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The Shelleys and the Art of Suffering

JEREMY DAVIES

Abstract: Mary Shelley's posthumous editions of Percy Shelley's poetry and prose have been regarded as striking examples of collaborative literary achievement, but in her editorial annotations Mary represents her husband's work as the result of his innately solitary genius. She does so in particular by associating his creative power with his constitutional ill-health. Via a reading of Percy's *Julian and Maddalo*, I argue that this connection between creativity and bodily debility does not imply that his poetry annuls the social context of its writing; instead, Mary seeks to ameliorate the conflict between philanthropy and sociability that she detects in Percy's work.

Keywords: collaboration, editing, illness, *Julian and Maddalo*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley

Seventeen years after she was widowed at the age of twenty-four, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley published the first 'complete' edition of Percy Shelley's poetry as a monument and eulogy to him. She justified her interventionist editorial presentation of his texts in part by reference to her lasting sorrow at his death. Her edition is marked by a burning sense of separation, but this posthumous collaboration has frequently been read as an impressive exercise in joint literary creativity. Literary collaboration is perhaps more readily associated with conviviality, good cheer, and mutual encouragement, and it is certainly the case that emphasising the camaraderie that fostered the writing of poems, novels and essays in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can distance us usefully from the spirit of serious intensity cultivated by high Romanticism.¹ Mary's work, however, stands as a valuable reminder of how broad the affective range of shared artistic labour can be. The critical consequences of sorrowful collaboration are difficult to pin down, and in this respect Mary's co-creation of the Victorians' Percy Shelley is especially, and fruitfully, ambiguous. She claims that Percy's poetry was fostered in part by his chronic physical debility. This line of analysis, which may well appear unrewarding at first, leads her commentary into a subtle and distinctive relationship with the poems that she edits.

By her own account, Mary overcame enormous difficulties to produce in 1824 a volume of Percy's *Posthumous Poems*,² and then in 1839 two landmark editions of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Her husband's

manuscripts were ‘so confused a mass, interlined and broken into fragments, [...] that the sense could only be deciphered and joined by guesses, which might seem rather intuitive than founded on reasoning’.³ The reference to intuition is characteristic. Mary claimed that her editorial accomplishment was the result not of disinterested scholarly enquiry but of her emotional connection to Percy’s poetical remains and her ‘liveliest recollection of all that was done and said during the period of my knowing him’.⁴ The manuscripts were ‘confusing & tantalizing’;⁵ they ‘consisted of fragments of paper which in the hands of an indifferent person would never have been decyphered — the labour of putting it together was immense’. Indeed, ‘the volume might be all my writing’, she declared.⁶ The effort required, and still more the strain of ‘having to think of & write about the [past]’, brought on a bout of illness that drove her ‘to the verge of insanity’.⁷ Yet despite everything, she insisted to Leigh Hunt, ‘[t]he edition will be mine’.⁸

The texts that Mary was editing were indeed partly her own creations. Percy, she revealed, had abandoned *Rosalind and Helen* and ‘Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills’ until she ‘found [them] among his papers by chance’, and persuaded him to complete them.⁹ *The Cenci* proved to have been a collaborative effort from the start. Percy had ‘urged the subject to me as one fitted for a tragedy [...] but I entreated him to write it instead’; as the play progressed, they ‘talked over the arrangement of the scenes together’.¹⁰ The most significant of all the contributions made by the new editions was the mass of interpretive annotations that Mary interwove with the poems. Prevented by Percy’s father from publishing a formal biography of her husband, she instead presented in intimate juxtaposition with his texts a piecemeal life history and critical commentary that offered a substantial and soon highly influential framework for judging his whole achievement.¹¹ So extensive, in fact, was Mary’s contribution to the volumes that Jack Stillinger included them among his list of ‘instances of unacknowledged multiple authorship’ in canonical literary works.¹² Susan Wolfson remarks on ‘the considerable authority, at times co-creation, that [Mary’s] editing involved. [...] By fragments and wholes, she virtually produced the basic “Shelley” texts and canon’;¹³ Samuel Gladden, too, speaks of Mary ‘as co-writer, as co-creator’.¹⁴

If, as these scholars suggest, Mary’s notes and broader editorial project represent the collaborative production of a Shelleyan corpus suited to early Victorian audiences, then the theory of creativity she put forward in those notes complicates matters considerably. Her interpretation of Percy’s work seems potentially to be at odds with that of readers who appreciate the 1839 volumes all the more for their suggestion of shared authorship. Indeed, it might imply an understanding of his poetry whereby that joint creativity would seem to be little more than an unavoidable but largely regrettable mediation of the author’s original vision. In Mary’s description, Percy ‘delivered up his soul to poetry, and felt happy when he sheltered himself from the influence of human sympathies, in the wildest regions of fancy’.¹⁵

