

## Shelley's Vestimentary Poetics

Abstract        The figures of veils in Shelley's poetics have long been understood as an inconsistent and potentially confused contribution to a debate between representational and expressive accounts of language. However, Shelley's veils are crucial to a broader range of aesthetic and ethical questions in his poetics, and when read alongside the related figures of clothing, armor, uniform, dress and draped curtain, these vestimentary figures underwrite some of the most ambitious of Shelley's claims: that poetry is infinite and yet tangible, that it contains "eternal truth" while existing within a historical context, and that it does not compete with but underwrites the work of reason.

Poetry appears in veils but is not concealed. The subjects of poetry are "clothed in its Elysian light" not to serve the vanity of poets but to make visible a measure of their inspiration.<sup>1</sup> This claim, central to Percy Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, finds few sympathetic ears. The metaphor of poetry's dress suggests to some that poets engage in obfuscation, if not reckless cover up. William Hazlitt says as much in an 1824 review of Shelley's *Posthumous Poems*. "His Muse offers her services to clothe shadowy doubts and inscrutable difficulties in a robe of glittering words, and to turn nature into a brilliant paradox. ... Where we see the dazzling beacon-lights streaming over the darkness of the abyss, we dread the quicksands and the rocks below." For Hazlitt, the "robe" of Shelley's composition is a beautiful distraction from his faulty ideas. Hazlitt's broader point is a rebuke, familiar in this period, to abstract, systematic thought: in spite of Shelley's "genius," and his brilliant execution of individual thoughts, images and passages, given the time and opportunity he would always get himself "entangled in a system" to the detriment of his writing.<sup>2</sup> To show that systematic philosophy has no place in poetry, Hazlitt employs Shelley's language of clothing against him, setting the covering against the covered, his decorative words against his underlying thought. The clothing metaphor here provides a theory of language which is itself anti-theoretical: a theory that divides language from systematic thought, and words from ideas. For Shelley, however, clothing metaphors permit some of the riskiest and most challenging claims in the *Defence* to be made.

The *Defence of Poetry* has long been regarded as troublesome. M.H. Abrams made a distinction not unlike Hazlitt's between its "magnificent passages" and "loosely articulated critical theory." Earl Wasserman noted more bluntly that for many of his contemporaries the *Defence* "had proved something of an embarrassment, if not an annoyance."<sup>3</sup> Certainly, there is cause for irritation if one is looking for a consistent and recognizably modern critical position: the *Defence* frustrates a historicist account of poetry by insisting that the parts of poetry that matter are not historically determined, and frustrates a formalist account by expanding the medium of poetry to encompass not only prose but at times even "colour, form, and religious and civil habits of action."<sup>4</sup> It combines Platonic philosophy and empirical psychology, a critique of reason and a critique of superstition, through a process William Ulmer has called "the recycling of opposites."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Shelley's use of clothing metaphors resist a consistent linguistic account. William Keach's analysis, which remains the most comprehensive, demonstrates the ways in which Shelley "consistently sees poetry from both an expressive and a representational perspective," allowing him to speak of poetry as both a veiling (of its object) and an unveiling (of the world).<sup>6</sup> Yet this does not acknowledge the way in which Shelley reimagines the *substance* of poetry through vestimentary figures.

This essay aims to establish the significance and broad coherence of the clothing metaphors in the *Defence*, and show that rather than decorating the theoretical body of Shelley's poetics, they underwrite Shelley's ambitious redefinition of poetry. In the category of the vestimentary I include not only the motif of the veil, but also various related figures which are often overlooked: clothing, armor, uniform, dress and draped curtain. For Shelley, the clothes of poetry do not cover over some other object or system (like the "Turkish attire" of Walter Benjamin's chess player) nor demonstrate a linguistic skepticism which separates the fabric of language from a world it cannot touch.<sup>7</sup> Rather, poetry's clothing mediates between what Shelley sees as the contingencies of poetry's reception by any given age or individual, and the elements of poetry dressed in, but not determined by, those contingencies: its aspirations to the true, the beautiful and the good. The figure of clothing has a long history in poetics, and it will be necessary to briefly rehearse a slice of it in order to demonstrate how Shelley modifies the figure, before turning to Shelley's own use of robes and veils.

