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The Poet as Sage, Sage as Poet in 1816: Aesthetics and Epistemology in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"

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Abstract

Philosophy and poetry for Shelley are considered as inter-related or even interchangeable. Nevertheless, critics have often struggled to reconcile the two sides of the figure of Shelley himself; the Romantic poet and the Enlightenment-inspired sceptical philosopher. If, in a Lockean sense, language is both an imperfect conveyor of knowledge and, like for Thomas Paine, the tool of tyranny, then this raises the question of how Shelley is to operate as a poet.

Focusing on 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' this article considers not only how Shelley's philosophy is *thematically* an aspect of the poem but also how this manifests itself *aesthetically*. The philosophical problem of the relationship between language and knowledge, this article contends, is an aesthetic one. Aesthetics and epistemology therefore intersect in the poem, overcoming the perceived tension between Shelley as poet and Shelley as philosopher.

Keywords

Shelley, sublime, philosophy, scepticism, aesthetics, 1816

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In a commonly related anecdote of 1816, Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in the registers of at least three hotels in the Vale of Chamonix that his occupation was 'Democrat, Philanthropist and Atheist' and his destination 'Hell'.[i] Colin Jager suggests that of the words entered in the registers it was 'atheist' that caused most opprobrium.[ii] This is evident from an 1819 review of *Rosalind and Helen*, different versions of which appeared in *The Commercial Chronicle*, *The London Chronicle* and *The Gentleman's Magazine*, which had apparently received its information from Robert Southey. The review ends as follows:

> Mr Shelley is understood to be the person who, after gazing on Mont Blanc, registered himself in the Album as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Atheist; which gross and cheap bravado he, with the natural tact of the new school, took for a display of philosophic courage; and his obscure muse has been since constantly spreading all her foulness of those doctrines which a decent infidel would treat with respect, and in which the wise and honourable have in all ages found the perfection of wisdom and virtue.[iii]

Not only is the word 'Atheist' the only word of Shelley's entry that is mentioned at all, the author likening it to 'foulness', equally striking is the author's dismissal of both Shelley's philosophy and of his aesthetics. The reference to Shelley having written the term despite 'gazing on Mont Blanc' is particularly significant. Richard Holmes points out that Shelley's register entry challenged 'the reputation Chamonix had among the travelling English at this time, as a natural temple of the Lord and a proof of the Deity by design.'[iv] Indeed, Timothy Webb cites an 1816 guestbook entry of the very sort that Shelley seems to be reacting to: 'Such scenes as these, then, inspire most forcibly the love of God' (140). Shelley's atheism is

therefore seen as both philosophically mistaken and a failure of aesthetic taste; he has failed in not appreciating the sublime Vale of Chamonix to be the work of the Creator. Instead, he has succumbed to his atheistic 'obscure muse'.

Focusing on 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', this article explores the connection between Shelley's aesthetics and his philosophical scepticism. In particular, Shelley's scepticism is demonstrated to not simply be a thematic concern of the poem, rather it is manifested aesthetically, informing Shelley's very poetics and vice versa. Whereas 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty's' sister poem 'Mont Blanc' appears a more explicit engagement with the Vale-of-Chamonix-inspired sublime religiosity Shelley encountered in 1816, as well as poems such as Coleridge's 'Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni' (1802), it is 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' where we observe Shelley's articulation of a sublime yet sceptical poetics more generally.[v]

The experiences of 1816 should not however be considered in isolation. Shelley's interest in and focus on the power of language, and nomenclature most specifically, is a significant aspect of his critique of organised religion. The alteration of the term 'God' to 'Power' between *Laon and Cythna* and *The Revolt of Islam* for example is not simply just an example of self-enforced censorship but, as I have argued elsewhere,[vi] can also be seen as thematically significant. Whereas in *The Revolt of Islam* 'Power', having replaced 'God', has a negative connotation in that it stands for all examples of hierarchical tyranny, the word also becomes strangely positive in a number of Shelley's other works, particularly 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'. As well as indicating a potential Spinozan influence on Shelley's writing, it is well established that Spinoza was an influence on *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811) for instance, Shelley's use of 'Power' turns out to be an appropriate and crucially indefinable abstract term for sublime experience; it avoids slipping into the discourse of religion and

faith.[vii] As Shelley puts it in 'On Christianity' regarding what he perceives to be the error of the Christian conception of the divine, 'where indefiniteness ends, idolatry and anthropomorphism begin'.[viii] Christianity has attempted to define and make concrete that which is not, resulting in the error of the Christian deity. This error is described more forcefully in Shelley's notes to *Queen Mab*:

