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# Power and the Poet: Religious Mythmaking in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"

SPENCER HALL

RECENT criticism has established the pivotal role of "Mont Blanc" and "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" in Shelley's poetic canon. These two difficult and richly textured odes, written during the intellectual and emotional ferment of Shelley's trip to Switzerland in the summer of 1816, seem in many ways like preludes to vision, rites of passage in which the young poet assumes a definitive poetic voice. They are dynamically transitional poems that bridge the gap between Shelley's early radicalism and the highly complex idealism of his Italian period. They formulate poetic strategies and structures, imaginative forms and concepts, that were to be expanded, elaborated, and refined in Shelley's mature mythmaking. Of the two poems, writes one of the most recent commentators on them, "'Mont Blanc' has been heavily interpreted by modern scholars; the 'Hymn' has been less studied and perhaps little understood."<sup>1</sup> One is impressed, indeed, by the comparative lack of close analysis the "Hymn" has received. Until recently, in fact, one might almost say that critics have been more attentive to the poem's title than to the inner workings of the poem itself.<sup>2</sup> In the present essay, I want to make some observations about the nature and the function of Shelley's religious mythmak-

1. Gerald McNiece, "The Poet as Ironist in 'Mont Blanc' and 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,'" *Studies in Romanticism*, 15 (1975), 311.

2. Harold Bloom (*Shelley's Mythmaking* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959], p. 36) summarizes—and rejects—the critical tendency to attribute a Platonic or Neoplatonic provenance to the title, although Shelley did use the phrase "intellectual beauty" in his translation of Plato's *Symposium* (1818). The phrase itself, as several scholars have shown, was in the air at the time and could have been found by Shelley in such diverse works as Wieland's *Agathon* or Robert Forsyth's *The Principles of Moral Science*. Since the present essay was written, reasonably detailed analyses of the "Hymn" have appeared in Jean Hall's *The Transforming Image: A Study of Shelley's Major Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) and Richard Cronin's *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

ing in the "Hymn" and then offer a somewhat more detailed reading of the poem than it usually has been given.

Let me suggest briefly the main perspectives I shall try to develop. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," like "Mont Blanc," and, in different ways, like most of Shelley's major poetry, formulates what may be called a myth of transcendent Power. The poem opens with a metaphysical (and metaphorical) proposition: "The awful shadow of some unseen Power / Floats though unseen amongst us."<sup>3</sup> It goes on to personify this unknown Power as a "Spirit of Beauty" (line 13); to address it directly as "thou" (line 15); to describe its nature and its relationship to man; and to catalogue its comings and goings (mostly goings). Long-standing critical tradition has inclined us to interpret Shelley's myths of Power in one of two ways: as if they expressed systematic metaphysical beliefs (usually Platonic or Neoplatonic in kind) about the existence and the attributes of noumenal reality; or as if they expressed some form of religious or mystical experience, the primary function of which is also to provide an insight into or an intuition of numinous or transcendent modes of being. In practice, of course, interpretation has often conflated metaphysics and mysticism, Platonic ontology and personal revelation, thus exhibiting that tendency to confuse distinct categories which professional philosophers lament in philosophically minded literary critics. However this may be, the critical tradition just noted is especially relevant to the "Hymn," since, along with "Adonais," it is the poem most frequently adduced as evidence of Shelley's inherently religious sensibilities and, more particularly, of his supposed Platonism, mysticism, or transcendentalism.

The perspective I shall try to develop here is that Shelley's myths of Power, rather than expressing a metaphysical belief or mystical revelation, evince instead a deep-seated skepticism about all such pretensions to know what cannot, on principle, be known, to dogmatize about what must remain, in the very nature of things, a mystery. They evince also a fundamentally existential and humanistic form of consciousness that, while remaining acutely sensitive to "all of mystery or majesty or power which the

3. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," lines 1-2, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977). This edition will be used for subsequent references to the poetry and, cited as *Norton*, to those prose works included within it.

invisible world contains,"<sup>4</sup> seeks to redefine transcendence—and thus religious values—by making it a subjective attribute of human experience, rather than an attribute, as it is both in classical metaphysics and in traditional Christian theology, of supernatural Essence. Intellectual Beauty in the "Hymn," then, is not to be interpreted as an antecedent and independent ontological principle or divinity whose actual noumenal existence Shelley affirms. It is to be seen, rather, as a "concept which is frankly constructed and projected by the poet";<sup>5</sup> as a hypothesis, a fiction, a metaphor, a "transcendental illusion"<sup>6</sup> that has existence only in relation to the poet's own symbol- and mythmaking activities and that the poet uses for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways.

A reading of the "Hymn" premised on the skeptical and hypothetical nature of Shelley's myth of Power will concentrate more on poetic function than on referential or symbolic meaning. It will tend to find irony, qualification, and uncertainty where more standard readings find epiphany and revelation. It will also tend to stress at all points in the poem the critical presence, whether latent or overt, of the poet's own subjectivity. "All things exist as they are perceived," says Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*, "at least in relation to the percipient" (Norton, p. 505).<sup>7</sup> The Berkeleyan dictum is important not as a formal epistemological axiom that the poet seeks to expound, but as a determining premise that underlies poetic structure and strategy. If Power reveals itself as an imaginative hypothesis, as, to borrow Wallace Stevens's phrase, a "necessary fiction," then the poetic center of gravity shifts from metaphysics to psychology, phenomenology, and morals; from the nature of ultimate principles to the necessities and the perceptions of the poetic mind that creates transcendental fictions and to the uses to which it puts them.

The "Hymn" is an obvious case in which Shelley creates a myth of the percipient poet in relation to a myth of perceived Power. The poem is a

4. "Essay on Christianity," included in *Shelley's Prose*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), p. 200; hereafter cited as *Prose*.

5. Spencer Hall, "Shelley's 'Mont Blanc,'" *Studies in Philology*, 70 (1973), 201. The "remote, serene, and inaccessible" Power in "Mont Blanc" is, metaphysically or ontologically speaking, quite different from the Spirit of Beauty in the "Hymn." The two Powers are alike, however, in that they are both hypothetical projections made by the poet.

