

Tropes of Desire: Figuring the “insufficient void” of Self-Consciousness in Shelley’s *Epipsychidion*

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DISCUSSIONS of the relation between Romantic subjectivity and Romantic poetry or, in a more contemporary idiom, of the relation between rhetorical and psychological structures, concentrate on a set of terms that appear to have been first introduced in a systematic manner in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. There the phenomena of the imagination, temporality, and of a “pure” figurative language are all related in order to mend a lesion in the fabric of self-consciousness that seems to result from Kant’s fundamental, synthetic paradigm for the human subject. As is well known, Kant’s conception of the “transcendental unity of apperception” restricts the “pure” self-consciousness to the formal function of binding together the two sources of transcendental knowledge: “pure intuition” and the “pure concepts of the understanding” (i.e., the categories). Kant recognizes, however, that to postulate the “synthetic unity of consciousness [as the] objective condition of all knowledge” (B 138) does not yet endow the human subject with the cognitive autonomy and freedom that his *Critique* is meant to demonstrate.¹ That is, the formal notion of apperception as the condition of possibility for the synthesis of “knowledge in general” does not provide this “pure self-consciousness” with any identity or knowledge of itself: “The thought that the representations given in intuition one and all

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith (London: MacMillan, 1965). In order to facilitate comparison of the translation with the German original, all citations follow the pagination of the *Akademie Ausgabe*, with “A” and “B” referring to the 1st edition from 1781 and to the revised text of 1787, respectively. The translation retains this pagination in the margins.

belong to me . . . is not itself the consciousness of the *synthesis* of the representations, it presupposes the possibility of that synthesis" (B 134).²

Kant's notation of a fundamental hiatus separating self-consciousness as a synthetic construct of purely positional value from a consciousness-of-self that could effectively know and recognize the synthetic unity implied by the former contains the "speculative germ" not only of German Idealism but also of Romantic narrative poetry. Since all reflection can only presuppose the very unity of the subject which it seeks to prove, "the identity of the consciousness of myself *at different times* . . . in no way proves the numerical identity of my subject" (A 363; italics mine). This cautioning remark from Kant's chapter on the "Paralogisms of Pure Reason" not only reinforces his restrictive position from the analytic part of the *Critique*, but it also identifies *time* as the condition that is responsible for this hiatus between self-consciousness as form and the personal identity that is implied by a consciousness-of-self. Moreover, Kant also recognizes that even the formal construct of a "pure apperception" remains at peril in that it lacks any effective control over the "quite heterogeneous" (A 137) elements of "pure" intuition and understanding of which it is comprised. In short, if self-consciousness as a form is to develop a *knowledge* of its intrinsically synthetic status, it must not only possess unity in the formal sense, but it also requires an intuition of this unity *as its own*.

Even at the transcendental level, all "synthetic unity . . . presupposes or includes a synthesis" (A 118), and it is here that Kant distinguishes between a merely formal or "intellectual synthesis" and a "figurative synthesis" (B 151) that provides the former with an intuition and thus enables it to be properly known. This figurative synthesis Kant assigns to the productive imagination, which "is the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is not present" (B 151). Kant's synthetic construct of the subject thus results in the recognition that the ultimate ground for the unity of all consciousness (that is, the unity of its "inner sense" in time), which is presupposed by the transcendental synthesis, cannot be recovered through an inward act of reflection but is to be *produced* by the imagination. The figurative dimension of the synthesis that is effected

2. My discussion follows, to some extent, Martin Heidegger's discussion of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. James Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965).

by the productive imagination emerges more distinctly when Kant introduces the "transcendental schema" as the unique *tertium quid* ("a third thing," A 138) or figure whereby the synthesis of the apperception is effected "according to [the] conditions of its form (time)" (A 142).³ Such a schema is not an image in the referential or empirical sense but rather constitutes what Kant calls a "*monogram* of pure *a priori* imagination" (A 142). Kant's metaphor merits close scrutiny, both as regards its function within the transcendental argument and as regards its inherently tropological status. For besides serving as an "*a priori* determination of time" which "effects . . . indirectly the unity of apperception," the trope of the "*monogram*" effectively presupposes a moment of personal identity that, in turn, rests on a moment of inscription. The *Critique of Pure Reason*, then, cannot effectively *contain* the "figurative" synthesis of the productive imagination within the domain of reason itself. Instead, the task of illuminating the conceptual status and function of such "schemata" within the overall argument of the *Critique* obliges Kant to substitute them with a trope (the "*monogram*"). Thus Kant's text remains *rhetorically* dependent on the same figurative element it invoked as the *conceptual* capstone for its critical edifice. Kant's doctrine of the schematism involuntarily discloses how the synthesis of the "pure apperception" or of "pure self-consciousness" is itself predicated on a contingent psychological function ("the productive imagination") *and* on a contingent rhetorical stratum (reflected in the trope of the "*monogram*"), both of which remain logically prior and thus outside the conceptual domain of pure reason.

I

Shelley's prose writings offer some striking evidence for his awareness of a problematic that is at least structurally cognate with that of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Thus early in his essay "On Life" Shelley comments on the constitutive fragmentation that characterizes all conscious-

3. According to Heidegger, "time is not only the necessarily 'pure' image of the schemata of the pure concepts of understanding but also their only possibility of [presenting] a pure 'aspect' [*Anblick*]. This unique possibility . . . reveals itself to be nothing other than time and the temporal." *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, p. 109. For other accounts of the schematism, see Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. James Haden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 193-217.