He 'had no care for any of his poems that did not emanate from the depths of his mind, and develop some high or abstruse truth'.¹⁶ If some of his poems, such as *Rosalind and Helen*, attend to 'human life and the human heart', and so have at least the potential for broad popular appeal, a larger and more characteristic group – *The Witch of Atlas* and *The Triumph of Life* are extreme examples – pursue purely self-created goals, to the point of 'discarding human interest and passion' in favour of 'huntings after the obscure'.¹⁷

It is not that Percy was a misanthrope. Although his social habits were retiring and much of his poetry stemmed from his solitary immersion in natural beauty and Classical literature, nevertheless it was precisely his fervent love for humankind and his commitment to radical social reform that made his poetry too remote from the 'human'. '[E]ven when employed on subjects whose interest depended on character and incident', Mary writes, 'he would start off in another direction, and leave the delineations of human passion [...] for fantastic creations of his fancy, or the expression of those opinions and sentiments with regard to human nature and its destiny; a desire to diffuse which, was the master passion of his soul'.¹⁸ The very ideal of humanity crowds out interaction with other people, as if Percy was himself trapped in the predicament he tried to analyse in *Alastor*. Mary is in no doubt of her husband's genius, and yet she believes so intensely in the inherently isolating nature of his creative instinct that her defence and popularisation of his poetry repeatedly tells his readers that, as Mary Favret puts it, 'both poet and poetry are innately unsympathetic and inaccessible'.¹⁹ In fact, this is why such active editorial co-creation and explication are needed: because Percy's genius is essentially unsociable, we must depend upon Mary to show us how to read his oeuvre.

Mary accounts for the rebarbative character of Percy's creativity in a way that apparently takes to its greatest extreme the notion of creative power as a solitary, internal force that transcends, or even nullifies, social explanation. She figures his creativity as a function of physiology. His literary corpus stems in part from the debility of his physical body, and the effort of composition in turn renders him hypersensitive and valetudinarian. Such a reading might immediately appear unattractive. On an unsympathetic view, it seems to naturalize Percy's poetry as the imponderable consequence of simple biological necessity: a vulgarisation of the Romantic fascination with poetic vocation that would become all too conventional as the century progressed.²⁰ Mary's visions of her husband with 'attenuated frame' and 'brilliant eyes', 'too delicately organised for the rough treatment man uses towards man', and her descriptions of 'the restless, passion-fraught emotions of one whose sensibility, kindled to too intense a life, perpetually preyed upon itself', are not without foundation,²¹ but they make no allowance for Percy Shelley the pamphleteer, polemicist and prospective co-founder of *The Liberal*, any more than they allow for the sometimes intimidating fist-fighter or the skilled shot and sailor. This matters, because on Mary's account Percy's ill-health has a strange propensity to bring about all kinds of apparently contrary impulses in his poetry.

'The very illness that oppressed, and the aspect of death which had approached so near Shelley', Mary writes about his poetry of 1817, 'appears to have kindled to yet keener life the Spirit of Poetry in his heart. The restless thoughts kept awake by pain clothed themselves in verse'.²² The way that sickness 'kindles' Percy's work seems to weaken his ability to direct its course. Illness is taken to explain both why *Queen Mab* is so unearthly and imaginative (arriving at Oxford 'endowed with the keenest sensibility, and with the fortitude of a martyr, Shelley came among his fellow creatures [...] like a spirit from another sphere'), and why it is at the same time so pressingly didactic ('[i]ll-health made him believe that his race would soon be run; that a year or two was all he had of life. He desired that these years should be useful and illustrious'²³). It explains equally well why his next long poem, *Alastor*, is so different from *Queen Mab*, with the cosmological speculations of the earlier work giving way to acute introspection. While he was writing it, '[p]hysical suffering had [...] considerable influence in causing him to turn his eyes inward; inclining him rather to brood over the thoughts and emotions of his own soul, than to glance abroad, and to make, as in "Queen Mab," the whole universe the object and subject of his song'.²⁴ His health similarly prompts the later poetry that Mary sees as born of more or less the sort of gloomy, lonely rhapsodising that *Alastor* had held up to sceptical critique. Throughout 1818 'Shelley suffered greatly in health' and, 'exhausted' by '[c]onstant and poignant physical suffering',

escaped to solitude, and in verses, which he hid from fear of wounding me, poured forth morbid but too natural bursts of discontent and sadness. [...] [E]njoying, as he appeared to do, every sight or influence of earth or sky, it was difficult to imagine that any melancholy he showed was aught but the effect of the constant pain to which he was a martyr.²⁵