6. McNiece, "The Poet as Ironist," *Studies in Romanticism*, 15 (1975), 312.

7. A more extreme statement of this idealist position can be found in the "Essay on Life" and will be quoted later in the text.

variant, it seems to me, of a structure Shelley was to employ repeatedly in his mature work. In this structure, an imaginative self (whether a lyric "I," an implicit consciousness, a dramatic or symbolic figure, or a combination of all these) encounters what the poem projects as a supernal Cause or transcendent Force. While the dramatic, symbolic, and thematic nature of this encounter can differ widely from poem to poem, the 1816 odes are essentially optimistic. Although in quite different ways, both poems embody confrontations between a poetic self and hypothetical Power that lead, through various strategies of invocation, identification, and transference, to a positive sense of the human imagination's creative and redemptive possibilities. The poetic "I" mythicized in the "Hymn" anticipates the idealized figure of the imaginative poet in the *Defence* "who draw[s] into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion" (Norton, p. 482). Self-dramatized and self-mythologized through his relation to the hypostatic Spirit of Beauty, the poem's speaker becomes a normative and representative figure. He assumes the role of poet-prophet; he comes to embody or symbolize, in some sense, the human imagination itself.<sup>8</sup>

In so doing, however, he takes upon himself (to use the language of the poem) an "awful" burden. Gerald McNiece writes perceptively that "one is impressed, perhaps even depressed, in Shelley's poems, by his insistence on the poet's burden and responsibility as both diviner and creator. . . ."<sup>9</sup> Shelley's skepticism was not, like Hume's, simply a principle of philosophical enquiry. It was a deeply rooted psychological, emotional, and imaginative, as well as rational, attitude. It extended to his feelings about the imagination and poetry as well as to his views about the reason and religion. The "Hymn," as I have said, is an essentially optimistic poem. It affirms the power of the imagination, as this power takes form in the mythic figure of the poet, to redeem the human condition. This affirmation, however, is not unqualified or unproblematical. The "Hymn"'s sense of man's existential and psychological contingency and its latent

8. Shelley writes in the Preface to *The Cenci* that "Imagination is as the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion" (Norton, p. 241). In Shelley's myths of Power and the poet, the poet himself incarnates the ultimate imaginative power, often at the cost of his own "mortal passion."

9. "The Poet as Ironist," *Studies in Romanticism*, 15 (1975), 335.

skepticism about the burden of imagination are perhaps as compelling, especially in the light of Shelley's later work, as its visionary exuberance.

## I

It is obvious, of course, that the "Hymn" makes use of religious, specifically Christian, forms of thought and expression, and that any reading of the poem must try to interpret the meaning and the function of its religious language. Shelley addresses Intellectual Beauty as a transcendent Spirit and likens its intermittent visitations to divine grace. He hymns this divinity, offering it worship; prays to it, supplicating its presence and its favor; and dedicates to it his own best powers. In the crucial fifth stanza, he depicts a sudden "extacy" analogous to a traditional conversion experience. Verbally, the poem employs a sustained, if not systematic, theological and biblical vocabulary: "Hymn," "grace," "mystery," "consecrate," "vale of tears," "God and ghosts and Heaven," "responses," "awful," "extacy," "dedicate," "vow," "worships," "fear." The Spirit of Beauty is personified as a remote and capricious deity the fitful visitations of which argue an ultimate unconcern for the human condition and that must therefore be supplicated by the poet, both in his own right and in his representative hierophantic capacity. How are we to understand this religious myth-making?

Like Blake and Wordsworth, Shelley aspired to the role of Romantic poet-prophet. In so doing, he was obliged, as they were, to confront the primary source of prophetic mythmaking in his culture, the Christian religion. One aspect of this confrontation, that associated with the rationalistic, revolutionary, and atheistical Shelley, is well known. *Queen Mab* and the early prose essays are programmatic (and derivative) in their attacks upon the moral evils and the metaphysical absurdities of Christian doctrine. This aspect of Shelley's thought was never to leave him entirely, and it certainly has a place in the "Hymn." "The full sense of the poem," as Earl Wasserman notes, "lies not only in what it presents but also in what it repudiates."<sup>10</sup> It uses Christian forms of perception and expression ironically to subvert Christian belief.<sup>11</sup>

10. *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 193.

11. In the "Essay on Christianity" Shelley pictures Jesus as doing very much the same thing in regard to the Hebrew law. Like all reformers, Shelley holds, Jesus was forced to

One of the significant transitional features of the 1816 odes, however, is that they begin, in quite different ways, an imaginative process of restructuring and transvaluing that leads away from a doctrinaire attack upon received religious forms. This process leads, instead, toward the elaboration of mythic structures that could stand as alternatives to those forms, could adapt to their own purposes what was viable in them, and could express the poet's own vision and experience of existence. Judith Chernaik makes the point with admirable clarity. Shelley's "Hymn," she says, is an attempt "to create a personal and secular myth, to deny the authority of dogma or Scriptural revelation . . . while implicitly granting the validity of the irrational yet profound human needs that traditional religion claims to satisfy."<sup>12</sup> Let us look more closely at the ways in which this secular myth-making simultaneously undermines, validates, and redefines religious modes of experience.

To take the "Hymn" at face value is to assume that it records what Shelley believed to be a genuine mystical revelation and that the insight into noumenal reality conveyed in this revelation defines the "thought content" of the poem and, to some extent, the "philosophy" of Shelley's poetry. So eminent an authority as Newman Ivey White maintains that the *ekstasis* dramatized in Stanza 5—"Sudden, thy shadow fell on me; / I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy!" (lines 59–60)—actually did occur, perhaps at Eton, probably at Syon House, when Shelley was eleven or twelve years old and that it significantly determined the course of his future life.<sup>13</sup> For Wasserman, the "Hymn" "must be accepted as reflecting an authentic epiphanic experience profound enough to have fixed a governing psychological pattern in [Shelley's] mind." It follows, then, that "in choosing the hymn form . . . Shelley is not making a scrupulous adaptation of a literary convention, but, in the traditional sense of a hymn, is offering a sincere prayer to divinity as he understands it."<sup>14</sup>

It is necessary, I think, to take a more flexible view of the poet's lyric sincerity and of his fidelity to biographical fact. Richard Holmes, Shelley's

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"accommodate" his own views to the multitude by seeming to adopt the very system he meant to overthrow. I shall have more to say about the relation of Shelley's "Essay" to the "Hymn" in the text.

12. *The Lyrics of Shelley* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1972), p. 36.

13. *Portrait of Shelley* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), pp. 11–12.

14. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, pp. 417, 192.

most recent biographer, adopts such a view when he argues that the supposed epiphany at Syon House never actually occurred, but that it was used by Shelley (and by the makers of the "Shelley legend") as a central episode in the poet's "elaborate private myth of his own childhood."<sup>15</sup> There is abundant evidence that Shelley was extraordinarily sensitive, at times painfully so, to extreme states of psychical, emotional, and oneiric experience. There is little evidence, however, that, like Blake, he believed his reveries, trances, dreams, or visions to constitute epiphanies in a traditional sense, to be authentic revelations of divinity. It is basic to Shelley's skepticism that he does not assert a definitive insight into the nature or the existence of a divine Being as the result of a personal mystical revelation (much less on the grounds of a Platonic or Neoplatonic metaphysics). The vehement skepticism of the poem's third stanza is more than the most concise attack on Christian superstition in Shelley's verse. It calls into question all claims to revealed truth, including, ironically, those made by the poet himself:

No voice from some sublimer world hath ever  
 To sage or poet these responses given—  
 Therefore the name of God and ghosts and Heaven,  
 Remain the records of their vain endeavour. (lines 25–28)

What the "Hymn"'s religious mythmaking does record and intend, if neither mystical insight nor metaphysical doctrine, is a profound responsiveness to the ultimate mysteriousness of man's subjective and existential being. It affirms the moral, imaginative, and psychological necessity of creating hypotheses (or fictions) about the unknowable first principles of human existence. And it simultaneously warns against the reification of such hypotheses into religious or metaphysical dogma. The thought of the "Hymn" is very close, in these respects, to that of the prose "Essay on Christianity," which was probably written around the same time.<sup>16</sup> The

15. Shelley: *The Pursuit* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 16.

16. The date of the "Essay," like that of Shelley's prose in general, is conjectural, speculations ranging from 1813 to 1819. Donald H. Reiman, whose conjectures in these matters carry authority, suggests the summer of 1817 (*Percy Bysshe Shelley* [New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969], p. 60). More recently P. M. S. Dawson has provided a date of "Sept.–Dec. 1817" in the appendix of *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). Lengthy discussions of the "Essay on Christianity" appear in Timothy



two works might be taken together, it seems to me, as indicating a significant change in Shelley's approach to Christian doctrine and thus, more generally, to his own role as prophetic and mythmaking poet.

The "Essay," while still voicing the intellectual and moral hostility that characterizes Shelley's early attacks on Christianity, introduces an altered perspective. Jesus himself is described as a poet (generically similar to the autobiographical figure of the poet dramatized in the "Hymn"), and the doctrines of Christian faith are seen as poetic myths to be interpreted imaginatively rather than literally. So interpreted, for example, the existence of a postmortal Heaven becomes an ideal imagining to be understood psychologically, morally, and aesthetically, rather than an article of belief to be affirmed or denied:

How delightful a picture even if it be not true! How magnificent and illustrious is the conception which this bold theory suggests to the contemplation, even if it be no more than the imagination of some sublimest and most holy poet who, impressed with the loveliness and majesty of his own nature, is impatient and discontented with the narrow limits which this imperfect life and the dark grave have assigned forever as his melancholy portion. (*Prose*, p. 205)

Of particular interest to a reading of the "Hymn" is Shelley's reconstruction (and deconstruction) of Jesus' teachings about God. The word "God," Shelley says, is "a common term devised to express all of mystery or majesty or power which the invisible world contains." Jesus Christ, he continues, contemplated this "mysterious principle" in the same manner that "every poet and every philosopher must," seeing it as "the interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things" (*Prose*, pp. 200–202).

Shelley draws from many sources in his analytical essays, and he does not always put them together with philosophical clarity or precision. The question must be left open, it seems to me, as to his use of the term "Spirit" or "Power" in this and many similar contexts, both in his prose and his poetry. At times Shelley seems to hypothesize the actual existence of a kind of *elan vital*, an immaterial generating or animating force that exists coex-

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Webb's *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1977) and Michael Henry Scrivener's *Radical Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

tensively with material forms but that may or may not inhere in them. At other times, he speaks as if all such essences or principles or powers were purely metaphorical in nature, terms meant "to express no real being," immaterial or otherwise, but only to refer to "a certain series of co-existing phenomena" ("Essay on a Future State," *Prose*, p. 177). Either way, however, Shelley makes one thing perfectly clear. The "invisible world" that traditional religion seeks to interpret and to experience remains incomprehensible to human thought. It is a mystery about which, insofar as it touches our lives, insofar as we think and feel about it and thus draw it "within the circle of existing things," we may—nay, we must—hypothesize. But it is a mystery of whose deep truths, if, indeed, deep truths there are, we can expect no final images, no definitive perceptions or experiences.

In the context of such skepticism, I shall quote one more passage from the "Essay" that might almost be used to gloss the central thought and symbolism of Shelley's "Hymn."

There is a Power by which we are surrounded, like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is suspended, which visits with its breath our silent chords at will. Our most imperial and stupendous qualities—those on which the majesty and the power of humanity is [sic] erected—are, relatively to the inferior portion of its mechanism, indeed active and imperial; but they are the passive slaves of some higher and more omnipresent Power. This Power is God. And those who have seen God, have in the period of their purer and more perfect nature, been harmonized by their own will to so exquisite a consentaneity of powers as to give forth divinest melody when the breath of universal being sweeps over their frame.<sup>17</sup> (*Prose*, p. 202)

The Aeolian harp is, of course, among the most pervasive of Romantic images and is often used symbolically in Shelley's work. It appears incidentally, as the comparative term in a simile, in lines 33–34 of the "Hymn." In conjunction with the hypothesis of a transcendent Power and the imagery of intermittent visitation, this symbolism bears directly on the central form of consciousness embodied in Shelley's religious mythmaking.

Like other Romantic idealists, Shelley founded his symbolic explorations

17. A very similar passage, which should also be read in relation to the "Hymn," appears in the *Defence* (Norton, pp. 504–505).

into human subjectivity and into the universe that appears to exist independently of it on the experience of privileged moments of being, moments of extraordinary fullness, wholeness, and harmony that have what the philosopher Marcel calls “ontological weight” and that seem to reveal a “purer and more perfect nature” within human nature itself.<sup>18</sup> These moments possess the character of being “givens”; they come passively, beyond the power of the will to demand. And they are, by their very nature, transient, beyond the power of the will to retain. Phenomenologically, such moments convey the sense of being interpenetrated or enveloped or dissolved by a power from outside the self whose ministrations are necessary to the extension of consciousness. Morally, they are felt to be an essential ground or source of the active, humanistic virtues, of benevolence toward others and of trust in oneself.

Modern secular theology refers to this sort of inner experience as psychological (as opposed to ontological) transcendence, and it is this kind of consciousness that underlies, I think, the religious language of the “Hymn.” It is a genuine, important, and often unmakeable distinction whether the Romantic poet uses religious forms metaphorically to define and to value what he claims as secular, preeminently imaginative, ways of being; or whether he conceives of imaginative experience “religiously,” using it to redefine and to revalue the traditional categories of the transcendent and the sacred. Romantic visionaries tend to blur this distinction. In so doing, they anticipate (and help prepare the way for) the liberal theology of modern times that “can no longer differentiate between religion and the highest and most serious forms of art”; that makes a “religious commitment to the creativity operating in human existence” without asserting this creativity to be “the manifestation in human existence of transcendent being”; and that holds that “it is not so much the substance of what is claimed to be transcendent as it is the *function of the claim itself* that is of interest.”<sup>19</sup> In this

18. In the *Defence* and elsewhere, Shelley associates such moments with experiences of poetry, of love, and, to a lesser extent, of nature. His notion of the “epipsyche,” upon which he bases his theory of love, is closely related to this idealistic emphasis upon the visionary moment.

