CHAPTER I

Introduction: text and figure

CHALLENGING ROMANTIC ICONOPHOBIA:
THE CASE OF SHELLEY

In Act II of *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley's oracular character Demogorgon responds to Asia's questions about a supreme deity by asserting with skeptical conciseness that, "A voice / Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless." A brilliant revision of Milton's account of Death and Burke's praise of that account as a model of verbal sublimity, Demogorgon's own voice emerges from the "deep" of his volcanic cave while Asia and her sister can see only a "mighty Darkness," "Ungazed upon and shapeless," a darkness possessing "neither limb / Nor form nor outline."[1] Shelley thus tempts critics into making the second half of Demogorgon's utterance a guide for interpreting not only this lyrical drama, but all of his poetry, as a skeptical attack upon both the aesthetic medium and the philosophic implications of visuality. Further, Romanticists have repeatedly invoked that phrase, "the deep truth is imageless," to characterize Romantic poetry more generally as a turning away from the "mirror" or mimesis of an objective world or its transcendent structures to the voice or music of an expressive subject.

So pervasive has been this focus upon the second half of Demogorgon's assertion that W. J. T. Mitchell quotes it to characterize what he calls the "iconophobic" or anti-visual tendency of Romanticism. Citing the repeated warnings in Wordsworth and Coleridge against "the tyranny of the eye," culminating in Wordsworth's discovery of an imagination that speaks through the unseen sound of waters on Snowdon, Mitchell enlarges M. H. Abrams' account in *The Mirror and the Lamp* with an historicist argument that these writers were turning against not only an Enlightenment aesthetics but also an Enlightenment radical politics derived from the French *philosophes*. His purpose in describing this anti-"idoliste" view of British Romanticism, however, is to qualify it by examining the composite art of Blake.[2] My purpose here is to qualify

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it still further: to argue that Shelley's writing indeed represents the expressive subject but represents its emergence into active engagement with public discourse. This engagement, I argue, draws both upon a Promethean creative imagination and upon a philosophical skepticism about all such making of visions. He accomplishes this not only through figures of elusive voice and music like those in Act II of *Prometheus* but also through experiments with the visuality of written language and with the relationships of the verbal to the visual.

For much of Shelley's poetry invokes the very iconicity that Demogorgon seems so darkly to attack. It does so both to bring into focus the idolatries created by cultural, religious, and political institutions in order to critique and revise them, and, as the freed Prometheus tells Asia in Act III, to "make / Strange combinations out of common things," so that they become "The wandering voices and the shadows . . . Of all that man becomes" (III.31–2, 57–8). However shadowy in the present, these new images of what humanity might aspire to become are figures, shapes, forms, images created by Prometheus as demiurge. Furthermore, we might read Demogorgon's "deep truth," itself represented by the visibly dark, possibly volcanic lair into which Asia and her sister Panthea have descended as a place inhabited, like Prometheus' cave in Act III, with the unformed, unarticulated potential of the human mind. Capable of generating figures, forms, and images, that mind is also capable of forgetting that such images, such ideals, even of creators, are themselves created – and that "all deities reside in the human breast," as Blake provocatively says in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.[3] If the "deep truth" of the mind's originating reservoirs remains a dark but fiery abyss, we should read Demogorgon's ambiguous volcanic metaphor, "If the Abysm could vomit forth its secrets" (II.iv.115), not as an absolute denial of such a vomiting of "sparks" or "coals," not as a denial of the witnessing power of visual images, but as a denial of their claims to an absolute, transcendent authority or transparent transmission of truth that would deny human creativity and agency. If cleared of false idols through a critical skepticism, as Demogorgon urges, that mind is ready to generate redemptive images. Such a cave or abyss may represent an individual mind in the process of articulating and communicating its consciousness – the "mind in creation" as a "burning coal" – or it may represent a collective, infinite potential of mind, as Shelley suggests in "On Life."[4]