Mary's fullest description of how for Percy bodily suffering and literary creation were intertwined comes in her parallel edition of his prose works, when she tries to explain the compositional process behind his disquieting fragment 'Catalogue of the Phenomena of Dreams'. 'No man', she writes,

had such keen sensations as Shelley. His nervous temperament was wound up by the delicacy of his health to an intense degree of sensibility, and while his active mind pondered for ever upon, and drew conclusions from his sensations, his reveries increased their vivacity, till they mingled with, and were one with thought, and both became absorbing and tumultuous, even to physical pain.²⁶

The sensations reflected on by Percy's 'active mind' are principally associated with the tense interaction between his 'nervous temperament' and 'the delicacy of his health'. His unspecified 'reveries' too do not obviously draw on anything outside the self. When their mingling results ultimately in physical pain, it becomes clear that the operation Mary describes here is essentially circular. Through its contamination by reverie, thought has turned into a

physical sensation of exactly the kind that will in turn be reflected on by new thoughts. This revolving process casts off literary texts as it goes, without concerning itself with the external world along the way. More generous readings of the note are perhaps possible, but to a sceptical eye Mary promises us nothing more appealing than a self-sustaining closed circle, invention swelling as it feeds on invention according to the archetypal logic of Romantic egotism.

This account of Percy's creativity could not fail to have implications for how his political opinions would be regarded, and a further passage would have delighted his enemies twenty years previously:

Through life [...] he was a martyr to ill-health, and constant pain wound up his nerves to a pitch of susceptibility that rendered his views of life different from those of a man in the enjoyment of healthy sensations. Perfectly gentle and forbearing in manner, he suffered a good deal of internal irritability, or rather excitement, and his fortitude to bear was almost always on the stretch.²⁷

Percy's hostile critics had always insisted that his radicalism was evidence of an internal disorder rather than of rational analysis.²⁸ That allegation is apparently given a solid medical grounding when his closest companion and chief defender admits coolly that under the pressure of nervous strain his views of life became overwrought and unhealthy.

Such remarks seem plausibly attributable to Mary's increasing conventionality and religiosity. But if she was trying to rehabilitate Percy for a mass audience by blunting his political edge, then she failed to anticipate the counter-productive effect of encouraging him to be dismissed in another way, as degenerate and unmanly: within a decade Thomas Medwin would write of 'the boy [...] whose genius was a sort of malady',²⁹ anticipating John Campbell Shairp's punning description of his poetry as 'like those fine pearls which [...] are the products of disease in the parent shell'.³⁰ We might also regret the gender politics that Mary implies. In describing the texts she edits as records of illness, she seems to cast herself as a devoted nurse who tends to her husband's painfully fractured corpus, a role that does not reflect her sophisticated practice as intellectual and artistic collaborator. Percy himself often preferred to associate both creative genius and the renovation of our ethical understanding with exemplary physical well-being, as is evident in his writings on vegetarianism and on Greek statuary, for instance.³¹ The implication that his philanthropy is at odds with sociability and with political agency is a version of the argument that *A Defence of Poetry* seeks to rebut, by describing how the individual set apart from mankind by a heightened attunement to human sympathies can also shape the main historical currents of the age. For all these reasons, we might regard with suspicion Mary's account of how illness informed 'the Spirit of Poetry' in her husband.

Nevertheless, a different view is possible. On Mary's interpretation, Percy's rarefied poetic consciousness manifests itself through its collision with, and deflection by, the volatile realities of his bodily condition. His languishing,

hypersensitive frame may be part of the reason why his work threatens to tip into repetitiveness and self-absorption, but the physicality of creativity is also what renews his poetry and gives us a way to trace its development. *Queen Mab* fuses the ethereal and the didactic; *Alastor* defines the risks of introspection; the 'Stanzas Written in Dejection' caress his symptoms in secrecy, whereas the 'Catalogue of the Phenomena of Dreams' exposes them to the light; the political poetry turns private strain into public agitation. If Percy's work can be transformed by his ill-health in so many different ways, it may be that his poetry actively embraces the possibility of metamorphosis in response to unpredictable shifts in the way its author experiences his body. Not content to conform to its potential audience's protocols of understanding, it will instead let itself be forged by the intimately strange phenomena of sickness and disease. Physical debility would then become a creative resource useful to Percy as a problem against which to test metaphysical idealism and political optimism: an understanding towards which Mary could have been led by 'The Sensitive Plant' and *Adonais* in particular. It follows that the connections drawn by Mary between sickness and poetry are not necessarily her way of attributing that poetry to natural-born genius but can alternatively be read as a productive occlusion of autonomous authorial will. We may disagree with Mary's descriptions of the problems with Percy's work – we may identify more continuities between the 'popular' and the overtly philosophical than she acknowledged or see his poetry as cannier about its contexts of production and reception than she believed it to be – but her attempt to deal with the supposedly destructive relationship between philanthropy and sociability by reference to a radically embodied poetics might nevertheless be a forceful and constructive manoeuvre.

