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978-0-521-27202-5 - Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems

Angela Leighton

Excerpt

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I

THE SUBLIME IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

It is possible to detect the influence of two main traditions of eighteenth-century thought on Shelley's work. The first of these is the influence of empirical philosophy. Shelley finds in the writings of Locke and Hume a description of the mind's relation to the outside world to accord with his own radical atheism. The philosophy of Locke in particular furnishes the young poet with an argument to refute both Deism and orthodox Christianity. Locke, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, attacks the Cartesian principle that there are innate ideas in the mind, and instead derives all knowledge from the perception of the senses. Shelley then uses this empirical theory of representative perception to put in question the existence of a benign God. However, if empirical philosophy provides the youthful poet with a method of countering religious orthodoxy and of undermining the institutionalised dogmas of Christianity, it fails to provide him with a sympathetic account of poetic creativity. As a result, Shelley turns gradually to another tradition of thought in the eighteenth century: the tradition of the sublime. It is in a sublime aesthetic, which develops alongside empirical philosophy but is in many ways antagonistic to it, that Shelley finds a language to protect inspiration as the original and mysterious Power of poetry.

One of the main features of empirical philosophy is its emphasis on the passivity of the mind as it receives sense perceptions of the external world. Knowledge is derived from the way in which external objects act upon the senses, and impinge upon the mind as ideas. Locke writes: 'Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call *Idea*.'¹ The ideas of the mind mediate between the

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external world and our recognition of it. However, in this mediation the mind itself remains inactive. As C. R. Morris writes, 'the nature of the ideas arriving in our minds through the senses is entirely determined by the nature of the objects, and not at all by the nature of the mind'.² This epistemology therefore seeks to return all forms of mental experience to the influence of simple ideas, which the mind receives passively. Locke distinguishes two kinds of ideas: ideas of sensation and of reflection, the first deriving from external objects and the second deriving from the internal operations of the mind. But in both cases the ideas are not shaped or created by the mind; they are the objects of its perception or contemplation. It is interesting that when Locke makes his large claim that all knowledge derives from ideas, his argument is hardest pressed to include the sublime. He writes that all 'sublime Thoughts, which towre above the Clouds, and reach as high as Heaven it self, take their Rise and Footing here: In all that great Extent wherein the mind wanders, in those remote Speculations, it may seem to be elevated with, it stirs not one jot beyond those *Ideas*, which *Sense* or *Reflection*, have offered for its Contemplation.'⁸ It is these 'sublime Thoughts' which might be thought to out-distance the grounding effort of empiricism.

If the characteristic of Locke's argument is to present ideas as objects of the mind's perception or contemplation, it is also a characteristic of his method to fall back upon a metaphor of sight. In fact, he uses the word '*Perception*' to refer widely to what man does 'when he sees, hears, feels, *etc.* or thinks'.⁴ Similarly Hume divides the mind's perceptions into '*Ideas*' and '*Impressions*', and the latter are defined as 'all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will'.⁵ But although these definitions include all the senses, a bias towards sight predominates. Locke states that the 'Perception of the Mind' is 'most aptly explained by Words relating to the Sight',⁶ but his use of a visual vocabulary is not just a verbal convenience. The status of the mind's ideas becomes very nearly that of mental images. Their truth is assessed according to their clarity, distinctness and completeness, and in opposition to any weakness or

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obscurity. It is a metaphor of the eye which governs Locke's arguments on behalf of empirical truth. To perceive ideas is to look with the mind's eye.

This bias towards sight is also evident in the works of Hume. When, at the beginning of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he attacks a metaphysics founded upon superstitions and religious prejudices instead of on a proper science, he distinguishes between obscure and clear knowledge. 'Obscurity, indeed, is painful to the mind as well as to the eye,' he writes, 'but to bring light from obscurity, by whatever labour, must needs be delightful and rejoicing.'⁷ Hume's division of knowledge into ideas and impressions is an affirmation of what is clear, vivid and perspicuous against what is obscure, confused or distant. Once again, it is the imagination's ability to go beyond the boundaries and limits of reality which seems to pose the greatest challenge to Hume's argument, and it does so because it might seem to escape the control of the eye. The realm of the imagination is in 'the most distant regions of the universe; or [goes] even beyond the universe, into the unbounded chaos, where nature is supposed to lie in total confusion'.⁸ This Miltonic landscape reflects a capacity of thought which might challenge Hume's sceptical empiricism, by being irreducible to visibility and sense perception. Like Locke, Hume is concerned to bring even the province of the sublime within the gravitational pull of empiricism. He writes that 'when we analyze our thoughts or ideas, however compounded or sublime, we always find that they resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment'. This resolution into simple ideas also applies to that other large imagining of the human mind: the 'idea of God'.⁹ Hume's swift and cunning move from the fictionalising imagination, which ventures into the unbounded regions of the sublime, to the 'idea of God', reveals an association of the two which is inherent in much eighteenth-century thinking and which will prove awkward for Shelley; for the atheist, radical and empiricist who would also be a poet.

