Skepticism and grimness in Shelley

Autor(en): **Quinney, Laura**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata**

Band (Jahr): **- (1990)**

Heft 11-12

PDF erstellt am: **22.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006657

Nutzungsbedingungen
Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.
Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.
Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss
Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

Ein Dienst der *ETH-Bibliothek*
ETH Zürich, Rämistrasse 101, 8092 Zürich, Schweiz, www.library.ethz.ch

http://www.e-periodica.ch

Laura Quinney

SKEPTICISM AND GRIMNESS IN SHELLEY

As against C.E. Pulos, who first argued that Shelley was a skeptic, of the mild Socratic variety which would suspend confidence in our capacity to make metaphysical determinations[1], it seems clear both that Shelley's skepticism took a chillier and fiercer form, extending to suspicions of life's malevolence, and that it was influenced as much by his literary aspirations as by his philosophical convictions. Any skeptical unveiling of the world is inherently ambiguous, since it can mean the unveiling either of a numinous reality, or of the reality of nothingness. The word "skepticism" accordingly ranges in meaning from doubt about the certainty or even the possibility of knowledge to annihilating dismissal of what passes for mundane reality.

Skepticism begins, in any case, by claiming to furnish that wide survey that Wittgenstein calls "perspicuous representation". Wittgenstein suggested that: "The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things." Thought promises us a "clear view of things", and we therefore think it possible to command a full view of whatever thought takes as its object. The desire for perspicuous representation may be in itself a "Weltanschauung", he added. In other words, to esteem views of the world is already a kind of world-view[2].

The flight over the earth and the heavens, one of Shelley's governing poetic ideas, realizes in physical form the claims of perspicuous representation. To take a relatively neutral example of this idea, there is the ascension of Queen Mab's chariot, which rises over the oceans, past the clouds, and beyond the sun:

---

1 See *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism,* Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1962.

2 *Philosophical Investigations,* 3rd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, New York, Blackwell, 1958, § 122.

The magic car moved on.
Earth's distant orb appeared
The smallest light that twinkles in the heaven;
Whilst round the chariot's way
Innumerable systems rolled,
And countless spheres diffused
An ever-varying glory. (I, vv. 249-55)[3]

Shelley was partial to this exhilarating fantasy of space travel. A somewhat lower, but similar flight is taken by the cloud, the skylark, the West Wind, and the second of the two spirits, in the poems that bear their names. In *Hellas,* it is Victorious Wrong who gains this birds'-eye view on her descent toward earth, her prey:

I saw her, ghastly as a tyrant's dream,
Perch on the trembling pyramid of night
Beneath which earth and all her realms pavilioned lay
In visions of the dawning undelight. (vv. 942-5)

This anthropomorphized image of flight readily combines with the purposes of Shelley's skepticism, since the identification of night as a "pyramid" or "cone" and of Heaven as a "canopy" or "pavilion" does the work of suggesting their limitedness, and the unknown magnitude of what lies beyond.

Shelley's *Ode to Heaven* follows the skeptical logic inherent in these metaphors. Apostrophizing Heaven as the "Palace-roof of cloudless nights, /Paradise of golden lights", an anonymous celebrant flies out to the limit of the Heavens, and looks back to see the planets, moons and stars in their dance:

Glorious shapes have life in thee –
Earth and all Earth's company
Living globes which ever throng
Thy deep chasms and wildernesses
And green worlds that glide along [...] (vv. 10-14)

To this atheistic naturalist, human beings are the byword of evanescence: "their unremaining Gods and they/Like a river roll away – Thou remainest such alway" (vv. 25-7). But "A Remoter Voice" intervenes, to

3 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Shelley are from *Shelley's Selected Poetry and Prose,* ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, New York, Norton, 1977. This edition provides the best texts for the poems that it contains.

take the idealist position that the Heavens are the evanescent apparition, doomed to fade in the higher reality of the ultimate, beyond "the portal of the grave" (v. 32). A paradoxically "Louder and Still Remoter Voice" has the last word, arriving at the most distant perspective, in which both people and the Heavens are the lightest motes of a radically expanded reality:

> What is Heaven? a globe of dew
> Filling in the morning new
>   Some eyed flower whose young leaves waken
>   On an unimagined world
> Constellated suns unshaken
> Orbits measureless, are furled
>   In that frail and fading sphere
>   With ten million gathered there
>   To tremble, gleam and disappear! (vv. 46-54)

This perspective, which by its position in the poem promises omniscience, dismisses to oblivion all the realities to which the other voices gave authority. With this ascendence towards ever higher overviews of reality, the *Ode to Heaven* brings out how much skepticism depends on the ambitions of perspicuous representation. At the same time, the poem's exhilarating widening of perspective makes manifest an internal logic of skepticism – its tenacity, its contagion, and its strange demand for self-transumption. In professing its final authority, each voice teases into being a more boldly annihilating position.

