

SHELLEY'S SUBLIME

by

CARSON TAYLOR VINES

STEPHEN A. TEDESCHI, COMMITTEE CHAIR

WILLIAM A. ULMER

DEBORAH WEISS

THEODORE TROST

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the Graduate School of  
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2017

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## ABSTRACT

The sublime is a topic with a rich context in art, philosophy, religion and rhetoric. Critical discussion of Percy Shelley's use of the sublime has frequently included connections to romantic aesthetics and the philosophy of the period. This thesis argues that Shelley utilized the sublime for political ends by engaging with its religious and philosophical perspectives. I investigate the way in which Shelley utilized the sublime in a way that shows his interest in the relationship of the reader/observer to sublime objects, images, or other elements in a text. Chapter One demonstrates, through a reading of *Mont Blanc*, how Shelley empties the sublime of its ability to figure for or explain power structures and instead redirects the reader's focus on his fellow man. Chapter Two considers how Shelley employs a perverted Christian allegory to show how sympathy and memory are linked to the response to the sublime. The final chapter illuminates the connection between the sublime and Shelley's take on Necessity in the prose fragment, *The Assassins*. It is the argument of this project that Shelley was interested in the moment of connection between reader and text and sought to construct his texts in such a way that the sublime might be didactic in so far as it produced the potential for a change in the reader's thinking by placing him closer to his fellow man. In this way, the sublime, normally thought of in terms of its boundlessness, operates as a means of closing the gap between the beholder and the object being observed as well as bringing the reader in connection with another person. The stakes of this move by Shelley are explicitly political, in that they acknowledge the power of public space and its necessary place in bringing about a change in the political landscape.

DEDICATION

To my family

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the result of having had the opportunity to work with and learn from numerous professors and fellow graduate students at the University of Alabama. I am grateful for this opportunity afforded me by the University of Alabama, the Graduate School, and the Department of English.

The members of my thesis committee, which included Professor William Ulmer, Professor Deborah Weiss, and Professor Theodore Trost, offered me support and wisdom throughout the process and for that I am thankful. Each member contributed a unique perspective and allowed me to see the project in a new light. Each of these members was charitable and patient with my ideas and always available for feedback.

My committee chair, Stephen Tedeschi, has been more generous with his time and advice than any graduate student could ask for. I am indebted to his commitment to guiding this thesis from the very early stages. I owe a great deal to the time he spent listening and commenting on my ideas.

A special thanks also to Shane Ashcraft for reading and commenting on the draft in the late stages.

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## INTRODUCTION SHELLEY'S SUBLIME SOCIAL SYMPATHIES

In May of 1816, Percy Shelley wrote to Thomas Love Peacock, chronicling his travels through the Alps towards Geneva:

The natural silence of that uninhabited desert contrasted strangely with the voices of the people who conducted us. For it was necessary in this part of the mountains to take a number of persons who should assist the horses to force the chaise thro the snow, & prevent it from falling down the precipice. <sup>1</sup>

The language of this letter and several others written during Shelley's trip as well as the poem *Mont Blanc*, composed afterwards, are often returned to as key documents in studies of Shelley's engagement with the sublime. Shelley is taken aback by the alpine surroundings and they impress upon him lasting images of how power is conceived of and communicated with. But Shelley's comment to Peacock about the mountain scene compels us to consider what power Shelley actually recognized in the mountains. He describes the area as "uninhabited" which challenges us to consider whether he means to say that humans do not live here or rather if all the inaccurate divine forms associated with this place are not actually there as tradition would have him believe. Here also is an explicit contrast between the sublime mountain scene and the element of immediate human power. Shelley notes that several people must cooperate to enable progress through the pass and keep their coach from crashing.

This project aims to investigate this concern with the relationship between the sublime scene and the human observer. I contend that critical discussions of Shelley's conceptions and

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Thomas Love Peacock, -- May 1816, Frederick L. Jones, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) Page 476.

figurations of sublime images, feelings, and landscapes have neglected to account adequately for how they relate to his commitment to revolutionary politics. More so than previous critics, I will focus on Shelley's sense of his relation to his public audience and attend to how he thinks his work would shape the minds of those who read it. Shelley's use of the sublime in his poetry compels the reader to reconsider both what the sublime is and what its effects in and on poetry might be.

The two major studies of the Shellyan sublime share in common, though otherwise dissimilar, the idea that the sublime is textualized in Shelley's work as an expression of fluctuating personal beliefs. Angela Leighton and Cian Duffy provide two full-length works on the sublime in Shelley's poetry. Leighton perceives the sublime in Shelley as an externalization of the poet's own struggles with poetic creativity and radicalism. Duffy's book argues that the sublime in Shelley's work houses the poet's political concerns of gradualism versus immediate radical action. He does this by demonstrating how the sublime images in Shelley's major poetry offer metaphors of stored up potential power, with mysterious and unknown catalysts. This project, however, focuses on how Shelley meant to construct a politically affective sublime that existed primarily to reorient the perspective of the reader and to encourage what possible political and social activity might be achieved through his poetry.

To begin this study, it is necessary first to acknowledge the disparate and even conflicting definitions of the sublime and to examine how these conflicts are inflected by the uses of the term in religion, art, literature, and philosophy, each field having its own tailored purpose for the model of sublimity. Friedrich von Schiller describes the sublime feeling in a way that explains at least some of the causes for the varied conceptions of and responses to the sublime:

The feeling of the sublime is a mixed feeling. It is at once a painful state, which its paroxysm is manifested in a kind of shudder, and that may rise to rapture, and which, without being properly a pleasure, is greatly preferred to every kind of pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

Schiller notes not only the paralyzing effect of the sublime, but also its tempting and perhaps even cathartic nature. James B. Twitchell observes in his introduction that the sublime is not only a complex feeling, but also a complex “process of physically transcending external limits while simultaneously crossing a logical boundary of consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> The sublime thus transgresses the lines between mental and physical as well as the repulsive and compelling.

The religious sublime is very much guided by the transcendental view of the landscape. In a study of representations of landscapes, Twitchell notes the conventional religious qualities of the sublime, where God is always just beyond the reach of human sight. The mystery of God’s presence causes the beholder to conflate the wonders of nature with the power of God. The fear and confusion defined by Edmund Burke and others that compliments the beauty and wonder of the sublime landscape is ultimately converted into a pious reverence. Twitchell reviews the evolution of the sublime in the centuries preceding Shelley’s life. He concerns himself with the transition of the sublime in the Romantic period being represented as a place where only God can dwell (the upper reaches of painting, an illumination behind the clouds of a landscape piece, etc.) to a space that humans could hope to reach.

Shelley’s interaction with the sublime has often been discussed within the framework of Romantic aesthetics and marked by connections to familiar Romantic tropes. One of the most notable of these tropes is that of the wandering and forlorn poet seeking direction from a higher

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich von Schiller, “The Sublime,” *Essays Aesthetical and Philosophical*. Anonymous translator. (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1882), Page.133

<sup>3</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Romantic Horizons: Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting, 1770-1850* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), Page 3

power. In poems such as *Alastor*, the landscape that both frames the poem and reflects the imagination of its central character is described in ways familiar from standard definitions of the sublime:

The stream, that with a larger volume now  
Rolled through the labyrinthine dell; and there  
Fretted a path through its descending curves  
With its wintry speed. On every side now rose  
Rocks, which, in unimaginable forms,  
Lifted their black and barren pinnacles  
In the light of evening, and its precipice  
Obscuring the ravine, disclosed above,  
Mid toppling stones, black gulphs and yawning caves,  
Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues  
To the loud stream.<sup>4</sup>

In this passage, the landscape appears boundless, mysterious, and dangerous. The sublimity of the landscape is found in its ability to exceed the wanderer's senses and excite within the reader the sense of being lost among perils. To stop at this level of investigation of how the sublime functions is to leave discussion of the sublime in the realm of a critical tradition that sees Romanticism in a specifically aesthetic and transcendental light. But as we will see, Shelley's use of the sublime has other purposes than only to portray the defeat of the senses and by extension, the aspirations, of his poetic characters.

Another common approach within the critical discussions of the sublime in Romantic literature is to figure and trace the longing for a land beyond the natural world. To that end, the sublime has been enlisted as a strategy for embodying the divine world (which itself is transplanted into Romantic tropes) and then employed as a catch all for the poet's dreams of a world more congenial to his or her aspirations. In this type of analysis, one might think of the

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<sup>4</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002), Lines 540-550. Hereafter I cite this source with the title of the work being quoted followed by the line number.

sublime strictly in terms of space. The boundlessness of the sublime landscape is a way of conjuring and symbolically representing a world where the poet's creativity will not be hindered by the constraints of the natural world.