> It is probable that the word God was originally only an expression denoting the unknown cause of the known events which men perceived in the universe. By the vulgar mistake of a metaphor for a real being, of a word for a thing, it became a man, endowed with human qualities and governing the universe as an earthly monarch governs his kingdom (*Queen Mab*, note to VI. l. 198, ll.137- 142).[ix]

For Shelley, the error made by Christians in their conception of God is a linguistic, or more precisely, a semantic one; of mistaking a 'word' for a 'thing'. God is perceived to be no more than a metaphor or a 'word'; a simple expression of causality. Christians have, for Shelley, deified an abstract concept which in linguistic or Marxist understanding would be seen as reification, or making an abstract noun concrete. In a letter written to Godwin in July 1812 – during the composition of *Queen Mab* [x] – Shelley establishes his belief that this misapplication of words to ideas is not simply a mere philosophical error but a mistake that can have profound and dangerous consequences:

> […]*words* are the very things that so eminently contribute to the growth & establishment of prejudice: the learning of *words* before the mind is capable of attaching correspondent ideas to them, is like possessing machinery with the use of which we are so unacquainted as to be in danger of misusing it.

> But [although] words are merely signs of ideas, how many evils, & how great spring from the annexing inadequate & improper ideas to words.[xi]

Whereas Locke determines words to be mere signs of our ideas, Shelley goes further than this to suggest that although words are indeed simple signifiers, they also possess their own dangerous power. The misapplication of the word 'God' for instance has for Shelley led to the establishment of a dangerous and corrupt faith. Furthermore, the references in *Queen Mab* and elsewhere to an 'earthly monarch' demonstrate how the conception of the infallible and monarchical Christian deity, based on a mere word, encourages tyrannical and authoritarian systems of a more terrestrial nature.

Despite this, the *Queen Mab* passage suggests a possible means by which Shelley can be a philosophically determined sceptic in his poetry. If the philosophical problem of God and the epistemological problem of causality are issues of linguistic expression, then Shelley can work these through in the act of poetic composition. In demonstrating an awareness of language and expression that present philosophical pitfalls for a sceptical poet, Shelley can work to avoid them. Whereas *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna* show Shelley as having pinpointed the political dangers in the Christian anthropomorphism of the word 'God', 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' demonstrates Shelley's commitment to revitalising such language and thus working out how to avoid such anthropomorphism in poetical representation of the sublime.

Critical studies of Shelley's approach to language, especially when concerned with language's relation to power, often take an outwardly formalist approach and yet are simultaneously keen to stress the philosophical and historical background from which Shelley's attitudes to language emerge. In particular, such studies stress the influence of the

empirical philosophy of Locke and Hume or Shelley's reading of eighteenth-century linguistic theory.[xii] A key critical concern, however, is the difficult relation of Shelley's reading of and admiration for such works, and the philosophical scepticism they offer, to his aesthetic or creative work as a poet. If language, especially poetical or metaphorical language, is to be mistrusted, then this raises the question of how a poet such as Shelley is to operate.

A helpful summary of this problem is offered by Angela Leighton. For Leighton, Shelley's reading of enlightenment philosophy is explicitly connected with religion: 'Shelley finds in the writings of Locke and Hume a description of the mind's relation to the outside world to accord with his own radical atheism' (1). Shelley, Leighton argues, utilises Locke's anti-Cartesian 'empirical theory of representative perception to put in question the existence of a benign God' (1). Leighton goes on to say, however, that 'if empirical philosophy provides the youthful poet with a method of countering religious orthodoxy and of undermining the institutionalised dogmas of Christianity, it fails to provide him with a sympathetic account of poetic creativity' (1). As a result, 'it is in a sublime aesthetic, which develops alongside empirical philosophy but is in many ways antagonistic to it, that Shelley finds a language to protect inspiration as the original and mysterious power of poetry' (1). In her consideration of Shelley's political and philosophical concerns therefore, which she argues to be inseparable from his poetics or aesthetics, Leighton uncovers a core issue at the forefront of Shelley criticism. That is, the problem of reconciling Shelley as a poet of the sublime to Shelley the inheritor – and avid reader of – empiricist philosophy.