ness: "We are born, and our birth is unremembered, and our infancy remembered but in fragments" (p. 475).⁴ Conceiving of the subject from a genetic and personal, rather than transcendental and analytic perspective, Shelley links the emergence of self-consciousness to the awareness of a temporal discontinuity. The awareness of such a discontinuity does not, however, allow reflection to reconstruct the origin—the "one mind"—of this discontinuous consciousness. On the contrary, self-consciousness itself is only conceivable as a formal device whereby we seek to contain the entropy, which characterizes all memory of ourselves, within the more controlled economy of cause and effect. That is, to speak of a self-consciousness, according to Shelley, implies a desire to fill "the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves" (p. 473). Moreover, Shelley recognizes that a self-consciousness characterized by the very awareness of its own discontinuity cannot, in turn, be reified by an inward act of reflection. As he notes in his *Speculations on Metaphysics*,

if it were possible to be where we have been, vitally and indeed—if, at the moment of our presence there, we could define the results of our experience, —if the passage from sensation to reflection . . . were not so dizzying and tumultuous this attempt would be less difficult. (*Julian*, VII, 64)

Shelley's ostensibly empiricist terminology should not be misconstrued as evidence that he is merely addressing the self within an empirical matrix. On the contrary, his notation of an unbridgable hiatus separating sensation from reflection in general already suggests that the construction of the self can under no circumstances be accomplished on the basis of pure inward reflection. Shelley, in fact, echoes Kant's purely formal and positional conception of self-consciousness or apperception when observing "that the words *I*, *you*, and *they*, are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement, and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them" (p. 478). If the "I" is a "grammatical

4. All citations of Shelley, unless otherwise indicated, refer to *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977). Texts and fragments of Shelley not included in this edition will be quoted from *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (London: Ernest Benn, 1926–30), also known as the Julian edition.

device" by means of which our consciousness organizes the intrinsically random play of perception and memory, language might well be expected to hold a similarly constitutive function for Shelley's subject as did the schematism for Kant's "transcendental unity of apperception."⁵

However, in sharp contrast to Kant's attempt at recuperating a rational unity for this apperception so as to retain the latter as the capstone of his transcendental system, Shelley reaches radically different conclusions as regards the constitutive function of language for self-consciousness. Contrary to the "figurative synthesis" the Kantian schema or "monogram" is meant to bring about, Shelley's "grammatical devices" are not expected to overcome the "insufficient void" in human consciousness through some "*a priori* determination of time." Rather, both in its grammatical and figural aspects, language constitutes the very medium wherein this void *in* the self becomes knowable *for* the self. Thus, after commenting on the positional function of pronouns, Shelley remarks how "we are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of how little we know" (p. 478). Consequently, it is "vain to think that words can penetrate our being! Rightly used they make evident our ignorance to ourselves, and this is much" (p. 475–476). The specificity of human consciousness, then, hinges on a use of language that would allow it to come to know the precise contours of the abyss that prevents it from coinciding with itself as an identity. According to Shelley, "man is a being of high aspirations, 'looking both before and after,' disclaiming alliance with transience and decay; incapable of imagining to himself annihilation; existing but in the future and in the past; being, not what he is, but what he has been and shall be" (p. 476).

According to Shelley, attempts at overcoming the void in the self by having the imagination produce a "pure image" of the unity of appercep-

5. As Jerrold E. Hogle notes, "language must be the alter ego of the imagination because discourse is so inclined to depend upon an other, because every utterance refers beyond its own location to a different level that precedes or succeeds its statements as its cause and its target. 'Language' needs thought in order to be itself as much as thought needs language for the same purpose" — *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 13. Already Herder noted the proximity of Kant's schematism to language in general; see his *Verstand und Erfahrung: Metakritik zur 'Kritik der Reinen Vernunft'*, in *Werke*, ed. Bernard Suphan (Berlin: n.p., 1881), XXI, 125.

tion constitute not a solution for this problem but, instead, mark off only one of the two realms of human activity that are separated by this void.⁶ That is, Shelley might well have subsumed Kant's "schema" — that "third thing" that is in homogeneity both with the category and with the appearance (A 138) — as but another instance of those "high aspirations . . . disclaiming alliance with transience and decay." Thus the imagination's "figurative synthesis," which Kant credits with the mutual configuration of consciousness and the phenomenal world, reappears in Shelley as a form of desire, "something within us which, from the instant that we live, more and more thirsts after its likeness" (p. 473). Such "aspirations" of human desire or imagination do not, therefore, produce any knowledge of the void in the self but rather seek to fill that void with figural signs (such as the "monogram") that are afterwards construed as a rational origin for the synthetic relation between what Shelley calls "sensation and reflection." As Shelley notes, all "philosophy, impatient as it may be to build, . . . reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation" (p. 477).

Man's "high aspirations" or "a spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution" (p. 476) continually return us to the void whose reality the ongoing process of figurative productivity either seeks to dissimulate ("disclaim") or proves otherwise unable to acknowledge ("incapable of imagining"). Meanwhile, this "void" not only becomes manifest indirectly, through the perplexing phenomena of the poetic imagination and an inward form of desire, but it also appears in the complex rhetorical structures that correspond to the imagination. Namely, language itself can only "fill" the void figuratively (as Kant's concept of a "figurative synthesis" already intimates), that is, by means of substituting the absence of a temporal origin or synthesis in the self with figurative signs or schemata. Shelley thus remarks how "almost all famil-

6. As Jerrold E. Hogle observes, "since the self is always what it 'has been' and 'shall be,' its rhetorical process must critique any limits that try to confine identity to a fixed 'present,' and that effort, as it extends itself into the needs of others, must verbalize structures as yet unattained in which that extension and those needs can be altered, furthered, and fulfilled. In other words, the 'augmented feelings' prompted by self-articulation in the language of the moment must reconstitute language, using its own potentials, to press it beyond what it currently tends to say": *Shelley's Process*, p. 14.

