

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11183-6 - Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime
 Cian Duffy
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction: Approaching the 'Shelleyan sublime'

It has become something of a commonplace to begin a study of Percy Shelley by noting the extraordinary fluctuation in his posthumous standing, personal no less than literary. In the years since his death, critics and commentators have given us a range of different Shelleys. It is fair to say that many of these portraits are radically misconceived, and often patronisingly reductive. From the nineteenth century, we inherit the Satanic Shelley, Shelley the 'lunatic angel', Shelley the 'beautiful and ineffectual angel', Shelley 'the eternal child'.¹ And while such ad hominem accounts were largely abandoned in the early twentieth century, critical appraisal of Shelley's work frequently remained condemnatory and dismissive. The New Critics and their followers gave us the vague and incomprehensible Shelley, the philosophically confused Shelley, the politically naive Shelley. More recent criticism has effectively refuted these charges, and Shelley's epistemological and political maturity is no longer in any serious doubt.² But one important aspect of his work has yet to benefit from this critical renaissance. Shelley's engagement with the 'discourse on the sublime' remains relatively unexplored and largely misunderstood, and this despite 'all those glaciers and winds and volcanoes' that Paul Foot and others have noted in his 'great revolutionary poetry'.³ This book explores the relationship between the sublime and the revolutionary in Shelley's work.

Critical investigation of Shelley's interest in the natural sublime has laboured under persistent misconceptions about the development of his thought – and, indeed, about the nature of the 'romantic sublime' *per se*.⁴ These misconceptions can best be illustrated by reference to the only full-length study of the subject to date, Angela Leighton's *Shelley and the Sublime*.⁵ Leighton reads Shelley's career as a 'shift' 'from reliance on empirical arguments, which support his radicalism and atheism, to an interest in the sublime, as a theory and language of creativity which is congenial to his own imaginative temperament'.⁶ There are a number of

significant problems with this reading, not the least of which is the extent to which it echoes New Critical claims that Shelley ‘progressively’ abandoned his early radicalism and atheism in favour of an ‘aesthetic . . . of inspiration or vision’.⁷ Leighton does not actually go so far as to repeat this claim; she accepts that Shelley remained ‘an atheist and a radical throughout his life’.⁸ However, she does locate Shelley’s interest in the natural sublime within a perceived ‘shift in emphasis in [his] thinking’: a supposed movement towards an ‘imaginative temperament’ that ‘consistently’ conflicts with his empirically grounded politics.⁹ There is thus, according to Leighton, a sustained ontological ‘tension’ between Shelley’s radical politics and his ‘imaginative’ interest in the natural sublime.¹⁰ And this formulation has been largely retained by the two most recent accounts of the subject: Paul Endo’s articles on *Mont Blanc* (1816) and *The Cenci* (1819), both of which similarly locate the ‘Shelleyan sublime’ within a perceived ‘shift’ towards an increasingly apolitical philosophical idealism.¹¹

The problem with this reading is the fact that it wholly elides the obvious political overtones of Shelley’s engagement with the discourse on the natural sublime. Put simply, by identifying the ‘Shelleyan sublime’ as an idealising and largely apolitical discourse, Leighton and Endo either blindly or wilfully fail to acknowledge – still less to explain or to account for – the recurrent appearance of ‘glaciers, and winds, and volcanoes’ in Shelley’s ‘great revolutionary poetry’.

This failure stems in no small measure from the fact that both Leighton and Endo assume the existence of a generic British ‘romantic’ discourse on the sublime that is both uncomplicatedly idealising and largely apolitical, an assumption that has long governed critical engagements with the subject. To put it more precisely, it seems to me that their accounts of the ‘Shelleyan sublime’ amply reflect what Peter De Bolla has identified as the persistent ‘misreading and misunderstanding’ of the British discourse on the sublime.¹²