This perspective informs the thesis of Angela Leighton's study of Shelley's sublime. Leighton argues that Shelley's work, over the course of his life, shows a "shift in emphasis" away from an empirical discourse on the sublime, marked by a concern for politics, and towards an interest in a transcendental creative sublime. Shelley's interest is characterized by Leighton as a "poetic need" which suggests that Shelley sought out the use of the sublime as a way to image and connect with a power that might influence his poetry.<sup>5</sup> Such a position finds some foothold in the biography of Shelley in that much of his later life is marked by self-exile and a search for a place where he might find the space needed to write. However, framing this sort of emotion within Shelley as a shift from empiricism to transcendental aesthetics does not account for the complexity of Shelley's poetry and more importantly, relies on a conception of the sublime founded on the Kantian tradition, which Shelley did not necessarily subscribe to.

Disagreement on the philosophical context for both Shelley and the sublime is largely responsible for the critical divide that this thesis seeks to attend to. In his book on Shelley's political sublime, Duffy begins with the claim that the fundamental misunderstanding regarding Shelley's use of the sublime is the incorrect context in which many scholars frame the Romantic sublime. He argues that critics should not depend on Kant's transcendental and idealistic appraisal of the sublime to read Shelley's work because Shelley simply did not read Kant.<sup>6</sup> For

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Page vii.

<sup>6</sup> Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Pages 2-3.

Duffy, critics apply a generic transcendental sublime to Shelley's texts despite Shelley's allegiance to an altogether different philosophical perspective.

Shelley's non-Kantian philosophy finds its groundings primarily in the work of Hume and Drummond. C E. Pulos offers insight on how Shelley's work was shaped by these two thinkers and defines the intricate nature of Shelley's brand of skepticism.<sup>7</sup> The significance of Shelley's allegiance to Hume and Drummond for a study of his use of the sublime is that for Shelley, the sublime resides in a skeptical awareness of the mind and the paradoxical power that lies in the recognition of those inherent human limitations. Because he understands the role that the human mind plays in discerning the sublime Shelley recognizes the power of individuals to contend with the power structures that often accompany representations of it.

Shelley's thoughts about political space and how one might go about affecting it fall in line with this philosophical premise. Shelley had confidence in the ability of the individual mind to be the catalyst for the improvement of society. His comments on "Man in society" in *A Defence of Poetry* reveal these hopes:

Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, next becomes the object of those passions and pleasures of man; and additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expressions... The social sympathies, or, those laws from which as from its elements society results, begin to develop themselves from the moment two beings coexist... and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence become the principles alone capable of affording the motives to which the will of a social being is determined to action<sup>8</sup>

Here Shelley is describing the development of poetic language as intimately connected with man's coexistence with other men. He argues that as man observes his own emotions and thoughts and then sees those thoughts reflected in other men, a mutual existence develops out of

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<sup>7</sup> C. E. Pulos, *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Skepticism* (University of Nebraska Press, 1954).

<sup>8</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, page 511.

this recognition that necessitates the existence of a language capable of expressing the unity man has found with another man. In a sense, what man has found in society is indeed himself. Out of this mirroring comes a productive sympathy that is effective, perhaps even inevitable, in changing society for the better. For the purposes of this project, it is significant that poetry can operate to show a man an image of himself as well as other men, an objective which Shelley's sublime targets. Shelley uses the sublime in a manner that is expressly political by demonstrating the sublime's ability to bring man face to face with other men in a way that represents a new emphasis brought to bear against, if not a break from, traditional uses of the sublime.

A crucial element of Shelley's social, skeptical, non-transcendental use of the sublime is his critique of Christianity. Reforming the transcendental sublime eliminates the influence God has as a ruling force. To reground the sublime in a skeptical space is to place the power to reimagine the structure and governance of the environment in the hands of man. Shelley's attention to Christianity as a manipulative power structure should be viewed specifically through the lens of Anglicanism, a form of Christianity intimately linked with governmental control. Shelley's denouncement of religion is linked to this sect, as his family as well as Oxford adhered to the tenants of Anglicanism. A shift to human power is a shift towards recognizing that man's connection to other men replaces the organizational structure of Christianity and the Christian sublime. In my analysis of *The Cenci* and *Zastrozzi*, I give close consideration of the resonance between this critique and his position on the sublime.

In order to illustrate Shelley's sense of the relationship of the reader to the sublime text, Chapter One will focus on the prescribed role of reader/observer in *Mont Blanc*. This seminal text has been the primary ground for locating Shelley's thoughts on the poetic, philosophic, and aesthetic functions of the sublime. I argue that the text refuses to adhere to a particular system

and instead directs attention down off the mountain and onto the elements of the poem that are material and human. To develop this argument for the introspective and reflective properties of the sublime, I examine how the sublime operates in a similar way to force readers to align themselves with the identity and emotions of characters in Shelley's play *The Cenci*.

Chapter Two extends the consideration of the sublime and the reader by demonstrating how Shelley uses the sublime to bring people together. Highlighting instances in Shelley's early gothic novel, *Zastrozzi*, I contrast the introspection prompted by Mont Blanc with the way the novel shows the ability of characters in the novel to connect through memory and sympathy. I also show how this novel displays Shelley's consciousness of the sublime's resonance with the Christian tradition and his exploitation of this resonance by perverting the traditional use of the sublime.

The final chapter of this thesis builds on the idea of the sublime as a means of encouraging people to unite politically by examining the representation of that process and considering its revolutionary potential in Shelley's prose fragment *The Assassins*. This chapter shows how Shelley's belief in Necessity intersects with his treatment of the sublime and how these ideas cooperate in his imagining of the actuation of political change.

This thesis focuses on the reaction of the reader to a sublime moment in the text and seeks to define how that moment differs from others in the act of reading. This project argues that Shelley was interested such moments and that he sought to construct his texts in such a way that the sublime might be didactic only in so far as it produced the potential for a change in the reader's thinking by placing him closer to his fellow man. In this way, the sublime, normally thought of in terms of its boundlessness, operates as a means of closing the gap between the beholder and the object being observed as well as between the reader and another person. The

stakes of this move by Shelley are explicitly political in that they acknowledge the power of literature and its necessary place in bringing about a change in the political landscape.

CHAPTER ONE  
THE SNAKES THAT WATCH THEIR PREY: THE READER AND THE SOCIAL SUBLIME IN  
*MONT BLANC* AND *THE CENCI*

Shelley's inclination to declare himself an atheist and a democrat in hotel guest books as he toured the Alps in 1816 reveals something of his motivation to write a poem like *Mont Blanc*.<sup>9</sup> To Shelley, the social scene around him at the hotels must have seemed absurd and misguided. Talk of tourists flocking to Switzerland to catch a generic commonplace glimpse of Mont Blanc, a supposed symbol of deity and a reinforcement of God's dominion over nature, was repugnant to Shelley.<sup>10</sup> These two interrelated issues, tourism and an equally thoughtless and automatic system, Christianity, are what the poem is specifically interested in contending with. Even Shelley's letters to Peacock explaining his adventures contain a hesitance to join the tourist crowd:

I do not err in conceiving that you are interested in details of all that is majestic or beautiful in nature – But how shall I describe to you the scenes by which I am now surrounded. – To exhaust epithets which express the astonishment & the admiration – the very excess of expectation, where expectation scarcely acknowledged any boundary – is this to impress upon your mind the images which fill mine now, even until it overflows? I too had read before now the raptures of travellers. I will be warned by their example.<sup>11</sup>

Shelley acknowledges Peacock's inclination to have the scenes of Mont Blanc relayed to him, but at the same time suggests a problem of mediation, or at least a problem with the impulse to

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1974) Page 342.

<sup>10</sup> For a full consideration of Shelley and tourism see the chapter, "The Raptures of Travelers: Writing *Mont Blanc*" in Benjamin Colbert's *Shelley's Eye: travel writing and aesthetic vision* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Thomas Love Peacock, 22 July 1816, *Letters* I.358

mediate. Shelley does give an account of his journey, but his reluctance to assume the role of enlightened tourist reveals that Shelley's view of the tourist is a negative one.

The problem with tourism and the problem with Christianity is that for Shelley they are both characterized by a problematic social structure. Tourists flock to an attraction and fix their attention on its supposed glory, shoulder to shoulder with their fellow man but completely unaware of their presence. However many connections may exist between an object and a person, there are none linking the observers together. Even in the act of writing home to tell of the event, the message is dominated by a wish to connect the absent person to the object, rather than connect two people in a shared experience. So too, in the institutional practice of Christianity, while the New Testament bears out plenty in the way of doing good for fellow man, these acts get devalued in place of enforcing a connection between an individual member and the object of the power structure.

The effect of reading *Mont Blanc* is to reverse this power structure and manipulate the expectation of the reader both by refusing to reveal whatever system of power should be present and by refocusing attention on the human elements of the poem. Shelley's poem defies the pervading discourse on the sublime by challenging the transcendental presence of God in nature and by repurposing the sublime moment as an opportunity to foster attention to human interactions.

