Life does show a much more tough minded, realistic, even agonized, understanding of the relation of idealism to "Life" than we find in Shelley's previous poetry. The relations drawn between the procession around the chariot and the level of progressive thought now show the difficulty of transferring ideals into experience and, as de Man rightly points out, there is a great deal of weight given to language in the poem. In order to see how language is being scrutinized, however, we will, first, have to counter de Man's reading of the poem as an inchoate 'structure of forgettings'<sup>7</sup> and study the clearly marked structure of remembrance so intensely begun in this fragment of a much greater work.

The poem begins by building up a wide philosophical framework or superstructure in which other points of view can be placed and judged. We see this architecture first in the introductory section which differentiates carefully between an exterior and an interior observation point. Shelley gives this exterior a progressive, social tenor. The dramatic rise of the Sun is connected to Shelley's figures for natural Power: the Demogorgon of Prometheus and the Spirit of the Earth, or the Great Parent of "Alastor." At least for the moment, this power is harmoniously aligned with humanity. For Reiman "The Sun is, in itself, a symbol of the Good"<sup>8</sup> and we see that the Sun vivifies everything that wears "the form and character of mortal mould" and these "Rise as the Sun their father rose, to bear/ Their portion of the toil which he of old/ Took as his own and imposed on them" (17-20). Mankind must work; the diurnal rhythm is the rhythm of his work, and the rise and fall of the sun beats out the tempo of his labour. But the very first line shows this solar being as something other than a beneficent task master. The details of the evocation make one feel the sun as the hub of the social universe, the positive centre of light and life of humanity, not merely a symbol of Good. While he does hasten, "to his task / Of glory and of good," as a result, all parts of the world his glance falls on come into social, relational being: the darkness falling away from the earth is a mask, the mountain snows are altars, the Ocean sends prayers heavenward, flowers are eyelids which are kissed by this light, even the air smiles in response. This sun, then, is not, as de Man would have it, violently

'mastering the stars';<sup>9</sup> it is awakening humanity to a spiritual and relational potential, a utopian vision. The falling away of a mask reminds us of the fall of religion in Queen Mab which allows the true energies of mind to be liberated, (and thus is very much in the tradition of imagery we have studied from Ginotti onward). The altars and orisons are also in the same vein: the use of natural imagery and discourse keep traditional, social hierarchies in perspective, a technique we found prominent in "Alastor" and "Mont Blanc." The opening imagery thus reconnects us to the pantheon of progressive thinkers that informs Shelley's social thought: Godwin, Drummond, Plato, Hume, and Rousseau and to their coalescence in Shelley's mind into a force which will overcome the oppressive symbols and states of society.<sup>10</sup>

This light-strewn exterior--representative of an achieved utopia--is next juxtaposed strongly to the inner world of the poet-narrator, "When a strange trance over my fancy grew / Which was not slumber." (29) The coming on of this trance is described as an alteration of light, the emanation of "a transparent shade" which interposes itself between the poet and the morning scene. The scene "came through / As clear as when a veil of light is drawn / O'er evening hills they glimmer . . ." (32-3). One must have a particularly negative cast of mind to see this as a "curiously scrambled" confusion of sleeping and waking or "like the symptom of a disease which recurs at the precise moment that one remembers its absence."<sup>11</sup> Shelley carefully distinguishes between the layers of this light. We see a trance state subtly

modulating clear perception, a lesser form of consciousness clouding a more intense form. It is not the radical mixing and blending of subject and an exterior we saw in the first stanza of Mont Blanc; here, one sees an exterior from an interior, as if one were to enter a dark room on a bright day and look outward through a window. The distinction between these types of knowing is marked and the effect is to enclose the trance, to limit it as light within light. Thus the Vision of the procession and its chariot might 'roll on' the narrator's brain and appear to block his awareness of the scene, but the reader is aware that the 'Vision' is defined by the first exterior scene and its visionary Sun. This exterior gives us perspective, a frame to which we will be referred throughout the poem, and it will be kept in view so that we can see examples of a false consciousness through contrast. Although, with the appearance of Rousseau, there will be the complex, further modulation of a secondary exterior-interior marking within this trance, the line outward, our contact with a standard of clarity and truth in mind and spirit, will remain apparent and easy to find.

It is within this interior, after the first distinction in mental intensities is made, that we come upon the instances of an enigmatic existence. They are all instances in which poetry and ideas do not seem to operate. De Man's reversal, in which he calls the perspective itself enigmatic, is reductive. The first people the poet meets are held within an enigma, 'numerous as gnats upon the public way' they hurry to and fro, without direction or goal. There is

much confusion of purpose: some fly from the God they fear and others seek this very thing. Some pore over death itself and others pore over their own shadow and call it death; others quest after metaphysical shadows of transcendence. For Bloom, "What is emphasized is the great numbers, the meaningless multiplication of ciphers, the lack of individuality in the way. The dust, the gnats, the leaves, the people are all alike, in that one speck of dust is much like another."<sup>12</sup> In terms of discourse, the images, like those of "Alastor," present us with a rather complete form of autism, an inability to express and connect, or to move forward out of confusion of thought. Unlike those who are walking in their own shadow, there are others who flee from it though they are also caught in the same oppressive atmosphere,

. . . as it were a ghost,  
Half fainting in the affliction of vain breath.

But more with motions which each other crost  
Pursued or shunned the shadows the clouds threw  
Or birds within the noonday ether lost,

Upon that path where flowers never grew;  
And weary with vain toil and faint for thirst  
Heard not the fountains whose melodious dew

Out of their mossy cells forever burst  
Nor felt the breeze which from the forest told  
Of grassy paths, and wood lawns interspersed

With overarching elms and caverns cold,  
And violet banks where sweet dreams brood, but they  
Pursued their serious folly as of old . . . . (60-73)

These beings are following an imaginary path: the religious world of ghosts, life after death, metaphysical shadows, all the tantalizing chimera of transcendence professed by insti-

tutional Christianity. The sensory beauties of the fountains, meadows and caverns with which the path is contrasted, are another development, then, of the scene with which we began. The 'path' represents a false quest and the people on it act out a variety of absurd gestures resulting from lack of awareness of the utopian frame of reference, the sunny world of relation that is as close as the senses. Caught in the official illusions of heaven, hell, prayer and the anthropomorphic God who upholds established society, they have no purpose because they cannot see through a received fantasy to the promise of the world around them.