"Death is the veil which those who live call life" (III, iii, v. 112), says the ambiguous Earth of *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley's demand for perspicuous representation realizes itself in figures of the veil and its rending, and yet those figures are delicate and provisional to the point of obscurity. There are layers, perhaps endless layers of veils, each of whose rendings invokes the drama of perspicuous representation. In Shelley, as elsewhere, unveiling is contagious. The dramatic gesture of unveiling always makes itself vulnerable to its own unveiling as a veil. Each unveiling must profess to be ultimate, at the same time that, by the imperative of ultimacy, it calls forth its own supercession. Nevertheless, in spite of his insight into this self-defeating logic, Shelley did not abandon the attractions of perspicuous representation, and in fact his last poems pursue it with the greatest energy. The rending of the veil underlies the concluding lines of *Adonais* in which the elegist drifts towards suicide, as he beholds that "The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!"

It seems that perspicuous representation bends by some inner weight towards grim revelation. Skepticism exposes the putative grounds of reality as a veil or screen of illusion. But once it begins exposing chimeras, it seems condemned to go on exposing more chimeras, tearing away the veil of still more fundamental grounds. The summoning up of a supramundane vision thus tends by an inner necessity to accelerating skepticism and dismissal. No one is surprised to find that the exhilarating flights of *Ode to Heaven* should end in the bleak otherworldliness of *Adonais:*

> Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly
> Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
> Stains the white radiance of Eternity. (vv. 461-3)

Skepticism is bound to generalizations about the nature of reality, and by its logic of exposure and contagious self-transuming, it seems bound as well to the premise that the truth it is constrained to reveal will be cruel. Conversely, the paradigm of the truth's cruelty has no life apart from perspicuous representation.

Generalization itself is a means and mode of such a representation, but one whose rhetorical form exerts its own attraction toward severity. A sovereign finality is entailed in the requirement for condensation, definitiveness and sharp persuasive force. Shelley's lyrics exemplify the charm of generalization and its consequences. Wherever his lyrics interact with the anonymous forms of wisdom literature – with proverbs and aphorisms – they join in the sweeping designs of perspicuous representation. The first two stanzas of the 1821 lyric which Mary Shelley entitled *Mutability* consist entirely of succinct and violent apothegms:

> The flower that smiles today
>   Tomorrow dies;
> All that we wish to stay
>   Tempts and then flies;
> What is this world's delight?
> Lightning that mocks the night,
>   Brief even as bright.
>
> Virtue, how frail it is!
>   Friendship, how rare!
> Love, how it sells poor bliss
>   For proud despair!
> But these though soon they fall
> Survive their joy, and all
>   Which ours we call.

This poem makes manifest the tugging within generalization to darken itself, as it works toward a conclusion whose bleakness supercedes that of the laments leading up to it. The sources of joy die, but only after having outlived joy itself. This escalation of despairing summaries echoes the technique of self-transumption that energizes skepticism. But it is more than an echo: the conjunction brings out the strange interdependence of these particular rhetorical and conceptual forms: poetic demands for sublimity and closure find a partner in critical intelligence, doubt and disappointment.

The power of self-transumption finds another concise example in a strong late lyric, ostensibly personal rather than formulaic, whose darkness lies in catastrophic generalization, the disappearance of the individual into the shadow of the aphorism and the law:

> When passion's trance is overpast
> If tenderness and truth could last
> Or live, whilst all wild feelings keep
> Some mortal slumber, dark and deep –
> I should not weep, I should not weep!
>
> It were enough to feel, to see
> Thy soft eyes gazing tenderly
> And dream the rest – and burn and be
> The secret food of fires unseen
> Could thou but be what thou hast been!
>
> After the slumber of the year
> The woodland violets reappear;
> All things revive in field or grove
> And sky and sea, but two, which move
> And form all others – life and love. –