In both *The Discourse of the Sublime* and his later *Reader*, co-edited with Andrew Ashfield, De Bolla has shown how scholarly descriptions of the eighteenth-century British discourse on the sublime have been persistently distorted by a tendency to read that discourse, without any sensitivity to historical context, through the transcendental-idealist paradigms set out in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790).¹³ ‘Kant’s critical philosophy’, De Bolla concludes, ‘has become sublimated within our perceptions of the sublime’.¹⁴ Ashfield and De Bolla correctly trace this tendency to Samuel Holt Monk’s highly influential 1935 study *The Sublime*, the first study to argue ‘with some scholarly authority’ that eighteenth-century

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11183-6 - Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime

Cian Duffy

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Approaching the 'Shelleyan sublime'*

3

British speculation about the sublime ought to be read as an 'inexorable movement' towards the paradigms of the third *Critique*.¹⁵ De Bolla's work seeks to replace Monk's distorting, Kantian perspective on British aesthetics with an 'historical account' of the role of the sublime in British cultural development during the eighteenth century.¹⁶ While he and Ashfield allow that Monk's narrative provides a 'general trajectory' for that role, it is clear that the widespread acceptance of this trajectory has not only sidelined texts which fall outside the epistemological scope of Monk's teleology, but has also led to a situation whereby commentators routinely read and assess pre-Kantian texts in broadly Kantian terms.¹⁷

My re-appraisal of the 'Shelleyan sublime' here takes a hint from De Bolla's consequent insistence upon the need to re-historicise the eighteenth-century British discourse on the sublime, to untie the Gordian knot that has for so long inextricably bound British speculation about the sublime up with the Kantian analytic. Indeed, although De Bolla's work is concerned only with the eighteenth-century British discourse on the sublime, it would be difficult to overstate its importance for our understanding of the 'romantic sublime', although that importance has yet to be elaborated, and has not been developed by De Bolla himself. The key factor here is De Bolla's emphasis on the extent to which Kant's philosophical paradigms have come to dominate scholarly descriptions of the British discourse on the sublime, on what he calls the 'widely unexamined Kantian appropriation of sublimity'.¹⁸ Once again, Ashfield and De Bolla's concern is that this appropriation has led to a situation whereby pre-Kantian texts are routinely read and assessed in Kantian terms. But, by extension, it seems to me that the widespread acceptance of Monk's thesis has also created an unexamined consensus amongst students of British Romanticism that the British 'romantic' discourse on the sublime – as the culmination of the eighteenth-century tradition – effectively *coincides* with the transcendental-idealist paradigms of the *Critique of Judgement*. That consensus will be subject to scrutiny throughout the following pages.

The dominance of Kantian paradigms over scholarly descriptions of the 'romantic sublime' began with Thomas Weiskel's seminal *Romantic Sublime*, which, drawing explicitly on Monk, describes a generic 'romantic sublime' in post-Kantian, Freudian terminology. 'Monk found in the *Critique of Judgement* "the unconscious goal" of eighteenth-century aesthetic', Weiskel asserts, 'and we can easily discern in Kant the unconscious origins or radical forms of nineteenth-century speculation'.¹⁹ Weiskel's formerly influential study is now seldom invoked directly, mainly because of its heavy reliance upon psychoanalytical terminology. But Weiskel's

concept of a 'romantic sublime' that coincides with the paradigms of the third *Critique* has effectively been enshrined as an orthodoxy of romantic-period criticism. Neil Hertz's *End of the Line*, for example, takes exclusively Freudian and Kantian paradigms for its enquiry into 'the literature of the sublime'.²⁰ Indeed, even De Bolla accepts a distinction between the eighteenth-century discourse on the sublime and the 'romantic sublime', which he sees as 'less a variant of the eighteenth-century enquiry than a completely distinct discourse which borrows many terms from it'.²¹