iar objects are signs, standing, not for themselves, but for others" (p. 477). This mutual implication of rhetorical and psychological structures Jerrold Hogle has recently elaborated with remarkable precision and differentiation as the phenomenon of "radical transference" in Shelley's work.⁷ Contrary to Kant, Shelley senses not only the dependency of self-consciousness on a moment of figuration but also recognizes the fact that the void to be filled by an *act* of figural production must inevitably reappear in the *text* that results from this act. Consequently, Shelley conceives of figuration not only as an inward act of the imagination (which the later Kant seeks to subordinate to pure understanding) but also as a semiological operation that imposes identity on heterogeneous things by way of continual substitution. That is, Shelley considers the temporal continuity of the self and of thought in general to depend on and, in fact, to originate in acts of continual figural substitution "suggesting one thought and . . . lead[ing] to a train of thoughts" (p. 477). The imposition of temporal continuity on consciousness, that is, the inference of a personal identity from the purely positional and formal unity of self-consciousness (i.e., the "I" as a "device invented simply for arrangement"), thus involves a productive synthesis Shelley locates both in a pre-conscious psychology *and* in the medium of language and signs generally speaking. Thus he opens his *Defence of Poetry* by linking the act of poetry (*to poiein*) to that of a "synthesis" (p. 480). A passage from "On Love" appears to elaborate further how such a poetic synthesis is comprised of an ongoing substitution of signs resulting in a "likeness" that, in turn, seduces human consciousness into conceiving its own "ideal" by (mis)construing the originary act of a tropological transference as an instance of specular self-recognition:

We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn and despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man. Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particulars of

7. I am especially sympathetic to Hogle's notation of a "subliminal impulse" that allows us to recognize that "Shelley's arising-and-receding 'Power' is not simply language or its possible relations. He clearly regards it as pre-linguistic, albeit in terms of the 'writing' that obscurely reflects it": *Shelley's Process*, p. 22.

which our nature is composed: a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap. To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble or correspond with it. (p. 473-474)

The *epipsyche* or "miniature of our entire self" proves but the construct of a consciousness that "thirsts" after an "ideal prototype" of itself. The construction of this "soul within our soul" (*Epipsychidion*, line 238), which is to sublimate consciousness from a form of desire to one of self-knowledge, strongly suggests that the "subject" of Shelley's poetry can never be isolated as a reified origin or telos of the speaker's own consciousness. As the subsequent reading of *Epipsychidion* shall make clear, the "transcendent" status of the poet's vision is not simply rooted in the hiatus separating the realm of "sensations" from that of the ideal; such a model would still assume the relative intactness and autonomy of self-consciousness as an agency endowed with purely inward ideals for its own self and for the world in general. On the contrary, Shelley's qualification of this reflection as "dim" and, oddly enough, as "*depriv[ing us]* of all that we condemn and despise" reveals self-consciousness as the product rather than agency of this reflection. That is, reflection constitutes no longer an intentional and specular experience of "pure" inwardness but, in an asymmetrical distortion of this mimetic and philosophical model, Shelley's paradigm of reflection emerges only in the interplay between the imagination's *act* of figuration on the one hand and in the narrative *text* of figuration on the other hand. Only through the positional play of the text's tropes and figures does there emerge, albeit fleetingly, the "resemblance" and "likeness" for which the imagination has been "thirsting" and on which all self-consciousness remains dependent.⁸

8. As Robert N. Essick observes, "to become a conscious self, [the subject] must have already become self-alienated into a doubleness prior to the projection of that doubleness as a desire for an exterior other"—"A Shadow of some golden dream": Shelley's Language in *Epipsychidion*," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 22 (1986), 165-175.

II

Throughout its first part (lines 1-189), the narrative of *Epipsychidion* seems eager to determine the relation between the poet and his vision through a referential form of expression. And yet already, the poem's opening verse, casting the persona of the poet and his vision as presumed blood-relatives, erodes this referential paradigm in the very same metaphorical gesture that seems designed to naturalize it; for to metaphorize the "Sweet Spirit!" as the "Sister of that orphan one" (line 1) prevents the poet, himself an orphan, from adducing the name of the parent so as to authenticate the desired referential relation to his ideal figure as a sibling. Unable to confirm the professed relation, the image effectively recoils from its semantic intent, manifesting instead an absence of identity on the part of both the poet and his vision. As a result, the "thou" of this first apostrophe can itself no longer be properly distinguished from earlier personifications of the poem itself that addressed *Epipsychidion* as "thou" and "Thy sweet self."⁹ As Robert Essick notes, a "prolific void remains not just at the center of unfulfilled desire . . . but within consciousness itself."¹⁰

This invasion of seemingly random connotations, which continue to compromise the denominative desires throughout the first section, progressively reveals to the narrative consciousness the linguistic as its irreducible and yet continuously elusive "ground" of existence.¹¹ Hence, the

9. See the final lines of the first *canzone* of Dante's *Convito*, quoted by Shelley, who translated them, at the end of his "Advertisement" for *Epipsychidion* and immediately before the opening verse whose referential structure draws on the same pronouns ("Thou" and "Thee") that organize Shelley's subsequent verse.

10. Robert N. Essick, "Shelley's Language in *Epipsychidion*," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 22 (1986), 174.

11. Shelley's narrative evolves as a dramatic performance that centers around the carefully articulated sobriety of the poem's fictional, posthumous editor and the persona of the poet, which I refer to as the narrative consciousness. Moreover, when submitting *Epipsychidion* to his London publisher, Shelley reinforces the temporal hiatus that prevents them from ever coinciding with his own sense of self: "the longer poem [i.e., *Epipsychidion*], I desire, should not be considered as my own; indeed, in a certain sense, it is a production of a portion of me already dead"—*Letters*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), II, 262-263. Elsewhere, Shelley observes that "the poet & the man are two different natures: though they exist together they may be unconscious of each other, & incapable of deciding upon each other's powers & effects by any reflex act": *Letters*, II, 642. See also D. J. Hughes ("Coherence and Collapse in Shelley with Particular Reference to *Epipsychidion*," *ELH*, 28 [1961], 278).

subsequent verse shows how the blood-relation metaphor is effectively dismembered as the ideal "figure" performs its/her own self-destruction:

High, spirit-winged Heart! who dost for ever
 Beat thine unfeeling bars with vain endeavour,
 'Till those bright plumes of thought, in which arrayed
 It over-soared its low and worldly shade,
 Lie shattered; and thy panting, wounded breast
 Stains with dear blood its unmaternal nest! (lines 13-18)