The rhythm of the death of love is folded into the inexorable rhythm of the earth. Yet the finality and impersonality of this reduction has a darkness not quite identical with the theme of the death of love. The severity of the fiercely sweeping word, "all" (all things, all others), exerts an autonomous rhetorical magnetism. The charms of generalization have here exerted themselves through a strange logic, since it is in the absence of life that things "revive". Totalized entities confront one another in a mutually exclusive relation. "All things" revive but life and love – which are all, in another sense. The structure of this ironic reduction has an authority independent of its subject. Whatever the terms in which they filled it out, Shelley's poems pursued this reduction again and again.

From *Alastor,* through *Stanzas written in Dejection, Julian and Maddalo, The Cenci, Adonais,* and *The Triumph of Life,* it is as if dark generalization had to go in search of its content. Thus these two lyrics enact in small the self-transuming, and self-consuming itineraries, not only of many longer Shelley poems, but of his career as a whole.

A self-transuming fierceness dominates Shelley's poetry, no matter how "Utopian", celebratory or lyrical its appearance. Shelley sought to re-invent the sublime in an erotic, but still de-naturalizing and passionate, mode. This is the work of the third, and particularly, the fourth acts of *Prometheus Unbound,* acts which would otherwise seem puzzlingly prolonged and redundant, however beautiful. Harold Bloom has helpfully written that "In Act IV the imagination of Shelley breaks away from the poet's apparent intention, and visualizes a world in which the veil of phenomenal reality has been rent, a world like that of the Revelation of St. John [...]"[4]. *Prometheus Unbound* is structured as an unveiling of progressively higher realities. The scope of the play radically widens, escaping the limitations of time and human perspective. This dramatic expansion of view – the rending of veils – obeys the same skeptical imperative that generates the structure of the *Ode to Heaven:* Act IV presents still louder and remoter voices than Act III. At the heart of Act IV is the hymeneal dance of the Earth and the Moon, anthropomorphized so as to be enfolded in the Ode's "frail and fading sphere". But their supernatural passion is unquestionably uncanny, as will be remembered from the Earth's notorious exclamation, "It interpenetrates my granite mass", or the Moon's description of sexual awakening:

> Gazing on thee I feel, I know,
> Green stalks burst forth, and bright flowers grow
> And living shapes upon my bosom move

This revelation of a post-apocalyptic paradise provides the occasion for the exuberance of a liberated figurative language. The "thrilling life" of poetic figures stands in for the awakening of "unimagined worlds". But these science-fiction imaginings already begin again to touch on strange and chilling effects. Act IV does deviate from the play's humanist agenda, and from Shelley's intention, but it is by way of sustained obedience to the aspirations of his elevated poetics. Though *Prometheus Un-*

4 Introduction to *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Modern Critical Views,* ed. Harold Bloom, New York, Chelsea House, 1985, p. 10.

bound has been allegorized as the flowering of Shelley's "hope", its hieratic style does not distinguish it from the fierce rhetoric of his putatively "disillusioned" poems.

Shelley's poetry is characterized by this peculiarly ambivalent combination of passion and severity. For to the skeptical theme of the world's blankness and poverty, Shelley joined a strong current of eroticism – or rather, he heightened a latent one. In the course of traducing him, F.R. Leavis called attention to Shelley's vivid and telling revisions of *The Recollection*[5]. In the original version, Shelley had described an ephemeral sensuous contentment in language that his revisions rendered atavistic:

> A spirit interfused around,
> A thinking silent life;
> To momentary peace it bound
> Our mortal nature's strife; –
>
> And still, it seemed, the centre of
> The magic circle there,
> Was one whose being filled with love
> The breathless atmosphere.
>
> ("The Pine Forest of the Cascine Near Pisa")[6]

Leavis shrewdly identified the vocabulary of these lines as Wordsworthian, by contrast with the "characteristically Shelleyean attitude"[7] that took their place:

> A spirit interfused around,
> A thrilling silent life, –
> To momentary peace it bound
> Our mortal nature's strife;
> And still I felt the centre of
> The magic circle there
> Was one fair form that filled with love
> The lifeless atmosphere. (vv. 45-52)

5 See Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse,* London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, pp. 144-45.

6 Quoted from *Poetical Works,* ed. Thomas Hutchinson, new edition corrected by G.M. Matthews, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970.