19. Robert Bellah, “Transcendence in Contemporary Piety,” and Henry Nelson Wieman, “Transcendence and ‘Cosmic Consciousness,’” included in *Transcendence*, ed. Herbert Richardson and Donald Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 85, 95, 153–155. The italics are Bellah’s.

sense, Shelley's hymn to a hypothetical Spirit of Beauty is a metaphorical invocation of the creativity and beauty in human existence that it is the poet's sacred mission to "interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel" ("Mont Blanc," line 83).

One must emphasize the idea of poetic mission. Ontological and psychological phenomena attract Shelley in their own right; its subtle, often indirect illuminations of subjective being are an enduring strength of Shelley's poetry. In Shelley's own mind, however, metaphysical and psychological insights do not present themselves neutrally or dispassionately; they are always at least potentially referable to what he conceived of as the moral and social duty of the poet. Shelley was a utilitarian of the imagination, a moralist among metaphysicians. He was convinced of man's deeply rooted need to ground his actions in metaphysical systems of belief. Hence the enormous importance of religion in his philosophical speculations. It has been said that a seminal breakthrough in Shelley's thought was the Nietzschean realization that man created God in his own image. Perhaps the more implicative and characteristic recognition was the other side of the coin: that man creates himself in the image of whatever God he happens to worship, of whatever Absolute he happens to affirm.

The "Hymn," therefore, offers an alternative to conventional Christian theology in several ways. For one thing, its mythmaking confers a religious valuation on the secular state of consciousness I have referred to as psychological transcendence. For another, it worships and affirms a hypothetical deity whose function it is to reinforce man's faith in the active, humanistic virtues of "Love, Hope, and Self-esteem" (line 37). As every commentator on the poem has pointed out, Shelley transvalues the usual Christian triad. Love of God becomes the secular and presumably erotic "sympathies, / That wax and wane in lovers' eyes" (lines 42-43)—or, more universally, the love of "all human kind" (line 84). Hope for divine salvation becomes a secular hope in human perfection strong enough, it is suggested in lines 47-48, to overcome man's inherent fear of the grave. Most obviously, of course, faith in a transcendent, supernatural divinity becomes "Self-esteem," a faith in the rightness and value of one's own motives that Shelley affirms over and over in his work to be a necessary condition, and often the only reward, of virtuous action.

Shelley's religious mythmaking here provides an alternative to tradi-

tional Christian belief and prophecy in another, less positive sense as well. The "God-language" of religion has traditionally functioned to convey a consciousness of deprivation as well as fullness, a radical sense of human finitude and contingency as well as a radical sense of human possibility and expectation. In the "Hymn"'s religious mythmaking, as always in the various expressions of Shelley's skeptical idealism, an acute awareness of existential limitations accompanies and qualifies a visionary faith in man's existential possibilities. Chernaik remarks pointedly that "the inconstancy of the spirit [of Beauty] is really a metaphor for human frailty."<sup>20</sup>

Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" is a prelude to the mighty vision of *Prometheus Unbound*. It is, as I have already suggested, an optimistic poem that envisions the possibility of redemption through the poet's ability to incarnate the mysterious but inconstant Power whose continued presence "within his heart" would make man "immortal, and omnipotent" (lines 39-41). The very nature of the poet's prayer to this hypothetical Spirit reveals, however, the tragic dialectics of vision: the greater the sensitivity to existential moments of creativity and beauty, the more piercing also the awareness of their inconstancy or failure. As we turn now to a selective commentary on the poem, we shall find it difficult to know at times which is the primary impulse, a paean to human possibility or a lament for human incompleteness.

## II

The first four stanzas of the "Hymn" project a myth of transcendent Power, the final three a myth of the poet who feels, interprets, and, ultimately, seeks to incarnate it. The twelve-line stanzas themselves are highly elaborate, dividing often into a 7/5 or 5/7 structure. The imagery, the structure, and the theme of the poem, as many commentators have suggested, owe a great deal to Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth, Shelley moves from elegy to affirmation, from regret for the mutability of visionary moments to at least a provisional faith in the continuity and purposiveness of the poet's (and, by extension, human) experience. It is not true, however, that the "Hymn" "is essentially a restatement of Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality.'"<sup>21</sup> Rather than simple recastings of Words-

20. *The Lyrics of Shelley*, p. 37.

21. F. L. Jones, "Shelley's 'On Life,'" *PMLA*, 62 (1947), 777. Shelley's complex and revi-

worth's myths of nature and the imagination, Shelley's myths of Power and the poet are both conscious and unconscious revaluations of his high Romantic heritage. If the 1816 odes are the work of a visionary Romantic poet in quest of alternatives to the mythology of Christian culture, they are also the work of a second generation Romantic poet seeking to formulate his own vision in response to Wordsworth's.

Stanza 1, according to Donald Reiman, describes "the nature of the Spirit of Intellectual Beauty," while Stanzas 2-4 describe "the Spirit's relation to mankind in general," and Stanzas 5-7 its "relation to one representative man (the poet) through three stages of his life."<sup>22</sup> The tendency of the poem is thus from the general to the particular, from metaphysical conceptualization to personal revelation. This structure reverses that of "Mont Blanc," in which the poet's "intuition of personal identity" precedes and "anticipates a symbolic projection of Power."<sup>23</sup> Both poems, however, are influenced in different ways by Shelley's skeptical and idealist belief that "nothing exists but as it is perceived" ("Essay on Life," *Norton*, p. 476). The last stanzas of the "Hymn" create, in effect, a normative or representative center of perception, the poet himself, through whose perspective and experience the unknown Power is made meaningful and, in a very real sense, existent. Ultimate Powers do not exist in themselves in Shelley's imaginative universe, as they do, for example, in Plato's. They exist only in relation to their effects, and, for Shelley, the perception of effects and the assignment of causes are themselves imaginative and creative acts.