Both Locke and Hume present an epistemology based on the

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authenticity of sense perception. This authenticity is determined mainly by the criterion of clarity or vividness; by a language which falls back, willingly or unwillingly, on a metaphor of sight. The mind's ideas or impressions are the source of true knowledge to the extent that they are clear, distinct, simple. However, this emphasis on the accuracy and clarity of perception in empirical philosophy results in another problematic assumption. If truth is to be found in perceiving ideas vividly and distinctly, it is not to be found in the language by which ideas are communicated. Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, claims that this fall in the status of language is the result of a general post-Cartesian emphasis on truth as 'evident and distinct perception', which it is 'the task of words to translate'.¹⁰ In English empirical philosophy the translating function of words is deeply distrusted. As language is reduced to being the mere necessary conveyor of the mind's ideas, its rhetorical and figurative susceptibilities become all the more menacing.

Locke devotes much of Book III of his *Essay* to cautioning against a careless use of language, by which he means a language unaccompanied by clear ideas. He writes that the 'use then of Words, is to be sensible Marks of *Ideas*; and the *Ideas* they stand for, are their proper and immediate Signification'.¹¹ Again the main threat to this empirical proposition comes from the realm of aesthetics. What Locke denounces as antagonistic to the cause of truth is a non-literal language, which has for its object, not clear perception, but emotional effect. He comprehensively asserts that 'all the Art of Rhetorick, besides Order and Clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat'.¹² Rhetorical language, according to Locke, cheats us of the different order and logic of ideas. True knowledge resides in this separate and autonomous system of mental discourse.

It is Berkeley who challenges the extremism of Locke's position. In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, he claims that 'the communicating of ideas . . . is not the chief and only end of language', because language also has as its aim the arousal

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of 'passion'.¹³ He reinstates the very example of literary and rhetorical language which Locke is at pains to banish. However, although Berkeley makes some space for a language which communicates the force of passion rather than clear ideas, when he wishes to distinguish the philosophical cause of truth, he too would dispense with 'names' and take only 'ideas' which are 'bare and naked' into 'view'.¹⁴ The source of true knowledge is still located in a purely mental order, of which language is too often a falsification. Hume, in his *Enquiries*, has very little to say about the working of language, except occasionally to remark on its irrelevance to philosophy. 'A moral, philosophical discourse needs not enter into all these caprices of language,'¹⁵ he claims. He refuses 'to engage in disputes of words' because these encroach upon 'the province of grammarians',¹⁶ and the philosopher's commitment must be to mental and moral systems that lie beyond the wily and capricious tendencies of words.

In general, the tradition of empirical philosophy, with its emphasis on theories of representative perception, seeks to expel language as far as it can from the domain of knowledge. Above all, it seeks to expel any rhetorical or aesthetic language, which obscures the mind's ideas by moving the passions. If empiricism starts by attacking the verbal intricacies of medieval Scholasticism, it ends by banning all forms of verbal ornamentation or subtlety. In order to communicate the clear and distinct perceptions of the mind, language must be as nearly nominal and literal as it can. Ideally, the empiricist's language will be perfectly transparent to the ideas it would convey, and this transparency is equivalent to a linguistic literalism. Such an ideal is mainly threatened, therefore, by figurative and metaphorical devices, which are commonly regarded, in the eighteenth century, as manifestations of the passions. Unlike literal language, these devices obtrude themselves upon the mind's eye and cloud its vision of the ideas. The measure of truth is to be found in the rule of sight once again, as empirical philosophy broadly distinguishes between a literal language which is transparent and true, and a metaphorical language which is opaque, and cheats. Locke, however, is uneasily aware that the

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distinction is loose, and that the obscuring effect of rhetorical and metaphorical language might extend to all forms of verbal representation. He writes that words by their very nature 'interpose themselves so much between our Understandings, and the Truth, which it would contemplate and apprehend, that like the *Medium* through which visible Objects pass, their Obscurity and Disorder does not seldom cast a mist before our Eyes, and impose upon our Understandings'.¹⁷ It is the very fact that words tend to interpose and mediate between the mind and the visible truth that makes them suspect. They interfere with the act of seeing.