7 Davies' phrase.

Shelley's changes ("thrilling" for "thinking", "form" for "being" and "lifeless" for "breathless") have, as Leavis said, the effect of supercharging these lines with eroticism. What makes them "characteristically Shelleyean" is not just eroticism but, as Leavis did not remark, the particular, ambivalent form of it – the eroticism of one lovely thing shining in darkness. This form of the erotic is inseparable from nihilism. The change from "breathless" to "lifeless" produces catastrophe. Whereas "breathless" may pass for a description of still air, "lifeless" is unmistakably fateful; it introduces the sense of phenomenality's emptiness, the death-in-life of life, which is familiar from Shelley's other late poems.

All the revisions of *The Recollection* work to intensify the poem's particular pathos of tenuous fantasy. In this way they are all eroticizing, though not in the restricted, interpersonal form that Leavis had in mind. The most interesting are the revisions of the fourth stanza, in which the reflecting pool, not mimetically exact, but fruitful of beautiful mutations, makes its appearance. The draft describes the reflection as "A purple firmament of light / Which in the dark earth lay, / More boundless than the depth of night, / And clearer than the day", while the final version not only reads "purer than the day", but more subtly changes "A purple firmament of light" to "A firmament of purple light". Pools of water on a dark ground reflect a dark sky; the phrase "purple light" carries this image toward the supernatural. The natural world is transformed out of natural possibility by the properties of the reflecting medium.

Shelley constantly evokes the bleakness of this eroticism – the extent to which the strange wonder of the erotic object throws the world's poverty into relief. But it manifests itself nowhere more clearly than in the ghastly hyperboles of *Epipsychidion:*

> Seraph of Heaven! too gentle to be human,
> Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman
> All that is insupportable in thee
> Of light, and love, and immortality!
> Sweet benediction in the eternal Curse!
> Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe!
> Thou Moon beyond the clouds! Thou living Form
> Among the Dead! Thou Star above the Storm! (vv. 21-28)

The eroticism of such a moment is a form of despair, since the celebration of Emilia expresses itself in contempt for all other available reality. Many quotable passages, which are generally discussed under the rubric

of Shelley's "search for the Ideal", might be cited here, but the conclusion to be drawn is evident. It is of very little importance whether or not the poetry celebrates a temporary incarnation of the Ideal; here the distinction between nihilism and affirmation is not profound.

The spectacle of the world's emptiness, which the panorama of perspicuous representation tends to produce, has special rhetorical attractions. Shelley's poetry often evokes its peculiar intensity. In this Shelley was following, not only Humean skepticim, but a long line of wisdom literature beginning with *Ecclesiastes*. "Lift Not the Painted Veil" both dramatizes the doomed search for what Shelley calls "love", source of "a secret correspondence with our heart"[8], and treats the seeker himself as our object of love, though unregarded and lost:

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

This scenario of disappointment is familiar from other Shelley poems. But as framed by the directive, not to lift the painted veil, it joins the tradition of wisdom literature and participates in the paradoxes of didacticism within that tradition. The poem pictures what it says we ought to be blind to, and teaches what it begins by claiming we ought not to learn. The wisdom it offers is as openly useless as that in the aphorism from *Ecclesiastes* that appears as the epigraph to Shelley's early poem *On Death:* "There is nor work nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest". Yet this uselessness in no way vitiates the rhetorical energy of the proposition. On the contrary, it becomes for this

8 See Shelley's "Essay on Love", in *Shelley's Prose, or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1954, p. 170.

reason impressive in the highest degree. This story of knowledge has at its heart the strength of severe and daimonic generalization.

From the prematurely defeatist *Alastor* through *The Triumph of Life,* Shelley chose perpetually to re-enact the skeptical discovery of the poverty of the world, recalling the trauma of this discovery to restless life. Because skeptical disappointment is vivid only as an individual experience, he kept dramatizing it in terms of tragic awakening. Leavis' influential canard, that Shelley's "characteristic pathos" is "self-regarding"[9] emerges as the unfortunate consequence of Shelley's readiness to enlist the first-person, if not himself, in this wintry drama.