Stanza 1 begins declaratively with a proposition about the fundamental nature of reality: "The awful shadow of some unseen Power / Floats though unseen amongst us" (lines 1-2). It seems to be a confident statement, well calculated to reassure the reader who puts his faith in doctrinal pronouncements about ultimate principles. One tendency of the poem, however, is to question just this kind of blind faith, and the closer we look at the opening proposition, the more problematical it becomes. The adjec-

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sionary relationship to Wordsworth is a recurrent motif in the criticism of Harold Bloom. It is worked out most definitively, perhaps, in *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

22. *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, p. 45.

23. Earl J. Schulze, *Shelley's Theory of Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 87.

tive “some,” as it often does in Shelley’s poetry, implies uncertainty and indeterminacy.<sup>24</sup> The repeated “unseen” links Power to the “invisible world” that, in the “*Essay on Christianity*” and elsewhere in Shelley’s prose, is identified with traditional religious experience. The as-yet-unnamed Power is “unseen” because, presumably, it is spiritual, nonmaterial, or, as the poem’s title has it, “intellectual” in nature. But it is also simply invisible and thus empirically unverifiable, in short, a mystery, an unknown. The problematical quality of this mystery is enhanced by a latent paradox that will unfold as the poem continues. The undefined (“some”) and “unseen Power” emits a “shadow,” and the reader is encouraged to rely upon a standard paradigm of symbolic thought: an unknown cause can be represented by a known effect. The problem, however, is that the shadow (or effect) is equally as “unseen,” just as unknown, as the supposed originating Power. Thus the opening proposition holds out yet frustrates a form of thought typically used in religious and metaphysical discourse. I do not want to overdetermine these lines, although poetic openings, like poetic closures, must carry a special interpretative weight. It may be, however, that the “*Hymn*”’s initial proposition functions ironically to make us understand the essential uncertainty religious phrasings commonly seek to hide.

The following lines begin to tell us more about the nature of the “unseen Power,” shifting the emphasis, as they do, from invisibility to inconstancy.

The awful shadow of some unseen Power  
 Floats though unseen amongst us,—visiting  
 This various world with as inconstant wing  
 As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.—(lines 1–4)

The implications of insubstantiality and transience conveyed by the word “shadow” and the verb “Floats” are reinforced in the remainder of the first sentence by “visiting,” “various,” and “inconstant wing.” We form the idea, as we do of Shelley’s mythic Skylark, of an unseen Spirit that comes and goes without apparent motivation or pattern. Unlike the Skylark, however, this Power has no voice with which to convince us of its reality—no voice, that is, except the poet’s own. There is the suggestion that the

24. See also line 25 of the “*Hymn*” and lines 49 and 53 of “*Mont Blanc*.”

variousness of the "world" (the term seems deliberately indefinite) is somehow related to—perhaps consequent upon, perhaps the mirror of—the inconstancy of the nameless Power. The sentence concludes by evoking the most indeterminate of the senses, that of smell, in the form of one of Shelley's favorite and recurrent images: fragrance-bearing "summer winds." The image functions well in context; not only is there the biblical allusiveness of wind blowing where it listeth and the Romantic metaphor of wind as an ultimately unknowable inspiring presence, but the phenomenon itself is apt. When the wind ceases, a category of sensory beauty—fragrance—ceases also, just as, when the shadow departs, a condition of possible beatitude departs with it.

Lines 5–7 contain one of those subtle imagistic and, ultimately, thematic shifts that it is all too easy to overlook but that provide inner tension in Shelley's best work. The opening sentence (lines 1–4) is intentionally abstract and indefinite; it is dominated by ideas of invisibility and inconstancy. The visitations of Power's shadow are directionless; its floatings, creepings, and wingings occur, if I may so express it, on a horizontal plane. Lines 5–7 reiterate the theme of inconstancy, but they add a sense of determinacy, direction, and substance: "Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower, / It visits with inconstant glance / Each human heart and countenance." The "visits" of the shadow are now compared to the fall of "moonbeams" that are, however insubstantial, at least visible and that "shower" downward in a vertical and determined line, unlike the random horizontal floatings of "summer winds." Is it fanciful to feel a critically significant weightiness or substance in the image of mountain pines as opposed to the image of flowers in line 4? Or to feel a similar significance in the contrast between "inconstant wing" (line 3) and "inconstant glance" (line 6), at least one meaning of the latter being a glancing off of or rebounding from something concrete and hard? One must be alive to the danger of forcing images into the service of concepts, of confusing a phenomenology of imagery with thematic interpretation. I cannot escape the thought, however, that this sudden shift of feeling and imagery in the direction of the more concrete and determinate has thematic meaning. The indefinite Power becomes (comparatively speaking) definite, the "unseen" shadow becomes (comparatively speaking) visible, only in the context of "Each human heart and countenance" (line 7). Not intuitions of unknow-



able supernatural Essence, but insights into the mysteries of man's existential and psychological being are the "main region" of Shelley's, as they were, in a different way, of Wordsworth's, "song."<sup>25</sup>

Although a majority of critics have chosen to interpret it differently, the poem seems pretty clearly to delimit the visitations of its hypothetical Power to the "various world" (line 3) of human consciousness. The inconstant Spirit of Beauty visits "Each *human* heart and countenance"; it shines on "*human* thought or form"; it nourishes "*human* thought" (lines 7, 15, 44; italics mine). Power in the "Hymn" is obviously not, as it is in "Mont Blanc," the hypothetical "unknown cause"<sup>26</sup> of phenomenal existence in general, but rather the hypostatic "unknown cause" of all that is best in man's spiritual and social being. It is a "transcendental illusion" or fiction abstracted from and expressive of the existential consecrations of human life, those moments of uncommon grace, mystery, beauty, value, and perfection that are undeniably part of man's subjective experience and to which Shelley was the most sensitive and attentive of poets. Seen in this way, the term "glance" upon which I have already commented takes on a particular urgency. The human heart or mind is recurrently pictured in Shelley's poetry and prose as a hard, unyielding entity that all too often repels the softer influences of love and beauty that would be its salvation.

The attempt to visualize and thus, in the sense I have tried to suggest, to "humanize" or "existentialize" the "unseen Power" initiates a pattern of imagery that will dominate the rest of the poem and a rhetorical strategy that will dominate the rest of Stanza 1.

Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,  
 It visits with inconstant glance  
 Each human heart and countenance;  
 Like hues and harmonies of evening,—  
 Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—  
 Like memory of music fled,—  
 Like aught that for its grace may be  
 Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery. (lines 5–12)

25. "Prospectus" to *The Recluse*, line 41.

26. Note to *Queen Mab, Prose*, p. 111. Shelley uses the phrase repeatedly in his prose to refer to the concepts of God and Power.