#### The Car and Social Autism

We can see the effect of this shining, individualized world in the allegory of the Shape and its chariot as well. The precise symmetry of levels and oppositions between the Sun and the Shape show it as the negative force motivating the lower state of mind and its enigmas. As the Sun is the center of the fully awake consciousness, the Shape is the epicenter of the illusion and through it Shelley reinstates his knowledge of how social power is maintained. The rising Sun revived everything its glance fell on; whereas the chariot is prepared for by "a cold glare intenser than the moon/ But icy cold . . . ." (77-78) The Sun "rejoiced in his splendour"; and the chariot carrying the Janus shape is

propelled by a solipsistic energy arriving "on the silent storm / Of its own rushing splendour." (86-87) In addition, the "Shape" does not emanate, it steals light, "and o'er what seemed the head a cloud like crape / Was bent, a dun and faint ethereal gloom / Tempering the light . . ." (91-93) The Shape is the negative symbol of a fallen moral state, the emblem of illusion and deadened expressivity. Shelley is developing his frame of reference in almost as rigorous a way as did Dante or Spenser before him. We have come upon a scene of wasted energies. The procession pictures a world that is not as it should be, a troubled, lower, uninformed and inchoate existence. For de Man this gradually more intense portrayal of confusion in life, however, ends as an index of Shelley's mind as he attempts the impossible feat of positing and presenting an imaginary world within a text:

. . . since Heaven and Hell are not here two transcendent realms but the mere opposition between the imagined and the real, what we do not know is whether we are awake or asleep, dead or alive, forgetting or remembering.<sup>13</sup>

De Man's claim that the semiotics of the text are confused requires that he pay no attention to the clearly limited levels of awareness at work in the poem, and the fact that Shelley has controlled our perspective so that we see conventional beliefs and mind as a form of sleep or death in life and the Shape as its symbolized essence.<sup>14</sup>

The overriding, progressive framework, and its connection to Shelley's earlier poetry of the myth of social power, become especially noticeable in the instances he next presents. We will study two of them as representative. In the first, the procession is compared to a Jubilee, or Roman Victory parade for a returning Conqueror, (almost certainly an allusion to Napoleon).<sup>15</sup>

The million with fierce song and maniac dance  
Raging around; such seemed the jubilee  
As when to greet some conqueror's advance

Imperial Rome poured forth her living sea  
From senatehouse and prison and theatre  
When Freedom left those who upon the free

Had bound a yoke which soon they stooped to bear.  
(113-116)

The procession of Life is again mired in paradox: as soon as the multitude allows others to be enslaved, they in turn must bear the yoke; the slave masters themselves become, inevitably, slaves. The theme of conventional morality as a condition of mental vacancy or a hypnotic state, has now been repeated, and its cause is emerging. Each moral enigma is the result of the relation of individuals to various movements that take place under the aegis of the Shape in the car; the autism and the paradoxical relation to freedom seem to result from a group mind, (perhaps a 'mindlessness') formed around the Shape's negative emanations. The trance seems then the result of the merging of individuals into a



group around a central symbol like the Christian God or Ceaser-Bonaparte.

Shelley's understanding of this relation goes back to his earliest reading of Godwin and his distrust of group mentality. We found less subtle examples of it in the uncovering of religious symbolism in Queen Mab. Here, the relations between members, procession and 'Shape' develop Godwin's idea in a more subtle way. Godwin's outline of the relationship of a subject to a King is couched in terms very similar to Shelley's maturest pictures of the mental and sensory dullness that produces and allows false leaders and false Gods:

To conduct this imposture [of Kingship] with success, it is necessary to bring over to its party our eyes and our ears. Accordingly kings are always exhibited, with all the splendour of ornament, attendance and equipage . . . and, when they are shown to the public, it is with every artifice that may dazzle our sense and mislead our judgement.

The illusion that the king is somehow a different, superior sort of being is maintained through all of our senses; our ears are assaulted with "the inflated style of regal formality" and eventually, under this sensory barrage, we submit and "the perfection of virtue is placed, in blind compliance, and unconditional submission."<sup>16</sup> For Godwin, then, the adoration attendant on kings is a matter of sensory illusion and the illusion is necessary to veil any suspicion that 'kings are but men.' In the image of a procession blindly following a forceful, cold Shape, Shelley once again carries

through his lifelong project of demystifying established power; he is taking apart, emptying the emblems of religion and kingship by uncovering the deluded, irrational and purposeless kind of existence they clothe. The allegory of the car and its Janus shape fits into the overall scheme we have found in all of Shelley's 'critical' or skeptical poems.<sup>17</sup> Here, as in Queen Mab, "Alastor" and "Mont Blanc," we have a spiritual potential, (the sun-lit world of the opening scene) and the uncovering, through allegory, of a deluded, oppressive state of symbolism that is being taken as reality.

The perspective appears, so far, fully under Shelley's control. He has so placed the chariot, the Shape and the crowd clustered around it that we see the emptiness, the illusion of contemporary social cohesion. Here is the 'equipage' of social convention from the point of view just 'above' or 'outside' those caught in its spell. It is a picture of a blind multitude, caught in the full aura of a regal personage, the 'cold light' of a regime, that is now, in 1822, only a masquerade of force and shape. Those caught in the procession exist without individuation, they live in a received and exploded set of ideas and lead delegated lives. This is the inchoate state, not the perspective Shelley is using. We are referred, again, to the frame. The unconscious slave makers are next set against the sacred few "who could not tame / Their spirits to the Conqueror, but as soon / As they had touched the world with living

flame / Fled back like eagles to their native noon." (128-131) This 'native noon' is the compass point of an ideal and it is opposed to a lower world which captures most people. The sacred few are unwilling to join the masquerade; and, again, the implication is that social forces are at work to obscure and mystify thought. There are only a very few who have managed to stay clear of them, (according to Reiman, only Jesus and Socrates, though other poets are implied). Shelley's idealism is yet strongly, coherently present.

For de Man, the imagery of light and darkness which delimits the supposedly confused layers of mind in the poem is like the veiling and unveiling of a memory. It is actually a form of forgetting and for him forgetting is, in its turn, erotic, "This play of veiling and unveiling is, of course, altogether tantalizing. Forgetting is a highly erotic experience; it is like glimmering light because it cannot be decided whether it reveals or hides."<sup>18</sup> One must ask, given the framework at work in the poem, what is being forgotten. The true Vision (the Sun) has been replaced by a less intense Vision (the cold light of the Shape, the car and the various groups around it), allegorical of a false consciousness. The interplay here is between a liberated mind and a mind clouded and controlled by forces exterior to it and cut off from its real sources. Only by a rather complete displacement of the framework at work in the poem and the replacement of it with another view, can one see the

relation between liberation and oppression drawn in the poem as tantalizing and erotic. The place of Eros in this subtle interplay of light and obscurity is, in fact, remembered and studied in the poem. We find it, quite openly, in Shelley's portrayal of the 'wild dance' of 'tortured and agonizing pleasure' that is also a part of the general movement of the procession. In this daemonic dance,

Maidens and youths fling their wild arms in air  
 As their feet twinkle; now recede and now  
 Bending within each other's atmosphere

Kindle invisibly; and as they glow  
 Like moths by light attracted and repelled,  
 Oft to new bright destructions come and go,

Till like two clouds into one vale impelled  
 That shake the mountains when their lightnings mingle  
 And die in rain,--the fiery band which held

Their natures, snaps . . . ere the shock cease to  
tingle  
 One falls and then another in the path  
 Senseless, nor is the desolation single . . . (149-  
 160)

These tortured beings are associated with the car, thus their sexuality is linked to autism, false relationships and a generally diminished mentality. The 'lovers' lose their chance at the exterior light through a physical act of merging which leaves them exhausted, dulled and (eventually) old; like those under the sway of a despot or of religion, they have no ideal existence, no sensitivity to the passions of mind, no informing mental level at all. Their 'relation' relies on the merest sparks of physical difference (attraction and repulsion), not on ideas, or the attempt to live up

to ideals. Such a connection cannot, then, include an intellectual Eros with its implications of knowledge, wisdom and moral progress gained through the dialectics of difference and equality. And, as a result, their unions are shortlived, end in frustration and 'die in rain'.