Broadly, then, it might be said that the predominant criterion of truth in empirical philosophy, which is the criterion of sight, is subtly endangered by two factors: by the large and chaotic vistas of the sublime and by the opaque and passion-moving devices of rhetoric. By presenting these two as most distant from, or antipathetic to, the pursuit of true knowledge, empirical philosophy points to a dilemma which will haunt the imaginative poet who claims to be an empiricist in religious belief. Locke and Hume advocate a distinction between verifiable knowledge and superstitious imagining, between clear ideas and rhetorical obscurantism, which will be present in Shelley's own thought and work as a long unresolved choice.

Although this empirical emphasis on clear sight results in a deep suspicion of rhetorical language, Locke's general precepts become highly influential on studies of rhetoric and aesthetic in the eighteenth century. His basic premise, that to perceive an idea clearly and distinctly is to avoid error and confusion, is transferred to the study of aesthetics, and comes to describe the effect of rhetorical images on the imagination. Joseph Addison, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, is one of the first to attempt to link empirical philosophy with aesthetics, and he does so by stressing the model of the eye. In his Papers on the 'Pleasures of the Imagination' of 1712, he unequivocally asserts the supremacy of sight, which is 'the most perfect and most delightful of all our Senses', and which 'furnishes the Imagination with its Ideas'.¹⁸ He elides the Lockean principle of accuracy with the very different

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principle of delightfulness, and he similarly transfers the Lockean ideas from the philosophical mind to the literary imagination. Addison uses the words idea and image interchangeably, and although the latter is not yet associated with the devices of metaphor and simile for which Coleridge is mainly responsible,¹⁹ it is already associated with the poetic imagination which represents things in words. Although Addison defers to Locke's privileging of sight as the source of true knowledge, he in fact turns Locke's argument on its head when he writes that words have 'so great a Force in them, that a Description often gives us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves'.²⁰ Words, and particularly descriptive words, are no longer condemned for obscuring ideas, but are praised instead for being more forcefully visualisable than things. Verbal eloquence begins to compete with clear ideas for the attention of the mind's eye.

This eliding of ideas and images, of mental discourse and rhetorical discourse, is evident in innumerable works of rhetoric and aesthetic in the eighteenth century. Hugh Blair, Lord Monboddo, Lord Kames, William Drummond, for instance, all describe metaphorical or poetic language in terms of its visual effect. Blair advises that poetic description 'should be as marked and particular as possible, in order to imprint on the mind a distinct and complete image'.²¹ The purpose of metaphor, according to Lord Monboddo, is to express 'the thing in a more lively and forcible manner',²² and according to Blair it is 'to make intellectual ideas, in some sort, visible to the eye'.²³ Lord Kames emphasises the dramatic element in this visibility of language when he writes that the 'force of language consists in raising complete images; which have the effect to transport the reader as by magic into the very place of the important action, and to convert him as it were into a spectator, beholding every thing that passes'.²⁴ William Drummond, in his *Academical Questions* (1805) which Shelley so admired, writes that 'it is always a beauty in the figures of rhetoric, when they represent what may be conceived as placed before the eyes, and what is agreeable to truth and probability'.²⁵ All these writers describe rhetorical figures as seen. But the emphasis has shifted

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somewhat, from Locke's insistence on clarity and distinctness, to an insistence on forcefulness and delightfulness. For Drummond, figures of rhetoric are visually beautiful as well as truthful.

Although Locke remains one of the main influences on eighteenth-century theories of rhetoric and aesthetics, his actual principles are somewhat ungratefully distorted. Rhetorical language, the figurative language of the passions, which Locke dismisses as the source of error and mystification, now takes pride of place. The visual clarity of the Lockean ideas gives way to the visual force and beauty of rhetorical images. Locke's plea for a pared and literal language which would not hinder the passage of mental ideas gives way to a celebration of figures of speech which work strongly and visually upon the imagination. The importance of the model of sight remains. But seeing is no longer the condition of philosophical truth; it is the measure of aesthetic effect.