One of Percy's poems in particular gives us a reason for pursuing this line of thought. Before her editorial notes of 1839, Mary produced another oblique idealised biography of her late husband: a beatified Percy is easily recognisable in Adrian, the hero of her novel *The Last Man*.³² That novel's early chapters, however, imply a slightly different configuration. Early in *The Last Man*, Lord Raymond serves as a portrait of Byron at his most self-aggrandising, the narrator Lionel (who later stands for Mary herself) seems most closely associated with Percy's vigorous, nature-loving side, and Adrian figures Percy specifically as a Godwinian rationalist and optimist so vulnerable to the slings and arrows of the world that when he is disappointed in love he must be confined as 'a maniac'.³³ Their passionate homosocial triangle is a reimagining of Percy's *Julian and Maddalo*, in which Maddalo is associated with a Byron accused of nihilism, Julian is a Shelleyan idealist, albeit closer to Mary's Adrian than to her Lionel (and for some readers a broadly sincere self-portrait but for others heavily ironised),³⁴ and the 'Maniac' is a frustrated lover who in Maddalo's unreliable eyes had been just like Julian until he was brought low by misfortune. Both sets of characters, like the Percy of Mary's fragmentary

biography, have a further, complex relationship to the real-life friendship between Percy and Byron.

Percy Shelley and Byron were among one another's most sophisticated and valued literary interlocutors, and their friendship stands as a primary example of the sociability that underlies the work of the British Romantics.³⁵ (Both were also, of course, participants in the Genevan ghost story competition from which *Frankenstein* arose.) Their urbane and gentlemanly style of creative collaboration is modelled in the night-long philosophical conversations between Julian and Maddalo. The Maniac, whose long, fragmented soliloquy interrupts and redirects these discussions, is a classic exercise in the Romantic iconography of the tortured and outcast genius.³⁶ He is a musician whose 'fragments of most touching melody' can pacify the madmen who are the fellow inhabitants of his lunatic asylum,³⁷ although his music – like 'the wild language of his grief [...] Such as in measure were called poetry' (l.541–2) – is born of a passion that makes him oblivious to his auditors. *Julian and Maddalo* is greatly concerned, then, with the ways in which creativity can be both a sociable and an alienating force. If the semi-fictionalised Percy Shelley of Mary's notes to the *Poetical Works* is cognate with *The Last Man's* Adrian, and if both are influenced by the Maniac and his ambiguous relationship to the partly autobiographical Julian, then Percy's poem is also a valuable resource for clarifying the possibilities opened up by Mary's posthumous collaboration with her husband.

In Percy's prose dialogue *A Refutation of Deism*, a deist and a Christian were intended to demolish one another's arguments so that a third possibility, atheism, would win out without having formally been endorsed. Similarly, *Julian and Maddalo* presents a debate between two men that does not lead to dialectical resolution but to a revelation of the blind spots that the two of them share. The writer of the poem's Preface – a shrewd although far from straightforward voice – describes Maddalo's leading characteristic as 'an intense apprehension of the nothingness of human life'. This is something close to a self-defeating point of view: the intensity of the apprehension of life constantly puts in question the sincerity of the claim that life is 'nothingness'. Maddalo believes that the world offers nothing worthy of commanding his attention, but from the point of view of the Preface that belief stems merely from his disdain for 'the dwarfish intellects that surround him'. His refusal to commit himself to creative involvement in life only means that he has become unwittingly the creation of his inferiors. Julian, recognising this, attempts to develop a position that, in contrast to Maddalo's, will be self-created and self-authorised. He believes that oppressive social conditions only reflect a weakness in the human spirit, destined to disintegrate in the face of a critical attitude. For him, human fulfilment depends on a radical reinvention of the world:

it is our will
That thus enchains us to permitted ill –

We might be otherwise – we might be all
 We dream of happy, high, majestic.
 Where is the love, beauty and truth we seek
 But in our mind? and if we were not weak
 Should we be less in deed than in desire?
 [...]