Emerging in response to the figure's incapacity of assuaging some "deaf" captors with her music, this destruction clearly takes on the very figure of blood-relations itself. For the poet's desire to invest his vision ("Sweet Spirit!") with a human specificity ("Sister") so as to counteract the perception of a void or absence of this quality within himself ("orphan") results in the interference of the rhetorical function of the blood-relation paradigm with the referential bond between poet and vision that this trope is meant to stabilize. The initial three verse paragraphs thus point up the aberrance of interpretive models that would insist on the historical and human specificity of the poet figure and/or his vision. More important yet, the opening verse also reveals the extent to which the narrative consciousness—driven by a desire to authenticate itself as a *human* agency through such figures—proves itself a "captive" of these linguistic figures, while the vision's presumed human specificity fades already out of sight.

The figure of "bright plumes of thought" that lie "shattered" is particularly instructive in this context, since the "proper" referent of this figure ("plumes"), namely, the individuality of human ideas and thought, is imprisoned or dismembered not as a historical reality but only as a "figural" entity, a bird whose plucked, "wounded breast / Stains with dear blood its unmaternal nest" (lines 17-18). Hence, the knowledge of circumstances that concern the historical Teresa Viviani is only of relevance as a parameter that allows us to assess the full extent of an interference between the "figural" and the desired "proper" meanings of Shelley's tropes. Namely, the strictly positional *equivalence* that characterizes figural substitution at the level of the signifier does not result in an identity at the level of the signified; rather, the textual vision of an identity or ideal self reintroduces the void the *act* of figuration had meant to

overcome. Consistent with this change of paradigm, the organic flower-image for the poem itself—"This song shall be thy rose: its petals pale / Are dead" (lines 9-10)—no longer claims an unmediated access to its vision, for it has "no thorn left to wound thy bosom" (line 12). The image of "unfeeling bars" (line 14), then, draws on historical facts (Teresa imprisoned) only in order to expose a cognate imprisonment of the poet figure and of the narrative consciousness behind the figural "bars" of this "song" itself.

The recognition that the present verse proves but a "withered memory" (line 4) of a presumed originary plenitude and identity results in the subsequent lines in an intensified denominative assault on this visionary figure. Evolving as an erratic sequence of figural substitutions, the poem's precarious narrative economy challenges readings that would insist on recuperating the imagery of *Epipsychidion* for what might be posited as an authentic contexture of family relations and documented acquaintances. For any critical typology seeking to match up the poem's recurrent symbols of moon, comet, and sun with the authentic personae of Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley, and Teresa, respectively, encounters problems in that the visionary figure is at different times approached through *each* of these figures. In fact, it is an awareness of the pervasive loss of reference rather than the belief in an intact system of correspondences that motivates the prolonged metonymical wanderings throughout the first section of *Epipsychidion*:

Thou moon beyond the clouds! thou living Form
 Among the Dead! thou Star above the Storm!
 Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror!
 Thou Harmony of Nature's art! Thou Mirror
 In whom, as in the splendour of the Sun,
 All shapes look glorious which thou gazest on! (lines 27-32)

Throughout *Epipsychidion*, the intrusion of what J. Hillis Miller has characterized as the "linguistic moment" makes it impossible clearly to distinguish in the chain of figures a referential and a purely semiotic dimension.¹² Rather than possessing any autonomous, phenomenal real-

12. "The dismantling of the linguistic assumptions necessary to dismantle Shelley's idealism must occur, however, not by a return to idealism, and not by the appeal to some 'metalanguage' which

ity, the “living Form” of the apostrophe owes its “life” to the perilous substitutive movement of the verse wherein it is articulated. The poet’s visionary figure, only indirectly likened to the sun, which traditionally has sponsored all reference-oriented readings of *Epipsychidion*, disappears amidst the specular imagery through which it is articulated.¹³ The “Sun” comes into play only as a simile (“as in the splendour of the Sun”) for the reflexive instance the vision, metonymized as a “Mirror,” may provide those shapes at which it directs its gaze. With metonymies being in need of additional figurative enhancement, the focus of reading invariably shifts to the strictly rhetorical functions that simultaneously delineate and render unbridgable the “bare and void interstices” (line 482) between the narrative consciousness and its ideal figure.¹⁴

At a time when the denominative drives of consciousness seem to have been thwarted by a profound interference between the referential and the figural function of the poem’s language, the narrative ostensibly abrogates the entire problematic, proclaiming instead that this visionary *parousia* has effectively taken place:

I never thought before my death to see
Youth’s vision thus made perfect. Emily,
I love thee; though the world by no thin name
Will hide that love from its unvalued shame.
Would we two had been twins of the same mother!
Or, that the name my heart lent to another

will encompass both, but by a movement through rhetorical analysis, . . . which can yet only be reached by recognition of the linguistic moment in its counter-momentum against idealism or against logocentric metaphysics”: J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 249. In critical extension of Miller’s observations, I wish to suggest that the loss of a purely theoretical domain does not imply the complete elision of the paradigm of the subject from criticism but merely brings into focus the void between what Hogle calls a “subliminal impulse” and its rhetorical manifestation. Shelley’s narrative poetry, especially in *Epipsychidion*, organizes itself as a response to the increasingly more focused recognition of this void.

13. Earl Wasserman’s reading of *Epipsychidion* seems especially troubled in aligning historical personae and philosophical positions with Shelley’s ever-shifting distribution of comet, moon, and sun. See *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 434–435.

14. The phrase is echoed in the *Defence* where Shelley comments on how “Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food” (p. 488).