Moreover, not only *Prometheus Unbound*, but all of Shelley's poetry, emerges from a mind unknown to us onto the material page in ways that seize upon and then thematize the graphic and material processes of

writing. For even if the "deep truth" underlying representation may be "imageless," Shelley's processes of composing his poetry are richly visual. The genesis of his published poems in draft notebooks shows repeated play with visual sketches and other graphic, material gestures, scripted words often punctuated or interwoven with visual sketches, texts often revised to incorporate their own sometimes resistant materiality into their themes and then reproduced as figures and themes in a printed text. Medieval manuscript copyists and Blake after them designed "iconic" pages on which visual image and visually perceived script work together to create a total effect carrying semiotic and aesthetic significance. Though Shelley does not work to produce such an iconic page as a final state of his artistic production, his generation of poetic verbal texts through the matrix of a provisionally, sometimes even accidentally, iconic page leaves traces, I will argue, on the verbal images and themes of the completed poem. Moreover, this process, as in Blake's illuminated pages, evokes and then challenges a further meaning of "icon" based upon the Christian theology of the incarnation and the human as an image of the divine: the icon as a religious painting representing a holy person and itself venerated as a holy object. Critics of such veneration, from Byzantine iconoclasts on, argued that such icons tended toward idolatry – and this debate, running in revised form through Catholic–Protestant polemic from the Reformation on, also influences, as Mitchell suggests, English attitudes toward French culture even when that culture is itself temporarily anti-Catholic. Modern debates over the meaning of the term "icon" – or how icons convey meaning – run from C. S. Peirce's distinction of the icon from the symbol and the index through Nelson Goodman's skeptical, nominalist critique of Peirce to Mitchell's wide-ranging analysis in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* and beyond.[5]

A number of Shelley's poems also test this ambiguous iconicity through verbal figuration of the visual, especially through figures of allegorical personification such as "Liberty" or "Hope" or "Famine" or "Death." More explicitly and more centrally than *Prometheus Unbound*, with its allusion to Milton's figure of Death, these other poems dramatize the borderline not only between text and image, but also between concept and its temporary incarnation in human figure.[6] Such eerily insubordinate figures exert a visualizable, energetic,[7] quasi-human agency within his drafting processes. Once deputized, they become central figures in the completed poem, where they enact both psychological and cultural conflicts. As Stephen Knapp shows, the ambiguous status of such figures, manifesting human, divine, or merely verbal energy, provoked uneasy

responses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Milton's portrayal of "Death," that "shape which shape had none," serves as a primary example of this provocative instability.[8] Writing to Elizabeth Hitchener in 1811, Shelley exploits the uneasiness that Knapp describes with a calculatedly outrageous iconoclasm: "Imagination delights in personification. Were it not for this embodying quality of eccentric fancy we should be to this day without a God."[9] Yet in spite of his disparaging attitude toward such "eccentric fancy," Shelley repeatedly dramatizes imagination's delight, employing "this embodying quality" not only to set up iconoclastic critiques of religion, but also to embody a more positive potential for figure and for creating mind. For him, the ambiguity of these borderline figures poised at the intersection of living person, visual image, and verbal concept allows intellectual and artistic creativity. Semi-autonomous delegates, Promethean sub-agents of the poet's, and hence of society's, creative power to construct deities, they are also subject to the recurrent, critical recognition that they are constructed agents and hence subject to imaginative renovation by an individual and by a community.

A close study of the interplay between these two elements – the material processes of the poet's drafting of words and visual sketches onto the page and the delegated agencies of personified concepts in those written texts – suggests that Shelley's Promethean imagination is not simply a process of continuous transference, as Jerrold Hogle argues.[10] Instead, both in its generative stages and in the final, completed works, it reveals a process of shifting hypostases, repeated icon-forming, and then critical revision of them. Moreover, just as Shelley reads and revises his own drafts as archives for the individual mind's struggle to find a public arena or stage for testing its yet-potential ideals, the allegorical personifications emerge as dramatically individual and yet, as they develop their careers, so to speak, they, too, test the boundaries of the individual mind. Whether positing a split in self or consciousness resembling a Blakean fall into division or figuring collective action or beliefs, these personifications are sometimes dangerously misleading and sometimes redemptive.

To evaluate these sequential experiments with personification allegory, two synchronic and formal perspectives guide my work. First, I include not only poems in which allegorical personification is the central organizing device, but also several that, like *Queen Mab*, employ the figure more indirectly – yet in ways that illuminate both personification and poem. Second, I ask to what extent the personification acts as a private or a public figure, whether it works as an "epipsyche" or projection from an individual subject, or as a public icon or an idol in Francis Bacon's sense,

a more collective projection. Shelley often connects these public icons to the civic progress or triumphal procession. The poems which Shelley organizes through a central personification are (in chronological order) "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," *The Mask of Anarchy*, *Ode to Liberty*, and *The Triumph of Life*.[11] He also experiments with personification in a cluster of "popular songs," which I will consider very briefly. The poems in which personifications do not determine the structure but are significant elements in the rhetoric of characters or narrators are, in addition to *Queen Mab*, *Laon and Cythna* and its revised version, *The Revolt of Islam*, *Epipsychidion*, and *Adonais*. From his earliest works to his final, incomplete poem, it is clear that Shelley moves back and forth between these two ways of deploying such figures, adding depth and complexity as he goes on.