Shelley's critique of an autistic sexuality is not wholly Godwinian. Its implication of a higher, (perhaps Platonic) intellectual form of erotic union is not present in Godwin's more completely rational outlook. For Godwin, sexuality, like the other physical needs and 'pleasures of sense,' was controllable by reason and essentially a matter of mind. Sexual pleasure has a fragile hold on us because it is dependent on communication, approval, and is easily disturbed by other, more important, forces and messages. Reason will eventually overcome desire and sexual union will be undertaken rationally and only in order to procreate and maintain the species.<sup>19</sup> Shelley seems to believe in the higher level of awareness involved, but not in its contents--its denial of desire. With these Bacchantes we see sexuality as mechanism and not productive of a continuous light, only of momentary, lightnings and a union that quickly fades. Its higher complement would be the lasting, light-filled relation not based in opposition that we can find in Shelley's essay "Love." "We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of everything excellent or lovely that we

are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man . . . . " the discovery of the 'antitype' which would vibrate in unison with this ideal is "the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends."<sup>20</sup> A life caught in this lower level of relationship is wasted in the eternal polarities of sex allowed by convention, as its worn out victims, the "Old men, [and] women foully disarrayed" who fall behind the car, attest. De Man's critique of the 'forgettings' in the poem requires only a hidden sexual message, but there seems no denial of sexuality here.

We have studied three examples which support the idea that Shelley's idealism is yet present in "The Triumph of Life," and that it can be clearly detected as an evaluation in the groupings around the car and its Shape. Additional evidence for an overriding level of ideas comes from the Shelley's arrangement of these examples of enigmatic existence within a hierarchy. We began with an undifferentiated mass of autistic followers; then this mass is broken up into the couplings of sexuality; and next we are presented with a group of wrong-headed individuals. Here we meet those powerful men and women who, while they do not live within a set of received images and ideas, have not helped further the general moral growth of mankind. These are "The Wise, / The great, the unforgotten; they who wore / Mitres and helms and crowns, or wreathes of light." (208-10) In this group Shelley includes Napoleon, Voltaire, Frederick the Great, Kant, Catherine the Great and Leopold II<sup>21</sup>, --The Enlightened

Despots and thinkers of the Age of Reason. At this level, life is not understood, it is opposed, and, in the end, the opposition has been fruitless, "For in the battle Life and they did wage / She remained conqueror . . . ." (239-40). Again, Shelley seems to be working out an orderly schema of evaluation. With this group, Life won because its members produced effects which did not last beyond their own generation. These are the members of the procession "Whose name the fresh world thinks already old" (298) and they have been superseded by the shattering revolutions that happened after them which overturned at least one of their regimes and disproved their theories of society. We seem, then, to be spiraling upward through more refined kinds of moral confusion, from mass consciousness to individuality, from acceptance to blind forms of resistance. The more we study the first part of The Triumph of Life, the more it becomes apparent that Shelley has spent a great deal of energy on its structure. There is an intensity of remembrance and reinstatement of principle in the first part of the poem which harks back to the ironies of "Queen Mab" and the heady Atheist positions of the days just after Oxford.

De Man is unequivocal in his understanding of the uncertainties of the poem, "Questions of origin, of direction, and identity punctuate the text without ever receiving a clear answer."<sup>22</sup> The questions are there, but they do not begin until we are introduced to Rousseau almost one third of the way through the poem; the making of these questions

the central aporia of the poem is reductive of a much wider area of coherence, remembrance and 'answering.' We have seen this coherence in Shelley's careful construction of a poetic argument through illustration, development and a step-wise upward movement. The poem begins as a remaking of Dantesque allegory along modern, liberationist lines and has the same kind of allusive, topical structure. It does not, however, remain in this form for long after the appearance of Rousseau.

### Rousseau as Topos

The remainder of the fragment is concerned with the problem of placing Rousseau within this general schema of levels, exterior and interior, mass versus individuality, and relative degrees of enlightenment. And it is here that the strong lines of structure begin to waver, the levels begin to merge and the strongly built architecture of ideas found in the first part comes under a distorting, self-reflexive pressure. The problem of placing Rousseau within this general order of thinkers and mental states is now the central issue of the poem and I think de Man is partly right in finding an identification. The identification, however, is by no means total, nor is it constant, and its waverings mark a different kind of relation than De Man's 'impositions,' 'erasures' and 'forgettings.' Cameron reminds us that while Shelley held Rousseau in great esteem, it was the Rousseau of La Nouvelle Heloise not the Rousseau of The



Confessions. "Rousseau, like Shelley, was a political radical, an exponent of the doctrine of universal love, and a man who felt himself misunderstood by his age."<sup>23</sup> But the car of life which Rousseau sees after his vision differs significantly from the car seen by the narrator and this indicates that Shelley is able to distance himself somewhat from Rousseau's vision. The view of Rousseau clearly continues the evaluative structure and Shelley's stated problem lies in determining where the complex composed of the Rousseauian ideal and its reception went wrong.

Cameron also thinks that the solitary, alienated image of Rousseau, conquered not by Life but his "own heart alone" has its source in Rousseau's Reveries of The Solitary Walker which Shelley had read in 1815. This text maps Rousseau's bewildered turning away from life, which Cameron sees as a defeat by life. And for Shelley this defeat is the result of Rousseau's passionate, sensual nature. But de Man holds to a rather complete identity of the two idealists: after the initial stages of his composition of the poem, Shelley's "close proximity to Rousseau is now more strongly marked than in the earlier passage; the possibility of his escape from Rousseau's destiny has now become problematic and depends on one's reading of Rousseau's own story, which constitutes the main narrative sequence of the poem."<sup>24</sup> Cameron's biographical reading can be buttressed by the text itself. As we have seen, position in relation to the car plays an important part in Shelley's allegory of contempo-

rare moral enigmas; thus, Rousseau's 'location' should give us some clues to Shelley's thought about him. This thought appears, at first, ambiguous because Rousseau is outside the procession and yet he is 'one of the deluded crew.' But there is no obvious, complete identification here:

. . . I turned and knew  
 (O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)

That what I thought was an old root which grew  
 To strange distortion out of the hill side  
 Was indeed one of that deluded crew,

And that the grass which methought hung so wide  
 And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,  
 And that the holes it vainly sought to hide

Were or had been eyes. (180-88)

De Man's assumption that Shelley and Rousseau are one is based on evidence derived from a point in the text far beyond this statement of their differences. Shelley first separates him from the narrator, and places him squarely among the deluded, although he is the 'crew-member' who, so far, is highest in relation to those few eagles who could 'not tame their spirits to the Conqueror.' We learn later that Rousseau's weakness was that he has not been overcome by Life as exterior force, but by himself, his passion. "I was overcome / By my own heart alone, which neither age / Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb / could temper to its object." (240-243) Shelley takes some time to show us that Rousseau has understood the negative dynamic of society, was perhaps brilliantly conscious of the deforming force of

human institutions, but communicated his insight through emotion-laden images, and unlike the bards of old, infected others with his angers and loves, not his dispassionate ideas; his error was that he did not know, thus could not control, himself. However, the differences between narrator and Rousseau do not remain so clear cut. At the same time, Shelley has placed him on an equal footing, (almost literally) with the narrator.