Once again, it is important to remember that De Bolla's work is not intended to challenge Weiskel's Kantian–Freudian topography of the 'romantic sublime'; rather, it critiques the tendency to reduce eighteenth-century British speculation about the sublime to a 'pre-text' for that topography.²² And yet, more than a decade after De Bolla first identified the need for re-historicising the eighteenth-century British discourse on the sublime, Weiskel's Kantian topography of the 'romantic sublime' remains largely unchallenged. Frances Ferguson's work on the sublime, for example – and I am thinking of her studies of Edmund Burke in particular – marked a crucial move towards recovering an historical and political context for the eighteenth-century discourse.²³ However, her otherwise highly perceptive readings in *Solitude and the Sublime* still take 'Burke and Kant as virtually the exclusive exemplars of the eighteenth-century and Romantic discussion of the philosophical issues' surrounding the discourse on the sublime.²⁴ 'Briefly stated', Ferguson writes, 'the view of this book is that the aesthetics of the sublime, as staked out principally by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant at the end of the eighteenth century, resolves itself into two basic positions – empiricism and idealism'.²⁵ Her aim is 'to represent' what she tellingly identifies as 'the claims of *Romantic and specifically Kantian idealism* in current critical debates'.²⁶

Let me not be misunderstood here: I have no wish to slight the contribution of these critics to our understanding of the literature of the sublime. However, I am pointing towards the need to challenge the pervasive 'Kantian appropriation' of the 'romantic sublime' that their work both exemplifies and perpetuates – to challenge indeed the very notion of a generic 'romantic sublime' that does not develop out of its eighteenth-century predecessor – and I want to identify this book as part of such a project. Hence, while first and foremost a book about Shelley, my exploration of the relationship between the sublime and the revolutionary in Shelley's work is also concerned to test the limits of the 'romantic sublime'.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11183-6 - Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime

Cian Duffy

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Approaching the 'Shelleyan sublime'*

5

We can now return to that exploration by re-stating the claim with which this survey of critical engagements with the discourse on the sublime began: namely, that the standard account of the 'Shelleyan sublime' is premised upon mistaken notions about the British Romantic discourse on the natural sublime *per se*. We are now in a position to refine that claim considerably. The standard approach to the 'Shelleyan sublime' is premised upon a critical orthodoxy which assumes not only that there is such a thing as a generic 'romantic sublime', but also that this 'sublime' rehearses the transcendentalist paradigms of the *Critique of Judgement*. Ferguson's 1984 article on *Mont Blanc*, for example, is guided by the assumption that Shelley, like Kant, 'identifies the sublime as the aesthetic operation through which one makes an implicit argument for the transcendent existence of man', that '*Mont Blanc* discovers the same assertion of human power that Kant did'.²⁷ Leighton similarly bases her readings on the paradigms of the third *Critique*, which she – following Monk and Weiskel – identifies as 'Kant's comprehensive systematisation of the eighteenth-century sublime'.²⁸ Paul Endo's work, too, follows suit: 'the sublime can be read', he affirms, 'following the model of Kant's mathematical sublime, as a *negative* comprehension, as the *indeterminate* conception of a magnitude'.²⁹

I am suggesting, then, that the standard account of the 'Shelleyan sublime' not only bears out De Bolla's claim that 'Kant's critical philosophy has become sublimated within our perceptions of the sublime', but amply vindicates his consequent insistence upon the need to re-historicise the British discourse. After all, while both Leighton and Endo confidently assume Kantian paradigms for their readings of the 'Shelleyan sublime', neither makes the slightest effort to demonstrate Shelley's access to those paradigms. Indeed, such an effort would be unlikely to succeed. As early as 1931, René Wellek felt that 'there is no evidence for any real acquaintance of Shelley with Kant's philosophy', and no substantial evidence has since emerged to contradict his claim.³⁰ Hence, by following orthodox notions about the 'romantic sublime' and basing their enquiries upon largely irrelevant Kantian paradigms, Leighton and Endo effectively ignore the actual discourse on the natural sublime available to Shelley in the early nineteenth century: a British discourse that had become heavily politicised in the wake of the French Revolution. In short, their idealising accounts of the 'Shelleyan sublime' are premised less upon attention to Shelley's texts and their historical contexts than upon what I have identified as received (and mistaken) twentieth-century notions about the 'romantic sublime'. It is hardly surprising, then, that these critics elide the historical and political dimensions of Shelley's engagement with the discourse on the natural

sublime. After all, as Ashfield and De Bolla put it, ‘the aesthetic, at least since Kant, has been understood as without political or ethical motivation since its *affective* registers are, according to the Kantian model, disinterested’.³¹