### *The Dress of Thought*

The metaphor of dress for style occurs in the writing of Cicero and Quintilian, and can be traced from John Dryden through numerous eighteenth century English writers, including Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson. “Language is the dress of thought,” Johnson writes.<sup>8</sup> The implication is that style is akin to getting dressed: one chooses how to present a more or less immutable body. Romantic writers present considerable opposition to the metaphor, which can be understood as part of their broader rejection of the principles of classical rhetoric. Wordsworth rejects the clothing metaphor on the grounds that words “hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an *incarnation* of the thought but only a *clothing* for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift.” Words are, famously, “things, active and efficient.” Coleridge provides a comparable formulation in a notebook entry of 1810: “words are not mere symbols of things and thoughts, but themselves things.”<sup>9</sup> When Wordsworth and Coleridge renounce “the principle of the substitutability of expressions [which] is the foundation of traditional rhetorical *elocutio*,” David Wellbery notes, they “exemplify a widespread attitude formulated as early as the 1770s and characteristic of Romanticism generally.”<sup>10</sup>

The romantic case against the clothing metaphor tends towards a theory of language. Thomas De Quincey distinguishes between “external realities” and internal “sensibilities,” holding that at least regarding the latter, “the style or the embodying of the thoughts cease to be a mere separable ornament.” Like Wordsworth, De Quincey takes the clothing metaphor to undervalue words; “if language were merely a dress, then you could separate the two; you could lay the thoughts on the left hand, the language on the right.” But poetry’s words and thoughts occur for De Quincey “not merely *with* the other, but each *in* and *through* the other.”<sup>11</sup> And Thomas Carlyle’s “Professor Teufelsdröckh” makes the characteristically romantic argument (reminiscent of Rousseau’s *Essai sur l’origine des langues*) that language is the flesh of thoughts because all language is originally figurative, and thus itself an imaginative kind of thinking.<sup>12</sup> The opposition between dress and embodiment hinges on whether the subject of poetry is external or internal to the writing. If it is external, poetry can be understood as essentially representational, and criticism the task of analyzing the techniques or “strategies” of representation; if it is internal, criticism must be instead study form and technique, which are understood to generate or express meaning. Thus the question of dress can be traced to the modern critical debate between hermeneutics and phenomenology.<sup>13</sup> There is criticism as unveiling and criticism as witnessing. One approach treats the body of a poem as a mere cloak, discarding what is most interesting in the process (its detractors believe); the other mistakes the veils of representation and ideology for the thing itself.

Yet Shelley's approach confounds this familiar debate. As critics have shown, Shelley does not consistently figure poetry as representation or embodiment; he never settles on whether the language of poetry refers to, or constitutes, knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, in the *Defence* poetry can both reveal *and* alter the world; it is a mirror that both "reflects" and "distorts" (*SPP* pp. 515-20). Poetry's clothing is a focal point of the ambivalence: the figure of unveiling encompasses "directly opposite meanings," and the "division in Shelley's attitude towards language" is revealed above all by his "doubling of the veil/curtain/vestment figure," it is claimed.<sup>15</sup> Yet the *Defence* fails to provide a clear position because Shelley is simply not interested in the linguistic debate that the clothing metaphor typically signifies. To read the *Defence* as linguistic theory of this sort—and in particular as a groping return to the position Wordsworth rejected a decade earlier—is to invite disappointment. Such an approach mischaracterizes the claims Shelley makes through the clothing metaphor, and overlooks the sociological and aesthetic dimensions of his argument.

Shelley speaks of poetry in the *Defence* in a broader and a narrower sense. Critics who restrict poetry to "a species of linguistic master text" must discard Shelley's broader definition, which encompasses "dance and architecture and statuary and painting" and is made not only from language but also "colour, form, and religious and civil habits of action," dealing only with what Shelley calls "poetry in a more restricted sense."<sup>16</sup> But even in Shelley's "restricted" sense, poetry is defined using categories not limited to language: rhythm, harmony, beauty, custom. Above all, it is misleading to speak, as Keach does, of "Shelley's preference for language-as-vestment (and language-as-mirror) over language-as-incarnation," as if Shelley sides with the rhetoricians against Wordsworth.<sup>17</sup> Shelley's vestimentary metaphors are not primarily linguistic. In fact, nowhere in the *Defence* does Shelley characterize words or language as clothing. The following things are figured as garments or veils: "the vices of [a poet's] contemporaries," "Elysian light," "irresistible attractions," "familiarity" and poetry's "figured curtain." And the following things are said to have figurative clothing or veils (or said to have them removed): "the invisible nature of man," "the permanent analogy of things," "the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism, and persevering devotion to an object," "unknown evil," "the hidden beauty of the world," poetry, "obscenity," "meaning," "vanishing apparitions," "the scene of things," pain and pleasure (*SPP* 515-33). At the very most, the metaphor applies to some kinds of language, and to many things which are not linguistic. Rather, as this survey suggests, the *register* of Shelley's clothing metaphors is chiefly aesthetic and ethical, and their argumentative *function* in the *Defence* is to mediate between what is present at hand and known, and forces that are unknown, hidden and sometimes unknowable.