Because empiricism is the dominant eighteenth-century philosophy, at least until the Scottish Common-Sense philosophers, Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, begin to challenge its theory of ideas in the later decades of the century, it is difficult for any other discipline to ignore its influence. Yet it seems that Lockean empiricism can be aligned with the cause of aesthetics only by a curious transmogrification of its principles. It is a comment on the nature of empiricism, that it makes no easy liaison with aesthetic theory. Its epistemology is based on the new scientific method drawn from the study of the natural sciences in the seventeenth century, and from the start it is in opposition to the metaphysical and theological formulations of Scholasticism. Locke and Hume repeatedly inveigh against metaphysical subtleties which are the product of verbal ingenuity and have no reference to true ideas. Their distrust of language, therefore, is mainly directed against Scholasticism, and is only incidentally directed against aesthetic language. Nonetheless, the effect of their reaction is to condemn all ingenious or figurative verbalising as tending towards the dissemination of dangerous fictions and grosser superstitions. The attempt of eighteenth-century theories of rhetoric to align themselves with a Lockean empiricism only reveals more acutely how

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tricky such an alignment must be. One of the whispered assumptions of empiricism, which Peacock will echo in 'The Four Ages of Poetry' to Shelley's dismay, is that imaginative writing is itself a lingering superstition from the dark ages of man's development. This association of aesthetics with religious belief is not, however, just an incidental corollary of empiricism. It finds support in another strong tradition of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinking, to which Shelley will be drawn in spite of himself.

The first English translation of the treatise *On the Sublime* attributed to Longinus appeared in 1652, but it was not until the 1730s that the work achieved widespread popularity. Boileau's famous and seminal translation became available in English in 1736, while the most important English translation of the original by William Smith was published in 1739. The enormous popularity of the work throughout the century seems, however, less due to the intrinsic value of the treatise itself than to a resurgent need on the part of the age which rediscovered it. The age finds in Longinus an aesthetic vocabulary to meet its own requirements. This is a vocabulary not so much of rhetorical style as of literary sensibility. Longinus in fact contains both. The five sources of the sublime which he lists are grandeur of thought, strong passion, skilful figures of speech, graceful expression and careful organisation of sentences. However, of the two main definitions of the sublime in Longinus' work: that it is 'a certain Eminence or Perfection of Language',²⁶ and that 'the Sublime is an Image reflected from the inward Greatness of the Soul',²⁷ the eighteenth century shows a marked preference for the second. The Longinian sublime gives to the age, not a series of rules about poetic style, but a language for celebrating the act of creativity. It is 'the inward Greatness of the Soul' which will become the main preoccupation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics.

Boileau, in the Preface to his translation of Longinus, first uses a psychological terminology which will be repeated unashamedly in innumerable accounts of the sublime. He argues that the main characteristic of the Longinian sublime is not to be found in stylistic conventions, but in something extraneous to language. It is

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described as ‘cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le discours, et qui fait qu’un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte’.²⁸ To raise, ravish and transport are the signs of some force in language which is strange and marvellous, and which therefore defies reduction to any linguistic process. The sublime, according to Boileau, is neither style nor theme; it is psychological effect. Furthermore, it is an effect which draws heavily on the language of religious mysticism. The sublime is a mysterious and violent force, irreducible to anything in the work, which strikes and uplifts the involuntary reader without warning. Such a description seeks to preserve an element of the unknown and unwritten in aesthetic works: something extraordinary and marvellous.

Although Longinus’ treatise is an outstanding landmark in the development of the sublime in England, the tradition does not originate here. In an essay entitled ‘Space, Deity, and the “Natural Sublime”’, Ernest Tuveson argues that the general concept of sublimity, or grandeur, first emerges in the seventeenth century, in religious writings which attempt to account for the nature of God in a philosophical terminology acceptable to the new scientific age: a terminology of infinite space and time.²⁹ Although the word ‘sublimé’ does not come into general use before the English translations of Boileau, the sensibility which it expresses is already evident in the works of the Cambridge Platonists, for instance, and in the writings of Thomas Burnet. Burnet’s *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* was finally published in English in 1690 and foreshadows many later descriptions of the workings of the sublime. Natural grandeur, for Burnet, becomes an image of divine presence. It is the vast in nature which points to and approximates the incomprehensible vastness of God. As a result, Burnet explicitly equates two kinds of mental state: the mind susceptible to natural grandeur is also the mind able to achieve religious ecstasy. Burnet had crossed the Alps in 1671, and the landscape which he describes in the *Sacred Theory* is familiar in retrospect, as one of the favourite locations of the sublime. It is precisely the emptiness and barrenness of this landscape which, paradoxically, makes it seem filled with a divine presence.