For Monika Lee, largely in concurrence with Leighton, this problem is considered more explicitly as a tension between two different conceptions, or 'philosophies,' of language that are both influential on Shelley in different ways:

> Shelley inherited a philosophy of Enlightenment that included a belief in language as rational and empirical, in accord with standard eighteenth – and nineteenth – century interpretations of Locke. In that tradition language was thought to be referentially directed toward an empirical world of sensation. Shelley was also a successor to English Romantic poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey) who considered language as organic in nature and viewed it as inspired by the emotions and the imagination. In many of Shelley's writings these two views appear to clash, and the seeming conflicts have provided ground for two widely divergent types of critics to claim Shelley, in the one case, as an advocate of materialism (i.e. Marxism, history, science) and, in the other, as a proponent of spirituality (i.e., Neo-Platonism, Manicheanism, Orphism).[xiii]

Lee's argument that in Shelley's writing these different conceptions of language at times 'appear to clash' suggests a certain lack of nuance and care in Shelley's work, as if he is somehow naively unaware of the contradictions. Instead, Shelley was very conscious of this perceived tension. As a sceptic of language and 'system' more generally, Shelley finds neither approach to language on their own to be wholly adequate to his poetic and philosophical task and thus makes use of both. Although Lee's suggestion that these conceptions of language sometimes 'appear to clash' may be overstating the case, there are nevertheless problems of, and *with,* language that Shelley purposefully leaves unresolved; 'indefiniteness' is to be celebrated.

It is in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' where Shelley most explicitly engages with attempting to articulate an unseen power or divinity without making, what he perceives to

be, the philosophical and linguistic errors of organised religion. Central to Shelley 'working through' the problem of being both sceptic and poet, is in his scepticism of metaphor. The problem with metaphor for Shelley is that there is an inevitable eventual confusion of the signifier with the signified which not only has repercussions in a philosophical sense but also in a socio-political context. 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', as a hymn, has been generally read as a quasi-religious poem.[xiv] Critics frequently read the poem as an indication, as Spencer Hall puts it, of Shelley's 'inherent religious sensibilities' or as an exercise in neo-Platonism.[xv] To suggest that the poet in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' possesses a religious sensibility however is appropriate only in the sense that he can be perceived as seeking answers to questions similarly contemplated by religion. Where he differs is in his refusal to settle for the same philosophically flawed answers.

As with 'Mont Blanc', Shelley's poem can be seen as similarly reacting to both the religiously-inflected sublime discourse encountered in 1816 as well as Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* and Coleridge's 'Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni'. In this poem, Shelley purposefully situates and articulates a sublime aesthetic as distinct from God and an anthropomorphic divine. The poet attempts to come to terms with 'Intellectual Beauty', which Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat define, as meaning 'nonmaterial' beauty[xvi] empirically, and with a language that does not deify or reify this abstract intellectual beauty into something resembling the God of Christian conception. The poem opens as follows:

> THE awful shadow of some unseen Power
> Floats though unseen among us,—visiting
> This various world with as inconstant wing
> As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.—
> 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 (ll. 1- 12).

Immediately this 'Power' is established as 'unseen'. This reference to sight sets this line in negotiation with Lockean epistemology that particularly emphasises the empirical power of sight. This 'Power' is therefore empirically unverifiable. Despite this difficulty in empirical verification, Shelley is nevertheless keen to avoid the potential, flawed, shortcut to knowledge and understanding that is offered by metaphor. Instead, we are presented with a series of similes or 'approximations'. This 'awful Power', or at least its 'shadow', is pointedly *not*, for instance, 'clouds in starlight' or 'memory of music fled'; it is simply *like* them. In this opening stanza the indefinability of this 'unseen Power' is the very point. It is like something, for instance, that is 'Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery'. Michael O'Neill's comment on the 'fascinating openness to interpretation' of Shelley's lyric and shorter poems in which close reading will discover no 'fixities or definites' is helpful in this regard.[xvii] Not only does O'Neill highlight the complexity and accomplishment of Shelley's lyric art, he also draws attention to Shelley's philosophical resolution; of not 'fixing' to a determined meaning that which should not, and cannot, be fixed. In 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' we are offered a sincere if implicit acknowledgement of the inadequacy of language with the poet comfortable in his inability to solve, or 'fix', philosophical problems.

This idea is further developed in the second and third stanzas of the poem. In the first of these, the poet asks this 'Spirit of Beauty' a number of questions:

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?
Ask why the sunlight not forever
Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain-river,

> Why aught should fail and fade that once is shown,
> 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? (ll. 13-24).

These ontological questions of being, concerning the transience of life, of beauty and of the contraries of man are left unanswered in the following stanza. Instead, the poet chastises those who affix names to these abstract notions, as if these mere words adequately solve such philosophical problems or answer such questions:

> No voice from some sublimer world hath ever
> To sage or poet these responses given—
> Therefore the names 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 (ll. 25- 31).

