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SHELLEY AND THE ROMANTIC REVIEWERS: THE RELEVANCE OF POETRY AND CRITICISM IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

Barbara Hill Elliott

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Thesis Director's Signature:

Houston, Texas

May, 1974
For Bubba

August 4, 1928

***

October 1, 1967

Midst others of less note, came one frail Form,
A phantom among men; companionless
As the last cloud of an expiring storm
Whose thunder is its knell; he, as I guess
Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness,
Acteon-like, and now he fled astray
With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness,
And his own thoughts, along that rugged way,
Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey.

--Adonais, xxxi, 271-279
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE TERMS OF RELEVANCE

"The history of poetry," says F. W. Bateson, "is, in one sense, the history of the criticism of poetry. For it is the critic who creates the data that the historian must clarify and co-ordinate. . . . Moreover, the value of a history will depend upon the kind of criticism on which it is based, the best criticism, because least irrelevant, being that of the poets themselves and the second best that of their contemporaries."\(^1\) At a glance, this statement concerning the relevance of literary criticism according to authorship or source seems axiomatic. But it is possible for both a poet and his contemporary critics, even though they seem to be unique agents of critical clarification, to be, without appropriate perspective, nothing more than potential agents of critical distortion. For, as R. P. Blackmur notes,

Poetry is idiom, a special and fresh saying, and cannot for its life be said otherwise; and there is, finally, as much difference between words used about a poem and the poem as there is between words used about a painting and the painting.\(^2\)

In this regard, the poet and his contemporaries are on equal ground: both write about the work; however, they write from different points of view.

1
The poet views his work from the vantage point either of creation or of creative process. His contemporaries, though, view it from the vantage point of product or representation. The poet, for example, may refer authoritatively to the nature of the poetic process, to the occasion of the work at hand, and merely refer to particular parts of the work as examples of his conclusions. His contemporaries, however, must bring to the work a certain assumption about its meaning and then demonstrate their conclusions by satisfactory analysis. Thus, the poet as critic has a somewhat simpler task than his contemporaries because of the inherent authoritative value of his first-hand knowledge: a poet can enumerate aspects of his intention and then support them with appropriate examples, often without any analysis. Conversely, his contemporary critics, lacking first-hand authority, must engage more in the process of analysis in order to persuade the reader that their critical assumptions are valid. Nevertheless, the test of relevance entails appealing impartially to the text of the poem for verification and confirmation of the conclusions of both kinds of criticism.⁴

Such reference to the text is necessary for two reasons: (1) the possibility that a poet may commit the critical error known as intentional fallacy, the assumption that
his poetic intention, stated or implied, automatically guarantees artistic achievement; and (2) the possibility that contemporary critics may commit the critical error known as the affective fallacy, the assumption that personal critical impression is automatically corroborated by poetic evidence. 4

Literary history confirms that certain prejudices or biases were so influential in many of the reviews of Shelley's day that poetry was often criticized only secondarily as literature. In this way, the work under review served merely as an excuse for an extraliterary essay by the reviewer. "A thousand motives," wrote an anonymous reviewer of Walter Scott's Lady of the Lake, "always imperceptible to the world, sometimes to ourselves, and which, if we knew them we should blush to own, are silently, but effectually operating upon our minds, when we would judge the merits of a living candidate for fame." 5

Or, as Robert Southey observed in his Letter from England:

Criticism is to a large class of men what Scandal is to women; it is indeed Scandal in masquerade. Upon an opinion picked up from the journals, upon an extract fairly or unfairly quoted,—for the reviewers scruple not at misquotation, at omissions which alter the meaning, or mispunctuations, which destroy it,—you shall hear a whole company talk confidently about a book as if they had read it. 6

Political bias was especially prevalent in the aims and practices of the two leading critical journals in
which Shelley's works were reviewed. For instance, Ian Jack concludes that "the clue to the virulence of the *Quarterly Review*'s attack on one writer, compared with its leniency toward another whose work might seem equally objectionable from the point of view of conventional morality, is often to be found in its belief that one is basically orthodox, the other free-thinking or 'jacobinical.'" 7 In addition, Jack explains, when some of the contributors to the *Edinburgh Monthly Review* complained to Editor Jeffrey about the increasingly Whig tendencies of the periodical, he replied that, though it might have two legs, literature and politics, the "right leg" was politics. 8

The strong political conservatism of the Romantic Reviewers was complemented by an equally astringent moral bias. One *British Review* writer proclaimed literature "a powerful engine of moral persuasion," 9 and as such equally capable of good and evil effects: public taste could be corrupted by literature which insinuated a lax attitude toward morality. In the opinion of another critic:

> When the slightest tendency to immorality and impiety pollutes a book, then no wit, no humor, nor all the elegant and splendid ornaments that genius can impart, ought to preserve it from the severest lash of criticism. . . . Criticism should be alert when any man, however humble in talent assails the pillars that support society; but when men high in literary fame abuse their talents in composing writings of such a tendency, it becomes every man to rally round those
supporters of the community those moral and religious principles, which, if eradicated from the minds of our youth, their loss must be followed by the downfall of the empire.\textsuperscript{10}

Similarly, Robert Southey, a contributor to the Quarterly Review, in the preface to A Vision of Judgement (1821) concluded that the English poetry of the early nineteenth century had become so polluted with "monstrous combinations of horrors and mockery, lewdness and impiety," that the age should "regard the morals more than the manner of a composition."\textsuperscript{11}

Finally, the Romantic Reviewers were as intolerant of stylistic innovation as they were of political and moral radicalism. Francis Jeffrey, one of the founders of the Edinburgh Review makes two statements that are exemplary of the attitude of Shelley's contemporaries in this regard. One of these occurs in his review of Southey's Thalaba; there he writes:

Poetry has this much, at least, in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer lawful to call in question.\textsuperscript{12}

The other appears in his critique of Madame DeStael's De la litterature; it reads: "The artist should attempt to please especially those who from their rank and education are likely to regulate the judgment of the reader."\textsuperscript{13}

The authority to which Jeffrey refers is that established by eighteenth-century writers regarding "the
business of the poet," as expressed by Imlac to Rasselas:

to examine, not the individual, but the species;
to remark general properties and large appear-
ances; he does not number the streaks of the
tulip, or describe the different shades in the
verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit, in
his portraits of nature, such prominent and
striking features as recall the original to every
mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations.\textsuperscript{14}

The same kind of authority is alluded to by a reviewer
who published an article entitled "What Is Poetry?" in the
March, 1820, edition of the New Monthly Magazine. "On the
right hand and on the left," he wrote, "I hear that Pope
was not a poet . . . , that he had nothing of a poet's
fire. This fire is all the rage, but unfortunately, in
the attempts at kindling a fire from green materials, the
world of poetry is now as much distinguished by smoke:

Poetry, like states, has been considerably
revolutionized, but we fear it has not
received much benefit from the change; taste
has become subservient to new laws; and
public opinion biased by new principles;--
thus a gradual change has been effected, and
poetry has assumed a new character. The
modern school of poetasters are not satis-
\begin{itemize}
\item satisfied with following the footsteps of the
\item great masters, but by constantly aiming at
\item novelty and originality they become obscure
\item and unintelligible, and by the misapplication
\item of words, and the misconceptions of ideas,
\item they lead the imagination into a labyrinth of
\item thought from which it is with difficulty dis-
\item entangled. Whether the revolution which poetry
\item has undergone be for the better, it is not for
\item us to determine, but as admirers of the old
\item school we cannot but lament the change. If
\item harmony, if beauty of expression, if lightness
\item of idea, and terseness of thought be the
constituents of poetry, where can we find them so brilliantly displayed as in Dryden, Pope, Goldsmith, Milton, and the writers of the last century? In offering these opinions, we do not mean to question the genius of some of our present poets, but we could wish to see poetry flowing in its former channels, and instead of being a vehicle of sensuality become again the delightful source of all that is truly beautiful and sublime.  

This reviewer, like his peers, is aware of a change in poetry, and also like them, he doubts its ultimate value. It would be a gross error, however, to imply that the clashes between Shelley and the Romantic Reviewers can be satisfactorily summed up by saying that their chief conflict resulted from the influential reviewers attempting to maintain eighteenth-century standards against undesirable innovations. For, even though Romantic Reviewers are frequently guilty of blatant critical irresponsibility by today's standards, still their work has some positive value for the history of literary criticism in spite of their tendency to confuse literary achievement with political, moral, ethical, and traditional allegiances.

Therefore, in assessing the relevance of the remarks of Shelley's contemporaries about his poetry as compared with the poet's personal statements regarding his work, our primary task will consist of testing the degree of cohesion between the substance of the critical pronouncements—by both the poet and his contemporary critics—and
the text of the work. This procedure is necessary because Shelley, like the Romantic Reviewers, was influenced to some degree, and not always with positive results, by certain personal, social, and stylistic biases.

Chapter Two, "Creation and Review: A Sociocultural Context for Relevance," enumerates, analyzes, and illustrates the major critical issues raised by the Romantic Reviewers in their evaluations of Shelley's poetry.

Chapter Three, "Creation and Intention: A Private Context for Relevance," examines selected epistolary, poetic, and prosaic commentary for evidence of Shelley's individual attitude toward and opinions regarding the relationship between contemporary poetry and criticism in general and that between his poetry and contemporary criticism in particular.

Chapter Four, "Creation and Reception: A Comparative Context for Relevance," juxtaposes Shelley's statement of intentions regarding his artistic aim in The Cenci with his contemporaries' reaction to the content of that statement to determine the degree of congruence between the poet's idea of his artistic success in The Cenci and that voiced by his contemporary critics in their assessments of his achievement in that work.

Chapter Five, "Creation and Artistic Dexterity: A Stylistic Context for Relevance," analyzes The Cenci as a
vehicle of intention against the background of one of its most frequently voiced stylistic problems (historically and currently), that of the Beatrice paradox: the difficulty of reconciling the heroine's insistent denial of obvious guilt with the poet's equally insistent ascriptions of her moral integrity.

Finally, Chapter Six, "Summary and Conclusions: The Relevance of Poetry and Criticism in the Early Nineteenth Century," summarizes the findings of the previous chapters and draws conclusions regarding the essential value of Shelley's prefatorial criticism vis-à-vis the criticism of his contemporaries in making aesthetic evaluations of his poetry, especially evaluations of *The Cenci*. 
NOTES—CHAPTER ONE


3 As a term of literary criticism, relevance refers to the closeness of relationship between the form and content of a literary work and the substance of critical commentary about it. Cf. Blackmur, op. cit., p. 329: "It is the fine object of criticism to put us in direct possession of the principles whereby the works move without injuring or dis-integrating the body of the works themselves."

4 See W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," Sewanee Review, LVII (1949), 31: "The affective fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does) . . . . It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism." Italics theirs.


6 Quoted by Newman Ivey White, The Unextinguished Hearth (1938; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1966), p. 15. Hereafter cited as UH. In this work, White lists, discusses, and reprints the bulk of published comment on Shelly during his lifetime. Many of the reviews he includes are not readily available in their original form; therefore, I found White's compilation to be an invaluable source of reference in the preparation of my study.


9 No. 9 (February, 1817), 21.

10 *A Critique on the Liberal* (1822), quoted in *UH*, p. 15.


12 *Edinburgh Review*, I (October, 1802), 63.


CHAPTER TWO

CREATION AND REVIEW: A SOCIOCULTURAL
CONTEXT FOR RELEVANCE

The contemporary axiological value of poetry varies directly with the degree of conformity between poetic statement and critical expectation. It is important that poetry should matter, and should be felt to matter, in a community. Whether poetry does matter and the way it matters in its immediate environment depends primarily upon two factors: (1) the place or role of the poet and poetry in society, and (2) the relationship between contemporary poetry and criticism.

Societies may assign poetry to various roles, high or low, and, depending on its fulfilment of those roles, either receive products of the creative imagination with approbation or reprobation, or ignore them all together. Historically, poetry has performed a variety of public roles. In primitive societies, for example, runes and chants had a varied but definite social role: to avert the evil eye, to cure some disease, or to propitiate some divinity. In addition, early forms of epic and saga served as vehicles of national history. Also, poetry was early associated with religious ritual, and continues to
be used for the ritualization of spiritual belief in the hymn, the sequence, and the litany. And, from primitive times, poetry has been a traditional element of that part of court life in which kings and heads of state have their virtues and victories extolled in verse.

In more advanced societies, the social functions of poetry are very conspicuous. In ancient Greece, for example, the drama was part of a public celebration of religious origin, and the Pindaric ode developed in relation to a particular kind of social occasion. In medieval universities, where recipients of academic degrees were customarily crowned with laurel, one who had attained distinction in Latin rhetoric was designated poet laureate. Originally, the poet laureate was expected to compose verse for state functions and to write eulogies, elegies, and other celebrations of important public events. Later, however, the title was used chiefly as one of distinction in honor of poetic achievement. In 1341, the Italian poet Petrarch was honored with a crown of laurel by the Senate of Rome for his achievements. In English history, British sovereigns have appointed poets to laureateships officially since 1668.¹

The possible social roles of poetry, however, are not limited only to the liturgical, the mythological, and the occasional; sometimes the poet himself has a deliberately
public aim. Such a situation is not unusual when a writer lives in a unified society, of which he feels himself to be a harmonious part. Such a poet will most likely write patriotic verse idealizing that society. It was in the interest of preserving such a society, for example, that Plato banned certain types of poets from his Republic.2

Always jarring against the demands of his public role and his public aims, imposed or deliberate, are the poet's view of and commitment to certain purely private purposes. If a poet lives in a transitional society, for example, one in which the established order is threatened with displacement by a potent new system of thought and feeling, either by revolution or evolution, such a writer, guided by private sensibilities and sympathies, may elect one or a combination of various options: (1) he may attempt to reconcile the old and the new into a unified whole; (2) he may call for allegiance to the old or the new; or (3) he may turn from both the old and the new to emphasize the universal in human experience, that is, what seems to him should become the essential values of his culture. Obviously, it is in connection with his fulfilment of private aims, especially of this third alternative, that a poet risks falling short of public expectation, and thereby provoking the righteous indignation of his critics.

Philosophically, a poet requires a literal faith to
give form to the substance of natural life which he sets apart for the reader as the poet's view of reality. As R. P. Blackmur notes, "The life we all live is not alone enough of a subject for the serious artist; it must be life with a leaning, life with a tendency to shape itself only in certain forms, to afford its most lucid revelations only in certain lights." In a unified society, the common forms needed to give the reader a vehicle of access to the poet's order of reality is provided by society itself in the form of reliable traditions, fixed conventions, communal beliefs, a systematic world order. Only society can furnish such uniform "leanings" to aid the poet in enhancing the communicability of his creative utterances.

Allen Tate defines tradition as 'a quality of judgment and conduct rooted in concrete way of life,' inherited from the immediate past, or, if the poet is a maker of tradition, created from contemporary life and passed on to the next generation. A convention is simply a way in which language has been used by the poets of a preceding generation. It is only in terms of language, which may be defined as the embodiment of experience in words, that both conventions and traditions either exist or survive. Therefore, society, when it provides a basis from which the poet may derive such discipline and authority, provides for the use of the poet the maximum resources of poetic language.
In a society in which the validity of once publicly held beliefs is being challenged, and, therefore, in which a poet has no systematic philosophy or external framework of ideas to sustain him, such a poet substitutes his own personality as a core of experience and meaning. In such a situation, the poet himself is compelled to provide an adequate mechanics of meaning and value for the benefit of his readers. He may substitute his own personality as a core of experience and meaning, "using the small conventions of the individual life as if they were great conventions"; or, he may attempt to resurrect some great convention of the past; or, he may attempt to discover the great convention that must lie, though hidden, in the life about him.

When a poet is so compelled, moreso than ever, he seeks through his art a knowledge gradually defined in its very process, that is, "the impulse out of which a poem grows is not so much the desire to salvage a bit of experience from the flux in which all experience is involved as it is the need to render objective, and so to understand, the intimations of some order, some pattern of meaning, that seem to emanate from certain combinations amid the general chaos." As a consequence, his critics are compelled to use references to the process of art as the keystone to their elucidations. For these critics, the controlling
assumption must be that, though society affects literature at every level—production, substance, form, reception—the work of art involved is an objective structure of meanings with its own separate existence and, therefore, contains within its own form and content all the material and information necessary both for its meaning and for its evaluation. Mark Schorer refers to this characteristic as the "achieved content" of the work. As he sees it,

It is only when we speak of the achieved content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content or art, is technique. When we speak of technique, then, we speak of nearly everything."

Similarly, Cleanth Brooks emphasizes that poetry does not compete with, but exists alongside and complements, scientific knowledge and historical knowledge: "Poetry has a characteristic structure and yields a characteristic knowledge." And, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren also stress that "the natural and sensible starting point for work in literary scholarship is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves.""