This second synchronic scheme works most effectively not to describe entire poems but to establish an heuristic starting-point for analyzing the shifting function of personifications within individual poems. The first motif, the "epipsyche" or "soul out of the soul," enacts a subjective, individual process of projection or reabsorption that questions the borders between one self and another. This motif pervades Shelley's poetry. Most central to *Epipsychidion*, it is also helpful for understanding *Queen Mab*, the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," *Laon and Cythna*, *Adonais*, and the final section of *The Triumph of Life*. The second motif, the triumph, enacts a public, communal *tableau vivant* or "progress" that may be positive, as in Laon and Cythna's victory celebration, or negative, as in *The Mask of Anarchy* or *The Triumph of Life*. Further, both epipsyche and triumph share an emergent, temporally processual dynamic.

Before considering further the cultural and political history of tableau and triumph, let me turn first to two theoretical approaches, less explicitly historical, that also inform my argument about visual text and figure. Although these approaches seem opposed to one another, one grows out of the other – and they both influence historicist and cultural-studies approaches. The "linguistic turn" is Richard Rorty's compelling characterization of post-Saussurean, linguistically based philosophy and criticism that leads both to skeptical deconstruction and to semiotic analyses of visual art in linguistically based terms. Following and responding to this stage, W. J. T. Mitchell proposes, is a late twentieth-century "pictorial turn" in western culture high and low – a turn toward graphic images influenced both by semiotic theories of common ground between literature and the visual arts, and by the technologies of film, television, and now the computer.[12]

For interpreting Shelley, literary criticism emerging from the twentieth-century "linguistic turn" has proved highly productive, not only because of the subtle analytics of its practitioners, but also because of Shelley's own skepticism. Paving the way for these deconstructionist interpretations of Shelley, Kenneth Neill Cameron and C. E. Pulos challenged transcendentalist, Platonic interpretations of the poet by tracing his readings in late eighteenth-century skepticism.[13] Because the "linguistic turn" of the deconstructionists includes a turn away from symbol, metaphor, and other logocentric renderings of presence, it is one particularly well suited to Shelley's skeptical attacks upon monumental cultural idols. By challenging the unity of the Coleridgean symbol and advocating instead a reading of allegory as a microcosm of Saussurean language, an ungrounded, unmotivated, anti-metaphysical mode, Paul de Man's version of the deconstructionists' "linguistic turn" has stimulated re-readings of allegory and of personification, the latter dismissed so firmly by Wordsworth, across all Romantic writing. His essay "Shelley Disfigured," in the 1979 collection of essays *Deconstruction and Criticism*, has proved extremely influential in focusing this "linguistic turn" upon Shelley.[14] Yet my analysis of Shelley's writing will argue for a more limited skepticism that defends its communicative agency.

Several critics have explored such limits. One group, extending the work of Cameron and Pulos, re-examines the influence of Sir William Drummond upon Shelley's skepticism, linking it to a revised, politically liberal Lucretian philosophy that speculatively infers but refuses any dogmatic knowledge claims for some unknowable power as the source of our empirical perceptions. Terence Hoagwood argues that Shelley, following Drummond, does not deny the existence of external objects – they exist as we perceive them but we cannot affirm or deny their absolute independent existence.[15] Responding both to Hogle and to Hoagwood, Hugh Roberts and Michael Vicario have placed Shelley within the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revival of interest in Lucretius and his transmission of Epicurean skepticism. Both argue, if with somewhat different emphases, that the version of Lucretius transmitted by translators and by Drummond offered a model both for a skepticism based upon the ceaseless swerves of atoms and for a form of idealism grounded in the indifferent, unknowable power behind sense perceptions.[16] Roberts argues that Shelley oscillates between these two possibilities in Lucretius' thought, the idealism reinforced by the poet's interest in a post-Kantian organic vitalism (452 fols.). Vicario sees a more consistent and stable balance strongly influenced by the

"intellectual system" of seventeenth-century skeptical Platonists. This balance, he argues, permits agency as it steers between two determinisms – the first that of a complete materialism and the second of a dogmatic dualism presided over by an intervening deity (Vicario, *Shelley's Intellectual System*, 18–19).