Forest Pyle sees this passage as serving 'to nullify the entire history of proposed answers, to demystify the claims of all those "sages[s]" or "poet[s]" who may fancy that they have heard a response.'[xviii] These alleged responses are considered the result of philosophical ignorance and fraud. Having not received answers from 'some sublimer world', these sages and poets attribute the unknown to religious and supernatural causes. Yet, further to Pyle's reading, these solutions are revealed to be mere *names*, the names of 'God, and ghosts, and Heaven'. The fact that these are a Trinity of names, two of which closely resemble the Father and the Holy Spirit of Trinitarian Christianity, adds an additionally blasphemous tone to this passage. This line also echoes the 'three words' of 'God, Hell and Heaven' that are established as the basis of political power on earth in Canto IV of *Laon and Cythna*. These 'answers' are not just philosophically flawed, but linguistically flawed also. These words serve not to enlighten man with knowledge of the universe; rather, they get in this enlightenment's way. Here Shelley again adopts a Lockean tone, making a particular

reference to sensory empiricism, to sound and sight, when he establishes that these names, these 'frail spells', aim 'to sever, / From all we hear and all we see,/ Doubt, chance, and mutability'. The superstitious names of God, ghost and heaven are terms that discourage free inquiry, or 'doubt', into the causes of that which is experienced empirically in the world. Similarly, 'chance' and the 'mutability' of the Universe are too neatly explained away by the term God. The poet is optimistic, however, saying that these words 'might not avail' in preventing mankind's enlightenment.

In the alternate version of the poem, discovered in Scrope Davis's notebook in 1976 (referred to hereafter, following O'Neill's lead, as *SD: Hymn*), 'God and ghosts and Heaven' (l. 27) is given as 'Demon, Ghost and Heaven'. O'Neill has written thoughtfully on the variations between *SD: Hymn* and the version first published in *The Examiner* (*Ex: Hymn*), the version considered here, although he does not comment on this particular variation ('Shelley's Lyric Art'). Whereas the line in *Ex: Hymn* gives us 'God' with an upper case 'g', clearly indicating the one god of Judaeo-Christian conception, the *SD: Hymn* rendering of this as 'Demon' seems less provocative or 'blasphemous' in the sense that it does not target Christianity specifically but superstition more generally. On the other hand, the existence of *SD: Hymn* and knowledge of the textual variant it offers suggests an alternate reading of this line in which the established religion of Christianity becomes conflated with primitive and fearful superstition. In the rendering of *Ex: Hymn* alone, 'God' is grouped with supernatural 'ghosts' but the fact that 'God' seems almost interchangeable with 'Demon' in Shelley's mind emphasises the Christian deity as a mere superstition.[xix] The fact that these names of 'God and ghosts and Heaven' are 'frail spells' further emphasises the superstitious nature of such terms, as if they have been willed into existence by a wizard or witch.

If superstition and religion do not provide the answers to the ontological questions posed in the second stanza, this raises the question as to where such knowledge is to be obtained. Addressing the 'spirit of beauty', the poet establishes that the path towards enlightenment is found with this very spirit. 'Enlightenment' is appropriate in a literal sense, since it is through this spirit's 'light' that one can attempt to obtain this elusive 'truth':

> 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 (ll. 32-6).

The final line's reference to 'truth', however, is not a claim for a definitive or ultimate certainty. Rather, 'grace and truth' are posited as quantifiable qualities or properties of 'life's unquiet dream' that are '*Give[n]*' by this spirit of beauty rather than revealed or defined by it. The poet makes no great revelation or truth claims here even if this line is a reference, as O'Neill points out, to *John* 1:17 in which 'grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.'[xx] Instead, Christ is displaced with what O'Neill calls the 'enigmatic "thou"' (33). As with the 'awful Power' in the first stanza of the poem, the spirit of beauty's indefinability is emphasised through an avoidance of metaphor that acknowledges language's inadequacy. The repetition of the grammatical conjunction 'or' in this passage is indicative of a struggle to adequately express this spirit's 'light'. It is *either* 'like' – again, a simile or approximation rather than metaphor – 'mist o'er mountains driven,/*Or* music by the night-wind sent/ Through strings of some still instrument,/ *Or* moonlight on a midnight stream' (my emphasis). The poet is unwilling to settle on a single image, name or, indeed, metaphor. To do so would be imprecise, restrictive and would lead the poet – or Shelley – onto the same path as those sages and poets critiqued at the start of the stanza that are guilty of epistemological shortcutting. Furthermore, settling on a single name or image following this

successive list of multiple instances of sublime experience is to be like 'Religion''s false 'God' in *Queen Mab,* in which all these multiple indefinable sources of the sublime are 'bent' to a single point: 'And all their causes to an abstract point / Converging, thou didst bend, – and called it GOD!' (VI. ll. 101-2). It is in this way that one can note how 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' advocates Shelley's doctrine of 'Necessity' despite there being no explicit reference to the term. Indeed, Necessity's observable 'immense and uninterrupted chain of causes and effects' without divine intervention, anticipates the scepticism of the Hymn (*Queen Mab*, note to VI. l. 198, ll.3-4).