The original source of the theory of this formalist emphasis on the form, style, and structure of the literary work itself in lieu of emphasis, say, upon literature as a social institution, is probably Aristotle's Poetics. It has more immediate roots in the nineteenth century,
however, in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), a work which provides a rationale for the formalist view of literature as a mode of revelation by emphasizing that literature, as opposed to science, conveys a unique sort of truth, and wisdom.\(^{10}\) It is the formalist theory of critical analysis that undergirds true descriptive criticism.

"It is essentially the business of descriptive criticism," says George Watson, "to perceive connections in terms of actual texts," and then to explain these texts, respectively, within the context of their stylistic interrelationships.\(^{11}\) The Romantic Reviewers had the actual texts of Shelley's poems before them as they wrote, but, because these poems differed sharply from any previously known in the history of English poetry, they completely failed to make contact with the purely literary features of the works before them. Unable, or unwilling, to present a unified textual analysis of most of Shelley's poems, they used selected aspects of them to judge the value of Shelley's life, to pontificate on every obscurity in the poet's works, and thought, and generally to deprecate what they could not, or would not, fully explain. This kind of critical fault-finding persisted even though Shelley, in many instances, anticipated the potential problems his works would pose for his contemporary critics and usually discussed the most obvious ones in his prefaces.\(^{12}\)
Shelley's published works, anonymous and acknowledged, were reviewed in a variety of early nineteenth-century periodicals of widely differing editorial allegiance. The natural expectation of such a broad diversity is an equivalent array of critical attitudes, tendencies, and standards. This principle of expectation, however, is not satisfied by the bulk of the extant reviews of Shelley's poetry. Instead, an unexpected sameness pervades the typical article—a sameness of tone, of literary standards, and of topical interests.

Most Romantic Reviewers considered their primary allegiance to be to society, not to the poet; their main interest consisted in preserving traditional values—political, religious, and literary. Therefore, with the exception of Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and *Indicator*, it is difficult to find a review which does not exemplify in some way the Anti-Jacobian conception of the relationship between poetry and criticism. "It is the duty due from critics," said the Anti-Jacobian, (1) to mark every deviation from religious and moral principle with strong reprobation; (2) to deter readers from wasting their time in the perusal of unprofitable and vicious productions; and (3) to check silly and licentious writers at an early period in their career.
This three-part critical goal illuminates not only the critical method of the Romantic Reviewers but also the critical pattern of the typical review of Shelley's poetry.

Although a few of the articles on Shelley's works begin with some form of praise for the poet's genius or art, no article ends without the reviewer voicing some form of reprobation, however mild. For example, according to the Eclectic Review, Alastor (1816) exhibited "the utter uselessness of imagination, when wholly undisciplined and selfishly employed for the mere purposes of intellectual luxury, without reference to those moral ends to which it was designed to be subservient."\(^{15}\) Similarly, regarding Rosalind and Helen (1819), Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine concluded that, although Shelley's modern eclogue exemplified throughout "strong feeling, and strong passion, and strong imagination," it exhibited at the same time "a strange perversion of moral principle--a wilful misrepresentation of the influence of the laws of human society on human virtue and happiness--and a fierce contemptuous scorn of those sacred institutions which nature protects and guards for the sake of her worth and dignity."\(^{16}\) Thus, it could not refrain from "expressing . . . the most decided reprobation of many of his principles."\(^{17}\) And a Monthly Review contributor concurred in Blackwood's opinion that
"when a man comes to such a degree of perverseness as to represent the vicious union of two individuals of different sexes as equally sacred with the nuptial tie, we really should be wanting in our duty not to reprobate so gross an immorality." And, reviewing *The Cenci*, an *Edinburgh Monthly Review* contributor noted that "the whole essence and structure" of that work is "so radically wrong," that it was "impossible" for him to present any thing like an analysis of it . . . without repeating in some sense the offence already committed by its author."19

The Reviewers' most frequent warning to the reader aimed at deterring him from the perusal of Shelley's works was invariably some aspect of the poet's innovative poetic practices, especially those related to: (1) language, (2) metaphor, and (3) subject matter—for example, character, theme, situation. The first two kinds of innovation, according to most Romantic Reviewers, resulted in obscure and frequently unintelligible meaning; the third kind, to them, often resulted in a negative effect on collective social morality.

In connection with these so-called artistic defects, a *Blackwood's* contributor said of the *Alastor* volume that "several of the smaller poems contain beauties of no ordinary kind—but they are almost all liable to the charge of obscurity."20 Also, when the *Revolt of Islam* was published,
Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine complained of its structural obscurity. "The Revolt," it said, "although a fine, is, without all doubt, an obscure poem... the author has composed his poem in much haste, and he has inadvertently left many detached parts, both of his story and his allusion, to be made out as the reader best can, from very inadequate data." The Quarterly Review echoed Blackwood's complaint in its conclusion about the same poem:

As a whole, it is insupportably dull, and laboriously obscure; its absurdities are not of the kind which provoke laughter, the story is almost wholly devoid of interest, and very meagre; nor can we admire Mr. Shelley's mode of making up for this defect—as he has but one incident where we should have ten, he tells that one so intricately that it takes the time of ten to comprehend it."

And the Monthly Magazine called The Revolt of Islam a "demi-maniac composition," in which Shelley's "command of language is so thoroughly abused as to become a mere snare for loose and unmeaning expression." The Quarterly Review termed Shelley's next poem, Rosalind and Helen (1819), "abundant in faults of obscurity," "rambling and diffuse," "palpably and consciously sophistical," and "unintelligible." Similar charges were made in various reviews of The Cenci (1820). The Independent said, for example, that though Shelley "writes with vigor, sublimity, and pathos," in the play, "he deals too much with abstractions and high imaginings—and forgets the world to which he writes,
and by whom he must expect to be read."25 In his opinion,

Abstractions suit not with life—nor are the
bulk of readers capable of valuing them.
Their value to life and its business is little
worth; and when they are coupled with subtrac-
tions from our hopes and fears of an hereafter,
they become eminently injurious.26

And The British Review found that a "general want of
fidelity to nature"27 pervaded Shelley's drama: it found
"the language . . . loose and disjointed, sometimes . . .
ambitious of simplicity" but then becoming "bald, inelegant,
and prosaic; words to which the ear of the average reader
was not accustomed, and a great deal of confused and not
very intelligible imagery."28

According to W. S. Walker, a Quarterly reviewer,
Shelley's work in Prometheus Unbound also presented problems
of obscurity. To him, this latest drama exhibited the
"predominating characteristic of Mr. Shelley's poetry, . . .
its frequent and total want of meaning." In Walker's words,

Mr. Shelley may plume himself upon writing
in three different styles: one which can be
generally understood; another which can be
understood only by the author; and a third
which is absolutely and intrinsically unin-
telligible. Whatever his command may be of
the first and second of these styles, this
volume is a more satisfactory testimonial of
his proficiency in the last.29

Walker then went on to explain what he means by saying that
Prometheus is "absolutely and intrinsically unintelligible."

"In Mr. Shelley's poetry," he said, "all is brilliance,
vacuity and confusion. We are dazzled by the multitude of words which sound as if they denoted something very grand and splendid; fragments of images pass in crowds before us; but when the procession has gone by, and the tumult is over, not a trace of it remains upon the memory.  

In addition to the charge of obscurity, many of the reviewers thought that Shelley's metaphor was excessive. A British Critic contributor, reviewing Alastor, emphasized:

We cannot do sufficient justice to the creative fancy of our poet. A man's hair singing dirges, and a boat pausing and shuddering, are among the least of his inventions; nature for him reverses all her laws, the streams ascend. The power of the syphon we all know, but it is for the genius of Mr. Shelley to make streams run up hill.

The Literary Gazette thought that Shelley's similes in Prometheus Unbound were "numberless and utterly inapplicable." Surely, it stressed, "the author looks at nature through a prism instead of spectacles." The Quarterly Review noted that Shelley's metaphors and similes could "scarcely be regarded as ornament of ... composition; for his poetry is in general a mere jumble of words and heterogeneous ideas, connected by slight and accidental associations, among which it is impossible to distinguish the principal object from the accessory." These aspects, it said, were especially true of the descriptions in The Sensitive Plant.
Shelley never describes the thing directly, but transfers it to the properties of something which he conceives to resemble it by language which is to be taken partly in a metaphorical meaning, and partly in no meaning at all. 35

Finally, the Gossip, in its review of Epipsychidion, referred variously to Shelley's work as exemplifying "phantasmagoria" and "metaphor run mad," this, because:

It is a species of poetry that excites no emotion but that of wonder—we wonder what it means! It lives without the vitality of life; it has animation but no heart; it worships nature but spurns her laws; it sinks without gravity and rises without levity. Its shadows are substances, and its substances are shadows. Its odours may be felt, and its sounds may be penetrated—its frosts have the melting quality of fire, and its fire may be melted by frost. Its animate beings are inanimate things, and its local habitations have no existence. It is a system of poetry made up of adjectives, broken metaphors, and indiscriminate personifications. In this poetry everything must live, and move, and have a being, and they must live and move with intensity of action and passion, though they have their origin and their end in nothing. 36

Not only were Shelley's reviewers concerned about his structural and linguistic obscurity, which they thought to be deliberate, and his metaphorical innovations, but also, and perhaps moreso, about the moral suitability of his themes, characters, and situations for the average early nineteenth-century reader. The Critical Review suggested that Zastrozzi was a "shameless and disgusting volume" and that it was by "such means of corruption" as it
exemplified "that the tastes of . . . youth of both sexes become vitiated, their imaginations heated, and a foundation laid for their future misery and dishonour." 37 Furthermore, so far as it was concerned, "When a taste for this kind of writing is imbibed, we may bid farewell to purity of thought, and all that makes youth and virtue lovely." 38

The Anti-Jacobin expressed similar feelings about St. Irvyne. Its reviewer felt that Shelley's notions of innocence and virtue were such that "were they to pass current in the world, would soon leave society without one innocent or virtuous being." 39 To substantiate his claim, he explained that although Shelley's two heroines in the work are represented as women of rank, family, and education, one of them, Megalina, is made to become the mistress of a member of a company of Alpine bandits who had just robbed and murdered her father. The other heroine, Eloise, who has had a religious education, and who has just buried her mother, also surrenders her virgin charms to a man who is wholly unknown to her, and whom she had seen under very suspicious circumstances. And, yet, under these circumstances, the poet still asserts that "her soul was susceptible of the most exalted virtue and expansion." 40

A Blackwood's reviewer questioned Shelley's moral motive in Rosalind and Helen. Regarding that poem, he
this kind?" Then, answering his own question, he concluded: "she would be a lone widow in the prime of life, neglected and scorned; while the sources of pleasure and honour would be open to her companion as freely as ever, and fresh victims ready for his solitudes."

Finally, he closes his review "with a pang of regret" that Shelley's mind should be "harassed and wasted on such wild and impracticable schemes of happiness, totally at variance with the experience of mankind, and the interests of society."

As it was with the last word of this Gossip Reviewer, so it was with that of many other contemporary reviewers of Shelley's works: the last part of a typical review usually consisted of the reviewer's direct appeal to the poet to fulfill a certain public obligation to morality, to desist from prostitution of poetical talent, or to repent of some form of poetic licentiousness, all of which appeals were sometimes accompanied by a footnote of hope.

For example, in reviewing Queen Mab, the Literary Chronicle said:

Mr. Shelley furnishes one of the most striking and melancholy instances of the perversion or rather prostitution of genius, that we have ever met with. . . . A man of Mr. Shelley's cultivated mind cannot but possess strong feelings, and he must sometimes reflect on the ruin he has brought on himself, and on the probable injury he may have done to society.
if he does so reflect, he must have a hell in his own conscience, which will torture him more severely than even the scorn of society and the abhorrence of all good men; and to that we consign him, sincerely wishing that this may be his only punishment, and that it may never be aggravated by the consciousness of having destroyed the happiness of others, either by his precept or example.  

In reviewing *The Cenci*, a *London Magazine* writer also accused Shelley of prostituting his talent; nevertheless, he conceded, "in the midst of . . . disgraceful passages, there are beauties of such redeeming qualities, that we adore while we pity—we admire while we execrate—and are tempted to explain with the last of the Romans, 'Oh! what a fall is here, my countrymen.'"  

Many reviewers, however, expressed hope that Shelley would someday adjust his poetic practice in such a way as to fulfill, at least on a minimal level, what most of them saw as the public responsibilities of art; in the words of an *Independent* contributor:  

To write successfully authors must proceed on the first principles of justice, religion, and nature. Nature must not be narrowed, religion constrained, nor justice suited to isolated abstract views; the wants, the wishes, and the interests of the many must be consulted; and the many are not of an author's particular day—but they are the people of futurity.  

A *Literary Gazette* reviewer of *Queen Mab* could not help "indulging the slight hope" that Shelley might yet "be struck with repentance." A *Blackwood's* critic of
Rosalind and Helen believed this about Shelley: "His fame will yet be a glorious plant if he does not blast its expanding leaves by the suicidal chillings of immorality—a poison that cannot be resisted." Another Blackwood's critic hoped "that ere long a lamp of genuine truth may be kindled within his 'bright mind'; and that he may walk in its light the true path of the true demigods of English Genius, having like them, learned to 'fear God and honour the king.'" Finally, the Edinburgh Review theorized:

His genius is rich to overflowing in all the nobler requisites for tragic excellence, and were he to choose and manage his theme with some decent measure of regard for the just opinions of the world, we have no doubt he might easily and triumphantly overtop all that has been written during the last century for the English stage.

"The wants and interests of the many," "Some decent measure of regard for the just opinions of the world," "Fear God and honour the king"—these are the key emphases that form the main elements of Romantic Review obstructions to impartiality. Instead of entering the world of a poem and trying to possess it fully by suspending for a time certain particular circumstances known to exist in the real world of the early nineteenth century, the Romantic Reviewers usually either disregard the entire integrative act which constitutes the poem or subordinate it by detaching individual poetic statements and pointing out
their disharmony with selected contemporary aims, beliefs, and doctrines. Instead of asking about the nature of a poem for its own sake, they ask about the effect of a poem on the character of the audience. Will the poem's central idea, for example, outrage public sensibility? Will its theme fracture sacred beliefs? Are its characters worthy of public emulation? Does its language conform to traditional standards?

These, of course, are questions which may ultimately be asked of any poem. It is only when they are the only questions asked that they may serve the artistic ends of art unprofitably. They must be balanced with the equally important questions: (1) What was the poet trying to accomplish in this work? and (2) To what extent was he successful in that attempt? A general view of what Shelley attempted in his poetry is the subject of the next chapter, "Creation and Intention: A Private Context for Relevance." Determining to what extent the critic-poet achieved his intentions in The Cenci is the main interest of the fourth chapter, "Creation and Artistic Dexterity: A Stylistic Context for Relevance."
NOTES--CHAPTER TWO

1 John Dryden was the first official poet laureate in England and served from 1670 to 1688. There had been other court poets before him, for example, Ben Jonson and William Davenant.

2 See "The Republic," Book X, rpt. in Great Books of the Western World, Vol. VII: Plato, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), p. 434: "But we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State. For if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State."


7 "Technique as Discovery," Hudson Review, I (1948), 67.


12 See Chapter Three of this study: "Creation and Intention: A Private Context for Relevance."

13 Hunt was deliberately partial to Shelley. His primary aim was sympathetic exposition rather than ardent championship; but in answering some reviewers, especially in instances where Shelley's character had been impugned, he became a wholehearted champion of the poet.


16 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, V (June, 1819), 268.

17 Ibid., 273.


20 Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, VI (November, 1819), 152.

21 Ibid., IV (January, 1819), 476.

22 The Quarterly Review, XXI (April, 1819), 462-463.

23 The Monthly Review, LXXXVIII (March, 1819), 323.

24 The Quarterly Review, XXI (April, 1819), 470.


26 Ibid.


28 Ibid., UH, p. 214.

29 The Quarterly Review, XXVI (October, 1821), 168-169.

30 Ibid.

31 The British Critic, N. S. 5 (May, 1816), 546.

32 The Literary Gazette, CXC (September 9, 1820), 580-582, rpt. in UH, p. 224.

33 Ibid.

34 The Quarterly Review, XXVI (October, 1821), 172.
35 The Quarterly Review, XXVI (October, 1821), 174.

36 The Gossip, No. 20 (July 14, 1821), 153-159, rpt. in UH, 278.


38 Ibid.


40 Ibid.

41 Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, V (June, 1819), 274.

42 Ibid.


44 The Gossip, No. 17 (June 23, 1821), 129-135, rpt. in UH, p. 275.

45 The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review, No. 107 (June 2, 1821), 344.


47 The Independent, I (February 17, 1821), 99-103, rpt. in UH, p. 206.

48 The Literary Gazette, No. 226 (May 19, 1821), 305-308, rpt. in UH, p. 58.
49. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, V (June, 1819), 274.