De Man takes some time with the passage which sees Rousseau as a face which at first looked like a root covered with grass. Rousseau, is 'disfigured' and this act of disfigurement characterizes the whole poem. When we first come upon Rousseau, his face is discovered as a tree root:

The erasure of effacement is indeed the loss of a face, in French figure. Rousseau no longer, or hardly (as the tracks [of the wolf image later in this scene] are not all gone, but more than half erased), has a face. Like the protagonist in the Hardy story, he is disfigured, defigure, defaced. And also as in the Hardy story, [Hardy's "Barbara of the House of Grebe"] to be disfigured means primarily the loss of the eyes, turned to 'stony orbs' or to empty holes. This trajectory from erased self-knowledge to disfiguration is the trajectory of The Triumph of Life.<sup>25</sup>

But this semiotic analysis which stresses language as the essential object of the distortion, misses Rousseau's position in the social allegory which must include the level of ideals: Rousseau is positioned through this 'disfiguration'; he is evaluated through a topos of the root and grass figure and this gargoyle-like visage tells us something about his

status. This is Shelley's view of the, by now, stereotyped Rousseau, the image of him in the public mind. De Man then has analyzed only Shelley's 'conscious, rhetorical picture, not the essential semiotic statement of the poem.

But we must also follow out the other, conflicting, details of this placement. Rousseau is very close to the narrator's point of observation through which we see the pageant as it passes beneath us, close enough that the narrator can see that Rousseau's hair and eye sockets are not the grass and roots he thought they were. In relation to the levels of mind we have just studied, this can only mean that he and the observer are on similar levels of consciousness and morality though Rousseau's ideas have now become both fixed by his death (rooted) and made into a horrible parody by the pageant. In terms of the sequence of development (in which we have noticed a successive rise in consciousness), Rousseau has also come before the Enlightened Despots. Thus the overt, negative evaluation is partly undercut because it is from this elevation, and Rousseau's descriptions, that we are able to see the problems in morality that have chained the Enlightenment figures so securely to the car. In addition, and most importantly, the function allowed Rousseau, and no one else, is the development of a 'point of view' through speech, dialogue and description and this, again, places the two, ambiguously, on the same level. The enigma in which Rousseau is mired is, as de Man rightly stresses, language. But it is not necessarily the narra-

tor's dilemma, nor is its essence the problem in figuration which de Man so sharply explores.

Rousseau, Discourse and A Shape All Light

The careful demarcation between levels and types of awareness is now repeated, at a secondary level, in Rousseau's vision of the 'shape all light.' We are now going a further step inward toward what should be a more intricate telling of a vision within a vision. The ambiguities become more complex yet de Man's reading holds this episode to be homogeneous, all of a piece.<sup>26</sup> Rousseau and Shelley are very quickly made identical, the 'shape all light' is "the figure for the figurality of all signification"<sup>27</sup> and show the error in Shelley's use of words in poetry. The error which this figure 'represents' is the violent usurpation (through the irrational positing powers of figuration) of the limits of life by language; and De Man's evidence includes the various metaphors for gliding, erasing, treading and trampling used to describe the shape. The figure enacts a series of confusions, indeterminacies and 'defacements' which undo the representative function; we come finally, to see the emptiness and nothingness supporting the radical and violent intrusions of the romantic symbol. De Man's reading is a muscular application of post-structuralist terminology to the uncertainties of this poem. But the hypothesis that Shelley gradually uncovers a monomaniacal, absolutist act of

usurpation in his own language flies in the face of all we have learned of his approach to allegory, symbol and discourse in our studies of preceding poems. In terms of this poem, it also pays no attention to the complex heterogeneity of points of view in this episode. De Man has seen that the issue here is language, but he has not seen that the forces and dynamics of this field of thought about language are multi-dimensional, based in dialogue, on the notion of an interplay of speakers and the complex indeterminacies of a self which has learned a great deal of its own art and philosophy from a personality inhabiting a poem it is, itself, creating.

One strong piece of evidence for this heterogeneity of view points is the fact that the episode in which Rousseau appears is clearly marked as dramatic dialogue. This section brings in the first examples of reported speech in a poem that has long before set its basis in a lyrical subject whose voice is absolutely singular and verges on a monodony, (the first quotation occurs on line 177.) It is as if a pressure had been building up which Shelley finally could not resist and he resorts, once again, to his familiar pattern of address and dramatic language.<sup>28</sup> In addition, within this newly introduced mode, we find an ironic overtone, a self-reflexive commentary. This irony begins exactly when the dialogue begins. Musing on the sad pageant before him, the narrator remembers a conversation that was, he thought, partly directed to himself, "Half to myself I

said, 'And what is this? / Whose shape is that within the car? & why --' (177-78). Rousseau's answer "Life" is interjected before the narrator can finish his question with "is all here amiss?" This clever, doubled reference, fragments the omniscient point of view. A number of possibilities are now open. The speaker may be speaking to himself as persona (narrator) of this poem, or, (the ironic overtone), to himself as taking the part of Rousseau or, more profoundly, to the part of himself that has been formed by Rousseau's thought. The audience overhearing this new conversation is also multiple: There is first the reader, then, within the fiction, a Dantesque kind of Rousseau, Rousseau as guide, Rousseau, as Virgil before him, a symbol of the best that the period has achieved. There are also a number of historical listeners outside the fiction. The shift in speakers is dramatic enough that one also feels an inner significance, as if the audience could also include Godwin, Mary, Byron, Claire Clairmont, anyone whose life Shelley has intersected with or disturbed through his deep-felt connection to the French Revolution and the figure, who in the public mind, was its primary theoretician<sup>29</sup>. To say the least, this breakage brings in a strong sense of an Umwelt; it immediately and irrevocably produces a dramatic context. And this context is quickly developed. By line 190, Shelley has the narrator become aware that the disfigured shape of Rousseau is "of my thought aware." There is a further development of the irony here, perhaps a reference to the

ventriloquism of making Rousseau speak, but the commentary also further breaks up the monopoly of the narrator. It shifts the point of view just enough that we see its fragility. The Rousseau who 'knows' Shelley's thought should be fictional, yet there is the other possibility. Rousseau may 'know' the narrator because they are so much alike; Shelley's ideas have been formed, partly, on a Rousseauian model. In this other possibility we see the precarious nature of both narrators: On the level of his ideas, Rousseau has created the narrator as much as he has created Rousseau. We are at a crossroads, that merging and separating movement of fictional address, idea and recipient we have noticed so often in Shelley's poems. In the last instance, just after the appearance of Napoleon we get a similar statement of the fragility of boundaries between speakers. "Rousseau" has the lead part and he is echoing the narrator's question about origins:

. . . "Whence I came, partly I seem to know,  
 And how and by what paths I have been brought  
 To this dread pass, methinks even thou mayest guess;  
 Why this should be my mind can compass not;  
  
 Whither the conqueror hurries me still less,  
 But follow thou, and from spectator turn  
 Actor or victim in this wretchedness,  
  
 And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn  
 From thee." (300-08)

The shifts in point of view are subtle, and seem almost impossible given the strength of the form Shelley has so far



established. Rousseau is asking the narrator to judge and evaluate his plight through experiencing it. The narrator must enter Rousseau's own scene of pain and victimage; he must experience a mind once held as the centre of European thought but one now "scorned" and blamed for all that has come after it. He is being asked then to slip from his position as spectator/narrator to that of 'actor' and 'victim' thus, to reverse roles and change from lyric poet to tragedian. Rousseau would, then, be telling his story but also watching and learning from the reactions of a narrator now submerged in his new role as audience; and we, the other audience, would be watching the interactions between Narrator and Rousseau. We have entered a poetic theatre, a situation something like Hamlet's play within a play except here we have a play within a monologue. Perhaps afterwards we will know how the present enigmatic state has come from the past and what the future will bring, but for now we have been asked to enter an illustrative tableau in which the narrator has canceled himself out and, momentarily, become, like us, an audience.