The third verse paragraph of the poem advances through a series of questions that clue us in to Shelley's message to the reader as well as to the viewer that the mountain cannot reveal what they wish it could. The stanza opens with "Some say dreams of a remoter world/Visit the soul in sleep" (49-50), a line that places the rest of the musings about the veil of life and death that follow in a tension with the first word. "Some" implies at the very least an uncertainty or

skepticism about the possibility of ascertaining knowledge of anything outside our own existence and even goes as far as to chide those who make the attempt. Shelley continues to question the relationship between the mountain scene and the human observer:

Is this the scene  
Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young  
Ruin? Were these their toys? Or did a sea  
Of fire, envelope once the silent snow?  
None can reply- all seems eternal now. (71-75)

The simple repetition of questions reveals a similar attitude towards the subject as “Some” does at the beginning of the stanza; the landscape refuses to offer any answer to the questions. The persistent search for answers to the history or future of our existence cannot be confirmed in any way by anything, much less a mountain. The physical landscape, for the Christian tourist, is supposed to offer a reassurance that God in fact exists and the object of the mountain is not only a symbol of his power but a reminder that he is still greater than this sense-defeating object. However, Shelley offers no such comfort. Duffy confirms this stating, “while conventionally the metaphorical connection between the sense-defeating landscape of the natural sublime and God is positive and redemptive, Shelley sees the connection as a ‘vulgar’ illusion of the untutored imagination – an illusion that originated in and now sustains ‘the falsehood of religious systems’ (Poems, I, p.360).”<sup>12</sup> For Shelley the affect of the sublime scene is largely dominated by the error of false system, an affect he sought to critique and replace.

The silence of the mountain in the face of existential questioning allows us to consider how in the opening lines Shelley critiques the Burkean sublime and those who adopt it as a way to affirm their Christian beliefs. The first verse paragraph announces to the reader that he will be forced to read the mountain and the poem without the guide of any system:

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<sup>12</sup> Duffy, *Revolutionary Sublime*, 113.

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark – now glittering – now reflecting gloom –  
Now lending splendor, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters, - with a sound but half its own,  
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume  
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,  
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river  
Over its rocks and ceaselessly bursts and raves. (1-11)

The opening lines of the poem place us immediately in the context of being unsure of the relation of the mind to the landscape. The lines at first glance appear to offer the path of the brook as a metaphor for human thought, but they retreat from this at each point that the metaphor might actually reveal some sort of truth. In the first six lines, the syntactical ambiguity presented by the antecedent of “its” forces us to continue the poem without a definite understanding of the relationship between the universe and the human mind. This ambiguity is a call to admit that there is no definable relationship between the separate entities.

The next five lines of the opening verse paragraph confirm this assertion by hinging on a seventh line that suggests the “feeble brook” will “oft” be “assume[d]” incorrectly to represent some underlying system. Even an alternate interpretation of the word “assume” indicates that the brook will only appear to take a certain form within this supposed system, but in reality it will always be only a brook among the woods. Finally, the image of the brook itself gets lost in the landscape as the verse paragraph closes with a barrage of images of wind and nature that decenter our focus on the brook at all, much less its possible allegorical reference to any wisdom flowing down from beyond the clouds. It seems that Shelley’s aim here in the face of a mountain scene manipulated by swarms of tourists into a tribute to divine power is to bring the discussion back down to empirical terms and to force our attention back to the material world. That is not to

say, as we will see later, that Shelley believes there is no power in the universe –his notes to *Queen Mab* indicate that he does – but that he thinks that it is fruitless to try to systematize that power instead of accepting it as a force that surpasses system.

The futility of uncovering a transcendental system within the universe is confirmed in the second and third verse paragraphs as the poem switches its focus to the mind itself. Shelley writes:

In the still cave of the witch Poesy,  
Seeking among the shadows that pass by  
Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,  
Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast  
From which they fled recalls them, thou art there! (44-48)

Here the speaker acknowledges the connection of poetry to the power in the mountain but only to leave the reader wondering if the cave of the witch is a true image of poetic power or just another failed attempt to establish some connection with the power of the mountain. The “faint image” that leaves as soon as it appears emphasizes that we are still within the realm of the fleeting impressions on the imagination and forces us to question whether this cave can present any sort of truth about the power in the scene. The thoughts of the cave recede back into the failure of objects to produce clear enough impressions of the acute reality of our own existence and confirm the paradoxical power that perceiving these limitations produces. Duffy argues well the point that this cave is, rather than a key to unlocking the mountain, further proof that the mountain cannot be rightly identified:

Whatever Shelley’s source for the “still cave passage may have been, however, the conclusion of *Mont Blanc*’s apostrophe to the ravine of Arve evidently describes the mind’s superstitious attempts to redress the anxiety of its defeat by re-imagining the material agency of that defeat...crucially, Shelley emphasizes the need to resist this anxious, figurative “labour” of the imagination, the need to “recall” the mind’s attempts to re-figure the “remote, serene, and inaccessible” “power” of the landscape. Rather, the “awful scene” must be left as an “unsculptured image”, as “the naked countenance of earth” which alone, Shelley affirms, can “teach the advertent mind” (*Mont Blanc*,

97,27,98,100)...Paradoxically, it is only by accepting *Mont Blanc*'s essential silence that the mountain's true "voice" can be heard.<sup>13</sup>

Duffy here marks Shelley's insistence that what is to be gained from the mountain will not be the result of uncovering a hidden truth about the power of the mountain, but rather that in the face of the mountain, the onlooker will realize the impossibility of fully comprehending the mountain and instead find power in something else. What Duffy doesn't say here is precisely what a turn away from the mountain asks us to turn towards.

A possible answer to the question of what Shelley would have us attend to in the poem rather than stare up at the dizzying expanse and fill it with our false conceptions of God and power lies in a contrasting theme that runs throughout the poem: the physical action of the (presumably) only other living things present in the scene. In the third verse paragraph of the poem, the "eagle brings some hunter's bone" amidst a "desart peopled by the storms alone" while "the wolf tracks her there" (68-69). The description of the mountain scene almost engulfs this image entirely, forcing our imagination to attend to the "dizzying Ravine" and its vistas. However, it is here, overlooked on the cliffs, that Shelley provides an alternative to the mountain scene. The action of the wolf tracking the eagle is perplexing, and seems to suggest some sort of hostile relationship amidst the cliffs. However, the Scrope-Davies notebook version of the poem replaces "tracks her there" with "watches her there." This substitution allows us to consider the interaction between the two animals in a way that suggests their careful attention to other living things and to the interconnected nature of their existence within the material world; this redirection of attention represents Shelley's subtle attempt at redirecting his reader's attention within the mountain scene.

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<sup>13</sup> Duffy, *Revolutionary Sublime*, 116-17.

The history of the scene at Chamonix as a tourist attraction that people flocked to in order to become reinvested with the sublime grandeur of Christianity provides Shelley the perfect opportunity to write a poem in which attention to the details below the mountain acts as the instructive force. This move recalls our attention to Shelley's concern with the reading public that they have been deceived into allegiance to a power structure that uses them in ways that they do not comprehend. In Shelley's notes to *Queen Mab*, he discusses the role of soldiers in a similar way, stating, "it seems impossible that the soldier should not be a depraved and unnatural being."<sup>14</sup> Shelley goes on to say that the soldier "is, of all descriptions of men, the most completely a machine; yet his profession inevitably teaches him something of dogmatism." (46-48). He frames the mechanization of these soldiers against his earlier description of tyrants, the "real authors of the calamity" (35), whose role it has been recruit these machines. The connection between the soldiers and the tourists is clear: the tourists, as well as the soldiers, need to be reprogrammed to see the "naked countenance of the earth" (98). The final mention of animals in the poem provides the lasting image:

Power dwells apart in its tranquility  
Remote, serene, and inaccessible:  
And this, the naked countenance of earth  
On which I gaze, even these primaeval mountains  
Teach the adverting mind. The glaciers creep  
Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains (96-101)

Here, the speaker submits with finality that power is "inaccessible" to man, but the absence of revelation does not exclude the opportunity for the landscape to provide instruction. It is the very concealment of power that forms the didactic message capable of "teach[ing] the adverting

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<sup>14</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) Lines 3.42-43. Hereafter, I cite the notes as *Queen Mab* notes followed by note and line number.

mind” not only an “awful doubt” but also precisely what to focus upon: it forces our gaze on the relations within our material perception. The result of the diversion of attention is bound up in the simile that, like the wolf and the eagle, gets swept up in the bombardment of imagery. The glaciers are likened to “snakes that watch their prey,” a comparison that forces us back into the animal kingdom in order to associate the movement of the glaciers with the attention of the wolf and the eagle to each other. The enjambment of the line forces the image of the glacier to recede and the snake to come forth as the dominant image. This accomplishes exactly the work of carrying out the admonishment of the poem to divert attention from the unresolved mystery of the mountain by letting the material world emerge as the center of focus. Further, by interpreting the glacier in animal terms, we perceive in the verb “watch” that it is by such perpetual avoidance, watching without watching as it were, that power will reveal itself to the mind. The undetected stalking of prey is connected here to the assertion that power will reveal itself to those who attend to the relations below the mountain.