J.J. McGann once proposed a scheme of three kinds of Shelleyan veils: firstly “the veil of old and worn out ideas that cover the true beauty of life,” secondly Nature’s veil of “beautiful appearances” and thirdly the veil that poetry “itself lays upon the visionary intuitions of the poet.”<sup>18</sup> This scheme is, I think, a little too neat, but it does make clear the fact that all veils are not equal for Shelley. Certainly, there is a clear difference between the veiling effects of the waterfall and the boundary of life and death in “Mont Blanc,” and between the veils of light and of corruption in “The Triumph of Life.”<sup>19</sup> The important point for Shelley is never that an object *is* veiled (as readers who explain them as figures of Shelley’s skepticism have supposed) but the nature of the gauze. This is clear when Shelley claims that poetry “lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists” (*SPP* 517). Poetry beautifies its objects, and in so doing, reveals otherwise hidden beauty in the world; poetry “reproduces” existing things *and* constitutes them as if new. There are at least four registers of perception here: the familiar and visible, veiled but beautiful world; the unfamiliar, unveiled world; that world now freshly clothed in poetry’s light; and a still ungrasped level of “gentle and exalted content” which poetry’s beautiful objects commemorate, and which appears to us only *as* memorial. Poetry appears as a continual proliferation of layers and surfaces. This is not Shelley’s wavering over whether poetry is or is not clothed; it is the basis for an aesthetic theory.

The argument that poetry’s objects are “not familiar,” Paul Fry observes, “is perfectly intelligible ... it anticipates the ‘defamiliarization’ of the early Russian Formalists.”<sup>20</sup> Poetry’s re-veiling is revealing. This is a useful starting point, but Shelley’s vestimentary figures should be understood far more broadly as aesthetic. When we do, it becomes possible to see how its clothing is for Shelley a condition of poetry’s possibility, and central to understanding its function. In what follows, I focus on two key aspects: firstly the relation between the ethical and the historical in the *Defence*, and secondly the epistemological role of the veil figure.

*“Antient Armour”*

Drew Milne has cast “the clothes of versification” in Shelley and Keats in terms of the “historically given materiality of prosody.” Milne’s discussion anticipates a renewed interest in the history of poetic technique that has taken the name “historical poetics.”<sup>21</sup> For all his talk of “the eternal, the infinite, and the one,” Shelley also thinks historically about poetics, but his approach is strikingly unlike these approaches because he considers historical *distance* to be illuminating; he is conscious not only what is “historically given” in every time and place but also what is “historically taken,” as it were. Shelley uses clothing to figure the historically contingent beliefs and practices that shape the production of artworks (*SPP*, p. 513). The following passage is central to my discussion, and bears quoting at length:

Every epoch under names more or less specious has deified its peculiar errors; Revenge is the naked Idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age; and Self-deceit is the veiled Image of unknown evil, before which luxury and satiety lie prostrate. But a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty. An epic or dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the antient armour or the modern uniform around his body; whilst it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful than either. The beauty of the internal nature cannot be so far concealed by its accidental vesture, but that the spirit of its form shall communicate itself to the very disguise, and indicate the shape it hides from the manner in which it is worn. A majestic form and graceful motions will express themselves through the most barbarous and tasteless costume. Few poets of the highest class have chosen to exhibit the beauty of their conceptions in its naked truth and splendour; and it is doubtful whether the alloy of costume, habit, etc., be not necessary to temper this planetary music for mortal ears (*SPP* pp. 516-17).

The specific context of these remarks is a discussion of classical epic; the “revenge” in question is most immediately the wrath of Achilles. Shelley does not defend Homer through moral relativism (revenge was then virtue, so *The Iliad* was virtuous in its day) nor by looking for moments in which that reverence for revenge is undermined or negated. Rather, the errors deified in Homer’s time are “the temporary dress in which his creations *must* be arrayed.” Poetry does not depend on its authors escaping history; rather, moral defects are an “*accidental* vesture” under which “the eternal proportions” can be discerned. This allows Shelley to hold that poetry has moral responsibility (and

moral truth) without needing to prove that poets are historical outliers or moral prodigies. The availability of poetry's beauty and virtue (which mingle, I take it, in Shelley's use of "grace") is explained in vestimentary terms, as when the drape of a garment articulates the body beneath. We never encounter poetry in its "original purity and force" (*SPP* p. 531). The challenging implication here is that the moral good of poetry expresses itself *through* the clothing of its barbarism; "the spirit of its form shall communicate itself to the very disguise."

Why is the "temporary dress" of vice unavoidable? Wasserman suggests that it is a question of a poet's materials, which are marked by the "inherent imperfections" of their time and place.<sup>22</sup> But this does not explain why Shelley supposes that "it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful" than the "antient armour or modern uniform" of Homer's contemporary vice. It is unconvincing to suppose that this task is "easy" because Shelley or his audience could have done better, or have purer materials. Rather, our advantage is a result of our vantage. We are able to see revenge for what it is—an idol—because we have ceased to think it a god. By implication, in Homer's day there was far less to distinguish the beauty of friendship and loyalty from the vice of revenge. It is when revenge ceases to be good custom that it becomes obvious costume. By dividing "majestic form" from "tasteless costume," Shelley is able to acknowledge moral failures *as* failures, without damning the poem therein. This gesture recurs in comments about "Athenian society," which was "deformed by many imperfections" that Christian poetry "erased," and yet brought forth more "energy, beauty, and virtue" than any other time (*SPP*, 518). Shelley attempts to assure poetry's transhistorical ethical value precisely by clothing it in history, with all its scars and defects.