There is another level of heterogeny. Rousseau does draw evidence for his plight from his own, singular, use of language, but the overriding model he uses for this judgement is not 'figurative' it is dramatic. He finds that his own words were 'infectious' rather than the careful 'quelling of inward passion' managed by 'the bards of old,' (274). The narrator also tells us that at one point Rousseau became

"like one who with the weight / Of his own words is staggered." (197) and finally his words are judged by the narrator as creative rather than, like those of the "Anarchs" who spread official Christianity abroad, destructive. These polarities of healthy and infectious language, enlightening versus deadly words, creative and destructive acts of dissemination are all 'audience sensitive,' in the sense that they show the effects of a well known thinker on his public. The exploration of Rousseau's plight will be carried out within this rather lively field; we will spiral upwards towards Rousseau's ideal through the 'shape all light,' but we will do so in order to evaluate Rousseau's ideas; at all points we will have the after-effects of his source fully in mind.<sup>30</sup>

As one would expect in a field of language so resolutely concerned with audience and purpose, this heterogeneity extends to the figure of the 'shape all light.' She is not, as de Man would have it, the essential case of 'forgetting' and confusion. She is an image of emancipation because Shelley has connected her positively to the generative Sun with which we began the poem; to give de Man his due, she is also something of a dark force and has overtones of usurpation, revolution and disruption but she can be contrasted with similar bearers of the revolutionary ideal Shelley has used in earlier poems.

In "Laon and Cythna" (1817-18) we find a scene much like this one, though also subtly different. When Laon

first describes Cythna she is something like Rousseau's epipsyche. She seems insubstantial, nourishing, associated with water, air, cloud, and dew, yet not positioned near a well or a cave:

She moved upon this earth a shape of brightness,  
 A power, that from its objects scarcely drew  
 One impulse of her being -- in her lightness  
 Most like some radiant cloud of morning dew,  
 Which wanders through the waste air's pathless blue,  
 To nourish some far desert: she did seem  
 Beside me, gathering beauty as she grew,  
 Like the bright shade of some immortal dream  
 Which walks, when tempest sleeps, the wave of life's  
[dark stream. 31

Later, when Cythna becomes Laone--the symbol of revolutionary awareness--, she begins to address her troops about victory, free love and atheism, though, again, while not associated with a well, her voice is strongly associated with a clear, mountain stream. "Her voice was as a mountain-stream which sweeps/ The withered leaves of Autumn to the lake." (V, stanza 53) This image of her is also not so closely connected to direct sunlight or all the pyrotechnics of flashing reflection she invokes in The Triumph of Life. At the beginning of his vision, Rousseau sees "a gentle trace / Of light diviner that the common Sun" (464) but then we see that she stands "Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze / Of his own glory, on the vibrating / Floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays" (349-50). Both of these images are reminiscent of the direct sunlight of the opening "rejoicing in his own splendour" (2). In contrast to Cythna

this is a more filled-in, at points even saturated, image. It is not reminiscent of Shelley's light-filled, airy, evanescent pictures of his revolutionary ideal. Shelley's typical revolutionary heroine is quick, light-filled, associated with the evanescence of thought through dew, the intangibilities of the atmosphere, and the movements and reflections of water. William Keach characterizes Shelley's general view of mental imagery as marked by a quest for pure immateriality; it is so unwaveringly non-material that language can obscure it. Poetic language may articulate pure thought but "in the end the veil of language remains as evidence of the 'limitedness of the poetical faculty', in spite of Shelley's wondrous capacity to make a virtue of that limitedness."<sup>32</sup>

The Shape's 'fierce splendour' does not give us clear evidence of this pure thought; she seems all image, and she is not able to communicate her ideas verbally. Cythna's talk is likened to a stream and the dream-maiden of "Alastor" is able to talk to her visionary "in low solemn tones," (153) whereas the Shape is emblematic, she acts rather than says. Like many of Shelley's symbols of liberation, however, she hovers and glimmers between distinct outline and ephemerality. For this lightness of her being, de Man saves his harshest judgement,

It follows that the figure is not naturally given or produced but that it is posited by an arbitrary act of language. The appearance and the waning of the light-shape, in spite of the solar analogon, is not a natural event resulting from the mediated interaction of sever-

al powers, but a single, and therefore violent, act of power achieved by the positional power of language considered by and in itself.<sup>33</sup>

The judgement rests on the notion that she represents a 'singular' act of linguistic power, the irrational positing of the romantic symbol itself. But, as we have seen, this episode has been set within a complex form of dialogue and there is no necessary reason why Shelley should suddenly shift his focus and make her represent one, technical aspect of language like figuration, or the general power of language to symbolize taken by itself. In the context of the heterogeny of voice Shelley has developed, in her lightness, silence and singularity she could be seen, I think more accurately, as the communicative essence of Rousseau's language; its singularity. There is evidence in the poem for the second level of generality (of language about language) but not necessarily for a 'figure for the figurality of signification' which is exclusively Shelley's; Shelley, as we have seen, has probed the nature of figuration from his beginning in the Gothic. She seems, more simply and more in keeping with Shelley's previous thoughts about language, a figure for the communicative and destructive power of Rousseau's imagery; its ability to create a social form like itself. Her gliding, forward action pictures the mind's ability to assume an outward aspect, to open itself to others; her lightness and shape, her tread which 'broke not the mirror' of the river's billow are the essence of Cythna and the dream maiden, the invisible shapes of mind as

it enters the communicative circle of language and becomes visible or audible to a listener. But her ability to strew the gazer's mind "beneath her feet like embers" and the effect of turning the mind to "sand / Where the first wave had more than half erased / The track of deer on desert Labrador" (405-6) is a kind of disruptive language which we do not find in Shelley prior to this. All the aspects Rousseau shows us of her are doubled and emphasise the difference between ideas and their medium. She is mental, invisible, yet she somehow appears 'amid' the Sun, and can be seen on the vibrating floor of the fountain. With her, (presumably), left hand, she flings "Dew on the earth, as if she were the Dawn," (352) and this 'invisible' rain 'forever seemed to sing.' In her other (right) hand she carries a chyrstal glass, "mantling with bright Nepenthe" (359) associated with Love in Prometheus Unbound. In the one hand the promise of another, brightly illumined, eternal world beyond the sensory medium, in the other 'oblivion,' the dropping away of the sensory shell which clouds her essence. She seems to move both through things and over them,

" . . . --the fierce splendour  
Fell from her as she moved under the mass

Of the deep cavern, and with palms so tender  
Their tread broke not the mirror of its billow,  
Glided along the river, and did bend her

Head under the dark boughs, till like a willow  
Her fair hair swept the bosom of the stream  
That whispered with delight to be their pillow."  
(359-366)

This figure is like the figure we saw hovering just on the edge of realization in the Vale of Chamonix; but she also could represent Rousseau's 'passion'; she is the essence of the expressive powers of mind, Rousseau's antitype or psyche, the more aggressive play and spirit of his language. Shelley is picturing an active symbol of revolution and this requires a darker symbol of emotional language and he has made her effects more overwhelming than those of Rousseau's own Emile or Julie.<sup>34</sup>

She does seem to represent the opposite of the Narcissus complex de Man has seen in her.<sup>35</sup> Here is the possibility of a being free in language, a being liberated from the conventionality of words, and thus from the old egoisms of possession. She is not a forgetting but an emancipation from language. And to return to the Labrador image where 'Rousseau' tells us he, "Touched with faint lips the cup she raised / And suddenly my brain became as sand / Where the first wave had more than half erased / The track of deer on desert Labrador," (404-407) we have not a blindly random 'act of forgetting' but Shelley's remembrance of 'l'homme naturel'; the possibility of new life, a radical, new beginning, the wish for the erasure of the corrupted hierarchy of egoism and power which initiated Rousseau's work. This, for Shelley, was Rousseau's insight, the core of the message given him: we came from this region of innocence and that we can, through such symbolism and its relational powers, return to it--breaking the bounds of the present, fallen

state. The action, music and color of this visionary episode is both positive and negative, an erasure and an awakening. Rousseau has tried to show us the untrammelled source of his ideas, their disinterestedness, the purity of his well but Shelley has built in a deeper overtone.