As I have already suggested, however, the standard critical approach to the ‘Shelleyan sublime’ is not only premised upon mistaken notions about the ‘romantic sublime’. Rather, it is also intimately bound up with a misreading of Shelley’s own philosophical thought: namely, the claim that he ‘moves progressively’ from a radical empiricism to an increasingly apolitical idealism.³² Nor indeed is this claim particularly new: critics have long read *Mont Blanc* – in despite of its ostensible subject matter – less as a statement about the natural sublime *per se* than as an ‘ambiguous’ philosophical manifesto, a ‘great transitional poem’ supposedly recording Shelley’s movement from empiricism to idealism.³³ Hence, again, Ferguson’s claim that *Mont Blanc* argues for the ‘transcendent existence of man’ and ‘discovers the same assertion of human power that Kant did’. I challenge this account of Shelley’s best-known statement about the natural sublime in chapter 3, where I re-contextualise *Mont Blanc* in relation to the complex, early nineteenth-century discourse on the alpine sublime. For now, however, it is sufficient to recognise that while Leighton’s deconstructive agenda certainly questions the *ease* of the transition described by Kapstein and his followers, her reading unquestioningly retains their basic assumption about Shelley’s philosophical development.

As long ago as 1962, however, serious questions were asked about the accuracy of that assumption. In his seminal account of ‘Shelley’s poetic skepticism’, Pulos argues persuasively that Shelley’s exposure to sceptical philosophy was ‘largely responsible for those modifications in his thought which critics have long recognised as distinguishing the mature from the young Shelley’.³⁴ ‘Due attention to Shelley’s scepticism’, Pulos suggests, ‘disposes not only of the alleged inconsistency between [Shelley’s] idealism and necessarianism, but also of his alleged pseudo-Platonism’.³⁵ ‘There is not the slightest evidence’, he notes, ‘that Berkeley had any significant influence on Shelley’s rejection of materialism’.³⁶ Hence, according to Pulos, Shelley’s philosophical career needs to be read not as a movement towards an apolitical idealism, but rather as an attempt to *re-ground* his politics in terms of a sceptical epistemology derived from David Hume and William Drummond. ‘Shelley’s scepticism is important’, Pulos concludes, ‘because it provides us with a possible clue to the unity of his thought in all its variety’.³⁷

Approaching the 'Shelleyan sublime'

7

This book bears out Pulos' claims. I argue that the connection between the sublime and the revolutionary in Shelley's work is the product of a lifelong, sceptical engagement with the eighteenth-century British discourse on the natural sublime. More precisely, I argue that Shelley was concerned to revise the standard, pious or theistic configuration of that discourse along secular and politically progressive lines, and that epistemological scepticism was central to the attempt. By the time that Shelley completed his first major poem – *Queen Mab*, in 1813 – the idea that natural grandeur was evidence, by design, for the existence of a creator-God had long been a commonplace of the discourse on the sublime in Britain.³⁸ In the second of his 'long and philosophical' Notes to the poem, Shelley makes a claim about the natural sublime that explicitly contradicts this commonplace (*Letters*, i, p. 354). 'The plurality of worlds', he writes, 'the indefinite immensity of the universe is a most awful subject of contemplation. He who rightly feels its mystery and grandeur, is in no danger of seduction from the falsehoods of religious systems, or of deifying the principle of the universe' (*Poems*, i, p. 360).³⁹ The passage reveals two things. First, Shelley's awareness that the 'contemplation' of the 'mystery' and 'grandeur' of the 'awful' in nature *has* led, or at least *can* lead to the repressive 'falsehoods of religious systems'. Second, his conviction that this 'deifying' response to the natural sublime is an error, an error arising specifically from the failure to 'rightly' feel the 'mystery' of natural 'grandeur'. In sum, then, the passage reveals Shelley's dissatisfaction with the pious configuration of the British discourse on the natural sublime, and implies a concern on his part to re-write that discourse along secular, libertarian lines, and away from a belief in the creator-God whom *Queen Mab* denigrates as the legitimating 'prototype of human misrule' (*Queen Mab*, vi, 105). That concern is the object of my enquiry here.