Harold Bloom, among others, has argued convincingly for the artistic and thematic appropriateness of the various images in this "tenuously connected profusion."<sup>27</sup> Moonbeams, clouds, music, memories are all intangible and ephemeral phenomena that reinforce the theme of beauty's mysterious inconstancy. Beyond this, the imagery is connected, however tenuously, by a central idea: the experience of light and, to a lesser degree, of sound in darkness, an association repeated in the last five lines of Stanza 3. (In Stanza 3 the idea of music heard in darkness is made explicit in the image of the Aeolian harp: "music by the night wind sent / Through strings of some still instrument," lines 33–34). Nocturnal phenomena of light, especially celestial light, and of sound held an almost erotic (or should one say "religious") fascination for Shelley. In his major poems such phenomena often form the basis of extremely complex symbolic structures. In Stanza 1 of the "Hymn" this nighttime imagery is used as a sensory approximation to or analogue for the super-sensuous beauty and mysteriousness of the hypothetical Power. As we shall see, however, it also introduces a different order of mystery by putting a potentially paradoxical and ironic form of expression at the service of Shelley's skepticism.

The most obvious feature of the last five lines of Stanza 1 is the insistent repetition of similes, the simile being perhaps Shelley's most characteristic rhetorical device. Critics who think of Shelley as a Platonist tend to interpret these series of comparisons as attempts to image what is, by definition, an imageless mental form. They see the piling together of numerous fragmentary sensible images as an attempt to approximate a nonsensible and unitary Absolute. My own view is that this profusion of similes expresses Shelley's subjectivism and skepticism rather than his supposed Platonism. The similes have the effect, it seems to me, of calling attention to themselves, to the act of simile-making itself, and thus to imaginative acts of perception and creation in general.

The comparison made in lines 5–7 is fairly clear; it likens the falling of moonbeams to the visitations of Power. The similarity, in other words, is one of process rather than substance. The four similes in lines 8–12 are more ambiguous. Although syntactically they seem to be determined by "It visits" in line 6, they no longer appear to refer to the process of visiting

27. *Shelley's Mythmaking*, p. 37.

but to the attributes or nature of the visiting Power. The unspoken term here is that of subjectivity itself. "All things exist as they are perceived," and as the similes turn from inconstancy (which is, after all, a comparatively objective category) to such qualities as "grace" and "mystery," we are reminded that all predications about the nature of unknown Power are necessarily hypothetical or metaphorical in kind. We cannot say what it is, only what it is "like," and the attribution of likeness is a subjective, relative, and creative act. Thus Power cannot be separated, as an antecedent and independent metaphysical Essence, from the value- and myth-making activities of the poetic consciousness. Read properly, it seems to me, the final simile—"Like aught that for its grace may be / Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery" (lines 11–12)—sums up the subtle transvaluation of Christian language we have already noted. Rather than attributes of a supernaturally existent Being or Power, "grace" (a loveliness that enlivens and renews the spirit) and "mystery" become forms of man's subjective experience given value (made "Dear, and yet dearer") by the human imagination. As such, they are freed from the bondage of religious dogma to become the property of the mythmaking poet.

I have dwelt at some length on Stanza 1. It is a remarkable achievement, constructing in one self-contained stanza a universal myth of transcendent Power whose implications will be developed in the remainder of the poem. Stanzas 2–4 elaborate the human meaning of the inconstancy attributed to the hypothetical Power and are thus elegiac in tone. It is significant that the elegiac tone accompanies the first explicit dramatization in the poem of a definite lyric "I." Whereas Stanza 1 is written in the third person and from an objective and generalized point of view, Stanza 2 begins to address Power as "thou," thus establishing the presence of a poet/speaker whose consciousness and experience will come more and more to dominate the poem. A myth of the poet has begun to emerge in relationship to the poem's myth of transcendent Power. The first act of this new, personalized speaker is to narrow the perspective on the mystery with which we began by defining the "unseen Power" as a "Spirit of Beauty." The speaker himself is also defined by the questions he asks in the first five lines of Stanza 2. These questions place him in the tradition of elegiac poets who, like Wordsworth in the "Intimations" ode, mourn the transience of visionary

beauty (although, in opposition to Wordsworth, he locates this beauty in "human thought or form" rather than in nature).

Spirit of Beauty, that dost consecrate  
 With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon  
 Of human thought or form,—where art thou gone?  
 Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,  
 This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate? (lines 13–17)

The expression and the thought are intentionally conventional. The deified Spirit of Beauty, imaged as a projected light (see line 32, "Thy light alone"), colors man's intellectual and sensory being with its own radiance. As befits a deity, the virtue, the power belong to the Spirit alone; when it withdraws, man's inner "state" is left "dim," "vacant and desolate." In the last seven lines of the stanza, however, there is, I think, an important modulation in tone. The unanswerable rhetorical questions, which are the only possible answers to those posed in lines 15–17, intimate a skeptical and realistic poetic consciousness lurking behind the conventional elegiac rhetoric. The poet suddenly unleashes a frightening and irrefutable catalogue of existential and psychological contradictions that threatens to deconstruct his traditional elegiac voice.

Ask why the sunlight not forever  
 Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain river,  
 Why aught should fail and fade that once is shewn,  
 Why fear and dream and death and birth  
 Cast on the daylight of this earth  
 Such gloom,—why man has such a scope  
 For love and hate, despondency and hope? (lines 18–24)

This potentially deconstructive counterpointing is furthered by a complication in the poem's pattern of light imagery. The Spirit of Beauty, as we have seen, has been associated with nocturnal light, has been imaged, appropriately enough, as a source of light in darkness whose departure leaves the world "dim." Now, however, a new order of light imagery is introduced, that of the daytime rather than nighttime sky. (These two kinds of celestial light are frequently juxtaposed in Shelley's symbolism, as,

for example, in “Epipsychidion” and “The Triumph of Life.”) “Sunlight,” “rainbows,” and “daylight” suggest what I shall venture to call a phenomenal order of loveliness corresponding to the phenomenal order of contrariety and mutability described in lines 18–24. The world, rather than being simply a dark “vale of tears” illumined only by the comings of supernal Beauty and dimmed again by its goings, turns out to be a more complex place. It has its own sources of light and beauty, as well as its own sources of “gloom” (line 17), quite apart from the activities of the transcendent Spirit. Once again, I do not wish to overread conceptual meanings into Shelley’s complex and illusive imagery. I would suggest, however, that the shift in tone and imagery which occurs in the 5/7 division of Stanza 2 functions ironically to point up the inevitable disparity between experienced reality and the potentially reductive and misleading myths of transcendent Power created to explain it—a disparity that exists, Shelley realizes, even when the explanatory myth is the poet’s own.