For Cameron, there are marked differences between the procession seen before Rousseau's vision and the car that is seen by Rousseau after it.

These differences in emphasis between the two visions presumably mean that the poet's vision is life in Shelley's day, in the aftermath of the defeat of the French Revolution, whereas Rousseau's vision is of life in the years before the revolution--Rousseau died in 1778--and may also reflect the early days of the Revolution, when Rousseau's spirit if not his body was still alive.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the problem of Rousseau's language not only lies in this disruptive image of a cleanly untracked, idyllic world, it lies in its transference into Life, the carrying over of the vision into the whirlwinds and storms of 'the multitude'. Rousseau has awakened the possibility of a new world but as soon as he returns it to his present day, (thus of pre-revolutionary France), his vision fades to a glimmer "More dimly than a day appearing dream, / The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep . . ." (427-28). We are once again in the threshold area between waking perception and interior vision with which we began, (though it is yet an earlier 'recounting'). The description that follows, then, is a description of the tragedy that occurred when Rousseau's ideal was taken over by social forces very much beyond his control. The procession, "and its cold, bright car" (434) is like the procession



seen by the narrator, but the transference of the rainbow of Iris from its place before 'the shape all light' to an arch of triumph "high over her wind-winged pavilion" afloat above the car marks it as Rousseau's vision. Instead of disbanding and starting afresh, (the tenor of the Rousseauian vision), the 'loud million' seems to have placed 'her star' directly above a newer structure of mass tyranny; she has become another example of the idolatry of language, the mistaking of a symbol for the mental state symbolized; we embark on yet another program of oppression.

In Rousseau's procession we see that the whole interplay of language, of dialogue, dialectic, the initiation of 'freedom of opinion,' the breakup of convention through the recognition of mind, has vanished. After a brief moment of 'aetherial glory' which 'clad the wilderness,' the light of Rousseau's vision is soon obscured and he and his anti-type fall "into the same track" (458-60) and are borne onward. Instead of engendering liberation, Rousseau's vision has been erected as an icon, thus pulled into the maelstrom, used to forward power and greed; given the framework of idealism, Rousseau must now be demoted to an enigma, his revolutionary ideas have become paradoxical, they now uphold conventional society. As free speech is yet constrained, and men are not allowed to forward their true opinions, corrupt ideas flourish; they send off emanations of themselves, like the shadows of the earlier car. The public mind did not or could not grasp the real meaning of Rousseau's idyll, the transformation of

humanity into spirit, and in its unregenerate deafness we hear a hint again of Godwin's theory of the growth and dissemination of mind:

"For deaf as is a sea which wrath makes hoary  
The world can hear not the sweet notes that move  
The sphere whose light is melody to lovers." (478-79)  
.....

Phantoms diffused around, and some did fling  
Shadows of shadows . . . .

And others sate chattering like restless apes  
On vulgar paws and voluble like fire.  
Some made a cradle of the ermined capes

Of kingly mantles, some upon the tiar  
Of pontiffs sate like vultures, other played  
Within the crown which girt with empire

A baby's or and idiot's brow, and made  
Their nests in it . . . " (487-500)

We are very much within Godwin's evolutionary view, his critique of Rousseau, and his absolute distrust of institutions.<sup>37</sup> Because the public mind had been merely inflamed, not awakened, there was no true revolution; instead, the violent disruption of the Terror and its aftermath in Napoleon, the Bourbons and the Congress of Vienna, shows a collective mind that has come full circle.<sup>38</sup> We are given an ironic picture of thoughts liberated only enough to deck themselves in the trappings of the old institutional oppressions. The inability to transfer the Rousseauian vision of a transparent innocence and clarity of mind into life has brought about a reinstatement of tyranny. Here the mind is

not free; it is taken over by forms that directly mirror the old oppressions. Thought is once again contingent on power, and good and the means of good have once again been separated. As a result the mind spawns simulacra of sensory reality; mind, overridden by power, takes on materialist colorations and its distorted shapes appear everywhere.

The fragment is just about to finish its tableau of Rousseau's vision and perhaps to reckon the effects we were promised when it is broken off. Rousseau grew weary of 'the ghastly dance' and fell by the way-side; we are not sure, however, that we have been given the reward we were promised for this drama, we have only been shown how Rousseau's ideas went wrong. And we end with the original question. "Then, what is Life?" I said . . . the cripple cast / His eye upon the car which now had rolled / Onward . . . " (544-46) As he is about to answer, the ultimate breakage occurs and the poem ends. If Rousseau can give us no answer for the question, Shelley confronts the possibility that there is no chance that the Rousseauian ideal and the procession of life can be wed through an adequate language and we would be left with the revolutionary mind pouring its spirit into the sands of an egoism unrelieved by an ideal, of a resistant idolatry of language, nowhere interpenetrated with spiritual vision. We cannot, however, go this far. The text is truncated here and this is the true aporia. We can say that, according to Shelley, Rousseau's vision has not taken root; we can also say that, at this moment, Shelley might

appear to be in doubt about the ability of pure mind to communicate itself, or to transform the social world and remain uncorrupted. We cannot go the next step and say that Rousseau and Shelley are the same and that this is a necessary break in a dialogue that is now impossible to continue; a dialogue that has erased its own possibility of continuing. The answer and the completion were not given us. We are left with a question and a fragment, not an answer.

De Man is right in claiming that the key to understanding that part of the fragment we can understand is language, but he has focussed mistakenly on Rousseau. Because he has not addressed the Godwinian element in Shelley's thought, de Man has confused, then, the case of Shelley for the case of Shelley's view of Rousseau. For Shelley, Rousseau was the visionary whose images have been used to impose a tyranny. Contrary to de Man's reading, the error lies, as far as we can tell, in the conventional limit on the ideal, the imposition of a force which did not understand this most subtle of languages within language.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For the positive reading see Reiman's, Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical Study (1965). For Rajan, the poem is a working through of the oppositions of transcendence and self: "In the course of Shelley's dialogue with Rousseau a logocentric poem of the soul, which is predictable from Adonais, becomes a skeptical and existentialist poem of the self (to borrow a Yeatsian antithesis)." See Rajan, Dark Interpreter, p. 60. For Bloom, the poem spins out in anguish the defeat of the myth-making ability. See Bloom Shelley's Mythmaking, pp. 220-275. Eliot liked this poem; it seems the only poem of Shelley's he did like.