Could be a sister’s bond for her and thee,
Blending two beams of one eternity!
Yet were one lawful and the other true,
These names, though dear, could paint not, as is due,
How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me!
I am not thine: I am a part of thee. (lines 41–52)

Once again, however, the purported identification of the poet with his ideal is marred as connotations of incest and adultery invade the reinstated metaphor of family relations. The mutually exclusive literal and figural meanings, the one “true” and the other “lawful,” progressively disclose their inadequacy, an insight that can neither be contained as “negative knowledge” nor be speculatively explored for the purpose of self-knowledge. For both the earlier admission that “dim words . . . obscure thee now” (line 33) as well as the critique of the denominative capacities of naming—“names, though dear, could paint not, as is due, / How beyond refuge I am thine”—defy any attempt on the part of the narrative consciousness to contain and reduce its intrinsic dependency on the linguistic. Naturally, “dim words” are bound to “obscure” their referent, and the very qualification of naming as a synaesthetic and inevitably finite process becomes entangled in its evasive complementary figure: “names . . . could paint not, as is due, / How beyond refuge I am thine.” To take cognizance of certain linguistic boundaries—“I measure / The world of fancies, seeking one like thee, / And find—alas! mine own infirmity” (lines 70–72)—merely extends the prevailing delusion into the realm of the theoretical itself; for thus far the narrative consciousness insists on controlling its linguistic medium on the grounds of a strictly inward, reflexive authority (“find . . . mine own”) that remains structurally cognate with the “pure” Kantian subject.¹⁵

15. As Jean Hall notes, the poet is “not in control of his own material.” *The Transforming Image* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 107. Likewise, Earl Wasserman comments on “the truth . . . that in the ecstasy of his Song of Songs the poet is not in control of himself or his materials, as he himself confesses”: *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, p. 427. Both imply, however, that a reflection on the loss or negation of autonomy still yields a purely inward, theoretical, and universal “truth.” Shelley’s poem, I would contend, exhibits how all theoretical edifices continue to be destabilized by the very same contingent, rhetorical functions whose impact on consciousness they dispute or otherwise seek to dissimulate.

The subsequent verse, then, renews its figural assault on a vision to which the consciousness of the narrative continues to impute a primordial and non-linguistic quality. Yet gradually the narrative begins to acknowledge its inherently rhetorical and linguistic grounds in that its organic imagery is subtly distorted and eroded. Thus the trope of the "Sweet Lamp" constitutes not a symmetrical, figural equivalent for the poet's creative imagination. Instead, when read as an instance of transcendent illumination, the trope reveals the hubris or ideological moment that inheres in any effort at suppressing its linguistic status so as to instantiate a moment of psychological plenitude; for at this lamp, "my moth-like Muse has burnt its wings" (line 53). Reminiscent of the random and potentially self-destructive meanderings of "a dizzy moth, whose flight / Is as a dead leaf's in the owlet light" (lines 220–221) rather than of the lamp conventional Romantic theories consider representative of the expressive imagination, the following images rapidly disintegrate in relation both to one another and to the vision they are meant to identify. Seeking to capture the figure again as "a Refuge, a Delight" (line 64), then as a "cradle of young thoughts of wingless pleasure" (line 68), the sequence of figures abruptly terminates with the image of a "violet-shrouded grave of Woe" (line 69). As becomes more and more apparent, any grounding of the poem's imagery in sensuous intuition, with its reliance on the compatibility of phenomenal and linguistic structures, will invariably corrupt its originary semantic intent with violent or otherwise unwanted forms of predication:

And from her lips, as from a hyacinth full
 Of honey-dew, a liquid murmur drops,
Killing the sense with passion;

 The glory of her being, issuing thence,
Stains the dead, blank cold air with a warm shade
 Of entangled intermixture,

 And in the soul a wild odour is felt,
 Beyond the sense, like fiery dews that *melt*
Into the bosom of a frozen bud.

(lines 83–85, 91–93, 109–111; italics added)

The denominative strategy of the poem's first part is effectively abandoned when, in recognition of the essential incommensurability of its own linguistic ground with phenomenal entities, the narrative consciousness no longer insists on limiting its visionary narrative to a dominant natural image or trope. Rather than seeking to reify the vision by way of positing—through a chain of figural substitution—equivalences between natural properties and a vision grounded in desire, the imagery of *Epipsychidion* now derives itself from concepts of language and representation:

See where she stands! a mortal shape indued
 With love and life and light and deity,
 And motion which may change but cannot die;
 An image of some bright Eternity;
 A shadow of some golden dream; a Splendour
 Leaving the third sphere pilotless; a tender
 Reflection of the eternal Moon of Love
 Under whose motions life's dull billows move;
 A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning;
 A Vision like incarnate April, warning,
 With smiles and tears, Frost the Anatomy
 Into his summer grave. (lines 112–123)

In their rapid succession, these figures of representation reveal the depletion of all available semiotic categories through which the consciousness might seek to signify its ideal figure, including specular ("A shadow" or "Reflection"), figural ("An image" and "A Metaphor"), or contingent inward (a "dream") modes of representation. The *proper meaning* of this figural structure, which is no longer grounded in a phenomenal entity and hence does not constitute a theoretical *meaning*, discloses the very instability of the medium to which the narrative consciousness seems inescapably committed; hence we find the echo (line 114) of a line from "The Cloud" (line 75) as well as the choice of mutable April, whose resemblance to the poet's "Vision" itself will paradoxically return "Frost the Anatomy / Into his summer grave." Facing a yet more severe erosion of reference, the narrative consciousness can no longer contain its expressive acts within the controlled grammatical scheme of a subject-object

predication but, instead, recognizes that any "ideal" figure—both as substance or as a controlled linguistic form—remains forever unattainable.