In her introduction to *Solitude and the Sublime*, Frances Ferguson challenges the linguistic form of skepticism advanced by de Man. Although she does not discuss Shelley directly, her concerns about agency and her questioning of de Man's theory of a linguistic materialism bear directly on both strands of my argument here: the materiality of Shelley's compositional processes and the embodiment of concepts in human-like figures. "The de Manian textual turn," she writes, "insists that language disarticulates bodies – prevents individual humans from being able to present their thoughts as the inner contents of their bodies to others in apprehensible form – because language has a body of its own" and that body, "like material objects, has a perceptibility and opacity of its own that continually exceeds its representative function."[17] Thus "the deconstructive portrayal of language," by generalizing from literary uses of language, "has seemed to make it impossible to sustain traditional accounts of an author who has responsibility for the meaning of a literary work" (15). Running through her critique of de Man's position and its denial of agency is a language that points toward Shelley's play with the partially opaque and resistant materiality of his textual processes, his reflexive development of ink blots, paper flaws, and visual sketches, into figurative language for his poetic drafts. It also points to his experiments with allegorical personification, the embodying of a concept as a person, an embodiment that paradoxically takes on a sort of resistant sub-agency even while, as deconstructive theory would point out, it possesses only a fictional living presence or logos. In both cases, I will argue, we can read Shelley's drafts not to deny the author's intentional agency before a determining, or rather, resistantly indeterminate, materiality of language, but to affirm it, or to affirm, at least, sequences of changing and redetermining meaning through changes on the material, marked page that reflect the author's productive encounter with the resistances of language, of literary conventions, and of social meanings.

Although Ferguson does not mention allegorical personification specifically, she does cite Stephen Knapp's analyses of that figure and readers' fears about its oscillating agency. In *Reinventing Allegory*, Theresa M. Kelley continues Knapp's exploration of the "linguistic turn" by

focusing upon the gap or slippage in allegory between its conceptual significance and the "other," concrete embodiment of that significance. As she focuses upon the unruly materiality or visuality of the concrete "other," however, she also moves beyond Knapp to include elements of Mitchell's "visual turn" as well.[18] Mitchell's own contribution to the "pictorial turn" has been both formal and historical, from his early studies of Blake's "composite" visual and verbal art through his historical, ideological, and formal analyses of *ut pictura poesis* debates in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, to the essays in *Picture Theory* which both synthesize and advance debates over how visual art signifies.[19]

At almost the same moment, the two-hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution accelerated the attention of cultural historians upon the political semiotics of that era. James Epstein, Madelyn Gutwirth, James Heffernan, Marie-Hélène Huet, Lynn Hunt, Joan Landes, and Mona Ozouf[20] have re-examined its propaganda, its festivals, and British responses, both anti-Jacobin propaganda to sustain its own nationalism, and liberal and radical attempts to redefine that nationalism. Although Shelley himself was too young to have witnessed directly the expression of the "idoliste" French Enlightenment in the revolutionary semiotics of the "jacobin imaginary" created by Robespierre, Jacques-Louis David, and others, like many liberals and radicals of the Napoleonic and post-Waterloo era, he turned back to that earlier era to re-examine both its ideals and its visual and verbal semiotics.

A year after the appearance of *Picture Theory*, William Galperin's *Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* acknowledged an "iconophobia" in Romantic poetry and in critical accounts of it similar to the one Mitchell had described. Proposing a post-structuralist model that integrates linguistic and pictorial turns, however, Galperin's study describes several technologies of the visual in London during the Revolutionary era, analyzing how panoramas, dioramas, and the theaters of London led to the public construction of a viewing subject destabilized among these multiple perspectives.[21] Gillen D'Arcy Wood's *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760–1860* explores the dislocating effect of popular, commercial visual culture upon the construction of a Romantic ideology; in a more positive interpretation of London's visual culture, Christopher Rovee's *Imagining the Gallery: The Social Body of British Romanticism* argues that such public visual spaces as Boydell's Shakespeare and Milton Galleries, the Royal Academy, and the display of the Elgin marbles construct a national subjectivity which overrides inherited rank. Luisa Calé's study *Fuseli's Milton Gallery: 'Turning Readers into Spectators'*