<sup>2</sup>De Man, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup>Letter to Horace Smith, (1822) in Cameron's Shelley: The Golden Years, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 451.

<sup>4</sup>We have, for instance, de Man's study of the textual variants of the poems and its conclusion, "As for Shelley himself, his close proximity to Rousseau is no more strongly marked than in the earlier passage . . ." (De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," p. 124).

<sup>5</sup>De Man, Shelley Disfigured, p. 125.

<sup>6</sup>De Man, p. 142.

<sup>7</sup>De Man, p. 130.

<sup>8</sup>Donald Reiman, Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical Study, Illinois Studies in Language and literature, 55 (Urbana: university of Illinois Press, 1965), p. 23.

<sup>9</sup>De Man, p. 139-40.

<sup>10</sup>Reiman also thinks that the Sun is a symbol of the Good and not merely the sun of Nature; he sees associations between this Sun and the Attendant Spirit of Milton's Comus (II, 78-81) and Psalm 19. Thus the opening reinstates a positive, hopeful outlook even though the poem is to deal with negative and fallen states. See Reiman, Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical Study, pp. 21-26.

<sup>11</sup>De Man, p. 130.

<sup>12</sup>Harold Bloom, Shelley's Mythmaking, p. 228. Holmes is both convinced that this is 'like nothing he had previously written' and equally sure that it "draws everywhere on previous work." The difference seems to be the clarity and hardness of the ren-

dering of life. The image "begins clearly as one of the chariots of the Roman Forum, but gradually it turns into a kind of vast, trundling, crushing Moloch, and from that diffuses further into something simply like a great storm wave thundering through disturbed sea, and leaving behind it a creaming wake. The effect is brutal and terrifying. The Chariot is the chariot of Life, and those who dance around it are those whom Life will unhesitatingly crush, the intellectual joy and sexual energy fruitlessly sacrificed and destroyed. It is one of the great images in English poetry." See Holmes, Shelley: The Pursuit, p. 720.

<sup>13</sup>De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," p. 130.

<sup>14</sup>Reiman sees this first phase of the poem as representative of amoral Necessity. The chariot and its shape especially mark necessity and history as blind, destructive forces working through those who cluster around it. I have no quarrel with Reiman here; his reading allows a Godwinian nuance: "The Shape, like Death in Paradise Lost, is a mythic creation that overflows the boundaries of any equation with a multiplicity of suggestions . . . . The chief attribute of the symbolic chariots of Ezekiel, Dante, and Milton was power--the irresistible might of God, or of His Church, to force obedience to an arbitrary will. . . . Thus the power that to Ezekiel, Dante, and Milton bespoke the majesty of God, to Shelley simply epitomized the rule within phenomenal experience of amoral Necessity, and the human being who bowed down to worship such power in any of its numerous manifestations became enslaved by a demonic force. . . . To be forced into actions either by external, physical necessity or by one's own unruly passions was a sign of the collapse of the autonomy requisite for ethical decisions." See Reiman, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup>Reiman, p. 458.

<sup>16</sup>Godwin, II, pp. 51-3.

<sup>17</sup>I am relying, again, partly on the general approach to Shelley developed by critics like Pulos, Wasserman and Abbey here. In this approach, as we have seen, Shelley approaches his subject skeptically, that is he will always play in the indeterminate position between two dogmas. In his introduction to Destroyer and Preserver: Shelley's Poetic Skepticism, Abbey begins with, "Percy Bysshe Shelley was in a state of almost total philosophical uncertainty throughout his career. He refused to embrace any dogma, either for the sake of social convention for psychological comfort. What is consistent in his work is his skepticism." (p. 1)

<sup>18</sup>De Man, p. 132.

<sup>19</sup>Godwin, Political Justice, I, pp. 70-4.

<sup>20</sup>Shelley, "On Life" in Reiman, Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p. 474.

<sup>21</sup>Grand Duke of Tuscany and later the Holy Roman Emperor, (1747-1792).

<sup>22</sup>De Man, p. 125.

<sup>23</sup>Cameron, Shelley, The Golden Years, p. 468.

<sup>24</sup>De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," p. 124.

<sup>25</sup>De Man, p. 127.

<sup>26</sup>Abbey notices these parallels, though he also sees them as adding to the confusion, "Just as the people on Shelley's 'public way' are 'numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam' (l. 46.), so the phantoms of Rousseau's concluding vision are 'like small gnats & flies, as thick as mist / On evening marshes' (ll. 508-9). . . ." This and other parallels suggest that "Shelley and Rousseau are giving us two perspectives on the same sunrise, the same day, and the same visionary experience." Abbey, p. 134.

<sup>27</sup>De Man, p. 139.

<sup>28</sup>Reiman also pays some attention to this sudden interjection of dialogue and commentary but he sees it only as a self-projection of the 'Poet.' "Rousseau knows the Poet's thoughts before they are expressed because he is only a projection of the Poet's internal questionings." He does not take the possibility any further than this. (See Reiman, p. 41.)

<sup>29</sup>That Rousseau and the French revolution were primary and unfading stars in Shelley's firmament is attested to by most biographers. During his elopement with Mary to Geneva (accompanied by Claire and eventually joined by Byron and his physician Polidori), Byron and Shelley visit the settings of Nouvelle Heloise, reading Rousseau's sentimental novel at the same time, and he is early struck by the power of Rousseau's imagination. "Meilleire, the castle of Chillon, Clarens, the mountains of La Valaise and Savoy, present themselves to the imagination as monuments of things that were once familiar, and of beings that were once dear to it. They were created indeed by one mind, but a mind so powerfully bright as to cast a shade of falsehood on the records that are called reality." (Preface to Frankenstein). In 1817, according to Holmes, we catch him, deeply engaged in the significance of the revolution for his own position: "As he settled into the spring [1817] at Marlow, he turned the whole question of radical political and social change over in his mind and began to read further studies of the French Revolution. More and more he came to believe that the way in which he and his contemporaries interpreted the French Revolution would decide the way in which they would fight for or oppose the present struggle for democratic reform." (Holmes, p. 366).

<sup>30</sup>And behind this the Terror and its aftermaths in Napoleon, Greece, the Bourbons and the various restrictive acts of the Pitt Government in England.

<sup>31</sup>The Revolt of Islam, (earlier published as "Laon and Cythna,") Canto II, stanza 23.

<sup>32</sup>William Keach, Shelley's Style, (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 33.

<sup>33</sup>De Man, p. 139.

<sup>34</sup>Starobinski has of course written at length on this interplay between the quest for transparency of mind to others and the need to veil the inner life in Rousseau. At one moment of crisis in Rousseau's early life, for instance, "The temporal dimension that opens up behind the present moment is perceptible only because it is fleeing into inaccessibility. The mind turns back to an earlier world and sees that world, which once belonged to it, as lost forever. As the child's happiness slips away, the mind recognizes the boundless value of this now-forbidden joy. There is nothing left to do but create the poetic myth of a bygone era. In the past, before the veil fell between the world and ourselves, there were 'gods who read in our hearts,' and nothing denatured the transparency and clarity of our souls." See Jean Starobinski, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction, Tr. Arthur Goldhammer, (1971 rpt; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup>In the sunlight as it floods this 'place' de Man only sees the first sun repeating itself "in the figure of the eye's self-erotic contact with its own surface, which is also the mirror of the natural world." (de Man, p. 110)

<sup>36</sup>Cameron, p. 470.