The *Defence* spreads poetry's significance across the whole history of its reception, from the moment of composition into the far future. "Time ... for ever developes new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which poetry contains." This alienates poets from the full contents of their works, and defers a poem's final evaluation: "it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect" (*SPP*, 515-16). If the meaning of poetry extends over time, then there is no point at which the whole work is visible, not because something hides it, but in the same way that in no single second of a film or single inch of a painting is the whole work apparent. As such, "no matter how closely we read the text now, we shall be unable to determine within it the seeds of all its future forms," Hugh Roberts comments.<sup>23</sup> Shelley's belief that meaning unfolds over time explains why he does not consider poems to belong to their authors, and why a poet "would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong which are usually those of his place and time in his poetical creations, which participate in neither." This reinforces, and to a

degree explains, the implication in the “antient amour” passage that our historical *distance* from the work allows us a clearer view of its vestments. The people of Homer’s day were cursed to deify their peculiar errors, as we ours. By placing poetry outside the authority of any one age, Shelley cautions against moralistic criticism of the past and against demands that contemporary art be immediately accessible.

In his incisive political analysis of the temporal logic of the *Defence*, Andrew Franta notes that Shelley “claims for poetic form itself the privilege of a future perspective on the present.”<sup>24</sup> One consequence of this privilege is that poetry waives the right to immediate or definite judgement. We may not recognize the poetry of our own day *as* poetry, blinded by contemporary prejudices, and likewise we might misidentify as genuinely beautiful that which merely echoes the “conceptions” of our “time and place.” In effect, poets are unacknowledged *poets* until their legislation comes to pass. Moral defects have historical specificity, but poetry extends beyond that moment; thus it is “not inasmuch as they were Poets, but inasmuch as they were not Poets, that they can be considered with any plausibility as connected with the corruption of their age.” The more truth, goodness and beauty Shelley attributes to poetry, the more it aspires towards the invisible, autonomous, non-human (indeed, divine) conditions of inspiration. What saves the term “poetry” from becoming as intangible as those other transcendental terms is the concrete nature of its coverings. But while its historical coverings ensure poetry remains tangible and present, poetry always exceeds the sum of its contingencies; it “defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions.” Thus poetry is not a consequence or symptom of the historical, but neither is it experienced as an escape from it; Shelley figures poetry’s mediation of the historical as the disruption and reconstitution of appearances, “whether it spreads its own figured curtain or withdraws life’s dark veil from before the scene of things” (*SPP* pp. 515-33).

The clothing metaphors provide Shelley’s solution to a familiar literary-historical problem: the difficulty of believing both (1) that poetry is shaped by the social and historical conditions of its production and (2) that poetry has enduring moral and aesthetic value, without conceding to (3) the defense that such value is purely relative to one time and place. The particular motivation for Shelley in the *Defence* is to counter Peacock by showing that the value of poetry is not limited to, or even constrained by, the age in which it is produced. The broader consequence is that the *Defence* stakes the value of poetry on its immersion in, and potential antagonism with, the conditions in which it is apprehended.<sup>25</sup> There are two further points worth noting: firstly, the relativism defense in (3) is no defense at all, because it implies that as moral and aesthetic values change, poetry decays and loses



its value (or, from the poetry's perspective, readers lose theirs.) Shelley's account strips a poet's contemporaries of the privileged viewpoint (and deprives any of us of a claim on poetry's "original purity and force"), but in return preserves poetry's potential value—and its capacity for new significance—for future readers. By wrapping poetry in contingent robes, Shelley keeps open the possibility that poetry might transcend history, while accepting that none of its readers ever can. Secondly, by insisting that poetry's beautiful form is communicated *through* its imperfect dress (and never in its "inmost naked" form), Shelley undermines the hermeneutic attitude that supposes that poetry's knowledge or insight can be extracted from the object, an attitude that, at bottom, seeks its redundancy—that once we have learned from art we will no longer need it.

### *Painted veils*

I want to open a second avenue for thinking about Shelley's clothing metaphors: the opposition they generate between certainty and satisfaction. I do so by considering once more the objection that Shelley is hiding something from us. I do not intend to return the old project of adjudicating between Shelley's skepticism and Platonism, nor to its more recent critique, which has resulted in a profusion of new labels for Shelley's thought rather than the overcoming of old ones.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, I want to risk using the term skepticism here to capture the specific kind of objection, centered on the clothing metaphor, that goes as follows: at best, Shelley's account fails to explain how poetry can furnish "eternal truth" (or else Shelley intentionally undermines that aspiration in a flash of corrective skepticism); at worst the veils evince deception—Shelley's poetics is just cloaks and mirrors (*SPP* pp. 513-15). Whether one sees a failure of representation or a willful cover up, the pressure is concentrated on the concealing function of poetry's clothing. To put the objection another way, by clothing poetry Shelley seems to require us to take the claims made for the underlying *content* of poetry—its truth, beauty and goodness—on faith. What I am calling the skeptical objection here is nothing more than the refusal of that faith. By working through a response to this objection, it will become possible to tease out a second function of the clothing metaphors.