The major focal point of Shelley's engagement with the eighteenth-century British discourse on the sublime was, of course, the imagination, long acknowledged as the agency of the mind's response to natural 'grandeur'.⁴⁰ By the time that Shelley wrote *Queen Mab*, there were any number of conflicting models of the faculty available: indeed, it is fair to say that from Addison right up to Dugald Stewart's 1810 *Philosophical Essays*, the imagination was a major pre-occupation of British philosophy.⁴¹ Nor indeed was this pre-occupation merely a matter of epistemology. In the wake of the French Revolution, conservative theorists like Burke linked the faculty directly with the impetus to violent revolution, with the dangerously excessive sensibilities of Rousseau and the 'frenzy' of his supposed Jacobin 'scholars'.⁴² However, the imagination had also long been

suspected by the rational-empiricist tradition deriving from Hobbes and Locke, and Shelley's radical forebears – the *philosophes* and *idéologues*, Paine, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin – similarly linked the faculty to primitivism and political reaction. The key concept here is 'enthusiasm'. 'Enthusiasm' as a source of revolution or 'enthusiasm' as a source of reaction: chapters 1 and 2 show that Shelley's early exploration of the imaginative response to the natural sublime treads a thin – and often blurred – line between these conflicting accounts of the faculty.⁴³

The pious or theistic configuration of the eighteenth-century British discourse on the natural sublime prioritises the imagination as the only faculty capable of intuiting the divine presence supposedly immanent in 'awful' natural phenomena. In his Notes to *Queen Mab*, Shelley confidently marshals materialist arguments – drawn principally from Baron d'Holbach's 1770 *Système de la Nature* – against this 'vulgar', *enthusiastic* 'mistake', the product of fear and ignorance of nature (*Poems*, i, p. 379). However, as I show in chapter 1, his little-discussed early letters and poems reveal a rather more ambiguous attitude to the rival claims – and, in particular, to the rival *political* affiliations – of the rational / scientific and the imaginative / enthusiastic responses to the natural sublime. This ambiguity is the source of Angela Leighton's rational–politics versus imaginative–aesthetics schema, but she fails to recognise both the complexity of the problem faced by Shelley and the extent to which he works through this early hurdle.⁴⁴ After all, *Queen Mab*'s claim that it is possible to 'rightly' *feel* the 'mystery' of natural 'grandeur' argues for an imaginative response to the natural sublime that *accords* with the rational, scientific understanding of 'awful' natural phenomena: an accordance that reflects the poem's utopian insistence that 'Reason and passion' should 'cease to combat' (*Queen Mab*, viii, 231).

In point of fact, this claim marks the beginning of Shelley's redemption of the imagination from decades of philosophical and political distrust within the radical and empirical traditions. As I show in chapter 2, vital epistemological support for that redemption would later come from the sceptical philosophy of David Hume, mediated – at least in part – through Sir William Drummond's *Academical Questions* (1805).⁴⁵ But Shelley's early confidence in the imagination also came from his own re-theorisation of the faculty, albeit a re-theorisation owing much – as argued in chapter 1 – to one of the (then) most famous of the *idéologue* writings: Constantin Volney's *Les Ruines, ou, Méditations sur les Révolutions des Empires* (1791). The imagination that *Mab* claims can 'rightly' feel the 'mystery' of natural 'grandeur' is not the primitive, reactionary imagination critiqued by

Approaching the 'Shelleyan sublime'

9

Godwin et al. Nor is it the enthusiastic imagination derided by Burke. Rather it is an *educated* imagination, an imagination acting in concert with a rational / scientific understanding of 'awful' natural phenomena (and hence I repeatedly emphasise Shelley's debts to contemporary science).⁴⁶ It is an imagination – as Shelley will put it in his approximately contemporary *Refutation of Deism* – '*considerably tintured with science, and enlarged by cultivation*' (*PW*, p. 120; emphasis added).⁴⁷ This innovative concept of an *educated* or *cultivated* imagination forms the central tenet of Shelley's attempt to revise the eighteenth-century British discourse on the natural sublime along politically radical lines – and arguably, of much of his thought. A major corollary of this study, then, is the claim that the concept of the politically and scientifically potent imagination that informs Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* was worked out – and can only be fully understood – within the context of his engagement with the pious configuration of the discourse on the natural sublime.