CHAPTER THREE
CREATION AND INTENTION: A PRIVATE CONTEXT FOR RELEVANCE

The record of Shelley's interest in criticism is sketchy and, therefore, inconclusive. But its inconclusiveness is caused not so much by its sketchiness as by what appears to be the poet's deliberate attempt to hide his true feelings about contemporary criticism behind a verbal mask of indifference and self-contradictory statement. The substance of his two short poems "Lines to a Critic" (1817) and "Lines to a Reviewer" (1820) plus that of Adonais (1822), the "most overwhelming chastisement ever inflicted on reviewers by English poetry,"¹ would be enough alone to explode his statements of indifference.² But in addition to this poetic evidence, several of his letters to his publishers, the Ollier brothers, and to some of his friends also hint more interest in contemporary critical opinion than Shelley
openly acknowledges.

Though his inquiries about certain reviews usually protest that Shelley is only interested in those that condemn him, they seem too interested in condemnation for the poet to be taken literally when he professes indifference to the same reviews. For example, in July of 1819, he informs the Olliers that he will not own The Cenci until it has been successfully acted; thereafter, he says, he will utilize its success. Similarly, on August 15 of the same year, in expressing his appreciation to Leigh Hunt for a friendly review of Rosalind and Helen, he says, "My great stimulus in writing is to have the approbation of those who feel kindly toward me." And, after the Olliers notify him that The Quarterly Review has planned to review The Revolt of Islam, in order to avoid delay, he directs them (September 6, 1819) to send the article by mail instead of by the slower method, parcel post. Then he adds, seemingly oblivious of his earlier remarks about
"approbation" being his "great stimulus in writing."

Of course it gives me a certain degree of
pleasure to know that anyone likes my writings;
but it is objection and enmity alone that arouse
my curiosity."

Following a similar pattern of ambiguity, on March 6, 1820, Shelley directs the Ollier brothers: "If any of the reviews abuse me, cut they out and send them. If they praise, you need not trouble yourself. I feel ashamed, if I could believe that I should deserve the latter; the former, I flatter myself, is no more than a just tribute."

But, before he closes the letter of March 6, he adds, "If Hunt praises me, send it, because that is another character of things."

Newman White in his study of Shelley's correspondence, discovered similar ambiguous attitudes toward contemporary criticism. In June of 1822, for example, Shelley wrote to John Gisborne of his "extreme indifference" to such a book as John Watkins' *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Lord Byron, with Some of His Contemporaries*, even though it contained several passages unfavorable to the poet.
Yet, he wrote to Trelawny at the same time: "I am curious to hear of this publication about Lord Byron and the Pisa Circle. I hope it will not annoy him; as to me, I am supremely indifferent." In this case, I agree with White that "either curiosity or indifference" is comprehensible, "but the two together suggest that contemporary opinion interested Shelley even while he persuaded himself that it did not."  

Whether or not Shelley was sincere in his protestations of indifference in his letters and in pertinent poems, he had much to say about the relationship between poetry and criticism both in the *Defence of Poetry*, his longest and only formal treatise on the nature and value of poetry, and in the prefaces published during his lifetime. And, although the poet's contemporaries did not have access to the ideas about poetry expressed in the *Defence*, they did have access to eight Shelleyan prefaces, in which the poet voiced opinions similar to those developed more fully in the longer work.
Shelley wrote thirteen prefaces in all, including one to Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Of these, three were not published during his lifetime; the prefaces to his translation of Plato’s The Banquet (1819), to Julian and Maddalo (1819), and to Peter Bell the Third (May-Nov., 1819) were not published until after 1822, the year of Shelley’s death: The Banquet in 1840, Julian and Maddalo in 1824, and Peter Bell the Third in 1839. Two were published anonymously: Oedipus Tyrannus in 1820 and Epipsychidion in 1822. The rest of the prefaces, however, the eight in which we are interested, were both acknowledged by the poet and available to his critics. These include the prefaces to Alastor (1816), to Leon and Cythere (1818),10 to Rosalind and Helen (1819), to The Cenci (1820), to Prometheus Unbound (1820), to Adonais (1821),11 to Hellas (1822), and to Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818).

In both the Defence and these eight prefaces, the poetic relationship which most preoccupied the Romantic Reviewers, namely, the various effects of poetry on society,
becomes Shelley's dominant topic. Also, in the prefaces, as is the case in the Defence, Shelley devotes space to answering, seemingly directly, several specific charges of his contemporary reviewers against his merit as a serious poet. For these reasons—the poet's thematic emphasis and his deliberately argumentative stance—it is instructive to view the Defence and the prefaces as vehicles of expression of the critic-poet's ideas about current literary criticism in general and about specific charges against his poetry in particular.\(^\text{12}\)

As we discovered in the preceding chapter, the Romantic Reviewers raised three main issues about the relationship between Shelley's poetry and other subjects: (1) the relationship between poetry and poetic genius, (2) the relationship between poetry and convention, and (3) the relationship between poetry and audience. The consensus preferred to see poetry "flowing in its former channels" of "terseness," of "simplicity of thought," and of "sublimity."\(^\text{13}\) A few conceded that Shelley's work contained far
"too many detached parts, "and was far too often a "snare for loose and unmeaning expression." 14

Shelley carefully defines his theory of the imagination as the poetry-making faculty in the opening sections of the Defence. For him, poetry derives not from the mind's logical power, or its power of analysis, but from its capacity to synthesize, to see relationships. In this way, synthesizing is the essential function of the imagination, and poetry is the imagination's essential expression. Thus, though his critics called continually for fidelity to nature, fidelity to institutional beliefs, and fidelity to literary conventions, Shelley's primary interest lay in fidelity to the imagination.

In his preface to Leon and Cythna, for example, he revealed that his central goal was to study the "growth and progress of an individual mind striving after excellence . . .; its influence in refining and making pure the most daring and uncommon impulses of the imagination, the understanding and the senses." 15 To do this, he
exclaims:

I have simply clothed my thoughts in what appeared to me the most obvious and appropriate language, . . . following instinct.\textsuperscript{16}

For, as he sees it, there is an "education peculiarly fitted for a Poet."\textsuperscript{17} And though some of the poet's characteristics are found in ordinary men, these characteristics are compounded in varying levels of intensity in the poet. First, the poet has an observant mind. For instance, in explaining that he had taken only six months to compose \textit{Laon and Cythna}, its "thoughts," he emphasized, "were slowly gathered in as many years." In his words:

\begin{quote}
I have been familiar from boyhood with mountains and lakes, and the sea, and the solitude of forests: Danger, which sports upon the brink of precipices, has been my playmate. I have trodden the glaciers of the Alps, and lived under the eye of Mont Blanc. I have been a wanderer among distant fields. I have sailed down mighty rivers, and seen the sun rise and set, and the stars come forth, whilst I have sailed night and day down a rapid stream among mountains. I have seen populous cities, and have watched the passions which rise and spread, and sink and change, amongst assembled multitudes of men. I have seen the theatre of the more visible ravages of tyranny and war, cities and villages reduced to scattered groups of black and roofless houses, and the naked inhabitants sitting famished upon their desolated thresholds. I have conversed with living men of genius. The poetry of ancient Greece and Rome, and modern Italy, and our own country has been to me like
\end{quote}
external nature, a passion and an enjoyment. Such are the sources from which the materials for the imagery of my poem have been drawn.

In addition to being observant, Shelley's ideal poet must keep open the channels of communication between thought and expression, as the critic-poet himself did, for instance, in a later poem, *Rosalind and Helen*.

"I resigned myself, as I wrote," he says, "to the impulse of the feelings which moulded the conception of the story; and this impulse determined the pauses of a measure, which only pretends to be regular inasmuch as it corresponds with, and expresses, the irregularity of the imaginations which inspired it." Similarly, his reason for not attempting an extensive revision of *Laon and Cythna* was his belief that such an activity would have resulted in "loss of much of the newness and energy of imagery and language as it flowed afresh from . . . [his] mind." And, regarding the aesthetic motive of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, he explains that the story-telling session out of which Mary's narrative evolved served as an "expedient for exercising
untried resources of mind,"\textsuperscript{21} and that the "impossible fact" on which his wife's story was based had afforded "a point of view to the imagination for delineating human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which ordinary relations of interesting events can yield."\textsuperscript{22}

Thirdly, as Shelley sees it, it is the power of the poet to embody and combine elements from comprehensive sources of knowledge and sensation. Or, as he states in the preface to \textit{Prometheus Unbound}:

\begin{quote}
As to imitation, poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new, not because the portions of which they are composed had no previous existence in the mind of man or in nature, but because the whole produced by their combination has some intelligible and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotion and thought, and with the contemporary condition of them.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

It is this third qualification of the poet that Shelley implies when he talks about his artistic management of the Prometheus myth. In his view, poets are not bound to adhere to a common interpretation of myth, that is, to imitate the narrative methods and models of their predecessors. The Greek writers themselves were not bound to do so, nor do
their works imply that they so acted, say, in the recreation and representation of the Agamemnon myth. Therefore, the poet's intention in Prometheus Unbound is not to restore the lost drama of Aeschylus on the unbinding of the mythical Titan. Instead, he says of his intention:

*I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the champion with the Oppressor of mankind. The moral interest of the fable, which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary.*

As a result of his innovations on the character of Prometheus, Shelley thinks that his hero is a "more poetical character than Satan, because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which in the Hero of Paradise Lost interferes with the interest." For Shelley, no quarter of subject matter was immune
from innovation by the poet: the poet, in his visionary capacity, has the privilege of improvisation, even on future events. As he emphasizes in the preface to Hellas: "The poem of Hellas, written at the suggestion of the events of the moment, is a mere improvise," for

Undoubtedly, until the conclusion of the war, it will be impossible to obtain an account of it sufficiently authentic for historical materials; but poets have their privilege. I have, therefore, contented myself with exhibiting a series of lyric pictures, and with having wrought upon the curtain of futurity, which falls upon the unfinished scene, such figures of indistinct and visionary delineation as suggest the final triumph of the Greek cause as a portion of the cause of civilisation and social improvement.

It should be emphasized, though, in connection with his insistence upon the poet's right to innovation, that although Shelley stresses the individuality of the poet, still he realizes that the poet is not completely autonomous. First, he believes that although the form of a literary work is inevitably an endowment of the poet's age, the spirit of a work must be the "uncommunicated lightning of the poet's own mind." As he suggests in the preface to Prometheus Unbound:
One word is due in candour to the degree in which the study of contemporary writings may have tinged my composition... It is impossible that any one who inhabits the same age with such writers as those who stand in the foremost ranks of our own, can conscientiously assure himself that his language and tone of thought may not have been modified by the study of the productions of these extraordinary intellects. It is true, that, not the spirit of their genius, but the forms in which it has manifested itself, are due less to the peculiarities of their own minds than to the peculiarity of the moral and intellectual condition of the minds among which they have been produced.

Thus, he concludes, "one great poet is a masterpiece of nature which another not only ought to study but must study." In addition to this stylistic influence of other poets, the ideal poet also shares certain generic similarities with every man:

A poet is the combined product of such internal powers as modify the nature of others; and of such external influences as excite and sustain these powers; he is not one but both. Every man's mind is, in this respect, modified by all the objects of nature and art; by every word and every suggestion which he ever admitted to act upon his consciousness; it is the mirror upon which all forms are reflected, and in which they compose one form. Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors, and, musicians, are, in one sense, the creators, and, in another, the creations of their age. From this subject the loftiest do not escape.
Thus, he concludes, the peculiar style of intense and comprehensive imagery of modern literature has not been the product of imitating any particular writer: "The mass capabilities remain at every period materially the same," he says; only "the circumstances which awaken it to action perpetually change."33

Finally, Shelley believes that the ideal poet must share his perceptions: "Whatever talents a person may possess to amuse and instruct others, be they ever so inconsiderable, he is yet bound to exert them."34 It is in connection with his execution of this belief that we encounter the most paradoxical area of disagreement between Shelley and his reviewers. According to his own statements of intention, Shelley's moral motives were honorable. Yet, the majority of his reviewers complained that his poetry had "no great moral flow in it."35

According to one reviewer, the themes of Shelley's poetry were "so vile" that they were "degrading and brutifying" to humanity. Another said that the situations
in Shelley's works were fit only for the "inmates of a brothel." Still another saw the poet's characters as being so "warped from the simplicity of nature" that they constituted a "libel upon humanity." Overall, as these reviewers read him, Shelley was in continual "violation of the moral sense, withdrawing the veil from things that ought for ever to remain concealed."36

In his own statements about the relationship between poetry and morality, however, Shelley seems as much concerned as his contemporary critics that poetry should have a wholesome moral effect on its readers. In fact, as Carlos Baker, one of the poet's later critics, observes, for Shelley, "poetry was always the outgrowth of some constructive ethical program."37

Both the Defence and certain prefaces include statements about aesthetic beliefs and intentions which support Baker's conclusion. The Defence, for example, contains the most extensive definition and exposition of both Shelley's central aesthetic assumption and his
essential conception of the aesthetic process by way of which poetry participates in the stabilization and development of human morality. According to Shelleyan aesthetic theory, poetry has a relationship to moral good through its "great instrument" or means, the imagination.

In the poet's words:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively. . . . The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect /moral good/ by acting upon the cause /imagination/.

According to Shelleyan definition of the aesthetic process, the higher kind of poetry holds up before the reader's eye certain "idealisms of moral excellence" in order to suggest to men of extraordinary sensitivity what they might achieve if they dared. The stages of this process are implied in what the poet says in the Defence about the effect of ancient Greek literature on its audience.

"Homer," he begins, "embodied the ideal perfection of /infant Greece/ in human character; nor can we doubt
that those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector, and Ulysses. . . .

The sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely impersonations, until from admiring they imitated, and from imitation they identified themselves with the objects of their admiration. 40

In the time of the great Greek tragedians, he continues, this process was intensified; for, the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles are "as mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself . . . stripped of all but that ideal perfection and energy which everyone feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become." 41

This aesthetic process—the awakening and enlargement of sympathetic perception, the growing desire (at once ethical and emotional) to imitate, and the willed development of imitation to the stage of self-identification—is what Shelley hopes his readers will experience, say, in the reading of Rosalind and Helen, when he says: "The story
of Rosalind and Helen is, undoubtedly, not an attempt in
the highest style of poetry. It is in no degree calculated
to excite profound meditation; and if, by interesting the
affections and amusing the imagination, it awakens a
certain ideal melancholy favourable to the reception of
more important impressions, it will produce in the reader
all that the writer experienced in the composition."^{42}
It is on the success of this process, too, that he depends
for the outcome of his aesthetic intention in *Jacob and
Cynthia*. "In the personal conduct of my Hero and Heroine,"
he says in the last paragraph of the preface to that work,
"there is one circumstance which was intended to startle
the reader from the trance of ordinary life. It was my
object to break through the crust of those outworn opinions
on which established institutions depend."^{43} Therefore,
he continues:

I have appealed . . . to the most universal of all
feelings, and have endeavoured to strengthen the
moral sense, by forbidding it to waste its energies
in seeking to avoid actions which are only crimes
of convention. . . . The circumstance of which I
speak, was introduced . . . to accustom men to that
charity and toleration which the exhibition of a practice widely differing from their own, has a tendency to promote.44

Shelley, however, was not so naive as to believe that his poetry could become an automatic touchstone for moral amelioration for every reader. We know this by considering certain direct statements he made concerning reader responsibility both in the Defence and in certain prefaces. These statements reflect Shelley's recognition that several elements--creative, environmental, and individual--may obstruct the formulation of valid literary judgments by the reader.

One such obstruction follows directly from the inherent nature of poetry itself: for Shelley, poetry derives from a mystical and divine intuition, and the poet, like a nightingale, "who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude,"45 when inspired, is not fully accountable, even though between moments of inspiration he is a man like other men, subject to the normal human influence, but "more delicately organized."46 Therefore, "in the
infancy of the world," he explains, "neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellence of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness, and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure . . . ." 47 Furthermore, he continues,

Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers; it must be impaneled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations. 48

Another obstruction to the formulation of reliable literary evaluations derives from the indigenous social nature of the poet; and, symbolically, of the poetic product. Shelley says, "Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive wisdom which is mingled with its delight," but the intensity of the pleasure affordable by poetry may be severely hampered by militant social conditions. Here, the poet speaks best for himself.
The connexion of scenic exhibitions with the improvement or corruption of the manners of men, has been universally recognized: ... in other words, the presence or absence of poetry in its most perfect and universal form, has been found to be connected with good and evil in conduct and habit. ... The drama at Athens, or wheresoever else it may have approached to its perfection, coexisted with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age. ... But in periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathises with that decay. ... The period in our own history of the grossest degradation of the drama in the reign of Charles II, when all forms in which poetry has been accustomed to be expressed became hymns to the triumph of kingly power over liberty and virtue ... At such periods the calculating principle pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition, and poetry ceases to be expressed upon them. ...

Civil war, the spoils of Asia, and the fatal predominance first of the Macedonian, and then of the Roman arms, were so many symbols of the extinction or suspension of the creative faculty in Greece. The bucolic writers, who found patronage under the lettered tyrants of Sicily and Egypt, were ... representatives of its most glorious reign. Therefore let us not circumscribe the effects of the bucolic and erotic poetry within the limits of the sensibility of those to whom it was addressed. They may have perceived the beauty of those immortal compositions, simply as fragments and isolated portions: those who are more finely organized, or born in a happier age, may recognize them as episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the cooperating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.