those who try may find
 How strong the chains are which our spirit bind,
 Brittle perchance as straw ... We are assured
 Much may be conquered, much may be endured
 Of what degrades and crushes us. We know
 That we have power over ourselves to do
 And suffer – what, we know not till we try;
 But something nobler than to live and die – (l.170–87)

Julian sees himself as one of ‘those who suffer with their suffering kind’ (l.190), and he intends the breaking of our chains to renovate the world in favour of human sympathies. Yet his attitude to ‘what degrades and crushes us’ sounds too casual here. Such abstraction in the interests of the greater good needs to be combined with a sincere acknowledgement of suffering in individual cases, and Julian fails that test almost immediately. Presented with the Maniac as a candidate for his sympathy, he responds abruptly that the man’s problem is no doubt ‘a want of that true theory [...] Which seeks a “soul of goodness” in things ill’ (l.203–4).

This disagreeable moment might be explained in part by another telling observation in the Preface. Julian is introduced as ‘an Englishman of good family, passionately attached to those philosophical notions which assert the power of man over his own mind’. ‘Man’, privileged sharply over ‘mind’ like this, seems to indicate a human essence that is not necessarily realised even in private consciousness. This ironic distancing from our own mental commitments threatens to make it impossible for us to trust the positive content of our thoughts; ‘our will’ is not really ours at all. Julian goes on to declare in the lines above that the mind’s job is to demolish the world as it stands, to shatter its historical ‘chains’ and replace pre-existing structures with a reflection of its own ‘beauty and truth’. But equally, the very alterity of the present world, he says, prevents us from knowing the capacity of our own mind: our ‘power over ourselves’, the basis of his philosophy, ‘we know not’ until we have exhausted ourselves in trying to bring it to fulfilment in concrete objective forms. ‘Man’, ‘mind’ and the external world are each rendered unknowable or suspect by Julian’s optimistic assertions. Throughout Shelley’s poetry, from *Alastor* to *The Triumph of Life*, the problem with truly passionate idealists is that the alienness of the material world strikes them with shocking and disabling force; Julian is one of Shelley’s lessons in the dangers of the perfectibilism by which he was always tempted. His demand for a world made completely new, no less than Maddalo’s disregard for life as ‘nothingness’, rejects the possibility that reformers might

engage creatively both with the world as they find it, and with the constraints that it imposes inescapably on them. Lived experience is liquidated when suffering is described as ‘a want of true theory’, and Julian’s sympathetic benevolence has more in common with Maddalo’s nihilism than he could admit.

Julian and Maddalo each project the other’s antipathy to creative immersion in the world on to the Maniac. Julian expects him to share Maddalo’s pride and his willingness to draw gloomy conclusions about life as a whole from private setbacks (l.48–52, 206–11), while Maddalo declares explicitly that the Maniac exhibits the final, disillusioned stage of Julian’s idealism (l.195–201). Yet in the end the Maniac allows us to see the problems common to the standpoints of the two friends. Julian and Maddalo both take it for granted that the windowless lunatic asylum in which they spy on the Maniac is an essentially appropriate place for him to be, that he demonstrably belongs outside the social order. His madness, though, stems not from estrangement but from too deep an immersion in social relationships. Our clearest glimpse of its onset comes from Maddalo, who knew him immediately before his arrest and confinement. He ‘cannot say’ exactly what drove him mad but was struck by the way ‘he seemed hurt, / Even as a man with his peculiar wrong, / To hear but of the oppression of the strong’ (l.237–45). While yet a free man, it seems, the Maniac took the evils of the world directly and personally upon himself. Having confused the general with the particular in such a way that he received second-hand sorrow as his own, he could not come to terms with a misfortune – rejection by his lover – that really did afflict him specifically, and he descended into madness wandering about ‘lonely isles of desert sand’ (l.248). This barren landscape is the Venetian Lido, a place that Julian loves because its uninterrupted views allow him to fantasize that his soul is, like his surroundings, ‘boundless’ (l.14–7), or effectively unencumbered by the material world.