For all its undoubted achievements, however, that engagement was far from being a comfortable or unambiguous success. Shelley's revision of the theistic discourse on the natural sublime turns upon the ability of the cultivated imagination to seize politically potent truths from the landscape of the natural sublime: the revolutionary 'voice' of nature that *Mont Blanc* insists is 'not understood / By all, but which the wise, and great, and good / Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel' (*Mont Blanc*, 80–3). In brief, the cultivated imagination reads the landscape of the natural sublime not as evidence of God's presence in creation, but as evidence of systematic natural processes. These processes expose the artificiality, the *un-naturalness* of contemporary social structures – we think, for example, of *Queen Mab*'s contention that 'Nature rejects the monarch, not the man; / The subject, not the citizen' – a politically potent revelation, and one that explicitly attacks Burke's attempt to justify the current political order in England as 'the happy effect of following nature' (*Queen Mab*, iii, 170–1).⁴⁸

The 'Shelleyan sublime' can therefore be (re)defined as – to borrow Furniss's phrase – an 'aesthetic ideology': as a discourse concerned not only to regulate and politicise the affective response to the natural sublime, but also to emphasise the historical and political implications of the landscape per se.⁴⁹ As such, Shelley's engagement with the discourse on the sublime repeatedly resists what Chloe Chard has identified as the tendency of early nineteenth-century tourist writing to *de-contextualise* the sites of the sublime.⁵⁰ While I have echoed Furniss's use of the concept of 'aesthetic ideology' in its contemporary, post-de Manian sense here, however, I also want to register the fact that this formula was not available to

Shelley and his generation.⁵¹ The term ‘ideology’ itself has its origins in French intellectual culture of the 1790s, and for Shelley and his contemporaries it described the increasingly politically-charged study, by French philosophers in particular (the so-called *idéologues*), of the nature and status of human ideas.⁵² This distinction bears directly upon a further corollary claim of this study: that the politicised theorisation of the imagination that arises from Shelley’s revision of the discourse on the sublime marks an important moment in the development of modern notions of ideology. As I make clear in chapter 2, it is during his own foray into the ‘science of mind’ (or ‘ideology’ in the 1790s sense), that Shelley first theorises the role of the imagination in articulating – and, therefore, in potentially *re-articulating* – the conventions upon which social and political institutions are premised.

As an ‘aesthetic ideology’, Shelley’s revision of the pious discourse on the natural sublime is perfectly in accord with the ostensibly gradualist, Godwinian tenor of his political thought.⁵³ Shelley’s great revolutionary writing – works like *Queen Mab*, *Laon and Cythna* (1817), *Prometheus Unbound* (1818–19), and *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1819) – repeatedly insists that a systematic revolution in opinion, a *moral* and *intellectual* revolution, must precede any successful or lasting change in political institutions. Shelley clearly saw his own work – and his revision of the discourse on the sublime in particular – as participating in this vital, long-term intellectual revolution. For all its ostensible faith in gradualism, however, Shelley’s great – and not so great – revolutionary writing repeatedly begs the question not only of *where* political change will come from, but also of *how* that change will come about. Chapter 5 describes at length the extent to which the ostensibly gradualist agenda of Shelley’s greatest utopian narrative – *Prometheus Unbound* – is deeply problematised by the violent imagery surrounding the actual moment of political change. But in point of fact, from *Queen Mab* onwards, there is a persistent – one might go so far as to say a *defining* – tension at the heart of Shelley’s political writing between gradualism and revolutionism, quietism and violence.

From the outset, this tension is intimately – and uncomfortably – bound up with Shelley’s revision of the discourse on the natural sublime. The relationship can best be introduced by noting the extent to which Shelley’s writing invokes the natural sublime not merely in a political context, but specifically in order to figure political violence. In the ‘Preface’ to *Laon and Cythna*, for example, Shelley describes the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars as ‘the *tempests* which have shaken the age in which we live’ (*Poems*, ii, p. 32). Similarly, the thirteenth stanza of the *Ode to Liberty*