Shelley’s refusal of systematic power in *Mont Blanc* reveals a strong wish to use the sublime to refocus our attention on the material and living world. His insistent calling us off the mountain to observe the living creatures amidst the sublime scene, demonstrates an early attempt to motivate readers to notice their fellow man. In *The Cenci*, however, instead of using the sublime as a bait and then offering a subversive turn, Shelley directly calls on the sublime to incite fear, guilt, and empathy in his readers or in the audiences of performances. The sublime silence and solitude associated in the conventional way of seeing the mountain in *Mont Blanc* becomes in *The Cenci* a use of terrible and moving silences within the play, relocating the power of the sublime immediately within our own minds and within relationships or sympathy.

Despite its continuous focus on incest, Shelley intended *The Cenci* to appeal to and reach a broad audience in London. It is clear from the preface material that Shelley felt strongly that the polite society of London had something to learn from his adaptation of Cenci family history and his impulse to push the envelope reveals his interest in sublimity. Fear and horror have historically been associated with the sublime by Burke, and others after him, who have remarked that being made to feel fear without actually being in danger produces a sublime feeling or effect.

An artificial construction of danger or horror, or any other emotion for that matter, is a general concept of poetry but it resonates with Shelley's work in particular. Shelley's mission for his poetry was that it could provide the opening for a change in society. False religious systems, oppressive laws, corrupt government structure, and overly conservative and misguided social norms could be overturned by an enlightening encounter with poetry. *Queen Mab* is a heavy-handed example, where Shelley's plot does the work of imagining the instructive process itself. In *The Cenci*, Shelley's strategy is subtle and more subversive. His topic is one "not to be mentioned in polite society" (144), as noted in his preface to the play, yet the play turns from the start on the inaction or corruption of good men who watch idly as the grotesque storyline plays out. Beatrice's words in Act One confirm this: "Can one tyrant overbear/ The sense of many just and wisest men?" (1.3.133-34). Shelley's ability to place the reader not only in the position of the onlooker, but also the way in which he is able to force the readers to align themselves with both victim and attacker, shows how effective he imagined the sublime moment to be. Shelley meta-thematically places the viewer of the drama in the position of those in the play who hear of Cenci's brutality yet fail to act. Further, Shelley forces us to bring our own self into the sublime

both in the role of Beatrice and also of Cenci himself. Barry Magarian highlights this act in his article on *The Cenci*:

Such a relationship allows for the creation of moral and emotional ambiguities that Shelley refuses to resolve for us. Rather, Shelley implies that the only resolution that might be arrived at can come only from the reader's own confrontation with his or her own self, a confrontation which will echo Beatrice's tumultuous negotiations with self-knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Magarian's remarks about the crisis of self that joins our reading of Beatrice is equally as applicable to our reading of Cenci. We join Cenci in his moments of sublime evil in a way that forces complicity and produces a sublime moment in which we are turned inwards on ourselves.

The audience's substitution of themselves for the characters begins with Count Cenci himself. In Act One, Cenci brags to Camillo about his various crimes and flaunts his ability to escape the punishment of the church through his wealth. Near the end of the scene he remarks, "And but that there remains a deed to act/ Whose horror might make sharp an appetite/ Duller than mine – I'd do – I know not what" (1.1.100-102). Shelley here allows the audience to search alongside Cenci for a deed worse than the previously mentioned murder, even murder tacitly approved of by the church. The sublimity of these lines lies in the moment where the reader's imagination soars to the boundary of what is conceivable to fit Cenci's remarks, and in that process discovers what they are capable of conjuring and unknowingly aligns them with the Cenci. Shelley also traps the readers in a sublime moment with Cenci in the final lines of the scene. A stage direction has Cenci looking around suspiciously at the thought of Beatrice before delivering his final words of the scene to his servant: "Bid Beatrice attend me in her chamber/ This evening: - no, at midnight and alone" (1.1.145-146). The suggestion of harm to Beatrice is implied here considering the violent hatred of Cenci shown in the first scene. However, it is the

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<sup>15</sup> Barry Magarian, "Shelley's *The Cenci*: Moral Ambivalence and Self-knowledge", *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 10:1, p. 181

way Shelley insists on letting the reader fill in the nature of the violence with only a little context that gives the lines their chilling nature. Cenci's insistence on privacy, the decision to meet in Beatrice's chambers rather than his own or a parlor, as well as his uncertainty on the time and eventual command for midnight are all subtle clues to sexual violence. While these are all mild clues, the reader must imagine that horrible act and fill in the scene. The reader's imagination is doing the same work as Cenci's raving mind and it is in this moment that sublime depravity closes the gap between reader and character.

Forcing the reader to feel complicit in the Cenci's plan speaks to the political nature of the play. In *The Mask of Anarchy*, Shelley assumes the readers are necessarily in the position of the trampled crowd, both consoling them for their struggle and urging them to see it as more than an empty waste of life. In *The Cenci*, it is striking that Shelley chooses to open the play by aligning his audience with the wicked character and leads them to the revelation that they contain the same capacity for evil as Cenci does by allowing their minds to make the jump from innuendo to the act itself.

The role of the sublime in both *The Cenci* and *Mont Blanc* is to be a tool for exposing an uncomfortable truth to the reader. In *Mont Blanc*, Shelley exposes both the emptiness of the proposed system of the landscape and convicts readers of investing energy in an unprofitable manner. The work of the sublime is to appear falsely to uphold values related to religion and the powers of the universe and then ultimately fail to reveal that power to the reader, a vacuum filled by the details of the landscape that suggest an attention to material concerns. This attention to reality is a call by Shelley to turn the focus of the reader inward to himself and laterally to his fellow man.

*The Cenci* doubles down on that mission by utilizing the effect of a sublime moment on the reader to force introspection. Placing Cenci as the center of the violence in the first act of the play is a brutal and violent displacement of sympathy. Rather than have Beatrice serve as the center of action and have the violence externally applied, Shelley is able to shape the violence of the play in such a way as to have it emerge internally through our own interaction with the processes of Cenci's mind. Forcing the reader to fill in the imagination of a horrible act such as incestuous rape is a sublime moment in itself. Shelley's goal in having the reader feel complicit in this act of violence is to cast light on the political implications of the play laid out in the preface that chastises Italian society where Shelley notes that the actual Cenci family history is edited from Italian society instead of being used as a tool to correct evil practices in the church. Further, Shelley uses the introspection that accompanies a sublime moment to alert the reader to his or her own capacity for evil, specifically evil that comes from ignoring or mistreating our fellow man. The boundlessness of the sublime and its attending fear and horror are not merely external objects and emotions that we contend with, but rather, the sublime is also a tool for realizing our own potential depravity. This self-realization links the aims of this play to other works by Shelley in that the knowledge of self is always the first link for reforming society. As we will see in *Zastrozzi*, the sublime has yet another function, the ability to conduct empathy between fellow men, a more positive function than the one employed in *The Cenci*.

CHAPTER TWO  
THE CHRISTIAN PERVERSION OF SUBLIMITY IN SHELLEY'S *ZASTROZZI*

Shelley's aims for the sublime in *Mont Blanc* and *The Cenci* are largely to put it to use to convince readers of the faultiness of their superstitions and misguided beliefs about the power structure of the world and to convince them of the consequences of an inattention to social sympathy. Shelley's use of the sublime is conscious of the eighteenth century of the sublime that carried explicitly Christian inflections. Shelley contrasts this portrayal with another sublime more in line with sympathy. Shelley's gothic novel, *Zastrozzi*, offers a sustained view of the psychological social consequences of this misguided apprehension of the sublime.

Shelley published *Zastrozzi* in 1810 shortly after arriving at Oxford from Eton College. It has been noted that Shelley likely composed the novel at Eton and had it published once he reached Oxford.<sup>16</sup> *Zastrozzi* has received very little critical attention other than to mark an early stage in Shelley's career and to note his initial turn from his Christian upbringing. Kenneth Neil Cameron dismisses *Zastrozzi* as a text that heavily imitates famous gothic novels.<sup>17</sup> Jerrold Hogle reduces the work to an exposition of the problems of self that plague the author in his college years.<sup>18</sup> It is true that the novel does reflect some of the angst and frustration that characterizes Shelley in his younger years. The perspectives of these two critics demonstrate a critical

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<sup>16</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley and Stephen C. Behrendt. *Zastrozzi: A Romance, And, St. Irvyne, Or, the Rosicrucian : a Romance*. (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Neil Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950) Page 1-36.