<sup>37</sup>Contrasting Godwin and Rousseau, Philip finds "Rousseau simply does not believe that the individual will follow the common good simply because it is good . . . . Rousseau also argues that our conception of the good and our pursuit of it arise through our experience in society." Whereas, the Godwin of Book II, of Political Justice thinks that no institutional norms of punishment and reward, or self seeking contracts with the whole can compensate for rational, enlightened action based on an individual's unforced understanding of the good. See Philip, Godwin's' Political Justice, p. 47, 52.

<sup>38</sup>Cameron has these lines as clearly evaluative of present life in society: "Some of the forms of that life resulted from the overthrow of the French Revolution and the restoration of the Bourbons as well as other reactionary regimes: the 'old anatomies' and their 'base brood' who by means of the Congress of Vienna, reassumed 'the delegated power' in which to 'monarchize.' The 'crown which girt with empire / a baby or an idiot's brow' is presumably a reference to the insane George III, and Napoleon's declaration of his infant son as king of Rome in 1811. Lower down on the pyramid of power are the hypocritically 'humble' corruptors, lawyers and priests and so on." Cameron, p. 472.



## CONCLUSION

In the preceding dissertation I have attempted to bring to light the outline and some of the detail of Shelley's semiotic understanding and practice. I began the thesis with the idea that this kind of awareness appeared in the earliest of his works and we have found it in the Gothic novels as a delight in the energies released when religious symbolism is played off against the dangerous language of social criticism favoured by Rousseau and Godwin. The poetry we have studied has shown a periodic movement, a swing between symbolic modes and a counter-voice of discourse that I maintain, and hope to have shown, Shelley discovered in Godwin. The highly tuned awareness of figurative language shown in Queen Mab is based in a Godwinian understanding of the reification and rigidification of thought that stabilizes mind into ideology. The primary instrument for this condensation is, for Shelley, the symbol. Although, in this stage of his practice, Shelley often mixed this deconstructive method with his own utopian symbolism, the prevailing tendency is anti-symbolist. He shows us, time and time again, what he takes as the danger entailed in the acceptance of a transcendent language of cathedrals, liturgy, religious story and dogma and he delights in showing the human face and force behind these allegories that have become the way of maintaining established social forms.

This critical, discourse model of language as opinion is not Shelley's unquestioned semiotic orientation. The use of Godwin's theory often conflicts with a symbolism. In "Alastor," we have seen Godwin's model at work as a highly sophisticated use of poetic figures to decentre an image of the poet as idealist-visionary. Here, the transcendent allegory of an ideal divorced from social reference and experience is the target of Shelley's irony. The allegory is again enfolded within a wider understanding of language as a form of discourse with social forces. Shelley here refuses an aestheticist view of poetry which claims its project as the reaching of a self-contained, autotelic universe composed of beautiful ideals and perfect forms. But there is also a marked undercurrent of faith in a symbolism of 'the spirit of nature'. As the Defense was to declaim six or seven years later, both levels are necessary to the high purpose of the arts: the transformation of social life through the liberation of the human mind from materialism.

"Mont Blanc" is a furtherance of these ideas and ideals and places a profound question at the centre of the images of sublime landscape Shelley had inherited from Wordsworth and Coleridge. The discourse model is now used to successively undermine the new romantic image of transcendence by gradually enclosing this symbol within a conversation. This high, poetic address to the mountain challenges and dislodges the fixed structures and spatial analogies through

which the preceding generation of poets expressed and forwarded their faiths. In the end a message is heard and through it Nature as true exterior and other has been reinstated and a false image has been erased. By the time Shelley has taken on the challenge of "Mont Blanc," the notion of poetry as an engaged discourse is now deeply a part of his view and it has been used in an increasingly subtle dialectic with the presences and forces of symbols, both poetic and religious.

The "Triumph of Life" continues this dynamic skepticism. Although Shelley yet maintains a faith in the efficacy of his militant ideal, the opposition to it seems now to be pictured in much more intransigent and unforgiving terms. Progressive and conservative forces now seem on an equal footing. The picture of a life of convention as a procession swept along by its faith in a symbolic 'Shape' now seems to have as much negative power as the positive plane of his ideals. Whether these ideals will ever overcome the autistic, degraded life of conventional morality is now very much in doubt. Shelley's questioning reaches one of the members of his pantheon, Rousseau. He begins an analysis of his ideals and their relation to the current state. The Rousseauian ideal is seen as having been desecrated by the collectivity of the revolution and made into an image of power. The critique of Rousseau continues the critique of the symbolic mode along Godwinian lines but we are not given a conclusion. Shelley, at the end of this fragment, seems

to have begun to realize the depth of the antagonism between ideal and experience.

The focus on the fundamental categories of language in my thesis has required a stress on Godwin necessarily at the expense of other philosophical and aesthetic influences. I do not deny these other formative powers in Shelley's work though I find Godwin's ideas steadily present in Shelley's conception of poetic language. The wider view of Shelley that emerges from study of this influence certainly aligns itself against Arnold's caricature of an ineffectual angel. It also argues against a view like Bloom's in which we find Shelley searching and finding a new religion, or a new myth. In matters of religion, new or old, my studies of Shelley's use of symbol and allegory show the doubled vision of a rather thoroughgoing skeptic and here I agree with critics like Pulos, Wasserman and Abbey. But study of Shelley's semiotics shows that this skepticism is directed and limited; he is not a skeptic in matters of social change, social conscience or his belief that humanity laboured under illusions that could, through the agency of poetry, be overcome. Shelley engaged himself in a consistent project of re-humanizing the ideals he found buried in the authoritarian social pattern of institutional Christianity and the poetry that preceded him. The thrust of his work then shows that metamorphosis, pointed to by Abrams, of the transcendent domain into a social ideal. As such, Shelley's work is at all points deconstructive and it is equally, at all points,

reconstructive. Shelley has taken a first step toward reclaiming language from religion. The will to do this seems to have been with him from the beginning.

In light of the preceding work, we can now see that the de Manian project is limited to the analysis of the Rousseauian influence in romantic ideology. It has led him in "Shelley Disfigured" to the deconstruction of a kind of symbol which does not exist in Shelley. "Monumentalism" may be an illusion of Shelley criticism, but it is the overt antagonist in all of the Shelley prose and poetry we have studied. The Godwinian strain in Shelley's thought and practice militates against any monumentalism of ideas. The societal emblems which represent and veil complexes of ideas about hierarchy, labour, marriage and authority are Shelley's unwavering target. Disruption and erasure on the plane of language are most certainly present from the Gothik phase to the uncertainties of The Triumph of Life but these do not entail, for Shelley, the release of the kinds of destructive or disfiguring energies which de Man suggests. The blend of Godwinism and Platonism which became the essential tenor of Shelley's poetry and thought about poetry, is pacifist, operating consistently and vigorously on the level of reason and on the plane of morality, ideals and language.

I hope also to have indicated that the structuralist model is a limited instrument with which to interpret Shelley. To paraphrase Perkins, the Xray of our contemporary criticism penetrates deeply to some things, but it has not

found Shelley. In de Man's poststructuralist usage of Saussurian terminology, the concrete, active aspect of Shelley's language is simply replaced by a dogma which denies that language is, at base, relation. It is appropriate to end with Shelley's own, inestimable word:

Thou demandest what is Love. It is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves. If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another's; if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood. This is Love. This is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything which exists.

On Love

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