Finally, Shelley recognizes that the reader himself may be his own worst obstruction to positive aesthetic
experience. For example, the reader’s resistance, whether conscious or subconscious, to the poet’s aesthetic cosmos may severely impede aesthetic delight, thereby resulting in highly prejudiced literary judgments. Shelley often refers to the need for a peculiar power of discrimination in those who would read his works. In the preface to 
Leon and Cymbeline, for instance, he says:

I have sought to enlist the harmony of metrical language, the ethereal combinations of the fancy, the rapid and subtle transitions of human passion, all those elements that essentially compose a Poem, in the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality; and in the view of kindling within the bosoms of my readers, a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence, nor misrepresentation, nor prejudice, can ever totally extinguish among mankind.\textsuperscript{51}

He recognizes, however, that these are only the poet’s intentions; fulfilment lies with the reader. As the poet says,

If the lofty passions in the work shall not excite in the reader a generous impulse, an ardent thirst for excellence, an interest profound and strong, such as belong to the meaner desires—let no failure be imputed to a natural unfitness for human sympathy in the sublime and animating themes.\textsuperscript{52}
For, as he was to say later in the *Defence*: "All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contains all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to savre, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and unconceived delight."53

In his prefaces to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley implicitly calls for readers who will not confuse private authorial beliefs with the details of published aesthetic truth. In the latter, he says, "I have a passion for reforming the world . . . . But it is a mistake to suppose that I dedicate my political compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform, or that I consider them in any degree as containing a
reasoned system on the theory of human life."  
Similarly, he says in the former, "The opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction nor is any inference justly to be drawn from the following pages as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind."  
In the same way, he had cautioned earlier in the preface to *Lanu and Cythna* that the characters in that work condemn "the idea of the Supreme Being not the Supreme Being itself."  

In short, Shelley would have his readers take the poetic work on its own terms; that is, he would have them intent upon experiencing in their respective minds, though to a less intense degree, all that the poet had experienced in composition. The Romantic Reviewers, however, for several reasons, were unable to conform to Shelley's readership ideal. The factors of their inability to do so provide the substance of the next chapter, "Creation and Reception: A Comparative Context for Relevance."
NOTES—CHAPTER THREE


2 Cf. "Lines to a Critic" (1817), stanza four:

   A passion like the one I prove
   Cannot divided be;
   I hate thy want of truth and love—
   How should I then hate thee?


4 IP, X, 79.

5 IP, X, 149.

6 IP, X, 149.

7 IP, X, 402.

8 IP, X, 406. Cf. In a letter written January 25, 1822, Shelley asked Leigh Hunt to say what effect was produced by Adonais. "My faculties are shaken to atoms, and torpid. I can write nothing; and if Adonais had no success, and excited no interest what incentive can I have to write?" Yet, in the lines following this very plain statement of anxiety about critical opinion, he reasserted that indifference to reviews which is inconsistent with it: "The man must be enviably happy whom reviews can make miserable. I have neither curiosity, interest, pain, nor pleasure in anything, good or evil, they can say about me."
Although the Defence was written in 1821, it was not published until 1840.

Laon and Cythna is now known as The Revolt of Islam, which is a slight revision of the work published under the original title.

Adonais was sold and reviewed in England by several periodicals, but it was not formally published until 1829. A pirated version appeared in The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review, December 1, 1821.

All references to the Defence are from the Ingpen-Peck edition, designated IP.

See Chapter One, n. 15.

See Chapter Two, n. 29.

IP, I, 239-240.

IP, I, 239-240.

IP, I, 239-240.

IP, I, 239-240.

IP, II, 5.

IP, I, 246.

IP, VI, 259-260.

IP, VI, 259.
23  IP, II, 173.

24  In *The Odyssey*, Homer shows Agamemnon meeting death at a banquet; but in the first play of his *Oresteia*, *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus shows Agamemnon dying in his bath. In each case, the poets have used the version of the myth which best suits their thematic and metaphoric designs, respectively: for Homer, custom and ingestion; for Aeschylus, intrigue and entrapment.

25  IP, II, 171.

26  IP, II, 171-172.

27  IP, III, 7.

28  IP, III, 8.

29  IP, II, 173.

30  IP, II, 172.

31  IP, II, 173.


33  IP, II, 173.

34  IP, II, 175; I, 240. Cf. In the preface to *Laon and Cythna* Shelley says: "It is the business of the poet to communicate to others the pleasure and enthusiasm arising out of those images and feelings, in the vivid presence of which within his own mind consists at once his inspiration and his reward."

35  *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, V (June, 1819), 268-274, rpt. in *UH*, 163.


38 IP, VII, 118.


40 IP, VII, 116.

41 IP, VII, 121.

42 IP, II, 5.

43 IP, I, 247.

44 IP, I, 247.

45 IP, VII, 116.

46 IP, VII, 116.

47 IP, VII, 116.


49 IP, VII, 120-121.

50 IP, VII, 124.
51 IP, I, 239.
52 IP, I, 240.
53 IP, VII, 131.
54 IP, II, 174.
55 IP, VI, 260.
56 IP, I, 246.
CHAPTER FOUR

CREATION AND RECEPTION: A COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

FOR RELEVANCE

In the preface to *The Cenci*, Shelley discusses the attached work both as product—concentrating upon its formal characteristics, and as process—concentrating upon artistic aims, authority, and special problems. Also, to facilitate the reader's appreciation, he points out parallel relationships both between *The Cenci* and similar works of different ages and cultures, and between the dramatic characteristics of *The Cenci* and analogous aspects of its representation in other arts, especially painting and architecture.

Shelley acknowledges that the Cenci story, of an old man who conceived and fulfilled an incestuous passion against his daughter, who, in turn, avenged herself by becoming an accessory to parricide, is "indeed eminently fearful and monstrous,"¹ and that "anything like a dry
exhibition of it on the stage would be insupportable" (IP, II, 70). Yet, for several reasons, he believes that "such a story, if told so as to present to the reader all the feelings of those who once acted it, their various interests, passions, and opinions, acting upon and with each other, yet all conspiring to one tremendous end, would be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart" (IP, II, 70-71).

First, the Cenci dilemma seemed peculiarly fitted for dramatization because, in the critic-poet's words, "All ranks of people in Rome, even after two centuries knew the outlines of this history, and participated in the overwhelming interest which it seems to have the magic of exciting in the human heart" (IP, II, 70). Even servants recognized the portrait of La Cenci. Thus, as Shelley saw it, the Cenci account was "in fact" already a tragedy which had already "received, from its capacity of awakening and sustaining the sympathy of men, approbation and success" (IP, II, 70). In addition,
The deepest and sublimest tragic compositions of *King Lear*, and the two plays in which the tale of Oedipus is told, were stories which already existed in tradition, as matter of popular belief and interest, before Shakespeare and Sophocles made them familiar to the sympathy of all succeeding generations of mankind. (IP, II, 70)

Also, the fitness of the Cenci story for artistic representation was sanctioned on the literal level by the portrait of Beatrice at the Colonna Palace. In that painting, the artist has captured what Shelley terms in the preface as the sympathy-evoking capacity of the Cenci character.

"In the whole mien," the critic-poet observes, "there is a simplicity and dignity which united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow are inexpressibly pathetic" (IP, II, 73). As he sees it, the visual study of Beatrice implies too the paradoxical nature of the Cenci character; Beatrice appears to have been one of those "rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another: her nature was single and profound" (IP, II, 73). For example, in the portrait, she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness; her lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish (IP, II, 73). Her eyes are "swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully
tender and serene" (IP, II, 73). Thus, Shelley concludes, "the crimes and miseries in which she was an actor and a sufferer are as the mask and the mantle in which circumstances clothed her for her impersonation on the scene of the world" (IP, II, 73).

Finally, on a symbolic level, the location and appearance of the Cenci Palace seemed to Shelley to be peculiarly appropriate as a setting for the horrors which ended in the extinction of one of the noblest and richest families of Rome. Although at the time he saw it, the home of the Cencis had been modernized, still it suggested to him the awful self-annihilation of the Cenci clan, for there remained "a vast and gloomy pile of feudal architecture in the same state as during the dreadful scenes which are the subject of this tragedy" (IP, II, 69). In addition, from the upper windows of the Cenci Palace, one could see the immense ruins of Mount Palatine, only half-hidden under a profuse overgrowth of trees. And, the poet's study of the "dark and secret caverns of the human heart," intended to be made "more apparent" in his dramatization of the Cenci tragedy, seemed to be symbolically suggested by "one of the gates of the palace, formed of immense stones, which led through a passage dark and lofty, and opened into gloomy subterranean chambers" (IP, II, 79; 74).
With such strong corroborative evidence of the fitness of the Cenci story for dramatization from life, art, and nature, nothing remained for the poet to do except "to clothe it to the apprehensions" of his readers in "such language and action as would bring it home to their hearts" (IP, II, 70).

The realization of such an artistic feat, according to Shelley, required the realization of certain stylistic goals, namely, in outline form:

1. He must increase the ideal, and thereby diminish the actual horror of the events in the extant version of the story.

2. He must attempt nothing that would make the dramatization subservient to what is vulgarly termed a moral purpose.
   a. The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama, is the teaching of the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself; in proportion to the possession of which knowledge, every human being is wise, just, sincere, tolerant, and kind.
   b. Therefore, it is in the restless and anatomising casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge, that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists.

3. He must endeavor, as nearly as possible, to represent the characters as they probably were, avoiding the error of making them
actuated by his own conceptions of right and wrong, false or true: The Cenci were Catholics, deeply tinged with religion.

4. He must avoid the introduction of mere poetry into his drama.
   a. In a dramatic composition the imagery and the passion should interpenetrate one another, the former being reserved simply for the full development and illustration of the latter.
   b. The most remote and the most familiar imagery may alike be fit for dramatic purposes when employed in the illustration of strong feeling. (IP, II, 70-73)^2

The accumulative value of these prefatorial remarks is twofold: they announce, though implicitly, (1) Shelley's view of the nature and style of organic poetry, and (2) Shelley's opinion that The Cenci demonstrates his application of organic theory to poetic practice. Neither Shelley's emphasis on the autonomy of the poet nor his call for a new psychology of audience, however, is prototypal.

The essence of his ideas regarding the relationship between poetry and genius was available as early as 1759 in the Reverend Edward Young's Conjectures on Original Composition. In this work, Young says that genius may be both original and imitative, but that original genius is necessarily better than the imitative variety: imitative genius builds upon the originality of someone else; original genius, coming as it does fresh from the hands of nature, uses its own material. Thus, Young
advise one who would develop original genius:

Dive deep into thy bosom; learn the depth extent, bias, and full fort of thy mind; Contrast full intimacy with the stranger within thee; excite and cherish every spark of intellectual light and heat, however smothered under former negligence, or scattered through the dull, dark mass of common thoughts; and collecting them into a body, let thy genius rise . . . as the sun choose. Let not great examples or authorities browbeat thy reason into too great a diffidence of thyself; thyself so reverence as to prefer the native growth of thy own mind to the richest import from abroad. 3

Young's theory is somewhat more solipsistic than Shelley's, but the essential point is the same: it is no longer necessary to study the ancients in order to write an acceptable literature. The creative mind itself is "primal, even godlike, something buried beneath the dull, dark mass of common thoughts, a self set apart from other men, wholly individual, wholly unique, a sun rising out of chaos, a native growth preferable to psychological borrowings from, or imitations of, others." 4

In addition to Young's precedence, the gist of Shelley's assumptions about genius, tradition, and audience, also finds affinity in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria, published three years before The Cenci. Much of what Coleridge says about the relationship between poetry and the imagination illuminates the philosophy of art undergirding Shelley's
preftorial claims regarding The Cenci. Both poets emphasize their common belief that the imagination is more than merely an image-making faculty.

In the Biographia Literaria, for example, Coleridge postulated two different aspects of mind in order to explain the means by which the mind perceives nature in both its universal and particular forms. For him, the mind divides into two capacities: reason and understanding; reason is the direct insight into the universal while understanding directs sense impressions, associations, and feelings related to the concrete world. But nature is neither the universal nor the particular: it is a process in which the universal and the particular both declare and sustain each other. Therefore, if the human mind is to realize this unity, it must have a capacity analogous to the synthesizing principle of nature, that is, process. It is this capacity that Coleridge distinguishes as the imagination, as the "completing power," as the catalytic capacity of mind which allows it to join together what it has grasped by two different aspects, reason and understanding.

For Coleridge, the imagination in its primary manifestation is a great ordering principle, an agency which destroys chaos by making its parts intelligible by the assertion of the identity of the perceiver. In this way, the primary imagination is a basic function of mind,
undirected consciousness; it is "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." It is the secondary imagination which is special; this unique faculty enables the mind consciously to reconcile sameness with difference, the general with the concrete, the idea with the image, the individual with the representative, the sense of novelty and freshness with the conception of old and familiar objects, and thereby to project and create new harmonies of meaning. Thus, the primary imagination is a basic function of mind, but the secondary imagination is special; the secondary imagination "dissolves . . . in order to recreate or . . . to idealize and unify." It is this faculty which allows the poet to write a "blameless style," which communicates through a system of symbols, both harmonious in themselves and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductor, and which, thereby, secures an "untranslatableness in words of the same language without injury to meaning." Such a poet, according to Coleridge, "described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity," as he diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, . . . exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.
Shelley makes a similar claim for the creative imagination in the preface to *The Cenci* when he says that he has avoided "with great care in writing this play the introduction of what is commonly called mere poetry," that in a dramatic composition "the imagery and the passion should interpenetrate one another, the former being reserved simply for the full development and illustration of the latter." For, to him, as to Coleridge,

> Imagination is as the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion. It is thus that the most remote and the most familiar imagery may alike be fit for dramatic purposes when employed in the illustration of strong feeling, which raises what is low, and levels to the apprehension that which is lofty, casting over all the shadow of its own greatness. (IP, II, 72-73)

For both, in short, the aim of art is to capture the fluid, almost intangible nature or identity of its object and then to disclose and present that identification in its unique individuality through symbolic language, a medium which duplicates the essence of the reality perceived, idealized, and unified by the imagination.

Obviously, Shelley's subordination of the communal nature of the poetic act to its value as unique expression directly opposes what we have discovered to be the Romantic Reviewers' hierarchy of artistic values. Moreover, the opposition is uniform, whether we focus on the realationship between poetry and genius, between poetry and tradi-
tion, or between poetry and audience.

As to genius, Shelley calls for the creative use of genius in unique expression. But, as we saw earlier, the Romantic Reviewers preferred poetry in which the poet has made some artistic accommodations in favor of communally established public goals. Since they saw literature as a powerful engine of moral persuasion, as a catalyst for the development of public taste, "when the slightest tendency to immorality and impiety pollutes a book," they said, "no wit, no humour, nor all the elegant and splendid ornament that genius can impart, ought to preserve it from the severest lash of criticism."  

Similarly, as to tradition, Shelley suggests that poetic method should be accommodated to the stylistic prerequisites of the individual perceiving imagination. But the Romantic Reviewers emphasized that "poetry has this much, at least, in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer lawful to call in question." For them, the business of the poet is "to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades of verdure in the forest." In short, it is not the business of the poet to exhibit "minuter discriminations"; the Romantic
Reviewers preferred that the poet exhibit in his art "such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind."\(^{18}\)

In the same way, regarding audience, Shelley encourages the reader to come to a reading of his work as he himself comes to its composition: \textit{tabula rasa}. As a result, Shelley's reader could offer the reception of the work a mind as uncolored by cultural prerequisites as the poet had offered his inspiration in its composition. The Romantic Reviewers, though, wished the poet to accommodate the form and content of his work to the moral sensibilities of his readers, to manipulate taste. The one, then, prefers that the reader view himself as worthy of unique experience; the other prefers that the reader have a view deliberately accommodated by the poet to the existing harmony of ideas. Thus, Shelley stresses that the poet is not obligated to make his work "subservient to what is vulgarly termed a moral purpose;"

The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama, is the teaching of the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge, of itself; in proportion to which knowledge, every human being is wise, just, sincere, tolerant, and kind. If dogmas can do more, it is well; but a drama is no fit place for enforcement of them. \((IP, II, 71)\)

But the Romantic Reviewers thought differently about the importance of artistic accommodation: "He that presumes to make his intellect address a voice to the
world," they said, "should know that his voice must either harmonize or jar with the universal music of life and wisdom."\(^19\) Moreover, they continued, if a poet "must be sceptical—if he must be lax in his human code of excellence, let him be so; but in God's name let him not publish his principles and cram them down the throats of others."\(^20\)

Because Shelley's principles of theory and style were in such direct opposition to those of his detractors, it is not surprising that the majority of the reviews of *The Cenci* negate its prefatorial claims. For example, of the twelve reviews of this work included in White's compilation of contemporary reviews, half comment on Shelley's stylistic intention to idealize the horror of the Cenci account as it appears in the original manuscript. All contend that such an intention is impossible to realize. One generalization emphasized that certain characteristics inherent in the subject matter of the story necessarily defeat the ends of idealization. The *Literary Gazette*, for example, warned: "In truth there are very few passages of *The Cenci* which will bear transplanting to a page emulous of being read in decent and social life."\(^21\)

Moreover, it contended, the crimes in which the Cenci riots and luxuriates are so beastly and demoniac "that no feelings can be excited by their obtrusion but those of detestation
at the choice, and horror at the elaboration." The
Monthly Magazine concluded that Shelley, in his attempt
to idealize the Cenci narrative had succeeded only in
"inspiring . . . sentiments of horror and disgust." The British Review commented:

The pollution of a daughter by a father, the
murder of a father by his wife and daughter,
are events too disgusting to be moulded into
any form capable of awakening our interest.
. . . Mr. Shelley, far from having even
palliated its moral and dramatic improprieties,
has rendered the story infinitely more horrible
and more disgusting than he found it, and has
kept whatever in it is most revolting constantly
before our eyes. And, the London Magazine announced: "It is quite impossible
to increase the ideal, or to diminish the actual horror of
such events [as those in the Cenci story]: they are
therefore altogether out of the Muse's province."