The inability to define the spirit of beauty is continued into the Hymn's next stanza:

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart
  And come, for some uncertain moments lent.
  Man were immortal and omnipotent,
Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.
  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 (ll. 37- 48).

Here the 'awful' spirit is pointedly 'unknown' yet simultaneously the poet is keen to stress its impact on human thoughts and sensibilities. What follows is a contemplation of the potential for man's immortality if only the spirit of beauty 'would keep firm state within his heart.'[xxi] Despite the absence from man's heart, this spirit nevertheless 'nourish[es]' 'human thought'. The simile Shelley uses here, of 'darkness to a dying flame', however seems to both emphasise this spirit's paradoxical absence and to demonstrate an anthropocentric universe. As Reiman and Freistat point out 'the Spirit does not really feed human thought at all but sets off and calls attention to it because of its opposite, antithetical nature' (92n).

The fact that the relationship between the spirit and human thought is likened to such an image establishes humanity as the true power in this dynamic; it is man's thought – and *not* the spirit – that is the source of this flame.[xxii] With typical Shelleyan complexity, however, the fact that this 'Spirit of Beauty' is now likened to 'darkness' contrasts with its 'light' at the start of the stanza. This passage calls to mind T.E. Hulme's notorious critique of Romanticism in 'Romanticism and Classicism' in which he bemoans how such an aesthetic places man at the centre of the universe, believing him a divine being:

> The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don't believe in a God, so you begin to believe that man is a god. You don't believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth.[xxiii]

Although we may now dispute whether this notion of divine humanity is such a bad thing, or whether religion is indisputably the 'right and proper outlet' for such instincts, Hulme's understanding of Romantic religion when applied to 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' is perhaps not too wide of the mark.

If man's thought is accentuated like a candle against surrounding darkness there is also the added implication that humanity may be alone in the universe with no benevolent divine force as a guide. Instead, there is only absence. The fact that this spirit of beauty is 'unknown' (l.40), 'unseen' (ll. 1, 2) and leaves man's 'state' 'vacant' (ll. 16-17) supports this idea. This does not help to explain the poem's title however, since it does not explain why Shelley should write a 'hymn' to something he acknowledges as absent. This is explained in the opening two lines of the poem, which establishes that 'though unseen', the Power 'Floats [...] among us' (l. 2). The spirit of beauty is paradoxically both absent and present. This simultaneous absence and presence reflects Shelley's difficulty in expressing intangible

or abstract concepts without reifying or deifying them. The absence is only the absence of a tangible, physical thing that can be empirically proved.

In the Wordsworthian[xxiv] fifth stanza of the poem, the poet recollects how as a youth he naively 'sought' and attempted to commune with such intangible and unknowable spirits of nature as if to empirically verify their existence:

> While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
> Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
> And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
> Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
> I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;
> I was not heard – I saw them not –
> When musing deeply on the lot
> Of life, at that sweet time when the 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 ecstasy! (ll. 49 – 60).

The 'poisonous names' referred to here are the 'frail spells' of the third stanza, the names of 'God and Ghost and Heaven'. With references to sound and sight – 'I was not heard – I saw them not' – the youth fails in his attempt to empirically verify the existence of the beings supposedly signified by these names. The realisation that 'God and Ghost and Heaven' are in fact mere expressions and no more, is imagined as what at first appears to be like a Damascene conversion to the enlightened 'religion' of the abstract 'Intellectual Beauty'. Bryan Shelley tentatively suggests this seeming conversion to have allusions to both *1 Samuel* 10:6 and *Ezekiel* 11:5 which talk of the spirit of the Lord either 'coming' or 'falling' upon the inspired subject, like beauty's 'shadow' falling on the inspired youthful poet in Shelley's poem.[xxv] If, however, such allusions are seen as simply determining the youth's 'conversion' to be akin to Biblical conversions, this would undermine the poem's scepticism and resistance to the fixities of religion. Judith Chernaik reads this passage instead as

'providing a religious metaphor for rational experience, substituting images of divine and external authority for [Shelley's] own mind and conscience.'[xxvi] For Chernaik then, Shelley simply uses a religious register in depicting an experiential event rather than suggesting it is literally analogous to a religious conversion. This reading also emphasises further the alliance of 'Romantic' imagination and empiricism – or vision and rationality – observed throughout the poem. Although Chernaik's suggestion at first seems fitting considering that the poem is simultaneously resistant to established religion and a 'hymn', she does not consider the possibility for melodrama in the youth's 'conversion' that would appear to mock traditional conversion narratives. In fact, Chernaik goes as far as to argue that the poet's 'ecstasy is the appropriate human response to a divine visitation' (37). Determining whether shrieking or clasping one's hands is, indeed, an 'appropriate human response' to such an event is a subjective comment. Equally, if read as mockingly melodramatic rather than 'appropriate', there is the potential for a stronger anti-religious reading of this passage than Chernaik allows for.