<sup>18</sup> Jerrold Hogle, "Shelley's Fiction: The 'Stream of Fate,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 30, 1981, p. 78-99.

discussion of the novel that does not account for the complex thematic value it displays or the intellectual sophistication it employs. My reading of *Zastrozzi* argues that despite the stock characters and familiar plot, Shelley's text reflects a complex critique of the Christian tradition highlighted by a compelling engagement with the sublime.

The plot of *Zastrozzi* follows the relationship of Matilda and Verezzi. Matilda is overcome with passion for Verrezzi while he has vowed his love to Julia. Matilda enlists the help of the assassin Zastrozzi to bring Verezzi to her and to eliminate Julia so her romance with Verezzi can flourish. Zastrozzi has his own reasons for pursuing Verrezzi: it is revealed at the close of the novel that Verezzi's father had disgraced his mother by abandoning her while she was pregnant with Zastrozzi. Zastrozzi conceals this from Matilda and allows her to believe that he is loyal to her and her pursuit of Verezzi's affection.

The key figure in understanding how Shelley's novel critiques Christianity's treatment of the sublime is the assassin, Zastrozzi. Aside from appearing quite Shellyan-- abruptly appearing and disappearing, offering admonition and instruction to Matilda-- Zastrozzi's character also provides perhaps the strongest tie to sublimity. He nearly always materializes suddenly out of the landscape, particularly when he appears to Matilda to provide what she thinks is sincere help in capturing Verezzi's love. Zastrozzi appears out on a cliff during one of Matilda's walks amid a crash of lightning, associating his character with the traditional sublime imagery: "His gigantic figure was again involved in pitchy darkness, as the momentary lighting receded. A peal of crashing thunder again madly rattled over the zenith, and a scintillating flash announced Zastrozzi's approach" (120). The intermittent and presumed danger of the lightning flash in conjunction with the cliff on which they stand connects Zastrozzi to the most familiar iterations of sublimity common to texts of the period, especially the gothic novel. Matilda's response to his

presence, too, fits the most basic conception of the reaction to the sublime. She, “surprised at his approach, started as he addressed her, and felt an indescribable awe, when she reflected on the wonderful casualty which, in this terrific and tempestuous hour, had led them to the same spot”(120). The word “indescribable” connects Matilda’s reaction to Zastrozzi to the sublime. She is, at least at first, unable to properly organize her reaction to Zastrozzi, perhaps revealing an instance of doubt regarding his allegiance or her ability fully to control his actions. Matilda’s mixture of fear and excitement are classically sublime. Her immediate trust that this sublime moment signifies destiny or fate suited to her wishes compels us to see Shelley’s purpose in the scene; as Matilda remarks, “Doubtless his feelings are violent and irresistible as mine: perhaps *these* led him to meet me here”(120). Matilda immediately overcomes her fear of the wildness and instability that the sublime scene presents by assuring herself that it is all in accordance with her designs. Such a resolution formally resembles the Christian response to the sublime whereby the terror of the cliff or thunderstorm is immediately rationalized by the self-assurance of God’s control over activity on Earth. Shelley demonstrates how in the Christian sublime one projects one’s own desire for control onto an unknown, unknowable and uncontrollable scene.

Read this way, the relationship between Matilda and Zastrozzi allegorizes the mistake Christians make when they see God’s presence in the sublime instead of seeing only the inscrutable power of Necessity. Matilda’s lust for Verezzi acts as the catalyst for the plot, while Zastrozzi’s history and wish for revenge remains totally hidden but for occasional and unexplained trances of deep thought and anger. Early in the novel, Matilda is introduced in a gothic castle where she orders Zastrozzi to kill Julia and to procure Verezzi for her own desires. As they depart to search for the two again, Matilda momentarily worries about Zastrozzi’s faithfulness before Zastrozzi assures her of his loyalty:

“But you forgive my momentary, unmeaning doubt?” said Matilda, and fixed her eyes on his countenance.

“It is not for us to dwell on vain, unmeaning expressions, which the soul dictates not,” returned Zastrozzi; “and I sue for pardon from you, for having, by ambiguous expressions, caused the least agitations: but believe me, Matilda, we will not forsake each other; your cause is mine; distrust between us is foolish. – But, farewell for the present...”(80)

Their conversation here, as well as Zastrozzi’s supposed employment, contain a subtle rebuke of Christianity. Matilda erroneously assumes that she has full dominion over Zastrozzi, a figure whose veiled agency and operation and association with the sublime identify him as a representation of Necessity. The dramatic irony in the exchange centers around Zastrozzi’s insistence that a mistrust between them is “foolish,” signaling not only his possible defection but revealing the mistake of Christians to take the sublime as a space controlled by God. While he deceives Matilda by falsely assuring her of his loyalty, Zastrozzi echoes the sentiments of *Mont Blanc*, chastising Matilda for “dwelling on vain, unmeaning expressions which the soul dictates not.” Here Zastrozzi speaks to Matilda as Demogorgon speaks to Asia: He only says what she is ready to hear. His criticism is applicable to empirical treatments of the sublime that describe a transcendental space reserved for deity.

Zastrozzi’s connection both to sublimity and to Shelley’s skepticism are further developed in the description of Zastrozzi following his arrival, as he “stood collected in himself, and firm as the rocky mountain which lifts its summit to heaven” (120). *Zastrozzi* predates the writing of *Mont Blanc* as well as Shelley’s trip to the continent, but Shelley would have known the generic conventions for viewing sublime landscapes. Zastrozzi appears in such a way that confirms Matilda’s dependence on him while also proving his character to be superior to hers. Zastrozzi uses this influence to instruct Matilda to bring Verezzi into the sublime scene via an

evening walk out on the mountainside in order to make him depend on her as a subject, a move that further allegorizes the mis-education of the Christian religion. Zastrozzi assures her “that if you dare to brave the dagger’s point- if you but make Verezzi owe his life to you-” then she will have complete dominion over him and finally be able to tempt him into a marriage. Zastrozzi suggests this after Matilda’s repeated attempts at professing her love to Verezzi have fallen short of winning him over. She eagerly accepts Zastrozzi’s advice, not realizing that it she and Verezzi both are being manipulated. This plot and the transaction it supposes suggests a grim connection to the role of a Christian subject and the actions that bind them to God.

Matilda’s place in the novel is to act as the God-figure, an assertion confirmed by her relentless pursuit of not only Verezzi’s attention but also of his amorous allegiance that will lead him to forsake all others. Matilda is convinced that Zastrozzi is not only working for her as a hired assassin, but also that he has her best interest at heart. This belief leads her to accept Zastrozzi’s plan. As Matilda and Verezzi walk out on the mountainside, Zastrozzi appears as a robber and Matilda steps between Verezzi and the attacker’s knife in a choreographed move. Verezzi’s feelings are “irresistibly touched” by the actions of Matilda, a moment that eventually leads to Verezzi resolving to marry Matilda. Matilda is now the focus of Verezzi’s allegiance due to what he believes is a life saving moment. He is driven by gratitude into a relationship with her, a move that confirms Matilda as a figure for the trinity. It is important here to remember that Matilda is acting as the sacrifice as well as the God-figure, a nod to the trinity being a unified being that acts in separate ways. Believers submit themselves in pious service just as the mechanized soldiers of the *Queen Mab* Notes submit to their king and just as Verezzi is now resigned to dutifully commit himself to the evil Matilda.

As in *Mont Blanc*, Shelley not only critiques the orthodox-Trinitarian sublime, but also supplies an alternative in Julia's character. Julia's presence in the novel is mostly limited to the memories of Verezzi, while her significance is a complex one in regard to Shelley's treatment of sublimity. She exists as a tool for Zastrozzi, a concealed weapon that will prove useful in destroying the plan Matilda has laid out to win Verezzi over. For Matilda, she appears to represent only an enemy, the competing suitor for Verezzi's affection. This is true, but Matilda also makes use of Julia for her own devices as she attempts to win Verezzi over. Lastly, for Verezzi, and so too for the reader, Julia represents something of an ideal conception of virtue even though she has very few opportunities to speak in the novel.