Another generalization developed by the Romantic
Reviewers regarding Shelley's stylistic intentions as
stated in the preface to The Cenci concerned the capacity
of the imagination to accomplish such a task of idealization.
Here, excerpts form the New Monthly Magazine summarize the
consensus. "It is doubtless one of the finest properties
of the imagination," it said, "to soften away the asperities
of sorrow, and to reconcile by its mediating power, the high
faculties of man and the mournful vicissitudes and brief
duration of his career in this world. But the distress which
can thus be charmed away, or even rendered the source of pensive joy," it emphasized, "must not be of a nature totally repulsive and loathsome."\textsuperscript{26} The distress of \textit{The Cenci}, it thought, was such a case, for in the most prominent of its sufferings and crimes "there is no poetry, nor can poetry do aught to lessen the weight of superfluous misery they cast on the soul."\textsuperscript{27} Thus, it concluded: "If the tender hues of fancy cannot blend with those of grief to which they are directed, instead of softening them by harmonious influence, they will only serve to set their blackness in a light still more clear and fearful."\textsuperscript{28} In fact,

> Beauties may be thrown around them \(\text{the sufferings and the crimes}\); but as they cannot mingle with their essence they will but increase their horrors, as flowers fantastically braided round a corpse, instead of lending their bloom to the cheek, render its lividness more sickening. In justice to Mr. Shelley we must observe that he has not been guilty of attempting to realize his own fancy. There is no attempt to lessen the horror to the crime, no endeavour to redeem its perpetrator by intellectual superiority, nor thin veil thrown over the atrocities of his life.\textsuperscript{29}

On the whole, then, the critical opinion regarding Shelley's first stylistic intention was this: though the \textit{Cenci} story may have been "extant in choice Italian,"\textsuperscript{30} that popularity was no excuse for making its awful circumstances the groundwork of a tragedy. Such a story was unfit to be told even as matter of historic truth; still
further was it from being suited to the purposes of poetry. Thus, if such things had been, it was "the part of the wise moralist decently to cover them," \textsuperscript{31} for there was nothing in the circumstances of a tale being true which rendered it automatically fit for the ear of the general reading public.

The success of Shelley's second intention, to rely upon a kind of dynamic morality rather than upon overt didacticism, was also challenged by his reviewers, as witness the following comments by the \textit{London Magazine}: "If it be really true that an individual once existed who really hated his children, and, under the impulse of hatred, committed an outrage on his daughter, that individual was \textit{mad}; and will any who are not the same, or worse, pretend that the horrors of madness, the revolting acts of a creature stripped of being's best part, can properly furnish the principle interest of a dramatic composition, claiming the sympathy of mankind as a representation of human nature?" \textsuperscript{32} Ancient Greek poets, it thought, had been free to treat such events as those in the \textit{Cenci} story for several reasons. First, in their compositions, man was not the agent but the sufferer: and the excellence of his endowments, and the noble nature of his faculties only served to give dignity to the scene on which he was played with by powers whose decrees and purposes were not liable
to be affected by the qualities of his will. For example, "the woes of the house of Tantalus are the acts of destiny, not the offspring of human character or conduct;—individual character, in fact, has no concern with them,—and no moral lesson is in any way involved in them, except that of reverencing the gods, and submitting implicitly to the manifestations of their sovereign pleasure."\(^3\) Secondly, the order and institutions of Greek society were not affected by this kind of representation; it only showed that the thunder of heaven might fall on the fairest edifices of human virtue and fortune. The only reasonable deduction from the awareness of the probability of such a fate was that the anger of Job was to be averted, if possible, by duly respecting the ministers of religion, carefully observing the rites of worship, and keeping the mind in an humble, confiding temper towards the will and interference of heaven.\(^3\) Thirdly, and finally, the Greek writers were free to treat subjects like the Cenci because the superior presence and awful hand of destiny were visible all the way through their works either through the poets' allusions or through divinity-sourced conventions. "The luckless victim of the wrath of Jove," said the London Magazine, "might be lashed to the commission of heart-freezing enormities, without human nature appearing degraded:
This, at least, is clear, that no indulgence towards the practice of such denaturalizing deprivities, could harbour even in the most secret recesses of those who were in the habit of seeing the occurrence represented as the immediate work of howling Furies. It was these latter that scourged the doomed person to the commission of such acts, in despite of himself,—in despite of the shriekings of his soul, and the revoltings of poor human nature! The hissing preternatural serpents accompanied the perpetration of unnatural acts and thus the human heart was saved from corrupting degradation, and human feeling preserved from being contaminated by a familiarity with evil things.35

In contradistinction to this Greek principle of characterization, Shelley, according to the opinion of the same magazine, seemed to act on a principle immediately opposed to that of the Greek writers. "His work," it said, "does not teach the human heart, but insults it:—a father who invites guests to a splendid feast, and then informs them of the events they are called together to celebrate the death of his own sons...'' has neither heart nor brains, neither human reason nor human affections, nor human passions of any kind:—nothing, in short, of human about him but the external form, which, however, in such a state of demoniac frenzy, must flash the wild beast from its eyes rather than the man.37

A number of other periodicals also expressed doubt that Shelley could accomplish his intention of effecting indirectly in his readers the kind of dynamic morality he
had envisioned in the preface to The Cenci. The view of the majority, to use the words of the Edinburgh Monthly Review, was that Shelley, before he released the play, should have given more consideration to the possibility that "the scrutinizing and anatomising discovery of things so monstrous" as those represented in his drama may have adverse effects on public attitudes toward crime and punishment and guilt. "It is absolutely impossible," stressed the Edinburgh Monthly Review, "that any man in his sober mind should believe that dwelling upon such scenes of unnatural crime and horror can be productive of any good to any one person in the world. . . .

in literature, as in all other human things, that which cannot do good, must, of necessity, tend to do evil. The delicacy of the moral sense of man—what when shall we say of that of woman?—was not a thing made to be tampered with upon such terms of artist-like coolness and indifference as these /those implied by The Cenci/. The Literary Gazette echoed the sentiments of the Edinburgh Monthly Review when it stated that Shelley nor any other man for that matter, "can pretend that any good effect can be produced by the delineation of such diabolism; the bare suggestions are a heinous offence." And, the London Magazine said:

The characters that appear in it /The Cenci/ are of no mortal stamp; they are daemons in human guise, inscrutable in their actions,
subtle in their revenge. Each has his smile of awful meaning—his purport of hellish tendency. The tempest that rages in his bosom is irrepressible but by death.\textsuperscript{41}

Shelley's reviewers had twin fears regarding the psychological effects of his Cenci account on the public-at-large. One of these was the belief that "the exposure of a crime too often pollutes the very soul which shudders at its recital, and destroys that unconsciousness of ill which most safely preserves its sanctities."\textsuperscript{42} There was little doubt in their minds that the horrible details of murder, which, they thought, were given too minutely in contemporary public journals led men "to dwell on horrors"\textsuperscript{43} till they ceased to be petrified and thereby were prepared to commit criminal acts which before they would have trembled to think on. The ancients were aware of this possibility. For example,

All know that for many centuries there was no punishment provided at Rome for parricide, and that not an instance occurred to make the people repent of this omission. And may it not be supposed that this absence of crime was owing to the absence of the law that the subject was thrown far back from the imagination—that the offense was impossible because it was believed so—and that the regarding it as out of all human calculation gave to it a distinct awfulness far more fearful than the severest of earthly penalties.\textsuperscript{44}

The companion fear of immediate moral corruption via exposure to literary representation was the fear of latent
effects of the same kind. "Crimes like those intimated in The Cenci," wrote the New Monthly Magazine, even "if the mind turns from their loathesomeness, ... may still do it irreparable evil."45

There is no small encouragement to vice in gazing into the dark pits of fathomless infamy. The ordinary wicked regard themselves as on a pinnacle of virtue, while they look into the fearful depth beneath them. The reader of this play, however intense his hatred of crime, feels in its perusal that the sting is taken from offences which usually chill the blood with horror, by the far-removed atrocity which it discloses. The more ordinary vices of the hero become reliefs to us; his cruelties seem to link him to humanity; and his murders are pillows upon which the imagination repose.46

Shelley's third intention, realistic characterization, fared better among his critics than did those of idealization and dynamic morality. In the preface Shelley explains that the Cencis were Catholics and were so deeply affected by their religion that it was interwoven with every aspect of their daily lives; moreover, their religion was not connected to any particular virtue, and, therefore, never served as a moral check (IP, II, 72). The Literary Gazette seems to ignore Shelley's explanation in its comment on the poet's "intemixture of things sacred and impure"47: "What adds to the shocking effect of The Cenci" it said, "is the perpetual use of the sacred name of God, and incessant appeals to the Saviour of the universe. The foul mixture
of religion and blasphemy, and the dreadful association of virtuous principles with incest, parricide, and every deadly sin, for a picture which, "to look upon we dare not." 48 Catholic or not, it claimed, "depravity so damnable as that of Count Cenci . . . never had either individual or aggregate existence." 49 Similarly, the British Review refuted Shelley's basic premise that in proportion as religion is interwoven with the whole fabric of life is its capacity for moral catalysis diminished. According to this review, Shelley was in error: "Men act wrongly in spite of religion; but it is because they have no steady belief in it, or because their notions of it are erroneous, or because its precepts do not occur to them at the moment some vicious passion prevails." 50 The London Magazine, however, in its interpretation of the character of Beatrice, and the Indicator, in its comparison of Shelley's characterization of the Cenci with that of its source, seem to have perceived and understood Shelley's prefatorial emphasis on the paradoxical nature of the Cenci personality. The London Magazine said of Beatrice:

She walks in the light of innocence; in the unclouded sunshine of loveliness and modesty; but her felicity is transient as the calm that precedes the tempest; and in the very whispers of her virtue, you hear the indistinct mutterings of distant thunder. She is conceived in the true master spirit of genius; and in the very instant of her parricide, comes home to
our imagination fresh in the spring time of innocence—balyzed in the deepest recesses of melancholy.51

And, the Indicator, regarding Count Cenci, explained:

"The Catholic author of the manuscript says that Cenci was an atheist, though he built a chapel in his garden. The chapel, he tells us, was only to bury his family in. Mr. Shelley, on the other hand, can suppose Cenci to have been a Catholic, well enough, considering the nature and tendency of the Catholic faith."52 In fact, continued the Indicator, the Count may have been either:

He might equally have been the man he was, in those times, and under all the circumstances of his power and impunity. The vices of his atheism and the vices of his superstition would, in a spirit of his temper and education, have alike been the result of a pernicious system of religious faith, which rendered the Divine Being gross enough to be disbelieved by any one, and imitated and bribed by the wicked.53

"Be this however as it might," it closed, "still the habitual instinct of his conduct is justly traceable to the prevailing feeling respecting religion, especially as it appears that he 'established masses for the peace of his soul.'"54

At a glance, Shelley's fourth and last stylistic intention, functional imagery, seems to have fared best of all in the estimation of his critics. Seven of the twelve reviews included in White's compilation make specific statements regarding the imagery of The Cenci, and the
majority of these are favorable. Shelley says in the preface that he has made every effort, at every level of representation, to effect an interpenetration between image and passion. The British Review was alone in thinking that the poet had failed completely to realize this goal; it charged linguistic and structural obscurity. "It [The Cenci] has, in fact, nothing really dramatic about it. It is a series of dialogues in verse; and mere versified dialogue will never make a drama," it said.55

If the only object of a writer is to tell a story, or to express a succession of various feelings, the form of dialogue . . . is the easiest that can be adopted. It is a sort of dragnet, which enables him to introduce and find a place for every thing that his wildest reveries suggest to him.56

Moreover, it added, "The language is loose and disjointed; sometimes it is ambitious of simplicity and it then becomes bald, inelegant, and prosaic. Words sometimes occur to which our ears are not accustomed . . . . We have a great deal of confused and not very intelligible imagery."57

The comments of the other six magazines were all favorable, but only, as we shall see later, if viewed in a general way. Speaking generally, the New Monthly Magazine noted: "The diction of the whole piece is strictly—that is, it is nearly confined to the expression of present feeling, and scarcely ever overloaded with imagery which
the passion does not naturally create."

Similarly, the *London Magazine* remarked that, in *The Cenci*, Shelley "preserves throughout a vigorous, clear, manly turn of expression, of which he makes excellent use to give force and even sublimity to the flashes of passion and of phrenzy,—and wildness and horror to the darkness of cruelty and guilt." In addition, it concluded, "his language, as he travels through the most exaggerated incidents, retains its correctness and simplicity; --and the most beautiful images, the most delicate and finished ornaments of sentiment and description, the most touching tenderness, graceful sorrow, and solemn appalling misery, constitute the very genius of poetry, present and powerful in these pages . . . ."

In connection with this fourth intention, the remaining journals were somewhat more specific in their praise of the poet's stylistic skills. Regarding Shelley's power to delineate human passion, *The Indicator* said: "The character of Beatrice is admirably managed by our author. It is thought by some, that she ought not to deny her guilt as she does;--that she ought not, at any rate, to deny the deed, whatever she may think of the guilt. But this, in our opinion, is one of the author's happiest subtleties.

She is naturally abhorrent from guilt,—she feels it to have been so impossible a thing to have killed a FATHER, truly so called, that what with her horror of the deed and of the infamy attending it, she would almost persuade
herself as well as others, that no such thing had actually taken place,—that it was a notion, a horrid dream, a thing to be gratuitously cancelled from people's minds, a necessity which they were all to agree had existed but was not to be spoken of, a crime which to punish was to proclaim and make real,—any thing in short, but that a daughter had killed her father. 61

Thus, the Indicator explained, Beatrice's lie "is a lie told, as it were, for the sake of nature, to save it the shame of a great contradiction. If any feeling less great and spiritual, any dread of a pettier pain, appears at last to be suffered by the author to mingle with it, a little common frailty and inconsistency only renders the character more human, and may be allowed a young creature about to be cut off in the bloom of life, who shews such an agonized wish that virtue should survive guilt and despair." 62

The Monthly Review, referring to the scene in which Beatrice first intimates to Lucretia, her stepmother, the unspeakable horrors perpetrated by Count Cenci, remarked: "Carefully and feelingly touched are these horrors." 64 In a similar way, the Independent noted:

The first scene of the third act is really appalling, its interest is powerfully dramatic and intense,—it is overwhelming. Beatrice becomes frantic at the thought which has seized possession of her mind—and never was frenzy directed to a terrible deed, but with all a conscience not dead to remorse, more ably portrayed than by our author. 65
The Independent thought, too, that Beatrice's reception of the news of her hastening doom had "all the most passionate feeling and awakening interest of Mr. Shelley's highest efforts"; namely,

the calm resolution with which she prepares to leave this world, is, perhaps, to be considered the less improbable, when we contemplate the whole of a character, which has altogether no parallel in our dramatic annals. There might have been one Beatrice—we scarcely believe another exists or can have existed.  

In addition to these instances of psychological realism, the Independent and the Indicator also praised Shelley for his descriptive skill. The Indicator said: "Cenci's angry description of the glare of day is very striking." It also commented:

We are aware of no passage in the modern or ancient drama, in which the effect of bodily torture is expressed in a more brief, comprehensive, imaginative manner, than in an observation made by a judge to one of the assassins.

Marzio: My God! I did not kill him; I know nothing; Olimpio sold the robe to me, from which you would infer my guilt.
2d. Jdg. Away with him!
1st. Jdg. Dare you, with lips yet white from the rack's kiss, Speak false?

(V.11.5-9; Italics mine)

The pleasure belonging to the original image renders it intensely painful.

The Independent noticed that "a part of the way" to Petrella, one of the country seats of the Cencis, was "admirably sketched."
The praise which Shelley receives here, as well as in previous quotations, however, with the exception of that of the Indicator, is of a very general nature. It is praise directed to isolated parts of the work rather than to the work as a total design; it is praise of the poet's genius in general rather than of the work in particular. Moreover, in the light of the nature of this praise by the poet's critics of his fourth intention--functional imagery, and of their uniform rejection of the other three (idealization of horror, dynamic morality, and realistic characterization), it is evident that the Romantic Reviewers failed to acknowledge any functional literary relationship between the form and content of The Cenci and the substance of its preface.