Consider this speculation which buttresses Shelley's earlier claim for the necessity of veils: the "planetary music" of "naked" poetry may be inaccessible to "mortal ears." Few great poets have

chosen to work with “naked” poetry, and none, it is implied, have clearly succeeded. (This is not, in practice, a question of volition for Shelley.) Christopher Miller has suggested that for Shelley there was “too much worth keeping in the idea of heaven to throw the word away.”<sup>27</sup> The same may be said in the case of veils, which Shelley employs despite their ritual uses and liturgical connotations. But a question of faith arises in a more abstract way in the case of poetry’s planetary music. *Musica mundana* proves a useful concept for Shelley in the *Defence* because it unites the melodious qualities of poetry with truth in general; poetry becomes the audible “echo of the eternal music.” But by restricting the “eternal music,” Shelley appears to hint that only god(s) might hear that music unalloyed, and therefore see truth without its veils. In other words, aren’t we forced to choose between a poetics unsuitable for mortals—that assumes a god’s-eye-view in spite of Shelley’s professed atheism—and a deflationary account which admits that there is nothing behind the veils of “costume, habit, etc.”? Either we cannot unclothe poetry’s substance, or else it has none. Either way, the garments are to blame (*SPP* pp. 515-17).

For what I am calling the skeptical objection, there is a crucial admission in the *Defence*. “Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed.” On this basis, Jerrold Hogle writes that veils “can suggest but never reveal some ‘inmost naked beauty,’” and Paul Vatalaro draws the “unsettling” implication that “nothing lies underneath all those veils.”<sup>28</sup> Of course, it is a leap to equate “never exposed” with “never existed,” and Shelley’s preoccupation with invisible and unseen forces in the *Defence* (“the nature of man,” inspiration, inmost beauty) suggests quite the reverse. But more importantly, there is a concrete dimension to Shelley’s point. Let us put the line about “the inmost naked beauty” into its context. “All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. . . . A great Poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight” (*SPP*, p. 528). Shelley invokes the infinite significance of poetry in order to account for its capacity to change over time. Every reader is capable of appreciating the portion “which their *peculiar relations* enable them to share” (recall the resonance with every age’s “peculiar errors”) but poetry is inexhaustible, and no one person lives long enough to receive everything a poem has to offer. Poetry is beyond complete comprehension not in a mystical or fraudulent sense, but because it is mediated by the moment in which it is apprehended. The limitation, if one insists on seeing it as one, resides not with the definition of poetry but human finitude.

But Shelley is still restricting access to poetry to individuals, the skeptic might say, and this is to some extent true. By clothing poetry, Shelley can employ truth as an absolute, give poetry access to it, and still acknowledge the vast limitations and myopia of every existing society. The compromise is that interpretive certainty becomes impossible; poetry cannot be used to definitively prove a point. How painful a compromise this is depends on how much one feels this gives up; Shelley himself has great tolerance for unseen and imperceptible things. Inspiration in the *Defence* is a force that even poets do not properly grasp; Shelley's famous image is of the wind that momentarily burnishes a fading coal, a wind so light that even those most attuned to it can only take brief notice, "and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure." Once again, it is clothing that saves inspiration from fading on the breeze: poetry "arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life, and veiling them, or in language or in form, sends them forth among mankind." If, as Angela Leighton has put it, Shelley moves in the *Defence* "from empiricism to the sublime," the resulting conception of inspiration is necessarily unavailable to consciousness, because it exists *through* the frustration of attempts to observe it.<sup>29</sup> As Forest Pyle observes, poetry "*produces* ... the apprehension of that which has not appeared to the senses."<sup>30</sup> Shelley's clothing metaphors figure the way in which individual poems render local and tangible that "ceaseless and invisible wind," at the cost of creating a perpetual layer of ambiguity.

A skeptical interpretation also beckons in a lexically-related sonnet, "Lift not the painted veil."<sup>31</sup> The imperative (that we do not lift "the painted veil / Which those who live Call Life") is complicated by the poem's anecdote (of the one who did). The moral of this anecdote is, for Peterfreund, "that, under the present circumstances, the aporia that obtains on this materially manifest side of life as effect is preferable to the emptiness that obtains on the immaterial side of life as cause."<sup>32</sup> Laura Quinney broadly agrees, but notes that the poem therefore offers a "useless" insight by depicting precisely the truth it claims "we ought not to learn," even if "this insight in no way vitiates the rhetorical energy of the proposition."<sup>33</sup> The recognition that what most who live call life is merely a veil *is already* a way of lifting the veil we ought not to lift. Understood in these terms, the poem's descriptions contradict its imperative, and disappointment is assured. But the sonnet's "message" ought not to be disentangled from the poem itself. Shelley frequently senses the limitations of the visible, and critics tie this sense to skeptical philosophy and particularly to Hume.<sup>34</sup> But the application of epistemology is not quite what is at stake in "Lift not the painted veil." For a start, there are two distinct registers of veiling in the poem: the "painted veil" and the fabric of shadows that "Fear / And Hope" are said to "weave." The emotions are caught outside the

appearance/reality couple. And nor is the disappointment experienced by the figure of the anecdote strictly epistemological.

