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

Angela Leighton

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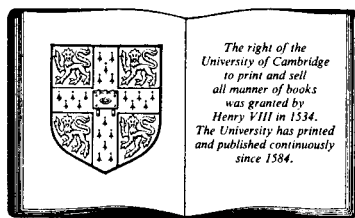
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An Interpretation of the Major Poems

ANGELA LEIGHTON

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PREFACE

In this book I trace the development in Shelley's work of an inspirational theory of poetry and examine the ways in which the language of some of the major poems reflects the tensions and paradoxes of such a theory. Shelley's aesthetic of inspiration, which finds its fullest expression in 'A Defence of Poetry', draws on the profuse and tangled tradition of the sublime in the eighteenth century. As an aesthetic of the vast in nature, and of an equivalent largeness of soul in the spectator, the eighteenth-century sublime may be seen to offer a challenge to the principle of representative perception which is the basis of English empiricism. It protects from the evidence of mere sense perception the ideas of original genius, imagination and inspiration, and thus protects an element of the mystical and inexplicable in the work of art.

Shelley's own indebtedness to the eighteenth century is wide and eclectic. It is not my purpose to give a detailed study of influence, but I would argue that he moves progressively 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. But although there is a shift of emphasis in Shelley's thinking, the two perspectives remain in conflict throughout his life. On the one hand, he consistently denies the religious basis and reference of an aesthetic of the infinite, and he does so with arguments drawn from the principle of sense perception in empiricism. On the other hand, he finds in such an aesthetic a stronghold for that Power of inspiration or vision which directs the writing of poems, and which is central to his own theory of creativity. The tension between his religious scepticism and poetic need is a tension which Shelley never fully resolves, and which underlies and orders the language of many of his poems.

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I aim to give a formalist interpretation of a number of the major poems, showing how Shelley's use of certain rhetorical devices reveals an anxiety about composition which is central to his own sceptical aesthetic of declining inspiration. It is particularly in those poems which present a landscape of sight-defeating heights and depths that this anxiety becomes evident. It has been customary to dismiss the language of the Shelleyan sublime with accusations of weak thinking or rhetorical escapism. But I would answer that such language expresses a dilemma of gain and loss in writing which is far from sentimental or escapist. Shelley's aesthetic of creativity is strangely modern in its scepticism and imaginative relativism. According to this aesthetic, all writing is a loss of that original inspiration which prompts composition. As a result, poetry continually acknowledges both the inadequacy and the sufficiency of its own rhetoric. This aesthetic is not separate from the philosophical and political subject matter of Shelley's poetry, but is intricately connected to it. Philosophy and politics are presented as problems of poetic utterance. For Shelley, the task of change and renovation is conducted in the language of inspired composition, which is the prerogative and aspiration of the radical poet.

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My main debt of thanks, however, must be to all those Shelley scholars whose work has been a stimulus to many of my own ideas and interpretations. In particular, I am aware of having been influenced by the work of Harold Bloom, Timothy Webb and Judith Chernaik. But I am grateful, too, for the more indirect influence of scholars and enthusiasts at successive Shelley conferences, and for the sustaining interest of my students, for whom this book is written.

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ABBREVIATIONS

P.W. *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corr. G. M. Matthews, London, Oxford University Press, 1970.

Letters *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols., ed. Frederick L. Jones, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964.

References by volume and page number only are from *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 10 vols., ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, London, Ernest Benn, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926–30.