Shelley regularly regretted the world's incapacity to saturate love or imagination. It is odd to think of this regret as itself erotic, but of course it is. By the same doubling that structures "Lift Not the Painted Veil", the *Alastor* poet leaves behind a world whose deadness has only been revealed by the withdrawal of his own ephemeral, illuminating presence. The final lines of the poem read:

> Art and eloquence,
> And all the shews of the world are frail and vain
> To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.
> It is a woe "too deep for tears", when all
> Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
> Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
> Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
> The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;
> But pale despair and cold tranquillity [...] (vv. 710-18)

This turn on the skeptical theme – when the disappearance of the unsaturated lover is treated as our erotic loss – helps to bring out how it is that Shelley's gloomy poems are invested with erotic pressure. There is here an eroticism-through-grimness which can be found to suffuse many Shelley poems. The identification of an erotic object – lost or yet to have – is not in itself so necessary; eroticism inheres in the freshness of skeptical disappointment.

Disappointment displaces eroticism without eradicating it. A diffused cathexis of the world, and the threat of its defeat, sustain eroticism, which can thus be born out of the generalizations of skeptical severity. What Leavis calls "erotic" in the substitution of "thrilling" for "thinking"

---

9 *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry,* London, Chatto and Windus, 1969, p. 220.

and "lifeless" for "breathless" is just as erotic in Shelley's compellingly dark generalizations and the strong, suspenseful rhythms in which they are expressed, as in these lines from *Adonais:* "He hath awakened from the dream of life – 'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep/With phantoms an unprofitable strife". The distinctive ambivalence of Shelley's poetry arises from the rhetorically contradictory character of its generalizations. This strange eroticism governs the daimonic splendor of Shelley's late poems.

Shelley knew the attractions of tragic representation well, having early in his youth written poems like *On Death* and the 1814-15 version of *Mutability:* "We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;/How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,/Streaking the darkness radiantly! – yet soon/Night closes round, and they are lost forever." These first experiments in gloom appear to seek conformity with some invisible standard of literary strength. How is it that Shelley, who in his adolescence was addicted to morbid clichés, came to write persuasive and original versions of the truth's austerity? His poetry does witness profound development of a technical order. The magnetism of a severe and daimonic style brought Shelley to the ironizing precision of *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*. Yet Shelley is romantically imagined to have followed over the course of his life an itinerary in which each phase of his thought exposed the comparative naïveté of the previous phase, and accelerated by one order of magnitude in the sublimity of its darkness. But, as we have seen, the self-transumptions of skepticism already shape the rhetorical structure of his individual poems.

Add to this that Shelley's poetry repeatedly dramatizes the debilitating incorporation of the truth – from *Alastor* to *Julian and Maddalo* to *The Triumph of Life*. His interest in this theme has even given rise to odd superstitions about the prophetic nature of his poetry. It is not uncommon for critics to describe *Alastor* or "Lift Not the Painted Veil" as the prophecy of Shelley's own destiny. But the very fact that he began in a preoccupation with the itinerary of tragic discovery makes it difficult to persist in describing the course of his career as a blind enactment of it. As the peculiar rhetorical structure of "Lift Not the Painted Veil" suggests, the changes in Shelley's poetry itself do not represent the movement from blessed ignorance to tragic knowledge. A more subtle movement within knowledge was in fact the subject of a curious fragment from 1820:

Alas! this is not what I thought life was.
I knew that there were crimes and evil men,
Misery and hate; nor did I hope to pass
Untouched by suffering, through the rugged glen,
In mine own heart I saw as in a glass
The hearts of others And when
I went among my kind, with triple brass
Of calm endurance my weak breast I armed,
To bear scorn, fear, and hate, a woful mass!
(Oxford Shelley, pp. 633-34)

The fragment breaks off just at the point of distinguishing the speaker's pre-experiential knowledge from his experiential discoveries, though it takes work to imagine what dark truth he had yet to learn. The distinction may have been difficult to tease out as a constative one, a difference in the content of knowledge. As long as dark generalization goes in search of its content, then its increasing success cannot properly be ascribed to the result of deepening knowledge. The temptation is to portray the difference between early and late Shelley as a difference in ideas, but the difference – sometimes in ideas, sometimes in style, intensity, or expertise – actually reflects a constant progress along a route determined by an autonomous literary imperative.