The figure who lifts the veil—let's call him the skeptic—is frustrated with the inauthenticity of the veiled life, understood here as the gap between appearances and “all we would believe.” Yet the skeptic is motivated not as a good metaphysician, distrusting the world of appearances and favoring truth, but as a man seeking, “For his lost heart was tender, things to love.” As Stanley Cavell has shown over and over, no amount of proof will ever be adequate in cases of love.<sup>35</sup> Or, to put it another way, if love can be less or more assured, that assurance does not flow from tenacious investigation. By the same token, “Lift not the painted veil” suggests that whatever things are lovable will not be discovered by one who forswears the credulous world of the living. There is an overtly psychological element to this result. Beyond the “unreal shapes” of life's painted veil lie “Fear” and “Hope,” but since the shadow they weave is cast over a “chasm, sightless and drear,” it must be invisible to the skeptic once he crosses the threshold. Emotions are oriented towards objects, and here become compromised and potentially indistinguishable. Hope without an object cannot live, and fear becomes an unfocused and unlimited anxiety. This is the inversion of Hazlitt's image of the “beautiful robe” that tempts us over the abyss; here the wish for certainty proves abyssal.

In exchanging the hues of appearances for blindness and certainty, the skeptic finds nothing he can “approve” (the term operating both in the senses of thinking something good and of testing a proof). But the epistemological debate (whether it is better to have appearances or assured beliefs) does not accurately account for the failure of the skeptic: his wish for “things to love” undermines any aspiration to rigorous skepticism, and suggests instead a confusion between the certainty of an impregnable skeptical position (which he might have attained) and satisfaction (which any certainty achieved would only serve to undermine). The skeptic's heart was already lost when he gave up on the visible world. To lift the veil is not only to forgo delight, but to abandon a whole category of experience. In other contexts, lifting a veil called life might suggest enlightened suicide, or at least the tragic heroism of choosing truth over pleasure. Here, however, it suggests a social death. The skeptic is figured as a solitary star in a black and empty sky. The same commitment that renders him a “splendour among shadows” is also what makes other people appear to the skeptic as “the unheeding many.” Their delusion begets his isolation. To ask whether “appearances are all we have,” as one critic does, is less relevant in this case than to ask if appearances are something we might

need.<sup>36</sup> The “unreal shapes” constitute the *substance* of beauty, and to relinquish them—even in an attempt to shore up the foundations of knowledge—is to give up one’s appetites.

Shelley wants poetry to offer a beautiful truth (or at least a truth capable of being beautiful and ugly, capable of inducing joy and pity and fear.) For this reason, poetry must have a tangible, visible, surface. “Lift not the painted veil” suggests that to wish for the truth beyond the painted veil is to wish for an impoverished, austere, and likely unsatisfying conception of truth. To choose truth *over* beauty is to suppose there can be no beauty *in* truth. “Poetry’s figured veil redeems the ordinary by revealing philosophy’s alienated truth as value-rich experience,” Milnes observes.<sup>37</sup> In this way, Shelley’s claims for poetry’s privileged access to truth in spite of its coverings of “irresistible attractions” and “Elysian light” represent an attack on the notion that certainty requires indifference. If knowledge can be hot and living or dry and dead, poetry’s responsibility is not merely to unveil but to enliven. The responsibility emerges, on Shelley’s account, because “impressions” are “blunted by reiteration” and words die over time. The “vitally metaphorical” language of poetry makes things and their relations visible and “perpetuates their apprehension.” When words die they become mere referents and language becomes “dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.” As Ross Wilson has demonstrated, for Shelley “poetry is in need of reanimation lest its words harden into mere terms and thus lose their connection with living.”<sup>38</sup> In this context we might understand “reanimation” as an attempt to bind epistemology to aesthetics, to renovate knowledge and even reason itself.<sup>39</sup> Whether scientific, moral or more strictly artistic, the fate of knowledge is to bend towards delight, or else to die. Part of poetry’s job, on this account, must be to seduce people away from the safety of comfortable and mundane and habitual beliefs towards a more vivid and affecting way of knowing and living; poetry blows back “life’s dark veil,” “the film of familiarity,” but it must also spread its own painted curtain—it must turn all things to loveliness—if its knowledge is to thrill (*SPP*, 512-33).