Although the following stanza seems to imply that the poet has become a devout follower of the path opened up to him through his 'conversion', upon further reading the truth is more complex. The poet declares:

> I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
> To thee and thine – have I not kept the vow?
> With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now
> I call the phantoms of a thousand hours
> Each from his voiceless grave […] (ll. 61-5).

If the epiphany in the previous stanza is a 'conversion' to rationalism and realisation of the unverifiable nature of the supernatural – whether we perceive it to be mocking religion or to be adopting the particular register of religion – then it is, in fact, as if the conversion never happened. Despite the poet's realisation in youth that seeking and calling for ghosts

or other supernatural beings is fruitless, the mature poet in this stanza 'even now' calls upon 'phantoms' from their 'voiceless grave[s]'. It is as if he has not heeded his youthful findings. The reference to 'phantoms' as opposed to 'ghosts' in the previous stanza, however, is a significant difference. Whereas 'ghost' is more indicative of an actual *thing,* whether incorporeal or otherwise, 'phantom' is more suggestive of a hallucination or a delusion, reinforced by the word's etymology from the Old French for 'illusion'. The change to 'phantoms' then implies the older poet's increased resistance to reifying those perceptions in which no causality is easily discerned. These '*phan*toms' are acknowledged as the products of individual fantasy – from the Greek, '*phan*tasy' – rather than actual de facto reality.

If these phantoms are the product of the poet's imagination, there is the suggestion that the move in this stanza is one towards a worship of the poet's own mind, or, as is often referred to in relation to Wordsworth, the egotistical sublime:

> [the phantoms] have in visioned bowers
> Of studious zeal or love's delight
> Outwatched with me the envious night –
> They 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 (ll. 66-72).

The image presented here, however, is not of a simple worship of the phantoms of the poet's imagination. Whereas the poet of the previous stanza seeks for ghosts in order to satisfy his youthful philosophical inquisitiveness, here the seeking after answers is presented through active study. Instead of finding a shortcut to knowledge through worship of a concrete divine figure, the poet here is a true scholar full of 'studious zeal'[xxvii]; he must learn it for himself. The focus on empiricism in this passage is demonstrated by the number of

references to sight and illumination that again recall the Lockean emphasis on the visual sense. The phantoms 'Outwatch' with the poet in his places of study that are depicted as 'visioned bowers'. The ambiguity of the word 'visioned', in that it suggests imagination almost as much as literal sight, emphasises again the connection between empiricism and 'Romantic' imagination as discussed throughout this essay. Through his attainment of knowledge the poet's brow is 'illumed' and hope is expressed that the addressed Power will bring light to free the world from its 'dark slavery' of superstition. The movement to a state of enlightenment is depicted almost literally as if from night to day, of a scholar studying all through the 'envious night' until daybreak.

Shelley returns to imagery similar to that used here, in describing individual enlightenment, when Rousseau relates the intervention in human history of Francis Bacon and his scientific method in *The Triumph of Life* (1822):

> […] still had kept
> The jealous keys of truth's eternal doors
>
> "If Bacon's spirit [ ] had not leapt
> Like lightning out of darkness; he compelled
> The Proteus shape of Nature's as it slept
>
> "To wake and to unbar the caves that held
> The treasure of the secrets of its reign – (*Shelley's Poetry & Prose*, 491-2, ll. 267-273).

The Baconian Method – 'Bacon's spirit' – is likened to 'lightning out of darkness' that, like the studies of the poet in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', similarly 'enlightens' the darkness of human ignorance. The fact that the lightning compels 'Nature' to 'wake' brings to mind the experiments and scientific enquiry of figures such as Luigi Galvani and Humphrey Davy, whose 'galvanism' was of course cited by Mary Shelley as an influence on *Frankenstein*

(1818). The lightning functions here both as a symbol of enlightening scientific enquiry as well as an animator of matter.