Such a reading gains credence, I think, from the explicit statement of skepticism in the first seven lines of Stanza 3. Although Shelley’s criticism is directed specifically at Christian claims to revealed truth, it would seem to cover as well all claims to transcendent knowledge that “charm” us away from the empirical realities of life (“all we hear and all we see”) and thus from a necessary awareness of “Doubt, chance, and mutability.”

No voice from some sublimer world hath ever  
 To sage or poet these responses given—  
 Therefore the name of God and ghosts and Heaven,  
 Remain the records of their vain endeavour,  
 Frail spells—whose uttered charm might not avail to sever,  
 From all we hear and all we see,  
 Doubt, chance, and mutability. (lines 25–31)

The essential thing about Shelley’s skepticism is that it is poetically creative, even visionary, while being metaphysically restrictive. It strips away from both poet and sage such transcendental supports (or distractions) as “God and ghosts and Heaven.” It demands a realistic and penetrating insight into the inmedicable evils of the human condition. But it does not sponsor a “realistic,” a “naturalistic,” or, in the usual sense of the term, an “ironic” poetic mode. Since “a voice / Is wanting” (*Prometheus Unbound*,

II.iv.115–116); since "no voice from some sublimer world" conveys ultimate meanings, the sagacious poet is both forced and liberated to create his own myths of deliverance. (Or, what is much the same thing, he must deliver himself, and mankind, through the power of his own imagination.) The poet who, for whatever reasons, would neither abdicate entirely the realm of transcendence nor indulge a poetry of perpetual denial is both set at liberty and compelled to formulate his own "transcendental illusions," to create his own necessary fictions.

This truth, it seems to me, is enacted in the very structure of Stanza 3. The first seven lines having skeptically called into doubt the making of transcendental mythologies, the last five lines create a radical juxtaposition by restating the poem's own myth of transcendent Beauty.

Thy light alone—like mist o'er mountains driven,  
Or music by the night wind sent  
Through strings of some still instrument,  
Or moonlight on a midnight stream,  
Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream. (lines 32–36)

It is as though Shelley must continually remind himself of the theoretical dangers of metaphysical and poetic visions, must constantly pull himself back to the existential phenomena that such visions all too often undervalue before he feels at liberty to unchain his own Promethean and visionary imagination.

Stanza 4, like Stanza 2, translates analogical imagery into moral and psychological doctrine. "Love, Hope, and Self-esteem," the "glorious train" of the "unknown and awful" Spirit of Beauty, "depart / And come" (lines 37–41) like the Spirit itself. Were these animating powers constant within the human heart, "Man were immortal, and omnipotent" (line 39), not, as Reiman points out, in a literal, but in a metaphorical and psychological, sense (*Norton*, p. 94). The last seven lines of Stanza 4 amplify the psychological and emotional inconstancies that keep us from becoming "all / We dream of happy, high, majestic" ("Julian and Maddalo," lines 172–173).

Thou messenger of sympathies,  
That wax and wane in lovers' eyes—

Thou—that to human thought art nourishment,  
 Like darkness to a dying flame!  
 Depart not as thy shadow came,  
 Depart not—lest the grave should be,  
 Like life and fear, a dark reality. (lines 42–48)

Like Plato, but without Plato's transcendental metaphysics, Shelley made the perception of beauty a determining psychological and ethical, as well as aesthetic, principle. Although he viewed rational and universal benevolence as a categorical imperative, he was acutely aware, both as poet and as man, that the erotic "sympathies" (line 42) that actually motivate, at the deepest levels, both sexual and social love are not controllable by the reason or the will. They spring, he suggests, from the irrational and inconstantly activated feeling for beauty that is one of the dominant mysteries of man's inner nature. The same is true of man's will to knowledge or "thought" (line 44) and even of his desire for immortality. His fears that he may cease to be—which are, from first to last in Shelley's work, a primary obstacle to human happiness and completion—are themselves viewed, in large part, as the product of "a gloomy and cold imagination" too weak to perceive creatively the "loveliness and majesty" of our own and of other natures ("Essay on Christianity," *Prose*, pp. 204–205). The invocation of the transcendent "Thou" thus functions on a deeply psychological level to illustrate the existential ills—the mutability of love, the failure of thought, and the fear of death—consequent upon the inability to sustain our sense of beauty as, to borrow Wordsworth's phrase, "a living Presence of the earth."<sup>28</sup>

The simile in lines 44–45 has elicited a good deal of critical comment: "Thou—that to human thought art nourishment, / Like darkness to a dying flame!" The logic of the comparison seems clear enough. Darkness might feed or "nourish" a weak flame by making it appear brighter. As Newell Ford says, however, "Shelley's simile upsets our normal expectations," especially since the Spirit of Beauty has been figured throughout the poem as a form of supernal light. The image, Ford argues convincingly,

28. "Prospectus" to *The Recluse*, line 42. Shelley's "Hymn" can be considered as a conscious response to the theory or myth of natural beauty presented by Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey," the "Intimations" ode, the "Prospectus," the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and elsewhere.

is an example of Shelley's paradoxical wit, an instance of his characteristic insight into "the ironic contrariety of things,"<sup>29</sup> a judgment that can be extended, I think, to include the next line as well: "Depart not as thy shadow came" (line 46). The word "shadow," according to Wasserman, can be understood here and in Stanza 1 as "'a diminished mode' of the light of Intellectual Beauty" rather than as a darkness.<sup>30</sup> In the context both of Shelley's skepticism and of the deliberately "upsetting" reversal of light/darkness imagery in the "dying flame" simile, however, a more problematic reading seems appropriate. "In the sense that it is part of the vast unknowable,"<sup>31</sup> the hypothetical Spirit of Beauty is necessarily shadowy or dark to human comprehension. But a less benign construction is also possible. The light of the hypothetical Spirit may be delusive, an appearance shadowing over what is essentially a dark emptiness. The sudden shift in imagery makes us aware that the myth of Beauty may be, like all religious myths, nothing more than a wishful projection that, teasing "us out of thought / As doth eternity,"<sup>32</sup> serves only to hide the metaphysical void. Influenced perhaps by the thought of man's "funereal destiny" expressed in the following lines, Shelley sounds in the latent ambiguities of these images the most despairing and supplicative note in the poem's elegiac music. The supernal light becomes a darkness; human life and thought become a "dying."

As we might expect, however, Shelley does not end his poem in irony or dark despair, any more than Wordsworth ended the "Intimations" ode with the lost vision of Stanzas 1-4. The "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" sets out deliberately, it seems to me, to revise the sepulchral myth of the poet and his vision that Shelley had presented in *Alastor*. There is, literally and figuratively, a flicker of hope. If human thought is a "dying flame," it is a "flame" nonetheless. Beauty's light-in-darkness shifts paradoxically from the shadowy and hypothetical transcendent Spirit to the human mind, and, in the process, the element of vital warmth, of fire, is added. The last three

29. "Paradox and Irony in Shelley's Poetry," *Studies in Philology*, 57 (1960), 654. It is interesting to compare Shelley's image to a similarly ironic use of flame/light imagery in Wallace Stevens's "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour": "How high that highest candle lights the dark."

30. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, p. 194.

31. Newell Ford, "Paradox and Irony," *Studies in Philology*, 57 (1960), 654.

32. "Ode on a Grecian Urn," lines 44-45.



stanzas of the poem will rise, phoenix-like, from this ashy flame to formulate an explicit myth of the poet as keeper of creative power and as transmitter of humanly significant beauty. We think ahead to Prometheus the fire-bearer in Shelley's great drama; to the symbolic association of ethereal fire and the poet in "Ode to the West Wind" and "Adonais"; and to the fine remark in *A Defence of Poetry* about the imagination's Promethean ascent "to bring light and fire from . . . eternal regions" (Norton, p. 503).

The explicit self-dramatization contained in the last three stanzas of Shelley's "Hymn" is neither factual nor fanciful autobiography. In the form of a condensed and idealized *Bildungsroman*, it constitutes a conscious myth of poetic maturation that serves a representative function. It is Shelley's version of Wordsworth's myth of poetic and, on a larger scale, "human" development through progressive stages of emotional and imaginative growth. The three stages of life depicted in Stanzas 5, 6, and 7, respectively, are, as Reiman observes, "not unlike those described in Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality.'"<sup>33</sup> The essential difference, however, is immediately striking and absolutely characteristic. The intention (if not always the effect) of Wordsworth's myth is to project poetic and human identity in relation to the processive continuities of nature and memory. Sudden, even apocalyptic moments of illumination are reabsorbed, through selected remembrance and teleological analysis, into a natural continuum of experience that makes the child father to the man. Shelley's myth of the emergent poetic self is much closer to the traditional Christian typology of a sudden revelation that sunders past from present and future, that marks a radical split in the subject's spiritual history and postulates the possibility of a new birth. In an ironic reversal, Shelley embraces the psychological truth embodied in the Christian conversion experience to undercut the metaphysical falsities and spiritual deceits embodied in superstitious Christian doctrine.

Stanza 5 portrays Shelley's "Hopes of high talk with the departed dead" (line 52) as a freak of boyish immaturity. (Shelley, of course, did try to raise ghosts on several occasions in his youth.) The tone becomes consciously satirical and self-deprecating as the vagaries of Gothic romance are associated with the force-fed poisons of religious dogma. (The "poisonous

33. Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 45.

names" of line 53 correspond to "God and ghosts and Heaven" in line 27.) Both romance and religion are superstitions of "our youth" (line 53) that do not meet the test of empirical reality: "I was not heard—I saw them not" (line 54). Maturity and poethood (they are synonymous in terms of the myth) are suddenly conferred in something very like a conventional religious conversion experience:

When musing deeply on the lot  
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing  
All vital things that wake to bring  
News of buds and blossoming,—  
Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;  
I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy! (lines 55–60)

Bloom describes this experience as a "prophetic convention"; Chernaik refers to it as a "fiction of . . . visionary seizure."<sup>34</sup> Whatever we choose to call it, it marks a crucial shift in the formal and thematic structure of the poem. Shelley's focus changes from a myth of mysterious Power, the thematic burden of which is remote and inconstant dualism, to a myth of the poet at work in time, the burden of which is creative immanence.

In Stanza 6, the poet's own vows and dedications take center stage, humanistic vows that include such forms of "holy living" as "studious zeal" and "love's delight" (line 66). The poet becomes a vehicle, a transmitter, a hierophant, a source of supreme beauty in the world. As such, he becomes a magical being. Whereas before he "called on poisonous names" and summoned ghosts to no effect, he can now "call the phantoms of a thousand hours / Each from his voiceless grave" (lines 64–65). Now he himself extracts a voice in place of the voice that never was "from some sublimer world" (line 25). Ultimately, of course, the voice belongs to the poet himself, and that can be the source both of celebration and of despair, of power and of doubt.

They [the resurrected hours] know that never joy illumed my brow  
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free  
This world from its dark slavery,  
That thou—O awful LOVELINESS,  
Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express. (lines 68–72)

34. Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, p. 41; Chernaik, *The Lyrics of Shelley*, p. 37.

The coronal of beauty's light-in-darkness has passed from the shadowy Spirit to the poet's brow, but, as always in Shelley, there is a skeptical qualification. The poet is unsure of his own powers; he does not know how little or how much his own words can express or effect. Like the biblical prophet, the Shelleyan poet-prophet must rely upon a Power beyond himself. For Shelley, however, that Power remains hypothetical, the product, at least in part, of his own symbol- and mythmaking imagination. The voice may be only an echo, and the poet's words themselves seem only to point to a further mystery, to an indeterminate unknown ("whate'er," line 72) beyond their capacity to express.<sup>35</sup> The one sure strength of the visionary and prophetic poet is the power of "hope" (line 69), not that of mystical insight or religious revelation. Such visionary hope Shelley made both an imaginative and a moral duty, a duty that, imaginatively if not morally, he found increasingly difficult to fulfill.

As has been said, however, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" is an affirmative poem, the somewhat derivative quality of its optimism suggesting, perhaps, its transitional nature. The affirmation of its closing stanza is strongly Wordsworthian in tone and owes much to the concept of "the philosophic mind" developed in the "Intimations" ode. Shelley's rhetoric of temporality shifts accordingly from the figures of mutability, ephemerality, and transience that dominate the rest of the poem to figures of growth, steadiness, and continuity. In lines that look forward to Keats's "To Autumn" as well as backward to Wordsworth, the imagery changes from glancing nocturnal visitations to the recurrent cycles of earth's diurnal and seasonal rounds.

The day becomes more solemn and serene  
 When noon is past—there is a harmony  
 In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,  
 Which through the summer is not heard or seen,  
 As if it could not be, as if it had not been! (lines 73–77)

The "spells" of the "Spirit fair" (line 83), unlike the "Frail spells" (line 29) of religious superstition, "bind" (line 83) the poet to what is best and most creative in himself. In the steady, Wordsworthian calm of his "onward

35. The inability of the poet's language to express his vision becomes, of course, a major theme in Shelley's later work, especially in "Epipsyichidion" and the *Defence*.

life" (line 80), he becomes a mythic locus of power, a power ultimately expressed not in mystical transcendence, but in the humanistic and existential imperatives of self-awe and social love: "To fear himself, and love all human kind" (line 84).

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