If Maddalo is right, the Maniac found himself cast out of society precisely on the basis of his total investment within it. Julian’s refusal to believe that ‘what degrades and crushes us’ has anything to tell us about the essential ‘power of man’ might look like a justifiable form of self-preservation when faced with this story. According to Mary’s notes, however, the predicament that drove the Maniac towards his collapse is central to Percy’s whole life and achievement. At the very start of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* Mary reflects that Percy’s strongest passions ‘must be difficult of comprehension to the younger generation rising around’. ‘[G]enerous to imprudence’, he ‘put [his] whole force into the attempt to alleviate for others the evils of those systems from which he had himself suffered’. For her, the most remarkable thing about him is this complete unselfishness: ‘any new-sprung hope of liberty inspired a joy and an exultation more intense and wild than he could have felt for any personal advantage. *Those who have never experienced the workings of passion on general and unselfish subjects, cannot understand this*’.³⁸ In her opening encomium to her husband’s memory Mary

raises the possibility that it is not just a large proportion of his poetry that is hard to understand: so too is the very principle of disinterested philanthropy that guided his whole life. The Maniac confronts the same problem that Mary comes across here. If we relinquish our exclusionary sense of self, how can we retain a standpoint from which to create art and intervene in the world? The Maniac can soothe his fellow inmates' lamentations with his piano, but 'the din / Of madmen, shriek on shriek', begins again as soon as he ceases to play (l.266–7). How can Percy's disturbingly selfless poetics have a more lasting effect than this, and what resources might the Maniac provide to help direct our sympathy towards a poet who is, for Mary, at once socially marginal and too deeply socialised?

There is one more connection between her fragmentary biography of Percy and the fragmented soliloquy of the Maniac. As Nora Crook and Derek Guiton put it, there runs throughout the latter an 'immediate sense of frenzied pain'.³⁹ The Maniac's creativity, like Percy's, is bound up inextricably with bodily suffering and decay. Julian discovers him with his 'pale fingers twined', his 'lips [...] In hue too beautiful for health', his 'eyes lustrous and glazed' (l.274–85), but what looks, when mediated through Julian, like peaceful, languishing decline emerges in the Maniac's first words as an excruciating entrapment in what Percy would later conceive of as the triumphal procession of Life:

'Month after month,' he cried, 'to bear this load
And as a jade urged by the whip and goad
To drag life on, which like a heavy chain
Lengthens behind with many a link of pain! (l.300–3)

Julian's way of liberating his authentic self was to describe life as it is lived as merely the spirit's 'chains' (l.181). The Maniac – whose music can 'charm the weight / From madmen's chains' (l.259–60) – finds that the chains of life define the thing chained, that the way he is bound to life in its materiality cannot be put aside. Any attempt at expression 'burns the brain / And eats into it' (l.479–80). He imagines himself as a trodden worm that does not die but

wears a living death of agonies!
As the slow shadows of the pointed grass
Mark the eternal periods, his pangs pass
Slow, ever-moving, – making moments be
As mine seem – each an immortality! (l.415–9)

These lines stayed with Mary. In her novel *Valperga*, when Euthanasia begs Castruccio to show clemency to the maniacal, heartbroken Beatrice, she tells him that 'moments are years, if they are lengthened out by pain; every minute that she lives in her dungeon is to her a living death of agony'.⁴⁰ Julian had supposed that the Maniac's lack of true theory had brought upon him

‘[s]ome living death’ (l.210). The sufferer’s own fevered repetition of the phrase multiplies its force, turning the living death of physical agony into a crisis that scrambles the categories of life and death in such a way as to curse its victim with immortality. Sensation is not the empirically limited event that Julian and Maddalo sought in their different ways to go beyond. Even within the body of an ‘instinctive worm’ (l.412), it can lay claim to an experience of infinitude. The Maniac’s thoughts grow ever more violent, as he recalls his lover’s wish ‘That, like some maniac monk, I had torn out / The nerves of manhood by their bleeding root / With mine own quivering fingers’ (l.424–6). These tropes of bodily injury culminate at a decisive moment in his soliloquy, when he bursts out with a cryptic self-definition. His words confirm the accuracy of Maddalo’s tentative observation that his chief characteristic is his confusion of the general with the particular, of ‘the oppression of the strong’ with ‘his peculiar wrong’:

me – whose heart a stranger’s tear might wear
As water-drops the sandy fountain-stone,
Who loved and pitied all things, and could moan
For woes which others hear not, and could see
The absent with the glance of fantasy,
And with the poor and trampled sit and weep,
Following the captive to his dungeon deep;
Me – who am as a nerve o’er which do creep
The else unfelt oppressions of this earth (l.442–50)