Whereas the empirical method of Bacon apparently leads humanity to 'truth' (l. 268) in that it 'unbars' Nature's 'secrets', the received enlightenment of the poet figure of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' is not to be in receipt of an absolute certain truth. Instead, the knowledge gained is in the Socratic mode, that true knowledge exists in knowing that you know nothing. The conjured phantoms do not help the poet in determining absolute knowledge since they are 'voiceless', lacking the appropriate language and discourse. But the poet too lacks this necessary language, still at this late stage of the poem acknowledging his own language's inadequacy. He does not settle down to define the spirit of beauty, content to refer to it only as an abstract 'awful LOVELINESS'. Crucially, this loveliness 'wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.' There is something, an enlightenment beyond language that contemplation of the universe can bring, even if such enlightenment simply reminds the enlightened of their own ignorance. Those, therefore, who attempt to confine and define the secrets of the universe into simple words and names such as 'God' 'Ghost' and 'Heaven' are in serious error.

In the difficult final stanza of the poem we have an apparent shift in which the inadequacies of a solely empirical approach to the universe are emphasised:

> 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! (ll. 73-7).

If the world exists only as we perceive it then, in summer, the evidence of our senses would tell us that autumn 'could not be, as if it had not been' since, again a reference to sound and sight, it is not 'heard or seen'. This is because, as Chernaik contends, 'the evidence of the

senses is limited to present time' (40). For Shelley, the changing of the seasons, as seen in the later 'Ode to the West Wind' (1820) or 'England in 1819' (1819), is frequently imagined as a natural indicator of the potential for socio-political change. If the senses cannot perceive the possibility of this change, then hope is lost. The poet's turn towards the spirit of beauty at the end of the stanza and the poem entire, in Chernaik's words therefore shows that 'hope is warranted, even imperative, against all contrary evidence' (40). The poem ends:

> Thus let thy power, which like the truth
> Of nature on my passive youth
> Descended, to my onward life supply
> Its calm – to one who worships thee,
> Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind
> To fear himself, and love all human kind (ll. 78 – 84).

Rather than dismissing empirical philosophy as inadequate, the poet instead learns to compromise, allowing it to sit alongside a sublime indefinable experience that helps to assert the importance of the human mind. Rather than fearing God and his commandments, the poet instead learns to 'fear', have reverence for, his own mind, and in doing so to love mankind. In contrast to the '*frail* spells' of 'God' and 'Ghost' and 'Heaven', this indefinable sublime Power has 'spells' of its own.

This article has demonstrated the possibility of reading 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' as a poem wrestling with empirical scepticism, of language and the universe more widely, and with the poetic attempt to come to terms with Shelley's 'sublime' experiences in 1816. In this poem, a philosophical or thematic problem becomes one of poetics, a poetical problem of expression. Attempting to define and confine sublime experience with the word 'God' is not just philosophically flawed, but also poetically inadequate, a dishonest failure to capture the essence of the experience. Shelley is conscious of the inadequacy of language

and refuses to reduce and confine experience to flawed words and metaphors; approximation is as good as you are going to get. In this sense, Shelley becomes both poet and 'sage' by perversely admitting he does not know.

Shelley's critique of religion is one rooted in his concern for appropriate linguistic expression and is as much apparent in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' as it is in the earlier *Queen Mab*. This is something Shelley acquired from his reading of Enlightenment-era philosophy. By determining the 'problem' of the Christian God to be a deficiency of language, Shelley can therefore both express and work this through aesthetically in his poetry. Over the course of his career, Shelley moved from articulating concern for the Christian anthropomorphising of an abstract concept, 'God', in *Queen Mab* to settling on the crucially indefinable term 'Power' when writing of sublime experience in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' and later poems. In this sense, the poetry and experiences of 1816 can be read as the beginning of a transition in Shelley's thought and, therefore, his aesthetics.

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[i] See, for instance, Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780-1830* (Cambridge, 1999), 232, Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice not Understood* (Manchester, 1977), 140-1 and David Fuller, 'Shelley and Jesus', *Durham University Journal*, 85 (1993), 211-33, 212.
[ii] Colin Jager, 'Shelley after Atheism', *Studies in Romanticism*, 49 (Winter 2010) 611-31, 611.
[iii] Anon. 'Review of New Publications', *The Commercial Chronicle*, 3979 (3 June 1819) 625-6, 626.
[iv] Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London, 1995 [1974]), 342.
[v] For detailed discussion of the religious scepticism in 'Mont Blanc' see Jager, Webb, 136-142, and Priestman, 234-237.
[vi] Paul Whickman, 'From *Laon and Cythna* to *The Revolt of Islam*: Shelley's Revisions in Context', Richard Gravil ed. *Grasmere 2012* (Penrith, 2012) 147- 59
[vii] Spinoza's identification of God with all of nature, essentially as an interconnected essence, has been seen to lend itself to Shelleyan scepticism in this vein. For instance: 'God's Power, by which he and all things are and act, is his essence itself'. See Benedictus de Spinoza, Edwin Curley trans., ed., *The Ethics* in *The Collected Works of Spinoza I* (Princeton, 1985), 34. For more recent work on the influence of Spinoza on Shelley or Romanticism more widely, see Jager and Marjorie Levinson 'A Motion and a Spirit: Romancing Spinoza', *Studies in Romanticism*, 46 (Winter, 2007), 367-408.
[viii] Percy Bysshe Shelley, E.B. Murray ed., *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Oxford, 1993), 253.
[ix] Percy Bysshe Shelley, Geoffrey, Matthews ed., Kelvin Everest ed., Jack Donovan ed., Cian Duffy ed., Michael Rossington ed., *The Poems of Shelley* (4 vols, London and New York, 1989–2013). Unless indicated, further references to Shelley's poetry are to volume 1 of this edition.