Rather than concealing poetry’s faults or omissions, Shelley suggests that the right sort of covering is what makes poetry, and its insights, worth having. Poetry is experienced though its capacity to shape its multiple and varied coverings. As a result, poetry’s claim on the beautiful as a route to a richer kind of knowledge amounts to an embrace of figures of surfaces and artifice which would otherwise appear as obstacles. A similar thought is articulated by Walter Benjamin, discussing Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*: “beauty appears as such only in what is veiled ... Beauty is not a semblance, not a veil covering something else. It itself is not appearance but purely essence—one which, of course, remains essentially identical to itself only when veiled. Therefore, even if

everywhere else semblance is deception, the beautiful semblance is the veil thrown over that which is necessarily most veiled. For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil.”<sup>40</sup> By the same token, for Shelley it is through its covering that poetry comes into the world, and through covering that poetry can present “wisdom mingled with its delight” (*SPP*, p. 516). In short, the relation between clothing and clothed in Shelley is not a relation of surface and depth, where one is false and the other true, one an imitation and the other real, nor one representation and the other content. The influence of Plato on Shelley’s thought in general is unmistakable, but this is no excuse for supposing that the appearance/reality dichotomy accounts for the multiplicity of clothes and veils in the *Defence*. Rather, at least some of poetry’s coverings are necessarily prejudicial, just as at least some are necessary to poetry’s aesthetic force; the challenge is to understand the interactions of poetry’s various clothes and veils—its multiplicity of surfaces and shapes—over time. And rather than the ahistorical linguistic analysis of how poetry signifies or the synchronic rebuilding of a particular context of reception, Shelley calls for a diachronic historicism that weighs the aspects of a poem’s argument, technique and significance that are presently most obvious against those almost lost to history and those just beginning to emerge.

Committing oneself to poetry as Shelley comes to define it—as imaginative disruption of what is currently known—is a risky business, since we cannot know in advance whether what we have before us is poetry in the full, normative sense (“high poetry”) and we cannot know whether we will prove adequate as readers. Given that Shelley promises “revolutions,” it cannot be any other way; poetry must not only change what we think, but also how we think it, and so nothing can prepare us. To borrow from Cavell: to attempt to be a poet, in Shelley’s sense, is to gamble “that risks those who trust you can’t have known they would take, will be found to yield value they can’t have known existed.”<sup>41</sup> In light of this, to treat poetry as strictly representational or expressive (or to suppose Shelley to be debating between the two) is to overlook some portion of the bargain. Ultimately, if poetry can operate in a “divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness”—if we are even to think through the implications of this claim—poetry’s clothing cannot be an impediment to our access but a condition of it appearing before us. Benjamin writes, following the passage above, that the “task of art criticism is not to lift the veil but rather, through the most precise knowledge of it as a veil, to raise itself for the first time to the true view of the beautiful.”<sup>42</sup> For Shelley, the form of a poem must be traced by attending to the layers of surface detail, whose texture is modified by every time and context in which it is read. Vestimentary figures make it possible to throw poetry forward as an idea regulating future intellectual and aesthetic

opportunity, and cast poetry back as “the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds” (*SPP*, 515-32). For Shelley, it is not poetry’s indeterminacy that should worry us—or its capacity to charm us past our doubts—but the risk that, inattentive to its multitude of unstable and gleaming surfaces, we might settle for merely what we already know. That way gapes the abyss.

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<sup>1</sup> Percy Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* eds. Reiman and Fraistat. (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 517. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SPP*.

<sup>2</sup> William Hazlitt in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Critical Heritage* Ed. James E. Barcus (London: Routledge / Kegan Paul, 1975) pp. 335-6. Originally published in *Edinburgh Review*, July 1824, xi, 494–514. On the broader point see David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), chapter 1 in particular.

<sup>3</sup> M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Norton, 1958), p. 127; Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> *SPP*, p. 513. On debates over the medium of poetry see John Ross Baker, "Poetry and Language in Shelley's Defence of Poetry," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39.4 (1981): 437-449, pp. 438-442.

<sup>5</sup> William Ulmer, *Shelleyan Eros: The Rhetoric of Romantic Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 14. See also Christopher Miller's suggestion that this "wavering between binary extremes" occurs in the secondary literature. Christopher R. Miller, "Shelley's Uncertain Heaven," *ELH* 72.3 (2005): 577-603, p. 579.

<sup>6</sup> William Keach, *Shelley's Style*. (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940* Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), p. 389. A useful account of the tradition of skeptical readings of Shelley appears in Tim Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapter 4.

<sup>8</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* 1.142 (*On the Orator: Books 1-2* Trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), p. 98); Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 11.1.3 (*The Orator's Education, Volume V: Books 11-12* Trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 9-10); John Dryden, *The Poems of John Dryden: Volume One: 1649-1681* Ed. Paul Hammond. (Harlow: Longman, 1995), p. 120; Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope* Ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 153; Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, No. 39 (April 14, 1711); Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets* Vol. 1 Ed. Roger Lonsdale. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 230.