The odd sense of circularity of tautology in Shelley"s career – the way in which his poetry seems to have predicted its own fate, as well as Shelley's fate, and to have accomplished a trajectory toward tragedy with which it was always pregnant – reflects its obedience to a necessity within literature. Those who write about this force rationalize it by representing its bending arc as the emanation of Shelley's gradual and unforeseen disillusionment. Thus, while Judith Chernaik may write that "these last lyrics confirm the darkening of [Shelley's] spirit", his "pessimism", and the "withdrawal" of his hopes[10], or while Bloom may praise "the wisdom of disillusion" that Shelley achieved after *Epipsychidion,* and the "realistic sorrow and wisdom" to which he ascended in *The Triumph of Life*[11], they are only giving naturalizing and spiritualizing names to a literary necessity to which they respond at the same time in finding that Shelley's "disillusionment" and "darkening" brought

10 *The Lyrics of Shelley,* Cleveland, Case Western Reserve University Press, 1972, p. 177.

11 *Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry,* second edition, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1971, p. 335.

about the fulfillment of the dream of his poems. The themes of demystification and dawning undelight themselves take shape within the paradigm of the grimness of the truth. Shelley's critics follow this paradigm in perceiving his mind to have darkened, and in this way they echo his skeptical vocation.

De Man's "Shelley Disfigured" obviously does not involve itself in this picture of Shelley's deepening knowledge. But it may choose other forms in which to participate in the paradigm of the grimness of the truth. It is an odd feature of the essay that it attributes to the poem such an exact and accurate apprehension of the "linguistic predicament" that de Man himself studied to uncover. Its "negative knowledge" does not of course prevent the poem from suffering the random textual articulation it describes, since it is fractured by "the actual death and subsequent disfigurement of Shelley's body"[12]. But de Man does not argue, as he does in roughly contemporaneous essays on Wordsworth and Rousseau, that the text itself regresses from its knowledge. *The Triumph of Life* perfected an austerity which de Man recapitulates, changing the vocabulary but not the resonance of the poem's skeptical fierceness. In *The Triumph of Life,* de Man's writing found a comparable text to enlist in its own enterprise of consolidating philosophical precision and rhetorical severity.

Shelley and his friends imagined that he had fulfilled the destiny of literature at his own expense. In her note on the poems of 1822, Mary Shelley ascribes to his poetry a strange collusion with his death (an ascription that many others make, including contemporary students of Shelley):

> [...] though dreams and hues of poetry cannot blunt grief, it [poetry] invests his fate with a sublime fitness, which those less nearly allied may regard with complacency. A year before he had poured into verse all such ideas about death as give it a glory of its own. He had, as it now seems, almost anticipated his own destiny; and when the mind figures his skiff wrapped from sight by the thunderstorm, as it was last seen upon the purple sea, and then, as the cloud of the tempest passed away, no sign remained of where it had been – who but will regard as a prophecy the last stanza of *Adonais?* (Oxford Shelley, p. 679)

Despite the frisson of uncanniness lingering about this quotation, it is not the case that literature conspired in Shelley's death, but that the spectre of this uncanny possibility arose when his life conformed to the fateful

12 *The Rhetoric of Romanticism,* New York, Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 120.

arc pursued by his poetry. The "sublime fitness" of which Mary Shelley wrote, the conformation of Shelley's life to the designs of his poetry, is a variant of the "sublime fitness" occasioned by the successful self-transumption of tragic skepticism. Shelley's poetry recreated the grimness of the truth, and his life illustrates its meaning.

Zusammenfassung

Im allgemeinen sieht man Shelleys Entwicklung als einen Weg, der von jugendlichem Idealismus zu einem desillusionierten Ende führte. Sein ausgeprägter Skeptizismus trieb ihn aber von Anfang an dazu, Ideen und Stilelemente zu suchen, die das Paradigma der finsteren Wahrheit erfüllen würden. Dieses Paradigma wird noch durch seine Bevorzugung der rhetorischen Strenge unterstützt, und in dieser literarischen Finsternis wurde Shelley Meister. Wenn man das Überhandnehmen des Finsteren als ein Zeichen der wachsenden Verzweiflung interpretiert, so akzeptiert man die grausame Aufdeckung durch die Wahrheit. De Man vermeidet zwar diese psychologisierende Auffassung der finsteren Sachzwänge in seinem "Shelley Disfigured", bemüht aber trotzdem das Paradigma der finsteren Wahrheit. Die kontrollierte Strenge seines eigenen Essays verbindet sich harmonisch mit Shelleys Skeptizismus.