Julia is described as a virtuous, polite woman, a woman whose "feminine delicacy shrunk from the slightest suspicion, even of indecorum." Moreover, "Her fragile form, her mild heavenly countenance, was contrasted with all the partiality of love, to the scintillating eye, the commanding countenance, the bold expressive gaze, of Matilda" (84). This image of Julia makes her appear as angelic or celestial. She is considered above reproach, calling for us to see her as a character as well as an ideal, similar to Shelley's opinion of Jesus. Julia represents a second, Shellyan Christ-figure in the novel. While Shelley despised the indoctrination and dogmatism of religion, in various places he affirms his respect and support for Jesus the man, even if he refuses to see him as a divine figure. Jesus is one of the "sacred few" in *The Triumph of Life* that escape the chariot by "returning to their native noon" and by putting "aside the diadem of earthly thrones or gems."<sup>19</sup> Shelley also remarks of Jesus in *Essay on Christianity* of "His extraordinary genius, the wide and rapid effect of his unexampled doctrines, his invincible gentleness and

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<sup>19</sup> *The Triumph Life*, Line 128-134

benignity, the devoted love borne to him by his adherents.”<sup>20</sup> Shelley’s concession of Jesus’ merits as a thinker and virtue as a person allows us to see how he could view Jesus as an ally of sorts. As the historical Jesus was turned into an instrument of religious manipulation, so too Julia will be used by Zastrozzi to carry out his plans, but only after the memory of Julia is distorted and exploited by Matilda. Julia, that is, embodies the self-sacrifice and the love of Shelley’s Jesus, while the manipulative Matilda figures the manipulative, mysterious Christ of Trinitarian religion.

Believing Julia to have been secretly killed by Zastrozzi, Matilda (with false sadness) reveals to Verezzi that his love is dead. After securing Verezzi to Passau from the Good Samaritan’s refuge, Matilda informs Verezzi “Julia--Julia--whom you love is dead” (91). After the terror of that message sinks in, Verezzi is apoplectic with grief; barely conscious before he awakes and eventually inquires of Matilda how Julia expired:

“Oh my friend!” said she, tenderly, “unwillingly do I tell you, that for you she died; disappointed love, like a worm in the bud, destroyed the unhappy Julia; fruitless were all her endeavors to find you; till at last concluding that you were lost to her for ever, a deep melancholy by degrees consumed her, and gently led to the grave--she sank into the arms of death without a groan (106).

The religious symbolism here is clear: not only is Julia a sacrificed ideal, but she has also died at the hands of Verezzi himself. His separation from her caused her death. Verezzi has been convicted of the death of the one who loves him (and whom he loves) just as the necessary indoctrination of the Christian involves converts admitting their complicity in the death of Christ. That the period between Verezzi’s hearing the news of Julia’s death from Matilda and their eventual ill-fated marriage is the centerpiece of the novel reveals the pressure Shelley wished to

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<sup>20</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. E.B. Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) *The Essay on Christianity* and *The Assassins* are quoted from this text.

apply to this singular tenant of Christianity: the deception and false emotion by Matilda- enabled by the interposition of distance and mystery- is instrumental in converting Verezzi.

Besides being used by Matilda as a way to cauterize Verezzi's emotions, Julia also exists within the sublime memory of Verezzi; a use of the sublime that insists upon human connection, even if it has been corrupted by the schemes of Matilda (Christianity). This connection is evidence of a sympathetic sublime, one that could be potentially beneficial if the religious sublime were to be dissolved. In the interlude between Verezzi's hearing of Julia's supposed death and the moment he is stable enough to inquire of Matilda how she died, he lies in a state of partial consciousness and with a vexed spirit. Matilda finds herself incapable of resisting the urge to form an emotional connection with Verezzi with initially disappointing results:

Matilda approached him-- she pressed her burning lips to his-- she shook his hand-- it was cold and at intervals slightly agitated by convulsions.

A deep sigh, at this instant, burst from his lips-- a momentary hectic flushed his cheek, as the miserable Verezzi attempted to rise.

Matilda, though almost too much agitated to command her emotions, threw herself into a chair behind the curtain, and prepared to watch his movements.

"Julia! Julia!" exclaimed he, starting from the bed, as his flaming eye-balls were unconsciously fixed upon the agitated Matilda, "where art thou? Ah! Thy fair form now moulders in the dark sepulchre! Would I were laid beside thee! Thou art now an ethereal spirit!" and then, in a seemingly triumphant accent, he added, "But ere long, I will seek thy unspotted soul- ere long I will again clasp my lost Julia!" Overcome by resistless delirium, he was for an instant silent- his starting eyes seemed to follow some form, which imagination had portrayed in vacuity. He dashed his head against the wall, and sank, overpowered by insensibility, on the floor (93).

The critique of Christianity in this exchange is Matilda's repeated connections with Verezzi, while they may seem to be a hindrance to her plans to win him over amorously, are an integral part of the indoctrination Shelley felt permeates the Christian tradition. It is necessary for Julia to come to Verezzi through her touch (even if she initially recoils at the thought of it) because it cements in Verezzi's mind that Matilda is the remaining substitution for the love he felt for Julia. He remarks in their opening exchange when he saves her from throwing herself into the river that

a similarity exists between them, a similarity that this continual sublime communication confirms even if Matilda doesn't recognize it. In this way, the death of Jesus by degrees brings the believer closer to God not only by supposedly paying penance for his sins, but by using grief to draw himself to the resurrected Jesus who has now rejoined God in heaven, the only place left for him to find him. What this moment also reveals is that Verezzi is seeking the grave as a refuge, a Biblical ideal borne out in numerous New Testament passages. Paul remarks "For to me, to live is Christ, to die is gain," a sentiment that suggests that if dying and reuniting with Jesus (Julia) is no option, than to live for God here on Earth is the next best option.<sup>21</sup>

This scene reveals to us how the sublime works in ways other than through typical landscapes and paralyzing reflections that follow a traditional understanding of the sublime. Here, Julia exists in the sublime space shudder noted by Schiller. Verezzi is "overcome" and in that moment he follows "some form, which imagination had portrayed in vacuity," an absolute emptiness or complete absence of matter.<sup>22</sup> Verezzi experiences this shudder as a sublime moment that reminds him of his true love. Even though Matilda's perversion of this use is clear, the sublime is here operating in a way that closes distance between two people rather than simply being associated with absolute boundlessness. This is not to say that Shelley is the sole author of the period that demonstrated memory operating in this manner, but that in conjunction with the influence of Matilda/Zastrozzi, we can see this as evidence of Shelley's belief that his text could function in a similar way to close the distance between people. The sublime space in this instance is occupied not by a symbol of power but another human. If we are to see Julia as

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<sup>21</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Philippians 1: 21.

<sup>22</sup> "vacuity, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 25 February 2017.

Shelley's Jesus figure (a human Jesus, stripped of deity but retaining virtue) then the sublime encounter points toward things human and social rather than the transcendental and religious.

*Zastrozzi* is a novel that receives very little critical attention. It is usually cast aside for Shelley's later work, as many critics view 1815 as the real start of Shelley's meaningful writing career. Those who do comment on the novel regard it as a type-cast text that replays the most titillating set pieces from M.G. Lewis' *The Monk* and others in the gothic tradition. But what Shelley is doing in this novel exceeds what the existing criticism of his work is willing to concede. *The Necessity of Atheism*, while a bold choice for a young student at Oxford, is mostly a boyish recapitulation of Lockean principles that proved effective in establishing himself as a rogue atheist but fell short of calling upon his literary power. In *Zastrozzi*, however, the critique of Christianity extends much further than in the pamphlet. Besides allegorizing the method and setting it within a familiar and congenial gothic genre, Shelley makes an incisive commentary on the psychology of the Christian experience. To be sure, the rogue Shellyan assassin and the gothic landscape are almost trite in their display, but the way in which Shelley is able to turn Father and Son into enemies, display the mis-education, deception, and torture that marks the existence of the believer is a far more complex argument than critics are yet to recognize in the work.

For the purposes of tracing Shelley's use of the sublime, we can see he fills the novel with familiar transcendental sublime scenes. The appearance of *Zastrozzi* from the landscape, the vexation, shudder, and strain of the senses that multiple characters experience are conventional. In a sense, Shelley is using these traditional sublime scenes against the typical reader just as he is using the Christian tradition against them. But what stands apart from these instances is how the character of Julia exists and operates in these moments in such a way as to stand apart from

simply overwhelming the perceiver. The novel does not foreground the sublime as we saw in *Mont Blanc* or will see *The Assassins*, but it equally decenters our expectations of what the sublime can do.

What these other sublime instances don't necessarily achieve in de-subliming the sublime, Shelley accomplishes thematically with the character of Zastrozzi. His manipulation of Matilda is a strong assertion that the Christian religion (and anyone else who might assume power by believing themselves to be at the helm of a system) has falsely believed itself to have found something systematic or capable of being utilized for their gain. The novel ends with Matilda violently stabbing Julia to death, a literal enactment of the struggle between virtue and false power. Verezzi is driven to suicide, Shelley's just end for his false education, and Zastrozzi willfully accepts death by inquisition, not only as an expression of bravado familiar to Shelley but also perhaps as a reminder that Necessity is as impossible to extinguish as it is to harness.