[xx] Although there is some disagreement as to precisely when Shelley began *Queen Mab*, it is nevertheless agreed that he was certainly writing it from at least as early as June 1812, completing it early 1813. See Donald Reiman ed., Neil Fraistat ed.,*The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley* vol. 2 (Baltimore, 2004), 492.
[xi] Percy Bysshe Shelley, Frederick L. Jones ed., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (2 vols, Oxford, 1963-4), i. 317.
[xii] William Keach, *Shelley's Style* (New York and London, 1984); Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An interpretation of the major poems* (Cambridge, 1984).
[xiii] Monika Lee, '"Nature's Silent Eloquence": Disembodied Organic Language in Shelley's *Queen Mab*', *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 48.2 (September 1993), 169-93, 169.
[xiv] See, for instance, J.R. Watson, 'Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and the Romantic Hymn', *The Durham University Journal*, 85.2 (1993), 203-9.
[xv] Spencer Hall, 'Power and the Poet: Religious Mythmaking in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"', *Keats-Shelley Journal,* 32 (1983), 123-49, 124.
[xvi] Donald H. Reiman ed., Neil Fraistat ed. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York and London, 2002), 93n.
[xvii] Michael O'Neill, 'Shelley's Lyric Art', Donald H. Reiman ed., Neil Fraistat ed. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York and London, 2002) 616-26, 617.
[xviii] Forest Pyle, '"Frail Spells: Shelley and the Ironies of Exile', Deborah E. White ed., *Irony and Clerisy, Romantic Circles Praxis Series* (1999) <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/irony/pyle/frail.html> - [accessed 14 December 2015].
[xix] Forest Pyle similarly notes the grouping of 'God' with 'ghosts', seeing it as evidence for 'Shelley's radical philosophical scepticism.' ibid.
[xx] Michael O'Neill, '"A Double Face of False and True': Poetry and Religion in Shelley,' *Literature and Theology*, 25.1 (March 2011), 32-46, 33.
[xxi] Reiman and Fraistat suggest that the immortality Shelley refers to here is not literal but 'virtual' in that it reflects his belief in the perfectibility of human sentiment. See *Poetry & Prose* 94n
[xxii] Reiman's and Fraistat's understanding of this image differs from Judith Chernaik's who sees this power dynamic rather differently: 'Human thought, like a dying flame in that it is frail, requiring sustenance to keep alive, must be fed by beauty; in the absence of beauty, thought flickers and dies.' Human thought is thus heavily reliant on 'beauty' and cannot survive without it. *The Lyrics of Shelley* (Cleveland, OH and London, 1972), 58n.
[xxiii] T.E. Hulme, 'Romanticism and Classicism', Robert F. Gleckner ed., Gerald E. Enscoe ed., *Romanticism: Points of View* (Detroit, 1975), 55-65, 58.
[xxiv] In particular, the stanza echoes Wordsworth's 'The Boy of Winander' passage that eventually appeared in *The Prelude* (Book 5), and the *Immortality Ode*.
[xxv] 'And the Spirit of the LORD will come upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy with them, and shalt be turned into another man' (1 Sam 10:6); And the Spirit of the LORD fell upon me, and said unto me, Speak; Thus saith the LORD; Thus have ye said, O house of Israel: for I know the things that come into your mind, *every one of* them' (Ezekiel 11:5). Noted by Bryan Shelley, *Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel* (Oxford, 1994), 176.
[xxvi] Judith Chernaik, *The Lyrics of Shelley* (Cleveland, OH and London, 1972), 37.
[xxvii] 'love's delight' (l. 67) is 'lore's delight' in *SD: Hymn*, emphasising further the importance of study in this passage.