Shelley was especially concerned about the question of audience in relationship to The Cenci. Once he described the work as "written for the multitude." According to him, "The Cenci ought to have been popular"; it was written "without any of the peculiar feelings and opinions" which characterized his previous works. It follows that he felt discouraged when the criticism he received was the opposite of what he had expected. "Nothing," he wrote to Peacock, "is more difficult and unwelcome" than to write "without a confidence of finding readers; and if my play of The Cenci found none or few, I despair of ever producing anything that shall merit them."
Wherein, it must be asked, did the poet fail? What were his irremediable liabilities? It is true that Shelley was writing organic poetry and that a systematic method for its analysis had not yet been developed, but most of the Romantic Reviewers were educated men and, therefore, may have worked out a methodology had they so wished. Thus, while the absence of a systematic formalistic technique for poetry like Shelley's may have been the source of some of the critical resistance to The Cenci, I think the main source of the critical hostilities against this work stemmed less from deficient methodology than from uniform rejection of the poet's audience dynamics.

Generally speaking, a writer, unless he strives to be deliberately sophistical, expresses himself in a form communicable to another mind; the author translates his experience into such symbolic equivalence in language that his symbol may be translated back again by the reader into a similar experience. In this way, poetic language is both expressive and representative. Herein lies the matrix for the Romantic Reviewers' chief opposition to The Cenci.

Since experience, in the words of Lascelles Abercrombie, cannot be directly transferred from one mind to another, but can only be communicated by a symbol, and since in literature the symbol consists of words and combinations
of words which are successively understood, it follows that the first thing to do in communicating an inspiration is to disintegrate its unity into the parts of which it was composed, and that the first thing to happen in receiving an inspiration must be to take in the parts of it piecemeal. But the artist in thus putting forth his inspiration must provide, all the time he is doing so, for the re-integration of its parts once more into a unity, when the process of their succession is finally complete; so that the mind that receives his art will have received a series of impressions in a certain shapeliness of succession that will give, at the moment when the series is complete, a form to the mass of his experience, whereby all the successive impressions unite in a single organic whole. This pattern of disintegration for analysis and reintegration for synthesis works well for didactic literature where the poet has made efforts deliberately to accommodate the style and content of his work to the terms of selected modes of morality. But what is the degree of reliability of this pattern for works like The Cenci?

There exists in the work itself an analogue which implies the deepest fear of the Romantic Reviewers: How would the average reader respond to Beatrice's rationalization of parricide? Would he read it in a way parallel to that of Cenci's son, Giacomo, as this character recalls his
rationale to become an accessory to parricide? "Oh, had I never/ Found in thy smooth and ready countenance/ The mirror of my darkest thoughts; hadst thou/ Never with hints and questions made me look/ Upon the monster of my thought, until/ It grew familiar to desire" (V.i.19-24). What, in effect, would be the reader's response to the dramatic mirror of The Cenci? Most feared that the sentencing pope's exaggeration would become fact. "Parricide grows so rife," said the Pope, "that soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young/ Will strangle us all, dozing in our chairs./ Authority, and power, and hoary hair/ Are grown crimes capital" (V.iv.20-24).

This sort of anxious watchfulness over the feelings potentially excitable by The Cenci, in spite of the poet's prefatorial statement of seemingly honorable artistic intentions, makes this drama a most fitting catalyst for judging the relevance of the criticism of it both by the poet and by his contemporaries.

It is only recently, to quote William Empson, that the public, as a whole, has come to admire a great variety of critical dogmas, simultaneously, so as to need not so much a single habit for the reading of poetry as a sort of understanding which enables one to jump neatly from one style to another. The aesthetic conflict between Shelley and the Romantic Reviewers results, on the one hand, from Shelley's press for a new habit of reading, and, on the other, from the
Romantic Reviewers' allegiance to traditional habits of poetic communication.

It is this aesthetic impasse that presents us the opportunity to turn to the text of the work to test its tolerance of the terms of each, namely: (1) regarding Shelley, and using the prefatorial intentions as a matrix for analysis, does the text of *The Cenci* yield favorable ratios between stated intentions and stylistic outcomes? and, (2) regarding the Romantic Reviewers, is the veracity of their ascriptions of negative social force to *The Cenci* in any way affected by the relative values of Shelley’s intentions-outcomes ratios? Discovering answers to these questions forms the main problem of the next chapter, "Creation and Artistic Dexterity: A Stylistic Context for Relevance."
NOTES--CHAPTER FOUR


2 The language of this outline is Shelley's except in cases where inflectional forms have been modified to achieve parallelism.


7 Schneider, 268.

8 Ibid.

9 Biographia Literaria, XXII, Schneider, 356.

10 Statesman's Manual, I (1816), rpt. in Bate, 386.
11 Schneider, 356.

12 Biographia Literaria, XIV, Schneider, 274.

13 Ibid.

14 See Chapter One.

15 A Critique on the Liberal (1822), quoted in UH, 15.

16 The Edinburgh Review, I (October, 1802), 63.


18 Ibid.


20 The London Magazine, I (April, 1820), 401-407, rpt. in UH, 176.

21 The Literary Gazette, No. 167 (April 1, 1820), 209-210, rpt. in UH, 170.

22 The Literary Gazette, No. 167 (April 1, 1820), 209-210, rpt. in UH, 168.
23  The Monthly Magazine, XLIX (April 1, 1820), 260.

24  The British Review, XVII (June, 1821), 380-389, rpt. in UH, 211.


26  The New Monthly Magazine, XIII (May, 1820), 550-553, rpt. in UH 183.

27  Ibid.

28  Ibid.

29  Ibid.

30  Ibid., 181.

31  Ibid., 182.


33  Ibid., 192.

34  Ibid.

35  Ibid.

36  The review refers to Cenci's speech in which joy is expressed at the death of his sons. See The Cenci, I.iii. 39-50:

   My disobedient and rebellious sons
   Are dead!—Why, dead! . . . .
   Rejoice with me—my heart is wondrous glad.
37  The London Magazine, I (May, 1820), 546-555, rpt. in UH, 192.

38  The Edinburgh Review, III (May, 1820), 591-604, rpt. in UH, 186.

39  Ibid.

40  The Literary Gazette, No. 167 (April 1, 1821), 209-210, rpt. in UH, 170.

41  The London Magazine, I (May, 1820), 546-555, rpt. in UH, 191. This review also made the following charge: Whatever is not to be named amongst men Mr. Shelley seems to think has a peculiar claim to celebration in poetry;--and he turns from war, rape, murder, seduction, and infidelity--the vices and calamities with the description of which our common nature and common experience permit the generality of persons to sympathise--to cull some morbid and maniac sin of rare and doubtful occurrence, and sometimes to found a system of practical purity and peace on violations which it is disgraceful even to contemplate. His present work /The Cenci/ is a case in point.

42  The New Monthly Magazine, XIII (May 1, 1820), 550-553, in UH, 182.

43  Ibid.

44  Ibid.

45  Ibid.

46  Ibid.

47  The British Review, XVII (June, 1821), 380-389, rpt. in UH, 216.
48 The Literary Gazette, No. 167 (April 1, 1820), 209-210, rpt. in UH, 168.

49 Ibid.

50 The British Review, XVII (June, 1821), 380-389, rpt. in UH, 216.

51 The London Magazine, I (April, 1820), 401-407, rpt. in UH, 173.

52 The Indicator, No. 42 (July 26, 1820), 329-337, rpt. in UH, 199.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 The British Review, XVII (June, 1821), 380-389, rpt. in UH, 210-211.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 The New Monthly Magazine, XIII (May 1, 1820), 550-553, rpt. in UH, 184.

59 The London Magazine, I (May, 1820), 546-555, rpt. in UH, 190.

60 Ibid.
61 The Indicator, No. 42 (July 26, 1820), 329-337, rpt. in UH, 200.

62 Ibid.

63 The reviewer quotes lines 20-97 of Act II, Scene 1, beginning: "He frowns on others, but he smiles on me,/ Even as he did after the feast last night . . . ."

64 The Monthly Review, XCIV (February, 1821), 165.

65 The Independent, I (February 17, 1821), 99-103, rpt. in UH, 209.

66 Ibid., 210.

67 Ibid.

68 The Indicator, No. 42 (July 26, 1820), 329-337, rpt. in UH, 202.

69 Ibid., 202-203.

70 The Independent, I (February 17, 1821), 99-103, rpt. in UH, 209.


72 Ibid.


CHAPTER FIVE

CREATION AND ARTISTIC DEXTERITY: A STYLISTIC CONTEXT FOR RELEVANCE

In great dramas, there is an essential relationship between the manner and context of the words of a given play and the totality of its meaning as an aesthetic whole. Since words are, in a sense, the material with which a play is created, the key to this relationship lies in discovering what happens to language in the dramatic development of the action and character of the work.

One method of revealing the dramatic function of poetically ordered language is to ask whether a given word or image has been put to use in a special way by the dramatist to support, illuminate, and magnify the action of the play. For example, imagery of all kinds, ambiguities, figures of speech made uniquely potent and momentous by the circumstances of context—all these are available to the dramatist for fulfilment of a particular artistic need.

The language of poetry is generally directed away from the literal and toward the symbolic. Through symbolic language, insights into aspects of experience which cannot be reduced to explicit proposition can be expressed analogically or figuratively in such a way as to reveal
an imaginative grasp of their nature and their emotional weight and moment. In this way, things which were before unrelated can be brought into association and disparate things can be shown in relationship.

In plays which have a distinctive quality of wholeness, a dramatist may draw from such a wide range of impressions for his figures and give to individual words so many special accents, that the accumulated associations and implications of these figures allow the action of the play to illuminate the most remote boundaries of human experience. Moreover, where symbolic language is integral to the play, the whole fabric of the work becomes affected, and the most inconspicuous speech may contribute to the probabilities of character and situation. In this way, the moment they appear, the images have relevance both to character and to the status of the action of the play. It is this capacity for organic vitalism, always available to the poet in his medium, symbolic language, says Cleanth Brooks, that is one of the poet's "most subtle and ironically telling instruments."¹

Symbolic language, since it consists of an image (the analogy) and an idea or conception (the subject) which that image suggests or evokes, may be, like its basic components--image and idea--either figurative or literal.
A figurative image suggests resemblances: it connotes "any and every imaginative picture or other experience, drawn in every kind of way which may have come to the poet, not only through any of his senses, but through his mind and emotions as well, which he uses, in the forms of simile and metaphor in the widest sense for purposes of analogy." On the other hand, a literal image, though it may ultimately participate in a symbolism, begins—whether in statement or in reflection—as a reference to specific subject matter: people, places, objects, actions, events.

Though they differ in substance, both kinds of images according to sense conform to the same patterns of recurrence. The same image, literal and/or figurative, may recur throughout a work, or a network of images may recur together at appropriate intervals throughout a work. Theoretically, if the same image recurs in different contexts, it serves to link those concepts in significant ways; if different images recur together several times in different contexts, then the presence of any one of them in subsequent contexts is capable of evoking the accumulative emphasis of its composite symbolic matrix.

Stuart Curran, who has done a detailed study of the figurative imagery of The Cenci in the light of the author's
prefatorial statement concerning the relationship between
technique and effect, feels about Shelley's results as
writes in Shakespeare's Way, "is that Shakespeare secures
a unity of each of his greater plays, not only by the plot,
by linkage of characters, by the sweep of Nemesis, by the
use of irony, and by appropriateness of style, but by
deliberate repetition throughout the play of at least one
set of words or ideas in harmony with the plot. It is like
the effect of the dominant note in a melody."³ About
Shelley's art in The Cenci, Curran says: "'The imagery
and passion . . . interpenetrate one another' to such an
extent that by the combination and recombination of image
patterns Shelley is able to fix for any given moment the
complicated relationship between father and daughter,
between persecutor and victim, between the corrupter and
the vessel of his corruption."⁴ Thus, he concludes, "By
the shifting combination of his image patterns, Shelley
is able to create an intricately textured fabric in which
the themes are continually bridged, the plot ramified, a
moral cosmos verified."⁵

Curran is right about Shelley's singular achievement
in the integration of figurative image and idea in the
development of character, theme, and plot in The Cenci.
But Shelley's artistic dexterity in this work is even more complex than Curran has indicated. The symbolic framework of *The Cenci* consists of intricately interwoven, but no less distinguishable, patterns of figurative and literal images which, if taken together, solve intrinsically the most frequently voiced stylistic problem of the work, but which, if taken alone, leave the same problem to be solved only partially. Curran’s work is a case in point.

In his characterization of Beatrice, for example, Curran says that the clue to understanding Shelley’s heroine is the realization that she faces “both a crisis of faith and a crisis of identity,” or “awareness.” He interprets both crises within the framework of the play’s figurative symbolism. “The bulk of the imagery,” says Curran, “consists of great paired symbols . . . . Though the symbols change, the essential pattern remains the same. Shelley juxtaposes light and dark, day and night, purity of eye and ambiguity of mask, the generative power of dew and the corrosive effect of poison.”

The most impressive feature in Beatrice’s appearance, remarked over and over, is her eyes, the most intense expression of her ‘light of life,’ her strength of purpose and clarity of vision. . . . Beatrice stands as a 'bright form' (II.ii.133), 'the one thing innocent and pure/ In this black, guilty world' (V.iii.101-102). Her father, on the
other hand, is described as 'dark and bloody' (II.i.55), 'dark and fiery' (I.i.49), reminiscent of Satan.

Thus, he concludes, "As Satan's mission is to corrupt Adam and Eve, Cenci's is to poison his daughter's soul, to establish his dominion over it. On the simplest level of action the play records the process by which Beatrice's 'light of life becomes dead, dark' (V.iv.134)."

In this play of a polarized good and evil Count Cenci is again and again apostrophized as the devil. Thus, in the opening scene Camillo compares Cenci to 'Hell's most abandoned fiend' (I.i.l17); Lucretia sees her daughter's rebellion at the banquet as rebuking 'The devil . . . that lives in him' (II.i.45); Cenci's devilish machinations ruin Giacomo's home and he vows that 'to that hell will I return no more' (III.i.331). Just before Cenci disappears from the play, he proudly admits his depravity:

I do not feel as if I were a man, But like a fiend appointed to chastise The offenses of some unremembered world. (IV.i.160-162)

Beatrice justifies her father's murder not as a punishment for having violated her, but because she is persuaded that the 'act/Will but dislodge a spirit of deep hell/Out of a human form' (IV.ii.6-8). And she prophesies that 'his death will be/But as a change of sin-chastising dreams,/A dark continuance of the Hell within him . . .' (IV.ii.31-33). Lucretia echoes the same thought in heavy irony when she tries to convince Savella that her dead husband is only asleep in 'a hell of angry dreams' (IV.iv.8). The murder is a righteous expunging from the world of a devil in human form.
But why, it may be asked, if the murder is a "righteous expunging," does Beatrice dissociate herself from the deed? This, in effect, is the main problem inherent in the characterization of Beatrice: her insistent denial of guilt vis-à-vis the angelic qualities of integrity ascribed to her. The gist of Curran's solution to the problem follows:

Beginning as a sensitive and basically good human being whose values are civilized, she finds herself inhabiting a bestial world whose denizens satisfy only a selfish appetite for power and personal gain. Always these men are alone, alienated from the world on which they prey, isolating their victims in turn. Both Cenci and Orsino bar her exit from the prison of their separate designs. And then that external savage chaos is perpetrated upon her person—not simply upon, but within as well. To keep from being swirled into that vortex of evil, Beatrice must use evil means to support good, to destroy the bestiality that would destroy her. . . .

She can withstand an exterior evil, an exterior assault. But the 'clinging, black, contaminating mist' suffuses her, becoming an interior evil that subverts good and subdues the girl to her father's will as long as he exists to exercise it. The incestuous act is both profoundly sexual and profoundly metaphysical: if Beatrice is not to become, like Lucifer, the instrument of evil for a cruel God—and Cenci throughout the fourth act voices this purpose—then she must commit murder. The intense bombardment of the imagery in the third and fourth acts emphasizes the truth of Beatrice's assertion at the trial that she has not committed parricide: her crime is deicide.

Thus, as Curran sees it, "The Cenci legend posed for Shelley a physical situation—perhaps the only possible one—
in which good was not merely made to suffer from evil, but was subjected to it so completely that it literally embodied evil. As a result,

Beatrice is faced with an ethical dilemma admitting of no solution consonant with her conception of good. To become, like Lucifer, the instrument of evil is the greatest of all possible sins against her Catholic God; to commit suicide is an act of mortal sin for which the Church allows no exceptions; only by killing her father in line with the principles of divine justice can Beatrice hope for absolution from the evil into which her father has plunged her. But the universe does not respond to her conception of it. Her act creates further evil, from which the only relief is death—if even that is to be a relief. For, at best the afterlife she conceives at the play's end will be a void; at its worst, it will be a Hell in which the evil God who rules the universe will at last and eternally commit Beatrice to Luciferian violation.