CHAPTER THREE  
SHELLEY'S POLITICAL SUBLIME IN *THE ASSASSINS*

In *The Assassins*, Shelley follows similar instruction as represented in the mountain scene of *Mont Blanc* and transfers the attention not to the animals but to the human forms that inhabit the sublime valley of Lebanon. In this fragmentary story, a group of enlightened resistance fighters have “fled to the solitude of Lebanon” (55-56) and away from the Roman rise of Jerusalem for the purpose of engaging in a lifestyle that puts Shelley’s emphasis on sympathy into practice.<sup>23</sup> Their beliefs acknowledged “no laws but those of God,” and they “modeled their conduct towards their fellow men by the conclusions of their individual judgment on the practical application of these laws” (17-19). The initial description of these liberals asserts a skepticism that in a subtle way at the outset undermines their very nature as Christians. They are guided not by the conventions of a religious allegiance or affiliation but by their ability to decipher for themselves the correct application of virtue and their attention is tuned not to a distant God but to their interaction with their fellow man. Shelley betrays his motives early by noting their submission to the “law of Christ,” a clever way of inserting his accordance with the teachings of Jesus that inform how men should treat each other while still placing these men in opposition to the Christian belief system.

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<sup>23</sup> *The Assassins*, 124-139.

The Assassins' opposition to but close relation with the systems of man appears mirrored in the physical landscape in which they opt to dwell. They reside in a valley surrounded by Lebanese mountains:

The fluctuating elements seem to have been rendered everlastingly permanent in forms of wonder and delight. The mountains of Lebanon had been divided to their base to form this happy valley; on every side their icy summits darted their white pinnacles into the clear blue sky, imaging in their grotesque outline minarets and ruined domes and columns worn with time. Far below, silver clouds rolled their bright volumes in many beautiful shapes... The immensity of those precipitous mountains with their starry pyramids of snow excluded the sun, which overtopped not even in its meridian their overhanging rocks. But a more heavenly and serener light was reflected from their icy mirrors; which piercing through the many tinted clouds produced lights and colours of inexhaustible variety. (126-141)

The position of the valley in relation to the mountains provides an interesting overlap with the themes of *Mont Blanc*. The description of the mountains' serenity and awful imposition on the sky, to the extent of blotting the sun, forms an almost exact match to the peaks of the mountains in the formerly discussed poem. The juxtaposition of the "verdant" "herbage" of the valley to the icy ruins above recalls our attention to the same action of focusing on what is beneath the mountain(s) rather than what is above them or beyond them. The recession of the mountain for the image of the animals in *Mont Blanc* is here distilled into an even clearer image by expanding the setting below the mountain in such a robust way. The sun shines invisibly through the mountains and is then reflected below on the surface of the lake, which intensifies the brightness of the mountain peak. The image of power is intensified not by looking up into the object itself but by looking downwards into the valley. The work of this refraction of light is to both see the mountain and the "lights and colors" it creates by looking in the exact opposite direction of the mountain. The "lights and colors" represent the expansion and development of sympathy, building and flourishing through Necessity and through the sublime. By obscuring the source of power into "inexhaustible variety," Shelley confirms the priority of the material living world

over the speculative transcendent domain. Power is most effective when we are not conscious that it is there, a reversal of the image in *Mont Blanc* where the “Ghosts of all things” encircle the “cave of the witch Poesy” (44-46) and lend themselves to the “chaotic confusion” that surrounds the scene. Shelley is constructing the skeptical relationship to the sublime in an even more powerful and instructive way that emphasizes the living connections on Earth rather than what lies beyond the clouds.

This redirection of attention in the sublime, here to specifically social connections, has historical repercussions, seen in the way the fragment subtly compares the “ruined domes and columns”(131) of the Lebanese mountains to the “defenceless and uninhabited” “ruins” of Jerusalem (80-81). It seems that these two sublime locations offer two distinct ends to the prospects of human interaction with the sublime. Perhaps the two juxtaposed ruins, one that reflects beauty down into the valley and the other described as “ruins of the human mind” (76) that “threw a shade of gloom upon her golden palaces which the brutal vulgar could not see” (78-79), combine our ability rightly to view the sublime with our ability rightly to view history. The divided attention to both scenes might also be directing into the views of history and the views of the sublime an interjection of the unseen power of Necessity either to uphold or to destroy.

The mode of presenting the two scenes through an observer correlates the course of history with a mode of observing the sublime and adverts to the reader’s own historical obligations. The description of Jerusalem includes the fact that “None visited, but in the depth of solemn awe, this accursed and solitary spot,” (81-82) while the description likewise frames our opinion of the scene by stating “No spectator could have refused to believe that some spirit of great intelligence and power had hallowed these wild and beautiful solitudes to a deep and solemn mystery” (173-176). Later, “Pilgrims of a new and mightier faith crowded to visit the

lonely ruins of Jerusalem and weep and pray before the sepulcher of the eternal God,” (230-232) an observation that again forces the reader to imagine the scene as it is viewed by the outsider, perhaps even the reader himself. The connection here is that the travelers to Jerusalem mirror in some ways the misguided observers of the mountain scene in *Mont Blanc*, searching for new ways to ignite the flames of something that never actually existed while the earth fills with “discord, tumult, and ruin,” (233). The attention to how this scene might be viewed by a third-party observer reinforces a similar aspect carried over from *Mont Blanc*, one that Duffy fails to account for: Shelley is admonishing the reader of history in a way similar to how he instructed the tourist in Switzerland.

This interest in how a human might benefit from both scenes provides a justification for observing how people in the landscape are affected or instructed by the sublime, not only these not quite present observers but the people of the city, the Assassins themselves, and those they encounter. In his reading of *The Assassins*, Duffy tunes our attention to the way that Shelley is twisting Gibbons’ *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. By attending to the repurposing of the work of a group of these Assassins to a benevolent force rather than an evil he makes a convincing argument for the treatment of the Assassins--even in the tale’s fragmentary state-- to speak to Shelley’s uneasiness regarding gradual reform and immediate political change through violence. But what this focus fails to include is the importance of the bonds of humanity in the text to do the work of that political response. Shortly after their departure from Jerusalem, Shelley describes the Assassins as unified in sympathy: “Love, friendship, and philanthropy would now be the characteristic disposers of their industry. It is for his mistress or his friend that the labourer consecrates his toil. Others are mindful but he is forgetful of himself,”(67-70). This attention to the fact the relationship between the “labourers” had become such that people were

overlooking their own wants and needs for the benefit of others brings to mind Shelley's imagining of the social fabric in the *Defence of Poetry*:

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; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. (517)

This salient commentary on the way in which the imagination allows for the very faculty of social sympathy and facilitates the increase of societal relations, is not only an informing note on the way Shelley describes the Assassins' treatment of each other, but also orients this social dimension to their position in the sublime as a facilitator of this imaginative faculty that increases their ability to treat each other in such a benevolent way. Further, Shelley's insistence on our ability "to go out of our own nature" describes the ability to feel sympathy with language similar to the response toward the sublime.

The central example of human sympathy in the text coincides with the entrance of a figure for Necessity into the story. In the opening description of Jerusalem, Shelley introduces a mysterious figure moving through the city, concealed within the text, much like the animal life dwelling beneath the mountain in *Mont Blanc*: "Tradition says there was seen to linger among the scorched and shattered fragments of the temple one being, whom he that saw dared not to call man, with clasped immoveable eyes and visage horribly serene,"(5-7). Amid the distraction of the ruins of the human mind and the desolation that has resulted from man's adherence to the "codes of fraud and woe"(81) described in *Mont Blanc*, this mysterious figure evokes the simple assertion a few lines down that "the power of man is great," (91-92). He appears on the social scene at just the time that the Assassins have focused their energy on accepting the "benign spirit" of Necessity and taught themselves the power of the imagination to expand their capacity

for Love. The stranger appears in an unannounced and unexpected way, reminding us of Zastrozzi's appearance out of the sublime scene. Like Zastrozzi, this man is a figure for Necessity, bearing a resemblance to the group of assassins who have retreated from the mountains and to the assassin from Shelley's novel.

Towards the end of the story, an injured man is discovered tangled in a tree and being consumed by snakes and birds. He is wounded and muttering his sarcastic and haughty protests towards an unnamed tyrant. He appears to be the same man who appeared earlier on the streets of Jerusalem. Albedir, a man dwelling presumably in the mountains of Lebanon, comes across this man who has fallen into a tree: "A naked human body was impaled on a broken branch. It was maimed and mangled horribly.. every limb bent and bruised into frightful distortion, exhibiting a breathing image of the most sickening mockery of life. A monstrous snake that had scented its prey from among the mountains fed eagerly...till the gluttonous serpent should be sated with his meal..." (378-387). The description of the man recalls figures of Necessity in *Mont Blanc*. He crashes onto the scene like an avalanche, recalling both the mountain scene and Zastrozzi. Following this mysterious figure is a snake, an image that immediately recalls our attention to the glaciers of *Mont Blanc* that stalk their prey. Reading this moment through *Mont Blanc* that portrays the snake "creeping" through time as the glaciers crept (hundreds of years have passed since the Assassins found their dwelling in the Lebanese mountains) and feeding on its "prey" allows us to make the connection between the "adverting mind" that views the glaciers and the colony of Assassins who have already learned to advert their minds from the prospect of seeing anything in the future by reading the sublime. The group has chosen instead to cultivate their ability to treat each other with a love and kindness that strengthens the imagination and

signals the arrival of Necessity onto the landscape. They see the figure of Necessity in a man, a broken and victimized man in need of care and love.