III

Throughout the poem's first section the attempt of the narrative consciousness to create a temporal identity for itself results in the reappearance of the temporal void the rhetorical production sought to overcome by means of metaphoric and metonymical relations (Shelley's *Defence*: "to poiein [is] the principle of synthesis"). Thus the temporal void in all consciousness reappears in the temporality of a text whose tropes of visionary (self-)presence disintegrate as soon as they assume semiological distinctness. Such a precarious temporal trajectory of figural substitutions results in the recognition of a temporality that prevents psychological and linguistic relations alike (consciousness and self; literal and figural) from ever coinciding with themselves in a synthesis or identity. Shelley's answer to this impasse will be to explore the opaque barrier of temporality itself, namely, by expanding the initial quest for an image of absolute and unconditional self-presence into a quest for origins. The exclamation "Ah, woe is me! / What have I dared? where am I lifted? how / Shall I descend, and perish not?" (lines 123–125), marks this reversal from repeated attempts at expressing a vision of self-presence to a straightforward, narrative repetition of the past.

Such a narrative remembering of the past, however, evolves no longer in the purely inward form of philosophical reflection; for reflection does not juxtapose a consciousness with itself at the service of an identity but, instead, involves an awareness on the part of the narrative consciousness of the extent to which any vision of self-identity is conditioned by rhetorical structures. Consequently, Shelley's poetic reflection involves both the relocation of its vision in an enigmatic past (which the last section recalls as "an antenatal dream," line 456) and the replacement of metonymically- or contexture-tinged metaphors of presence with a semiotic category that seems strictly unaffected by any contingent semantic potential, namely, metaphors of music:

We—are we not formed, as notes of music are,
For one another, though dissimilar;

Such difference without discord, as can make
Those sweetest sounds, in which all spirits shake
As trembling leaves in a continuous air? (lines 142–146)

Yet already this universal harmony imputed to the sound of "trembling leaves" reconnects the "spirits" in question with the Dantean image of death Shelley had carefully developed in his "Ode to the West Wind," from whose "unseen presence the leaves dead / Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing" (lines 2–3). Once the analeptic narrative of *Epipsychidion* gets under way ("There was a Being whom my spirit oft / Met on its visioned wanderings . . ." [lines 190–191]), no further attempts are made to determine the vision as a reality independent of its specific conditions of expression. Indeed, the narrative consciousness now deliberately focuses on the illusory quality of those very figures through which before it had sought to instantiate its vision as a phenomenal reality.¹⁶ Thus the poet's "visioned wanderings" are remembered to have taken place

Upon the fairy isles of sunny lawn,
Amid the enchanted mountains, and the caves
Of divine sleep, and on the air-like waves
Of wonder-level dream, whose tremulous floor
Paved her light steps;—on an imagined shore,
Under the grey beak of some promontory
She met me, robed in such exceeding glory,
That I beheld her not. (lines 193–200)

The entire middle section of *Epipsychidion* proceeds from the recognition of the error that "In many mortal forms I rashly sought / The shadow of that idol of my thought" (lines 267–268). However, as a "man with mighty loss dismayed" (line 229), the narrator not only laments the loss of the phenomenal world as a source of reference but simultaneously agonizes under the concomitant loss of his self. The question "Whither

16. As I have tried to show elsewhere, the collapse of a phenomenal paradigm for linguistic reference, which is a major argument of American Deconstruction, does not entail the outright dissolution of the consciousness that seeks to determine its human specificity or identity through tropes characterized by a desire or nostalgia for such reference: see "Rhetoric and the Existential: Romantic Studies and the Question of the Subject," *Studies in Romanticism*, 26 (1987), 487–512.

'twas fled, this soul out of my soul" (line 238) triggers a search for an image of self-presence whose linguistic involvement, however, can no longer be reduced to the interiority of a purely intentional consciousness. Instead, this quest of consciousness proves dependent on "names and spells which have controul" (line 239) over the narrative consciousness itself. In this context, then, even replacing the manifestly inadequate referential use of language with a natural, unmediated mode of expression remains but a brief and transient moment within the figural trajectory of *Epipsychidion*:

In solitudes

Her voice came to me through the whispering woods,
And from the fountains, and the odours deep
Of flowers, which, like lips murmuring in their sleep
Of the sweet kisses which had lulled them there,
Breathed but of her to the enamoured air. (lines 200–205)

To cast the vision in tropes of unmediated expression or "pure figures" (to cite Kant's paraphrase of the "transcendental schema") proves pointless as long as it is not effectively integrated with the linguistic realm of the poetic narrative itself. Yet once committed to verse, these figures of a "pure" and non-referential expression inevitably disintegrate under the sedimentations of a distinctly literary culture, being articulated "In the words / Of antique verse and high romance" (lines 209–210). The recurrent intrusion of the linguistic, of "form, / Sound, colour—in whatever checks that Storm / Which with the shattered present chokes the past" (lines 210–212) obscures the poet's vision as a "veiled divinity" whose semantic extrapolation out of the allegorical triad of Moon, Comet, and Sun is forever forestalled. Any attempt to remit the three allegories into a linear biographical scheme not only seems "dull"—as the "Advertisement" notes—but also ignores the fact that such figures are already embedded within the semantically elusive form of a dream (lines 278, 307). The dream acquires meaning not by way of offering an inroad to some extraneous and authentic dream material, but rather by its withholding any possible semantic presence behind the "rash form" of its own presentation. Hence the lines at the end of the Planet-Tempest episode caution the reader against hopes for semantic *parousia*: "These words conceal:—If

not, each word would be / The key of staunchless tears" (lines 319–320).¹⁷

Once again, *Epipsychidion* appears to brush aside all complexities attendant on its own figurative involvement when suddenly, toward the end of the middle section, the ideal vision seems to be fully recovered and present: "At length, into the obscure Forest came / The Vision I had sought through grief and shame" (lines 321–322). The redemptive thrust of this passage not only extends to the troubled narrative consciousness for whom "from her presence life was radiated" (line 325), but it also appears to restore an integrity to the realm of nature that already seemed lost (lines 326–334). However, the prevailing death/entombment/resurrection pattern effectively undermines any interpretation that wishes to endorse its implicit teleology. As the vision "Floated into the cavern where I lay" (line 337), and as the poet's spirit is

lifted by the thing that dreamed below
As smoke by fire, and in her beauty's glow
I stood, and felt the dawn of my long night
Was penetrating me with living light:
I knew it was the Vision veiled from me
So many years—that it was Emily. (lines 339–344)

What initially presented itself as a genuine and sublime moment of redemption now yields to an apostrophe that temporarily erases from the poem the very consciousness of the speaker whose identity has supposedly just been restored.¹⁸ Namely, the agency effecting the spiritual restoration of poet and vision to one another is not the narrative consciousness itself but the as yet enigmatic "Twin Spheres of light who rule . . . this *me*" (lines 345–346). Not only does the poet figure relinquish control over its own fate here, but this very transference of power is simultaneously enacted at a rhetorical level by the narrative consciousness

17. For an example of a critic's insistence on an authentic and phenomenal frame of reference, see Kenneth Neill Cameron's study of the poem: *PMLA*, 63 (1948), 950–972; reprinted in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 637–658.