Curran's interpretation of the Beatrice paradox is consistent with his view that, in The Cenci, Shelley "distills the incestuous act from its sexual to its metaphysical nature." For Shelley, Curran believes, "is a sensitive enough artist to realize . . . that an undefined evil is of greater enormity than any crime conceivable, 'for there are deeds/ Which have no form, sufferings which have no tongue' (III.i.141-142). Cenci's outrage of his daughter is no mere sexual assault or criminal incident, no incident at all, but 'a truth, a firm enduring truth, Linked with each lasting circumstance
of life, / Never to pass away' (III.i.61-63)."17 Nevertheless, the plea of deicide implies a context of martyrdom which in turn subordinates Beatrice's essential humanity to abstract principle: she surrenders her life for what she conceives to be a divine cause. Therefore, I suggest that there is a complementary resolution of the Beatrice paradox which focuses on and reconciles the heroine's insistent denial with her intellectual integrity in a more nearly human perspective. This solution, I think, lies in the signification of Shelley's other symbolic scheme in *The Cenci*: the literal symbolism.18

To amend Curran's view to reflect this additional stylistic dimension, it will be necessary, first, briefly to summarize the narrative of *The Cenci*, then to isolate, define, illustrate, and interpret the pattern and meaning of Shelley's literal symbolism, and finally, to demonstrate the significance of this pattern as a vehicle of amplification of the Beatrice paradox.

Generally speaking, *The Cenci* tells the story of the ramifications of Beatrice Cenci's oppression by parental and ecclesiastical authority. In its barest outline, Count Cenci, obsessed with intense hatred for his family, first prays for the death of his two sons, Rocco and Cristofano, and then holds a banquet to celebrate their
demise after he has received news that both have been killed in freak accidents, which, in his mind, were acts of God in direct response to his prayers. Because Beatrice, less defeated in spirit by his inveterate hatred than the remaining members of the family—wife Lucretia and sons Giacomo and Bernardo—denounces Cenci at the satanic feast, the Count, although he has contemplated it previously, becomes more determined than ever to break her spirit by forcing her to participate with him indefinitely in the unnatural act of incest. In turn, Beatrice and the rest of the family, unprotected both by ecclesiastical and federal authority, resolve to murder their common oppressor. Though they hire assassins to execute their resolution, unforeseen developments bring all of them except Bernardo under suspicion; with the exception of Beatrice, all, under intense interrogation and/or torture, confess their guilt; and all, including Beatrice, are finally executed.

The clue to the potential significance of paradox in general as a structural element in The Cenci occurs in the preface of the work. There, as Shelley announces his intention of dynamic morality, he makes the following statement about the relationship of his characterization of Beatrice to this goal: "It is in the restless and anatomising casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; it is
the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge, that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists.\textsuperscript{19} A semantic clue to paradox lies in the fact that a viable union of paradoxical elements is often the end result of the process of sophistical, equivocal, and specious reasoning characteristic of casuistry. In addition, Shelley's statement contains two syntactical clues and one notional clue. One of the syntactical clues occurs in the clause "what she \textit{Beatrice} did and suffered." Here, though syntactically the heroine is the actor in the clause, in sense she is both actor \textit{did} and object \textit{suffered}. The other occurs in the compound direct objects of the verb \textit{contemplate}: "her wrongs and their revenge." In this instance, we are presented with a possible two-faced ambiguity: "her wrongs and their revenge" could mean either the things she herself (as agent) did wrong and for which she became the object of her victim's vengeance, or it could mean those wrongs which became hers as a suffering object, which wrongs, she, as subject, avenged in her personal behalf. Finally, there is a notional clue in the phrase "contemplate alike," meaning "contemplate" 'at the same time,' 'simultaneously,' 'at once,' seemingly mutually exclusive entities. The accumulative value of these clues is the suggestion that the clue to resolving
the Beatrice paradox does not lie in analyzing the heroine's characteristics into antithetical categories but in synthesizing them into a meaningful unity. Thus, we ask not whether Beatrice's crime is accessory to parricide or deicide, but to what extent it could be considered both. We ask, also, not whether Beatrice ruled out suicide, but on what basis it may be said that her crime is really a curious paradoxical mixture of all three—parricide, deicide, and suicide. This triple possibility, I think, is the epitome of Shelley's stylistic subtlety in *The Cenci*.

Beatrice is casuistry incarnate. As such, she is not meant to be justified; she is meant to serve as a catalyst for evocation of a battle between sympathy and antipathy "to teach the heart knowledge of itself" not for the purpose of emulating the circumstance of its contemplation but for the purpose of transcending it. For, as Shelley also says in the preface, "Undoubtedly no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes. If Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better..."
But, we do not have to take Shelley's word regarding the possibility of Beatrice being a figure of casuistry incarnate. Such is the import of the poet's dual symbolic scheme in the poem; therefore, the poem has its own voice.

We have already summarized Curran's view of the function of figurative imagery in the characterization of Beatrice. Our interest lies in developing a view of the value of the literal imagery in reference to the same character in order to show that both schemes interrelate to provide a matrix of reference which permits the resolution of the Beatrice paradox.

Literal imagery usually begins, as we have said earlier, with reference to specific objects: people, places, events, things, all of which, as the work develops, ultimately acquire symbolic proportions through a process of association. In The Cenci, however, one could almost miss Shelley's literal imagery because instead of taking a specific object as his imagistic magnet, he takes the word itself as class or as nomenclature. Then, by exploiting its grammatical and derivational dimensions, he ultimately develops a symbolic system capable of illuminating both Beatrice's motives and her rationalizations of those motives.

The repetition of word or words throughout the play draws our attention, first, to the value of the word as
class, of the word per se as an instrument of communication. In the first act, for example, Camillo hopes that Cenci's "false, impious words" (I.i.124) will not tempt God to abandon the Count. 21 As Cenci contemplates his plans to commit incest with Beatrice, he says, "I need not speak over what now I think. Though the heart triumph with itself in words" (I.i.138-141). When Beatrice discusses with Orsino the possibility of filing with the Pope a petition against her father, and Orsino tends to flattery and verbosity, she chides him: "Speak but one word" (I.ii.44). When she later challenges as false Cenci's statement that the purpose for the feast is to celebrate the death of two of his sons, the Count defends his credibility by evoking "the word of God" to witness that he speaks "the sober truth" (I.iii.55-58).

In Act II, Lucretia, in referring to her reaction to Cenci's rejoicing at the death of his sons, recalls: "At the first word he spoke I felt the blood/ Rush to my heart, and fell into a trance;/ . . . Whilst you alone [Beatrice] stood up, and with strong words/ Checked his unnatural pride" (II.i.40-44). Later, Cenci himself reveals that in response to this rebuke by Beatrice, "inarticulate words" had fallen from his lips as he fled the presence of his verbal chastiser.
In the mad scene of the third act, Beatrice herself speaks some "wild words" (III.i.66). And so disconcerted is she by Cenci's initial assault that she suggests that if she tries to speak, she shall go mad (III.i.7-25). Lucretia, however, thinks that her step-daughter's refusal to say exactly what has happened to her is deliberate. To this, Beatrice can only respond rhetorically: "What are the words," she asks, "which you would have me speak? . . . of all words/ That minister to mortal intercourse,/ Which wouldst thou hear? For there is none to tell/ My misery" (III.i.107-116).

In the fourth act, Cenci continues his scheme of subjugation against Beatrice. When she does not present herself at his apartment after three summonses, he prays aloud for a divine curse to be lodged against her (IV.i.114-149). He does not relent at Lucretia's plea to him to "unsay those dreadful words" (IV.i.137). Instead, he bids his wife to persuade his daughter to hasten to his chamber before his "words are chronicled in Heaven" (IV.i.159).

Finally, at the very end of the play, Camillo reports that his intervention with the Pope in behalf of the Cenci inmates has been unsuccessful; the Pope has said to him "these three words coldly: 'They must die'" (V.iv.14). Bernardo, though, does not give up hope. As he sees it,
"there are words and looks/ To bend the sternest purpose" (V.iv.30); thus, he makes a personal plea to the Pope. But this last hope for clemency fails also, causing Beatrice to say of her prosecutors: "Oh plead/ With famine, or wind-walking Pestilence,/ Blind lightning, or the deaf sea, not with man!/ Cruel, cold, formal man; righteous in words,/ In deeds a Cain" (V.iv.105-108).

The initial impression of these repetitions of the word as class or as nomenclature is to suggest the importance of the word per se as an integral part of human relationships. At this level, words can be seen both as indicators of meaning and as monitors of human behavior. As such, they serve as vehicles of communication with self (intimate) and with others (social), either spoken—as in speech, prayer, vow; written—as in order, petition, sealed commission; or thought—as in picture, image, name (in the sense of identification for purposes of classification).

Words also have metaphoric power: the word as a vehicle of meaning, via the processes of equation, correlation, and symbolism, can become freighted with a broad range of contextual values. For example, there are strong implications in The Cenci that thoughts equal words, that gestures equal thoughts, and therefore, that gestures equal words. Such is the figurative logic of Camillo's statement to
Cenci in the first scene of the play: "How hideously look deeds of lust and blood/ Through those snow white and venerable hairs!--/ Your children should be sitting round you now,/ But that you fear to read upon their looks/ The shame and misery you have written there" (I.i.38-42).

Here, looks and appearances can be read just as words can be read from the printed page. Cenci himself likes to "look on such pangs as terror ill conceals,/ The dry fixed eyeball; the pale quivering lip,/ Which tell . . . that the spirit weeps within/ Tears bitterer than the bloody sweat of Christ" (I.i.110-113).

In connection with this point, at the feast, we get two different readings of the Count's smile during his announcement of the death of his sons. One guest does not believe that the Count could make such an announcement in a cheerful mood; therefore, when the other guests begin to leave in outrage, he says:

No, stay!
I do believe it is some jest; . . .
I think his son has married the Infanta,
Or found a mine of gold in El Dorado;
'Tis but to season some such news; stay, stay!
I see 'tis only raillery by his smile.
(I.iii.70-76)

But Beatrice gives a clearer reading. "Great God!" she says, "Some dreadful ill/ Must have befallen my brothers. . . . I fear that wicked laughter round his eye" (I.iii.39).
His sons Cristofano and Rocco are indeed dead, and Cenci is happy about it.

Later, though Beatrice will not reveal to Orsino the exact nature of the outrage she has suffered at Cenci's hands, still he is able to determine what she plans to do about it; "whilst her step-mother and I," he says to Giacomo,

Bewildered in our horror, talked together
With obscure hints; both self-misunderstood
And darkly guessing, stumbling, in our talk,
Over the truth, and yet to its revenge,
She interrupted us, and with a look
Which told before she spoke it, he must die... (III.i.349-361)

And, at the trial, the officer who witnessed Marzio's death reported that the prisoner said nothing before he died, but "As soon as we/ Had bound him on the wheel, he smiled on us,/ As one who baffles a deep adversary;/ And holding his breath, died"(V.ii.180-183).

Acts or deeds also have word value in The Cenci; thoughts equal words, acts or deeds derive from thoughts, and therefore, acts or deeds equal words. Here, the literal image of word-as-class comes still closer to symbolic status as the poet further develops word value by suggesting a series of correlative truths. Any one or a combination of previous thoughts, acts, and utterances already ordered, performed, and spoken by one character
in a given context, can illuminate the pattern and
significance of word and action spoken and performed by
another character either by contrast or by comparison.
Through correlative analysis, we discover that Beatrice
duplicates several of the basic characteristics of her
father-adversary. Such duplication is surprising, since
he represents the epitome of evil, and she, the epitome
of the opposite quality, good. Yet, such duplication,
we discover, is functional in this sense: it demonstrates
that there is little difference between extremes, that an
opposing view taken to extreme may take on characteristics
of that from which it attempts to differentiate itself.

First, both Cenci and Beatrice assimilate theological
virtue. Cenci, for example, sees the death of his sons
as a divine response to his prayer, as an incident which
demonstrates that he is favored from above (I.iii.65;
IV.i.110-111), that his prayers for their death were
"chronicled in Heaven" (IV.i.159). So strongly does he
feel that he is correct in this deduction that he suggests
that those friends who love him should, as they do for
saints, "mark the day a feast upon their calendars"
(I.iii.66-68). He is certain that God will not require
his soul of him "till the lash/ Be broken in its last and
deepest wound;/ Until its hate be all inflicted" (IV.i.66-68).
Similarly, Beatrice defends that God knew of Cenci's outrages against her and made her "speedy act \[of revenge against him\] the angel of His wrath" (V.iii.114); therefore, "Crimes which mortal tongue dare never name/ God ... scruples to avenge" (IV.ii.129). In addition, she is certain that her act of vengeance against Cenci but "dislodged a spirit of deep hell/ Out of human form" (IV.ii.5-8).

In addition to sharing the tendency to assimilate theological virtue, both the Count and his daughter display a witch-like belief in the potency of words. First, a witch makes up a word of power by associating it intensely and repeatedly with one or more impulses she discerns in her own nature. Next, repeating it only after sacred preparations, she fixes the word in her depths by rite and image. Finally, if not overused, the word becomes magic: invoking it truly summons up or releases those forces or moods the witch has locked into it. In similar fashion, Cenci and Beatrice treat certain words as omnipotent. First, each searches for a word to indicate a special thought. Once the indicator is determined, each devises a method to actualize the thought represented by the indicator. Finally, the indicator gains existential particularity—thought is translated into deed—by successful application of whatever method each has selected for
such actualization. In this way, the word, so to speak, becomes flesh.

In Cenci's case, for example, "any design . . . captious fancy makes/ The picture of its wish" becomes his "natural food . . ./ Until it be accomplished" (I.i.87-91). The Count confides to Camillo that he was happier in early manhood when he could more easily "act the thing" he thought (I.i.90-100). Yet, though "invention palls" in his old age, still he thinks "there yet remains a deed to act/ Whose horror might make sharp" again his now dulling appetite (I.i.100). Thus, early in the first act, Cenci hints that his possible ravishment of Beatrice will represent the epitome of a scheme of horrors he is contemplating against his family. He has prayed for the death of his two sons; but even if they do not die, he will deny them sustenance, hoping to starve them to death. Bernardo, his youngest son, and his wife, Lucretia, he thinks, "could not be worse/ If dead and damned" (I.i.129-136). What he plans for Beatrice, though, must remain for the moment only in his thoughts: "then, as to Beatrice," he says,

I think they cannot hear me at that door;  
What if they should? And yet I need not speak  
Though the heart triumphs with itself in words,  
O, thou most silent air, that shalt not hear  
What now I think! Thou, pavement, which I tread  
Towards her chamber,--let your echoes talk  
Of my imperious steps scorning surprise,  
But not of my intent.  
(I.i.137-144)
After Beatrice verbally chastises him at the feast, Count Consal becomes even more determined to execute against her a "charm" that will make her "meek and tame." Moreover, a charm that will work well "must be done, . . . shall be done," he swears. Obsessed with this thought, the Count refers to it often until it has been accomplished. Once he exults to himself:

'Tis an awful thing
To touch such mischief as I now conceive;
So men sit shivering on the dewy bank,
And try the chill stream with their feet;
    once in . . .
How the delighted spirit pants for joy.
(II.i.124-128)

On another occasion, he refers to it as "a deed which shall "confound both night and day" (II.i.182-184), as an act that "shall extinguish all" for him (II.i.188). "I," says the Count, "bear a darker deadlier gloom/ Than the earth's shade, or interlunar air,/ Or constellations quenched in murkiest cloud,/ In which I walk secure and unbeheld/ Towards my purpose.--Would that it were done!" 23

Once the outrage is committed, the initial impact of the crime conforms to the Count's wish, that his victim "wish for night" (II.i.187). At first, Beatrice gives brief consideration to the ultimate form of night for human beings--suicide, or, in her words, "self-murder" (III.i.132). She later decides, however, that neither death nor life, as
it is, can give her rest from the outrage she has endured: "I thought to die," she says to Orsino, "but a religious awe/ Restrains me, and the dread lest death itself/ Might be no refuge from the consciousness/ Of what is yet unexpiated" (III.i.148-151). Something must be done, she concludes, "something which shall make/ The thing that I have suffered but a shadow/ In the dread lightning which avenges it;/ Brief, rapid, irreversible, destroying/ The consequence of what it cannot cure" (III.i.85-91). Here is the counteracting special thought; the indicator, however, is yet to be determined—"Some such thing is to be endured or done: when I know what, I shall be still and calm;/ And never anything will move me more" (III.i.92-94).

The indicator needed by Beatrice soon reveals itself to the heroine as she muses to herself:

All must be suddenly resolved and done.
What is this undistinguishable mist
Of thoughts which rise, like shadow after shadow,
Darkening each other?

(III.i.169-172)

"Mighty death!" she verbalizes, "Thou double-visaged snadow?
Only judge!/ Rightfullest arbiter!" (III.i.177-179). The indicator known, the next question is, what shall be the means?