After being entreated to come closer through soft voices of Aeolian music, Albedir's relation to the fallen man changes from shock and surprise to "tender affection" (435). Albedir likened him to a long lost childhood brother or friend. This transformation set to Aeolian music anticipates thematically the stranger's exclamations that "The great tyrant is baffled even in success...Joy!" (40-41). The encounter of Albedir with this stranger, bearing the marks and scars of Necessity, anticipates the efforts of Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*. It is the careful and loving attention of Albedir, a young man raising a family beneath the shadow of the mountain that brings the stranger off the rock and into the realm of society. Recalling the silence and vacancy in *Mont Blanc*, at this revelatory moment a "period of strange silence intervened. Awe and cold horror were slowly succeeding to the softer sensations of tumultuous pity when again he heard the silver modulations of the same enchanting voice" (442-444). Here again, Duffy skips over this integral scene that demonstrates the social potential of the sublime and assumes that the stranger will eventually call the Assassins to urgent political action. However, it cannot be overlooked how the final scene, while absent of revolutionary violence, shows Shelley's investment in the social effects of the sublime.

The final hundred lines of *The Assassins* confirms the notion in *Mont Blanc* that the true power associated with the sublime lies in an imagination tuned to the sympathies of the material world. After Albedir leads the stranger to his house, the stranger meets Albedir's wife Khaled and remarks, "I came from amid the tumult of a world how different than this! I am unexpectedly among you, in the midst of a scene such as my imagination never dared to promise--I must remain here, I must not depart!"(526-529). These lines insist that power will attach itself to the

surviving chords of social sympathy. As opposed to locating this power as tourists seek it--in a temple, or on a mountain top--Shelley places it in the home and in the community. Shelley's sublime makes its presence known by facilitating the imagination in its attempt to treat others with love and then works through this social construction at the very moment the participants have turned their attention away from its presence and toward themselves.

The final scene from the fragment pictures Albedir's children, under the watchful eye of parents and stranger, charm the snake as it dances around them: "They sate beside a white flat stone, on which a small snake lay coiled, and when their work was finished they arose and called to the snake in melodious tones, so that it understood their language. For it unwreathed its shining circles and crept to the boat..." (574-578). Here the reader is reminded of the past image of the snake: feasting on the stranger's body in the tree, a suggestion that Necessity is drawing its nutrients from a man, perhaps even suggesting that they are one and the same. That mixture of snake and man meets another snake being showered with love, this time by Albedir's children. The melody Albedir hears that compelled him to show kindness to the stranger is congruous with the melody sung to the snake by the children in the stream. It is as if the presence of Necessity has intensified the exchange of imagination and allowed the dwellers of the valley of Lebanon to share with Necessity a sort of poetical resonance. This scene recalls another passage in the *Defence of Poetry* where Shelley writes, "The social sympathies, or those laws from which as from its elements society results, begin to develop themselves from the moment that two human beings coexist; the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed"(511). This passage speaks to the similarity between the two scenes in the fragment that contain the snake of Necessity. Both are marked by the benevolence of one man to another. From the first scene to

the second, the reader sees both the plant and the seed. The fabric of social sympathy is what provides the structure for Necessity to operate within.

Shelley's treatment of the sublime as a creative space reversed the notion of the transcendental sublime by shifting the importance of the scene away from what lies beyond the faculty of the human mind to what lies within it. Shelley discards the power systems supposedly latent within the defeat of the senses by the boundless and instead applies pressure to the creation of a social sympathy within the material world capable of reforming society. This structure allows man in the face of nature to direct his attention to the concerns of his fellow man. In doing this, Shelley works against a treatment of the sublime that dissolves the bonds of man and instead binds them to a power beyond their sight. This concept is seen very clearly in some of Shelley's earliest texts, *Mont Blanc* and *The Assassins*, and the presence of this concept forces us to consider how his philosophical and political thought applies to his prose. It is vital to the study of Shelley's politics to correctly orient his treatment of the landscape. His landscapes are strikingly powerful and didactic without insisting that there is a unified and easily ascertainable connection between the power of Necessity and the fluctuations of human thought. The more concrete connection that appears over and over appears to be that the path of Necessity follows from the development of common sympathy, a sentiment that not only increases the imaginative faculty according to the *Defence of Poetry* but that clears the path of Necessity in transforming society.

## CONCLUSION

Shelley's treatment of the sublime in these texts represents a break from tradition, a treatment of the sublime that is not a minor, incidental, or temporary aspect of Shelley's work. Duffy and Leighton are at pains to argue that Shelley's attitude towards the sublime underwent a turning point, or at the very least a shift, yet, this thesis has shown that Shelley's treatment of the sublime has a consistent logic, albeit with different emphases in different works, from his early publications through his *annus mirabilis*.

Duffy argues that changes in Shelley's treatment of the sublime reflect the way in which his political objectives matured as he aged, while Leighton argues that Shelley's use of the sublime shifted with his fractured emotions regarding his work. Duffy writes that, "in point of fact, from *Queen Mab* onwards, there is a persistent-- one might go so far as to say a *defining*-- tension at the heart of Shelley's political writing between gradualism and revolutionism, quietism and violence. From the outset, this tension is intimately--and uncomfortably--bound up with Shelley's revision of the discourse on the natural sublime."<sup>24</sup> Duffy's claim that Shelley's political thoughts change is largely convincing and consistent with the main lines of Shelley criticism. But the way in which Duffy argues that Shelley uses the sublime to carry out that change is inadequate. Duffy's sublime operates mainly at the level of metaphor as a way of describing or evoking a power and ruination that cannot be described with an exact image. Duffy conceives of Shelley's sublime as separated from Kantian notions but still very much informed by the visual and, by how it functions in the Christian tradition. If Duffy's work suggests a shift

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<sup>24</sup> Duffy, *Revolutionary Sublime*, 10.

in Shelley's political opinions, Leighton's critique insists something biographically infused as well. Leighton writes that, "On the one hand, he consistently denies the religious basis and reference of an aesthetic of the infinite, and he does so with arguments drawn from the principle of sense perception in empiricism. On the other hand, he finds in such an aesthetic a stronghold for that power of inspiration or vision which directs the writing of poems, and which is central to his own theory of creativity."<sup>25</sup> Leighton's ideas about Shelley's use of the sublime frame it as a space that is explicitly less political because it developed as a result of Shelley's failure to create his desired effect in politics. This designation fails to account for Shelley's continued attention to the political sphere over the course of his poetic career. Further, it suggests that apart from his skepticism, Shelley adopted a set of aesthetic principles that also vied for control of his poetry. Leighton argues this through a use of *A Defence of Poetry*. However, as this thesis discusses, the fundamental element of Shelley's remarks in *Defence* is the relationship that man has to man. That relationship is what extends the capabilities of poetry, produces a congenial society, and directs political change. As this thesis has also shown, the sympathy laid out first in *A Defence of Poetry*, is demonstrated through Shelley's use of the sublime.

Beyond investigating in what way Shelley responds to both the Christian and the transcendental versions of the sublime and replaces it with something closer to de-sublimation, this thesis shows that the main lines of criticism are misguided in looking to dissect Shelley's career into disparate parts. Duffy and Leighton offer insightful looks into Shelley's work, but they belong to a critical division that tends to read Shelley's career as a narrative of changing aspirations and disappointments. What they miss are the currents of Shelley's work that are consistent from beginning to end. With the exception of *The Cenci*, the focus of this project has

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<sup>25</sup> Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime*, vii.

been to illuminate the themes of Shelley's work in texts that have either been largely overlooked, as in the cases of *Zastrozzi* and *The Assassins*, or as in the case of *Mont Blanc*, have been discussed at length but approached from different perspectives. Yet, from these works we see a pattern. Shelley's use of the sublime reflects a constant interest in how to interact with the individual man, and further, how to connect them with each other. This can be thought of as a tool, which Shelley used to distribute his politics, but the two should not be conflated (or isolated for that matter). Shelley's poetry is at all times, perhaps with the exception of a handful of fragmentary musings, interested in how, as *The Defence of Poetry* reminds us, to strengthen the bonds of man by expanding our capacity to communicate with each other and thereby recognizing anew the conditions of being social.

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