18. Carlos Baker fails to notice the troubling repetition of this ostensibly redemptive passage, thus endorsing the proclaimed ideality of the island: *Shelley's Major Lyrics: The Fabric of a Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 237.

whose deictic phrase ("this *me*") now acknowledges the void that separates rhetorical productivity from the inward desire for subjective identity. Not surprisingly, then, the narrative reverts from an attempted recovery of the past back to the mode of a mere invocation.¹⁹

So ye, bright regents, with alternate sway
 Govern my sphere of being, night and day!
 Thou, not disdaining even a borrowed might;
 Thou, not eclipsing a remoter light;
 And, through the shadow of the seasons three,
 From Spring to Autumn's sere maturity,
 Light it into the Winter of the tomb,
 Where it may ripen to a brighter bloom. (lines 360–367)

All the *topoi* of the first moment of redemption return: hope for a "dawn of my long night" (line 341) is echoed once again, and the narrative consciousness reiterates its faith that it will be resurrected (as an identity) from "the Winter of the tomb." Furthermore, the image of death and entombment reappears so as to receive its fulfillment within the metaphor of an integral seasonal cycle according to which the poet's spirit cannot but ripen to an eventual, organic plenitude. Meanwhile, however, the agency of this pervasive restoration no longer coincides with the narrative consciousness itself. Instead, the poet's consciousness is effaced as an agency at the very moment that it proclaims a reflexive control over itself as a self-identical subject. No longer "disdaining . . . a borrowed might," it is now reduced to anticipate figuratively a vision of self-determination and self-identity that only "a brighter bloom" may hold in store. With its loss of autonomy, then, the repetition of the death/entombment/resurrection pattern actually dismantles any remaining faith that consciousness might be able to produce and control the conditions for self-presence and self-identity under the paradigm of a purely intentional and reflexive act.

Shelley's recognition, in the *Defence*, that poetry "acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness" (p. 486) even-

19. See Earl R. Wasserman, who observes the poet's "passive acceptance of the world as it is rather than as it may be; and it is a condition in which the poet is acted upon instead of acting." *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, p. 439.

tually leads to the annihilation of those allegories the earlier narrative had still considered a reliable ground for its quest. Thus we learn how the comet "went astray and . . . was rent in twain," how "the living Sun" burns out, merely feeding "from its urn / Of golden fire," while "the Moon will veil her horn / In thy last smiles" (lines 372, 375–377). "[O]f this sacrifice divine"—the closing comment on the loss of an autonomous conception of poetic self-consciousness—"A World shall be the altar" (lines 382–383). This "World," whose duplicitous aesthetic appeal is comprised of an effaced, sacrificial, and progressively muted form of expression, is explored in the final section of *Epipsychidion* as the last available temporal refuge: that of futurity.

IV

In his "Refutation of Deism," Shelley offers a rather skeptical assessment of prophecy, not only arguing that prophecy suffers from the intrinsically contingent nature of all "historical evidence" but also implying that the inevitable failure of all prophecy is the result of a hiatus separating man's interpretive *desire* for knowledge (for what is "*pretended* to be foretold") and the interpretive *authority* ("discernment") that is being withheld by God:

Prophecies, however circumstantial, are liable to the same objection as direct miracles: it is more agreeable to experience that the historical evidence of the prediction really having preceded the event pretended to be foretold should be false . . . than that God should communicate to man the discernment of future events. (Julian, VI, 40)

Epipsychidion's prophetic vision of a "far Eden" thus remains utopian not only because the poet will die before he can embark on his journey to this "Elysian isle" but also because this prophecy remains caught up in an entropy of textual tropes and figures for whose "discernment" the narrative consciousness cannot assume any authority. The numerous self-referential tropes, allusions, and disruptive, contingent references of *Epipsychidion's* closing section reiterate that any mediation of human consciousness with itself as an identity requires a "crossing over" into the figural realm of self-representation; the ideational desire for transcendence thus results in the material transference or substitution of tropes.

Thus the bark which is to carry the visionary and his ideal figure to "an isle under Ionian skies, / Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise" (lines 422-423) is likened to an albatross (line 416), a rather duplicitous choice given that bird's ill-fated journey in Coleridge's poem.²⁰ Furthermore, the island's alleged innocence never quite attains a reality beyond that of a bucolic topos in literary history, being inhabited by "some pastoral people native there, / Who from the Elysian, clear, and golden air / Draw the last spirit of the age of gold" (lines 426-428). Suspended between a set of paradoxical expressions, it resembles "an antenatal dream. — / It is an isle 'twixt Heaven, Air, Earth, and Sea, / Cradled, and hung in clear tranquillity" (lines 456-458).

Clearly under the constraint of having to prolong a vision whose reality he cannot authenticate beyond the strictly positional occurrence of its figural presentation, the poet comforts both himself and his sexual and ideal *alter ego*:

I have sent books and music there, and all
Those instruments with which high spirits call
The future from its cradle, and the past
Out of its grave, and make the present last
In thoughts and joys which sleep, but cannot die,
Folded within their own eternity. (lines 519-524)

Shelley's narrative here seeks to negotiate two conceptions of time, the one discriminating sharply between past and future, and the other sustaining the idea of an eternal present, an *aion*, which ideally would envelop the former two "within their own eternity." Of even greater significance in this context proves the understanding that only acts of expression ("books and music") can ever serve as the adequate "instruments" for accomplishing this mediation of past and future.