The first answer is to have the Count ambushed on his way to Petrella Castle. That plan fails, however, when the
Count passes the designated gorge before he is expected by his ambushers. The second answer is death in his own apartment at the Castle. This one is successful. Even as the henchmen are executing the murder, Beatrice encourages Lucretia, "Fear not/what may be done, but what is left undone;/The act seals all." 24

Thus, for both father and daughter, once the thought becomes word, neither rests until the word has become actualized in deed. They also share a third characteristic discoverable by correlative analysis; both have a tendency to individuate meaning, to assign private meanings to words which have long-established public significations.

This tendency is evident at the feast, for example, in the remarks of one of the guests about the purpose of the gathering. According to Cenci's guest, the purpose of the feast is to celebrate some "most desired event" in which they all "demand a common joy" (I.iii.18-20). Cenci agrees: "It is indeed a most desired event" (I.iii.21). But it turns out that the "most desired event" thought by Cenci to "demand a common joy" is a private, and by public standards, even a diabolical joy. "My disobedient and rebellious sons/Are dead!—Why, dead!" he says. "Rejoice with me—my heart is wondrous glad." 25

In the same way, though implicitly, Cenci individuates
the culturally determined social-behavior norms of the father-daughter relationship. The introduction of sexual love into the father-daughter relationship, for example, completely fractures Beatrice's conception of her social and genetic identity. This result is suggested by her inability to supply an indicator for the molested self: "What thing am I?" she inquires. "O what am I?/ What name, what place, what memory shall be mine?/ What retrospects, outliving even despair?" (III.i.37; III.i.74-76). This time, no indicator comes. But she does reach a significant conclusion: "I have no father" (III.i.39-40).

It is this conclusion which serves as the conceptual axis of the supreme example of individuation of meaning in the play.

The last scenes of the play cannot be fully rationalized by considering the poet's figurative imagery alone. The figurative imagery suffices for paralleling the dichotomous character traits of Cenci and Beatrice (he is devilish; she is angelic); it also serves well to dramatize the heroine's sense of personal outrage: Cenci's sexual abuse of her by suggesting the transmutation of her virginal qualities of light, innocence, and purity, to acute sensations of darkness, guilt, and evil. But the central problem with Shelley's characterization of Beatrice occurs after her
assimilation of Cenci's satanic characteristics. It is the continual ascriptions of innocence to the heroine after this assimilation both by herself and those closest to her, that become difficult to reconcile with the known facts of her previous experience. Thus, it is fortunate that by the time we reach the closing scenes of the play the word-as-class-as-equation-as-correlation has evolved into full symbolic status.

At this stage, we are less concerned about words as words than about the essence of semantic dynamics. Freighted as they have become with such intense powers of suggestion, the words now spoken by the characters share many of the characteristics of their speakers. Just as a single human being, for example, say Beatrice, may be at once daughter (to Cenci), step-daughter (to Lucretia), sister (to Bernardo and Giacomo), citizen (to the state), convert (to the church), and individual, private personality (to herself), so may a single work represent a wide range of signification. And, just as a human being may intensify any one of his roles to his advantage in controversial or threatening situations, so may a semantic dimension of a word be used to parallel advantage.

The trial judge and her accusers, for example, see only Beatrice Cenci, daughter. That is why she must die.
The law relies on denotative precision: a female child is the daughter of the man who sires her; if such a child is found to be in any way responsible for the death of such a man, then she is guilty of parricide. Hence, at the purely denotative level, Beatrice argues against a prima facie case. Only at the symbolic level does the heroine's plea of innocence make sense.

What Beatrice emphasizes in her answer to the judge's question concerning her guilt or innocence is that the law really has no word for her crime, at least at the level of her reasoning. "What is it thou wouldst with me?" she asks.

Or wilt thou rather tax high-judging God
That he permitted such an act as that
Which I have suffered, and which He beheld;
Made it unutterable, and took from it
All refuge, all revenge, all consequence,
But that which thou has called my father's death?
Which is or is not what men call a crime,
Which either I have done, or have not done;
Say what you will. I shall deny no more.
If ye desire it thus, thus let it be,
And so an end of all.

(V.iii.77-88 Italics mine)

Beatrice's alternatives (is or is not a crime; have or have not done) are allowable only at the symbolic level. Only the poet's scheme of literal symbolism allows the heroine the semantic latitude she needs to validate her claim to transcendent being, a claim implicit in her defense that she has been an instrument in the hand of God meant to scourge the world of evil spirits like Cenci, for the
betterment of mankind. The literal symbolism available at this stage of the action provides an interpretive scheme which has been developed in such a way as to permit harmonization of the seemingly mutually exclusive factors implicit in the figurative scheme of characterization. Here, the three characteristics which both characters share—assimilation of theological virtue and semantic ritualization and individuation—serve as a composite catalyst for harmonization or reconciliation of paradoxical elements.

Analogically, Beatrice is a lot like Cenci: both are a lot like God, in that for both, words become flesh through acts, and both create deeds of hatred and vengeance. That they create, not what they create is what makes them god-like: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light"; and Cenci said, "Let there be incest," and there was incest; and Beatrice said, "Let there be revenge," and there was revenge.

On the basis of these analogical factors, to say that Beatrice, as regards Cenci's death, killed a god (deicide), or killed her father (parricide) is to suggest that she killed herself (suicide), since her own being, at the symbolic level, is so intricately bound up with the personality of all three. And, because her presence at the trial rules out suicide, by symbolic deduction, the
other two possibilities of criminal conduct (deicide and parricide) are also discounted. Only in this way can Beatrice say to Bernardo in her last speech in the play: "be constant . . . to the faith that I, / Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame, / Lived ever holy and unstained" (V.iv.146-150).
NOTES—CHAPTER FIVE


5 Ibid., pp. 127-128.

6 Ibid., p. 129.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 108.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 107.

12 Ibid., p. 130.

13 Ibid., p. 138.

14 Ibid., pp. 140-141.
The following excerpts from Curran’s analysis imply his awareness of the significance of the literal word, if not the literal symbolism, in the development of character in The Cenci.

Page 91: He distills the act of incest from its sexual to its metaphysical nature. . . . Shelley is a sensitive enough artist to realize that an undefined evil is of greater enormity than any crime conceivable.

Pages 133-134: The drama poises between the necessity of . . . isolated figures to establish their will in fact and their fear lest it cannot be accomplished safely, between an agony of decision and an agony of indecision. . . . The conspirators are naturally anxious that the murder be accomplished quickly and fearful that Cenci may escape and destroy them all; but this linguistic pattern is not simply confined to that part of the tragedy lying between their resolve and its accomplishment. Orsino ends the second scene of Act II with the assertion that success in his world can only proceed from clever flattery of the dark spirit ruling it—"As I will do" (II.ii.161). This remark, uttered at the end of his soliloquy stands not only as a reiteration of his resolve, but as the culmination of his self-incitement. The two previous scenes have concluded with a similar imprecation falling from Cenci’s lips. He has whetted his appetite with plans for his most insidious crime; he has contemplated his artistry with a relish that he realizes the deed will end, but his delay is caused less by his professed delight in caressing the design than by a nameless fear of Beatrice.

20 IP, II, 71.

21 Cf. Chapter Four of this study, n. 58.


23 Ibid., II.i.193.

24 Ibid., IV.ii.49-50.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS: THE RELEVANCE OF POETRY AND CRITICISM IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

The relationship between criticism and poetry closely resembles the relationship between poetry and life; both criticism and poetry use the resources of language as a defense against infinite flux—poetry against the flux of actual experience in the concrete world of reality, and criticism against the flux of metaphoric profusion in the symbolic world of poetry. "Poetry is a criticism of life; poetry names and arranges, and thus arrests and transfixes its subject in a form which has a life of its own forever separate but springing from the life which confronts its. Poetry is life at the remove of form and meaning, not life lived but life framed and identified." Sequentially, criticism attempts to make the view of life framed by poetry more available to and seen through a clearer light by the reader.

Since a poem is made by a poet, takes its subject matter from the universe of man, things, and events, and is addressed or made available to an audience of hearers or readers, a critic may discuss its meaning either in reference to aspects of its form and content or in reference to one or
a combination of factors external to the poem—for example, biography, history, culture, tradition. Since no critical approach, in the words of R. P. Blackmur, "opens on anything except from its own point of view and in terms of its own prepossessions," there is always room for another idea among the critical approaches to literature. Moreover, the usefulness of a given approach is relative to the critic's strength of mind and to the inherent limitations of his critical generalizations. "Since all readers are critics, whether or not they intend to be," says Donald Stauffer, "and since the critic is considered an interpreter of an artist's work to an audience, then, ideally, in order to reach an accurate appraisal, the audience should know not only all it can about the work itself, not only all it can about the artist, but also all it can about the critic and his aims." For, he concludes, it is "only when we are aware of the relations of artist, work of art, critic, and audience may we be certain that criticism is leading us closer to the actual work of art."

There are no formal prerequisites for critics. Nevertheless, a good critic is always aware that the literary work with which his understanding labors must be allowed to remain itself: poetry is idiomatic; it is a saying which cannot be said otherwise. Because of this characteristic
feature of poetry, there is as much difference between using words to talk about a poem and the poem itself as there is between words used to elucidate a musical composition and the music itself. It follows, then, that the relationship between poetry and criticism is never absolute; criticism is always assertive, provisional, tentative.

Although poetry is self-sufficient as artistic document, it is seldom self-explanatory. Because of this, criticism can perform a useful service to poetry: "The capacity to ponder works of art and to say something which enlarges our conception of their value, or gives them a fresh relevance, is the rudiment of criticism as art"; the intent of all good criticism is in some way to ameliorate the relations between art and its audience, whatever the nature of the framework selected for critical elucidation. For, as contemporary novelist Morris West says, a poet "draws pictures in the sand which the wind blows away, but for just a moment people can look at themselves and say, 'Ah, there's a truth. That's something they didn't tell us.' The wind blows it away tomorrow, but the truth is in the brains of a man. Even half the truth. That's his function. That's his justification." And, as Matthew Arnold says about the critic: "the critical power... tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely
true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces. 

... Presently these new ideas reach society, the touch of truth is the touch of life, and there is a stir and a growth everywhere."8

West and Arnold, of course, refer to the ideal relationship between poetry and criticism, a situation in which the critic serves as the poet's interpreter, in which the critic is at hand to inform and explain the work to the poet's intended audience. Sometimes, however, the poet's "pictures in the sand" are so abstract to the available critical sensibility that the poet himself (in the absence of sympathetic criticism or in the anticipation of hostile reception) must turn critic to act as his own interpreter, to be his own mediator between his product and its intended audience. Such was the case with Shelley the the Romantic Reviewers.

Instead of asking how Shelley's poetry performs in the design that it itself has created and that it assumes is the truly meaningful design of things, the Romantic Reviewers came to Shelley's poetry with "assumptions of a relational system other than its own"9 and protested that it refused to behave according to the laws of their imposed system. Instead of entering the world of a given poem and trying to possess it fully, they detached
individual statements from it and pointed out their disharmony with selected contemporary aims, beliefs, and doctrines. Their main interest focused on the moral and societal dimensions of literature, and their central concerns centered in the implications of a work for the intellectual and spiritual growth of the individual and of society. Always they evaluated literature as a part of the forum of human ideas and attitudes: Will the poem's central idea, they asked, outrage public sensibility? Will its theme explode certain public beliefs? Are its characters worthy of public emulation? Does its language conform to traditional literary standards?

Until the end of the eighteenth century, in the words of Wasserman, there was sufficient homogeneity for men to share certain assumptions, or universal principles, outside the structure of discursive language, that tended to order their universe for them. There were available to the poet certain "cosmic syntaxes": the Christian interpretation of history, the sacramentalism of nature, the Great Chain of Being, the analogy of the various planes of creation, the conception of man as microcosm, and in the literary area, the doctrine of genres; as a result, the poet could afford to think of his art as imitative of "nature," since these patterns were what he meant by "nature."
this time, a poet could transform language by means of these public syntaxes, survey reality and experience in the presence of the world implied by them, and expect his audience both to recognize and to understand his work without much difficulty.\textsuperscript{11} A moral order of criticism, such as that of the Romantic Reviewers, is eminently appropriate for poetry written by poets who share with their readers such a comprehensive body of philosophical beliefs.

But by the time of Shelley's work, men no longer shared, in any significant degree, a sense of cosmic design that made uniformly imitative poetry meaningful. For late eighteenth-century poets, for example, the imagination was considered primarily as an "image-making" faculty and as such was subordinated to reason. Shelley and other "new poets," however, assigned the imagination a more significant role in the poetry-making process. For them, through the efficacy of the imagination in designing and executing symbolic language, art could capture the fluid, almost intangible nature or identity of its subject and then disclose and present that identification in its unique individuality to the reader. As such, poetry in itself became a self-sufficient form of knowledge, requiring reference only to itself for understanding.
Shelley realized the radical difference between his ideas and those of his critics concerning the function of language in poetry and the ultimate value of poetry as art. He attached to his major works—*Alastor*, *Laon and Cythna*, *Rosalind and Helen*, *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Cenci*—detailed prefaces in which he seems to answer deliberately certain charges voiced against his works by his contemporaries. In these commentaries, he shared his ideas about the main topics of interest to the Romantic Reviewers: (1) the relationship between poetry and genius; (2) the relationship between poetry and convention; and (3) the relationship between poetry and audience.

For Shelley, no quarter of subject matter was immune from innovation by the poet: the poet, in his visionary capacity, has the privilege of improvisation, even on future events; thus, poets are not bound to imitate narrative methods and models of their predecessors. The gist of Shelley's aesthetic theory is that poetry has a relationship to moral good through its "great instrument" or means, the imagination: the higher kind of poetry holds up before the reader's eye certain "idealisms of moral excellence" in order to suggest to men of extraordinary sensitivity what they might become if they dared.

Despite Shelley's prefatorial expositions, however,
the Romantic Reviewers were unable, or unwilling, to penetrate his aesthetic code. As a result, when they read his four-level intention in *The Cenci*—idealization and diminution of horror, dynamic morality, realistic characterization, and functional imagery, most of them accused Shelley of making impossible claims for the creative imagination. More than a century and a half of literary criticism, however, has proved the positive value of the poet's prefatorial remarks. Of special notice in this regard is Stuart Curran's detailed study of the figurative symbolism of the work: *Shelley's "Cenci": Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (1970).

According to Curran, "'The imagery and passion . . . of *The Cenci* interpenetrate one another' to such an extent that by the combination and recombination of image patterns Shelley is able to fix for any given moment the complicated relationship between father and daughter, between persecutor and victim, between corrupter and the vessel of his corruption."12 Moreover, Curran concludes, "By the shifting combination of his image patterns, Shelley is able to create an intricately textured fabric in which the themes are continually bridged, the plot ramified, a moral cosmos verified."13

In addition, as Chapter Five of this study demonstrates,
Shelley's symbolism in *The Cenci* is even more complex than Curran has analyzed. The symbolism of this work consists of interrelated patterns of figurative and literal images, both of which are needed for satisfactory resolution of its most often voiced stylistic problem, the Beatrice paradox.

Though there exists a low degree of correspondence between Shelley's expressed intentions about his work and his critics' opinions about the same work, still both kinds of criticism are important in the history of literary criticism. Though neither kind is purely descriptive, each has important implications for the relationship between poetry and criticism. While legislative criticism (how poetry should be written) and theoretical criticism (the nature of poetry in general) may precede actual composition, descriptive criticism (the interrelationship of form and content of specific poems) must, of necessity, follow actual composition. Moreover, in situations involving innovative poetry, both the poet and his contemporary critics are nearly equally liable to partiality in critical judgment, the one tending to theorize and enumerate rather than analyze and demonstrate, and the other tending to confuse the effect of selected parts of the work with the ultimate value of the work as a total design.
In addition, poetry and criticism, especially descriptive criticism, evolve at different rates; "new poetry" evolves faster than purely descriptive criticism. Some periods of English literature, for example, say the Elizabethan and the Metaphysical, have no extant descriptive criticism as such. And, the disparity between Shelley's idea of his poetic intentions and that of his critics about the same goals implies one cause for the absence of much descriptive criticism in the history of literary criticism before a method was worked out by the "New Critics" in the early twentieth century: it is difficult to describe and evaluate almost simultaneously with creative production with little or no time for reflection and no previously established method.

Finally, it must be said, that though many of their negative estimates of Shelley's literary worth have been dispelled by later critics, still the Romantic Reviewers served the poet; whatever the nature of their comments, they made his poetry an important part of the literary life of the early nineteenth century. To the poet, an audience of any description is better than no audience at all. In the matter of relevance, however, since the essence of Shelley's claims about The Cenci (that it is organic poetry, that it has a structural dynamics of its own), is decisively
verifiable, it must also be said that, at least as regards this work, the poet knew his way better than any of his contemporary critics.
NOTES--CHAPTER SIX


2 Ibid.

3 The Intent of the Critic (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1963), p. 6.

4 Ibid.


6 The Intent of the Critic, p. 6.


10 Ibid., p. 11.

11 Ibid.

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