The Maniac projects himself into all the sufferings of the world, sacrificing discrimination and self-control for the sake of unreserved sympathy. The difference between the two stages of this self-analysis may, however, be the most crucial thing of all. At first, with his heart worn down to ‘sandy’ particles, the Maniac becomes like the bare indifferent sands of the Lido that offered no resistance to Julian’s supposedly ‘boundless’ soul, or like the ‘lone and level sands’ that ironize human pretensions in ‘Ozymandias’. The next five lines – however emotionally generous – show that the result of this scattered blankness is unproductive imaginative dissolution in the sufferings of others. If the Maniac may earn Julian’s respect by being among ‘those who suffer with their suffering kind’ (l.190), his passive acquiescence in the hardships of the poor and the captive makes him represent the bankruptcy of the goal of a purely imaginative ‘power over ourselves’. It is only when he makes a second thrust at defining himself, in the last two lines above, that he moves abruptly beyond Julian’s positions. Bringing to a focus his tropes of physical hurt, he now offers us the body rather than the imagination as the starting-point for creative interaction with the world. Maddalo’s ‘oppression[s] of the strong’ creep over and press down on the Maniac like huge insects. His perception is stripped back to its most basic physiological component, magnified and raw. Figuring himself as the apex of some global nervous system, he is at once colossal and microscopic, plugged into a vast

system of sensation or reduced to a single, quivering electrical fibre.⁴¹ The imaginative vision of the previous lines has intensified to the point of collapse. Sympathy is replaced by a contentless introspection, by a mechanical and involuntary transcription of hurt.

As with Mary's notes, the routing of creativity through the body follows a complex and indirect path. If the Maniac's love and pity for 'all things' transform the general into the particular by dispersing the self across a sentimentalised world, then his nerve-like sensitivity does so by bringing the whole world to bear upon an acutely concentrated self. Both kinds of movement seem necessary if we are to become capable of genuine sympathetic warmth (he 'was to thee [his lover] the flame upon thy hearth / When all beside was cold', as his next words have it (l.451–2)). Unbounded imaginative projection and the externalisation of the 'beauty and truth' of an ideal 'power of man' – Julian's project – need to be set against the Maniac's sensitivity to the force of localisation and individuality. When the Maniac sees his truest self as like a sheer fragment of matter – an 'instinctive worm' or sensing nerve – he takes a view that is precisely the reverse of Julian's attempt to prioritise the power of man over mind and the power of mind over the external world. Authentic creation cannot, for him, involve the establishment of such a hierarchy. '[I]f we were not weak / Should we be less in deed than in desire?' Julian had asked (l.175–6). The Maniac would not endorse this impatient rhetoric: he is only too aware that we cannot free ourselves from complicity with a material world that does not conform to our desires.

In the end it is Julian, not the Maniac, who loses faith in sociability. He desires to stay with the Maniac in the hope of restoring him to health, but instead – in what seems to be the poem's decisive indictment of his claims to an exemplary benevolence – he pleads business elsewhere and abandons Venice the next morning (l.582–3).⁴² Years later Julian learns from Maddalo's daughter the story of the Maniac's later life, but we readers do not: 'she told me how / All happened – but the cold world shall not know' (l.616–7). These are the poem's final words. Julian's mistrust of the world is what brings the poem to an end: he wants to preserve the Maniac's story for himself alone.⁴³ That story, however, was about the Maniac's refusal to countenance anything other than complete openness to the sociable and tangible worlds beyond his control, even to the point of catastrophe.

I have argued that the Maniac's predicament of intense engagement with society and radical incompatibility with its practices is very similar to the one that Mary Shelley sees as characterising Percy's creativity. *Julian and Maddalo* encourages us to take seriously her claim that Percy's writing was shaped decisively by his experiences of physical suffering. It is not that we need authorisation from Percy's poetry in order to read Mary in this way. The point is, instead, to show how complex her relationship to the texts that she edits might be, and to suggest that the Shelleys share an interest in the unshareable: in moments, like the Maniac's felt reduction to a nerve, that attend to the elementary preconditions of sensibility. If we are justified in

seeing the *Poetical Works* of 1839 as an exercise in collaborative creativity, then Mary's elegiac technique might be a subtle way of reading Percy's life in terms of his poetry, albeit one that runs alongside a biographical reading of his poetry that is sometimes too sentimental. The impulses behind Mary's annotations are many and various, and we should not reduce them too neatly into alignment with the poetry that they frame. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that for both of the Shelleys a fully committed creative artist is habitually pushed into a form of pathology by the force of his or her encounter with the world. According to Mary's notes, physical suffering can be a way of organising that encounter, and creative self-identity can arise through a certain loss or surrender of control to the body. A way of reading that at first appears to endorse a narrow conception of solitary genius may ultimately imply that a productive disunity exists even within a single embodied self.

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, the emphasis placed on politically radical conviviality in Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (eds), *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Jeffrey N. Cox's description of the importance of Leigh Hunt's genial hospitality to London's post-war liberal intelligentsia in *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

² *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: John and Henry L. Hunt, 1824)

³ *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mrs. [Mary Wollstonecraft] Shelley, 2nd edn (London: Moxon, 1840 [1839]), p.322.