also analyzes the construction of a nationalist identity, through a pride in British poetry that raises the status of British painting. She emphasizes, however, the political tensions between the establishment Royal Academy and the dissenting, liberal politics of the commercial galleries.[22] In the war years, graphic satire displayed in shop windows and state-sponsored public sculptures of civic and military heroes are also intended to generate a mass, collective subjectivity, the imagined sense of a nation. Even articles of clothing such as cockades or the red Liberty cap, as Epstein notes, offer symbolic, if frequently contested, visual images of nationhood.[23]

As both Rovee and Calé point out, classical and neo-classical sculpture formed an important element in the visual fabric of urban experience for Romantic writers. From the Alexandrian era on, moreover, the deities so often represented in classical sculpture had been interpreted as allegorical personifications; I'll return to this point later. The arrival of the Elgin marbles from the Parthenon generated a complex debate, traced in its many ironies by Grant Scott, among artists, collectors of antiquities, and – as Rovee also points out – writers.[24] Mary Shelley's journal for early 1818 reports several visits to the marbles, as well as other gallery visits, but her absence of pronouns leaves unclear whether Percy also went with her.[25] If he did see them, however, he did not become a partisan. Under Peacock's influence, his interest in Greek sculpture had grown along with his passionate commitment to the values of Hellenic culture. The sculptural style he admired, however, was not the rough muscularity of the Elgin marbles but the smooth continuities of what Shelley, along with establishment connoisseurs, believed to be Praxitelean and which we now know are Hellenistic copies. That sculpture, he hoped, would point toward the central form of a unifying spirit of the age of Pericles, a spirit, as Winckelmann argued, expressing and supportive of Greek liberty.[26] As he was drafting *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley and Mary ordered and installed in his study at Marlow plaster casts of the Belvedere Apollo and the Medici Venus, two exemplars of that softer, more fluid "Praxitelean" style.[27]

TEXTUAL THEORIES: GRAPHIC ORIGINS, GRAPHIC OBJECTS

Both the earlier linguistic turn and the more recent visual turn described by Mitchell shape textual theories that underlie my argument for interpreting Shelley's manuscript notebooks. One sub-field of this revised discipline of textual studies examines the origin of the literary "work" and its diachronic development through sequential, or sometimes forking,

developments of the verbal text. Another sub-field examines the material conditions or modes of production through which the work reaches its audience. Both of these approaches analyze visual or iconic elements as well as words.[28]

Shelley famously writes in the *Defence*, "The mind in creation is as a fading coal … which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness … Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results: but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline" (*SPP* 2, 531). Yet if this idealist claim for a pre-existent work of art describes the actual materializing of the work as a fall or loss,[29] his draft notebooks retain an astonishing archive of material evidence for a fanning of these coals into new flame as Shelley's original, often fragmentary, drafts metamorphose into later ones, into fair copies, and into printed form. How might these drafts be understood both as meaningful in themselves and as hermeneutic guides to the completed version? Because so many changes develop in this process of composition and revision, and because Shelley dies so unexpectedly, even establishing a verbal text for an edition has proved challenging to his editors from Mary Godwin Shelley on.[30] Beyond the issue of choosing a specific best text for an edition, how might the critic use this draft archive to interpret the published text or the most complete manuscript text?

As post-structuralist theory developed critiques of an autonomous human subject, textual theorists have also developed critiques of a unified, stable work reflecting the author's original intention or his "final intention" – the last state of the work supervised by the author. One response to these challenges is, as Hans Zeller proposed, to accept different "versions" of a work, each with claims to some intermediate intention, or at least some intermediate coherence – for example, to include not only Wordsworth's 1850 *Prelude* but also the 1805 version and even the 1799 two-part version in Wordsworth's canon.[31] Another response is to include all textual drafts as well as versions as a part of the work, claiming equal status with a published or otherwise final version. In *The Textual Condition*, Jerome McGann defines the work as the shifting sequence or totality of all the textual states or versions (9). Yet this provocative formulation must be used cautiously for at least two reasons: first, it can disrupt the aesthetic response of reading a single version at a time. Second, it also tends to blur the difference between an early and a later draft, or later drafts and a published or "released" version supervised by the author and which represents the author's "final intention."[32] Although Tilottama