<sup>9</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth* Vol. 2 Eds. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 84-85, my emphasis; William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*. Eds. James Butler and Karen Green. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 351; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* Vol. 3: 1808-1819 ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), entry 3762.

<sup>10</sup> David E. Wellbery, "The transformation of rhetoric," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* Edited by Marshall Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 185-202, p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas de Quincey, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey* vol. 12 ed. Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001), pp. 73-74.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* Ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 57.



- <sup>13</sup> I use these terms as a shorthand for the critical debate while allowing that the opposition itself may be false. See Alexander Freer, "Rhythm as Coping," *New Literary History* 46:3 (2015): 549-568, pp. 561-65.
- <sup>14</sup> Keach, *Shelley's Style*, pp. 26-33; Tim Milnes, "Centre and Circumference: Shelley's Defence of Philosophy," *European Romantic Review* 15:1 (2004): 3-22, p. 18.
- <sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Brown, *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p.76; Keach *Shelley's Style*, p. 33.
- <sup>16</sup> Stuart Peterfreund, *Shelley among Others: The Play of the Intertext and the Idea of Language* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 9; *SPP* pp. 512-13.
- <sup>17</sup> Keach, *Shelley's Style*, p. 27.
- <sup>18</sup> Jerome J. McGann, "Shelley's Veils: A Thousand Images of Loveliness," in *Romantic and Victorian: Studies in Memory of William H. Marshall* Eds. W. Paul Elledge and Richard L. Hoffman. (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1971), pp. 198-219, pp. 200-1.
- <sup>19</sup> Percy Shelley, *The Complete Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* vol. 3 Eds Donald H. Reiman, Neil Fraistat and Nora Crook (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) pp. 81-83; *Shelley: Poetical Works* Ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 508-11
- <sup>20</sup> Paul H. Fry, *The Reach of Criticism: Method and Perception in Literary Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 140. The same observation appears in Robert Kaufman, "Legislators of the Post-Everything World: Shelley's 'Defence of Adorno'" *ELH* 63.3 (1996): 707-733, p. 723.
- <sup>21</sup> Drew Milne, "Flaming robes: Keats, Shelley and the metrical clothes of class struggle," *Textual Practice* 15:1 (2001): 101-122, 102-6. For two divergent accounts, see Simon Jarvis, "What is Historical Poetics?" in *Theory Aside* Ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 97-116; Yopie Prins, "What Is Historical Poetics?" *Modern Language Quarterly* 77.1 (2016): 13-40.
- <sup>22</sup> Wasserman, *Shelley*, p. 210.
- <sup>23</sup> Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (University Park, PA: The Penn State University Press, 1997), p. 310. See also John Archer "Authority in Shelley," *Studies in Romanticism*, 26.2 (Summer, 1987): 259-273, p. 259.
- <sup>24</sup> Andrew Franta "Shelley and the Poetics of Political Indirection," *Poetics Today*, 22.4 (Winter 2001): 765-793, p. 767.
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. Kaufman's Adornian reading, "Legislators of the Post-Everything World."
- <sup>26</sup> Eg. Milnes *The Truth about Romanticism*, pp. 108-130; Roberts' expansion of the problem into Lucretius, chaos theory and Michel Serres, *Chaos of History* pp. 249-287.
- <sup>27</sup> Miller, "Shelley's Uncertain Heaven," p. 598.
- <sup>28</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 278; Paul Vatalaro, *Shelley's Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 157.
- <sup>29</sup> Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), ch2
- <sup>30</sup> Forest Pyle, "Skylark-Image: or, the Vitality of Disappearance," *European Romantic Review* 25:3 (2014): 319-325, p. 320.

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- <sup>31</sup> Quotations from Percy Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley: 1817-1819* Eds. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 414-15.
- <sup>32</sup> Peterfreund, *Shelley among Others*, p. 220.
- <sup>33</sup> Laura Quinney, *Literary Power and the Criteria of Truth* (Gainesville: University of Florida Presses, 1995), p. 119.
- <sup>34</sup> Eg. Arkady Plotnitsky, "Thinking without Being and Acts of Poetry in Shelley," in *Romanticism and Philosophy: Thinking with Literature* eds. Sophie Laniel-Musitelli and Thomas Constantinesco (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 76.
- <sup>35</sup> See Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), chs. 3 and 4.
- <sup>36</sup> Merle R Rubin, "Shelley's Skepticism: A Detachment Beyond Despair," *Philological Quarterly* 59.3 (Summer 1980): 353-373, p. 355.
- <sup>37</sup> Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism*, p. 127
- <sup>38</sup> Ross Wilson, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 134
- <sup>39</sup> See Fry, *The Reach of Criticism*, p. 130.
- <sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926* Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 350-351.
- <sup>41</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 184.
- <sup>42</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings 1*, pp. 350-351.