⁴ *Poetical Works*, p.x.

⁵ *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980–88), vol. II.330.

⁶ *Letters*, vol. II.300.

⁷ *Letters*, vol. II.315; *The Journals of Mary Shelley: 1814–1844*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), vol. II.563.

⁸ *Letters*, vol. II.305.

⁹ *Poetical Works*, p.viii.

¹⁰ *Poetical Works*, p.158.

¹¹ Influential most notably on Matthew Arnold: see his *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* (London: Macmillan, 1913), p.206–7, 251–2. See also P. D. Fleck, 'Mary Shelley's Notes to Shelley's Poems and *Frankenstein*', *Studies in Romanticism* 6 (1967), p.226–54.

¹² Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.204–5.

¹³ Susan Wolfson, 'Editorial Privilege: Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley's Audiences', in Audrey A. Fisch, Esther H. Schor and Anne K. Mellor (eds), *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.49.

¹⁴ Samuel Lyndon Gladden, 'Mary Shelley's Editions of *The Collected Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Editor as Subject*', *Studies in Romanticism* 44 (2005), p.204. See also Lisa Vargo, 'Close Your Eyes and Think of Shelley: Versioning Mary Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*', in Timothy Clark and Jerrold E. Hogle (eds), *Evaluating Shelley* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.215–24, and Michael O'Neill, "'Trying to make it as good as I can": Mary Shelley's Editing of P. B. Shelley's Poetry and Prose', in Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (eds), *Mary Shelley in Her Times* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p.185–97.

¹⁵ *Poetical Works*, p.ix.

¹⁶ *Poetical Works*, p.229.

¹⁷ *Poetical Works*, p.229, 278, ix.

¹⁸ *Poetical Works*, p.160.

¹⁹ Mary Favret, 'Mary Shelley's Sympathy and Irony: The Editor and her Corpus', in *The Other Mary Shelley*, p.19.

- ²⁰ Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).
- ²¹ *Poetical Works*, p.x, 37, 204. On Percy's ill-health, see Nora Crook and Derek Guiton, *Shelley's Venomed Melody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and, for a more sceptical view, Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).
- ²² *Poetical Works*, p.204.
- ²³ *Poetical Works*, p.37–8.
- ²⁴ *Poetical Works*, p.47.
- ²⁵ *Poetical Works*, p.230.
- ²⁶ *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments, by Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mrs. [Mary Wollstonecraft] Shelley, 2 vols (London: Moxon, 1840), vol. I.251.
- ²⁷ *Poetical Works*, p.ix–x.
- ²⁸ William Hazlitt notoriously regarded Shelley's wish 'to overturn all established creeds and systems' as but 'an effect of constitution' (*Table Talk*, in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, 9 vols, ed. Duncan Wu (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), vol. VI.130–1).
- ²⁹ Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1913), p.33.
- ³⁰ John Campbell Shairp, *Aspects of Poetry: Being Lectures Delivered at Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881), p.255.
- ³¹ *Shelley's Prose, or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), p.86–7, 217, 221.
- ³² Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p.148–53; Maggie Kilgour, "One Immortality": The Shaping of the Shelleys in *The Last Man*, *European Romantic Review* 16 (2005), p.563–88.
- ³³ *The Last Man*, ed. Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, 8 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996), vol. IV.41.
- ³⁴ Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p.114–30.
- ³⁵ See, for instance, Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), p.126, 153–5, 194, 235–8.
- ³⁶ Timothy Clark, *Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.195–6, 203–5; Stuart Peterfreund, *Shelley Among Others: The Play of the Intertext and the Idea of Language* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p.212–7.
- ³⁷ *Julian and Maddalo*, ed. Ralph Pite, in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (London: Longman, 2000), vol. II, l.221. Subsequent references are to this edition cited by line number in parentheses within the text.
- ³⁸ *Poetical Works*, p.vii–viii (my italics).
- ³⁹ *Shelley's Venomed Melody*, p.114.
- ⁴⁰ Valperga, ed. Nora Crook, *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, vol. III.239.
- ⁴¹ Silke-Maria Weineck aptly describes this figure as the 'grim counter-image' to the Aeolian lyre of *A Defence of Poetry*, which re-creates and harmonises the impressions it receives: "They Met – They Parted": On the Relationship between Poetry and Madness in *Julian and Maddalo*, *Studies in Romanticism* 38 (1999), p.98.
- ⁴² The classic rebuke is Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p.80. For an interesting defence of Julian's choice, see Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p.381–3.
- ⁴³ See Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of his Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.121–2.

JEREMY DAVIES is a visiting fellow at Birkbeck, University of London.