In response to this interimplication of expression and temporality, there obtains, throughout the last section of *Epipsychidion*, a strong current with figures of either sexual or natural immediacy, all of which exhibit a desire of the narrative consciousness to escape its own implica-

20. By the time Shelley writes *Epipsychidion*, Coleridge's "Rime" had been reprinted four times (1800, 1802, 1805, and 1817) since its original publication in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798); it is also quoted in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

tion in the linguistic.²¹ With the narrative consciousness determined to make this "present last," such imagery is once again designed to assimilate the vision to a realm of pure intuition, a desire that becomes manifest in the outright conflation of the isle with the visionary figure itself: "the isle's beauty, like a naked bride / Glowing at once with love and loveliness, / Blushes and trembles at its own excess" (lines 474-476). Such "excess" not only marks the imminent supersession of *agape* by *eros*, but the sustained parallelism simultaneously exposes the hubris of figuring an identity between the locality and the vision ("island's beauty . . . naked bride") and the prophetic and erotic desire of the narrative consciousness and its elusive vision ("love and loveliness").

Already suspended in the problematic frame of pure prophecy, such a desired sexual union "Where secure sleep may kill thine innocent lights" (line 557) inevitably deteriorates into an outright muting of all expressive action, a tendency that proves oblivious to the very consciousness by which it is articulated and whose desire for human specificity and identity it is meant to fulfill:

And we will talk, until thought's melody
Become too sweet for utterance, and it die
In words, to live again in looks, which dart
With thrilling tone into the voiceless heart,
Harmonizing silence without a sound.
Our breath shall intermix, our bosoms bound,
And our veins beat together; and our lips
With other eloquence than words, eclipse
The soul that burns between them. . . . (lines 560-568)

This double-bind of the entire quest, that "The winged words on which my soul would pierce / Into the height of love's rare Universe, / Are chains of lead around its flight of fire" (lines 588-590), again articulates the grounding problematic of *Epipsychidion*. Thus there emerge in the closing section of the poem two mutually interfering rhetorical strategies, namely, to accept the "controul" of such verbal chains or to erode

21. See Hogle's lucid discussion of the relation between rhetoric and sexual desire in the closing section of *Epipsychidion*: *Shelley's Process*, pp. 284-286.

all cognitive ground ("how / Shall I descend, and perish not?" [lines 124-125]) in the attempt of overstepping the boundaries of the linguistic. The agony of the narrative consciousness in the closing section of *Epipsychidion* is predicated precisely on the contest (Grk. *agon*) of these two strategies that seem equally suggestive and fatal to a consciousness continually trying to determine the elusive grounds of its own being.

The narration of this contest coincides with a description of its very arena, that "pleasure house" where the poet finally hopes to realize "passion's golden purity" (line 571). Meanwhile, the desired union between the poet and his visionary figure remains contingent on the former's ability to purge this site of any uninvited historical and textual sedimentations. However, his insistence that "It scarce seems now a wreck of human art" (line 493) and that "all the antique and learned imagery / Has been erased" (lines 498-499) remains deceptive, for the very natural properties credited with having restored the building's "living stone" (line 496) to its primordial innocence remain themselves profoundly informed by the phenomenon of writing.²² Thus, in an attempt to supplant or overgrow, without any figural residue, all cultural sedimentations, such as the ostensibly belated and artificial phenomenon of writing, the natural imagery hinges itself on figures that are derived from the realm of writing:

The ivy and the wild-vine interknit
 The volumes of their many twining stems;
 Parasite flowers illumine with dewy gems
 The lampless halls, and when they fade, the sky
 Peeps through their winter-woof of tracery
 With Moon-light patches, or star atoms keen,
 Or fragments of the day's intense serene;—
 Working mosaic on their Parian floors.
 And, day and night, aloof, from the high towers
 And terraces, the Earth and Ocean seem
 To sleep in one another's arms, and dream
 Of waves, flowers, clouds, woods, rocks, and all that we
 Read in their smiles, and call reality. (lines 500-512)

22. See J. Hillis Miller's reading of this passage, "The Critic as Host," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Seabury, 1979), 241-246.

Quite similar to *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley's *Epipsychidion* provides ample material for what deconstructionist or rhetorical readings call "the performative function of language."²³ That is, a rhetorically sensitive interpretation willing to suspend the conceptual, referential, and generally ideational paradigms that inevitably obtain in the reading of narrative structures will have to recognize how, throughout *Epipsychidion*, figurative language continues to erode the telos on behalf of which the poem's quest initially originated. Specifically, this erosion takes the form of an interference between the semantic (ideational) *identity* of the narrative consciousness and its vision on the one hand and the positional (rhetorical) *equivalence* of the countless signifiers whose sequence is supposed to render the desired "vision" of self-identity transparent for the poet-figure. Virtually from the outset, then, *Epipsychidion* receives its narrative impulse not from the ideational and inward "vision" of a self but from an increasing awareness, on the part of the narrative consciousness, of a gap that prevents the semantic paradigm of a self-identity from ever coinciding with the purely positional equivalence among the countless signifiers invoked in its behalf.²⁴

As we have seen, then, the interference between the substitutive sequence of signifiers and the ideational desire that initiates and sustains the figural activity of the narrative consciousness is twofold. At a strictly formal level, the *equivalence* presupposed by all substitutive activity for its signifiers refuses to yield a semantic and personal *identity* for the narrative consciousness. In order to have figural substitution yield a sense of identity for the narrative consciousness, Shelley's poem totalizes the positional equivalence of the signifier to the point of indifference.²⁵ At

23. For three representative deconstructionist readings of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, see Tilotama Rajan's *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), Paul de Man's "Shelley Disfigured" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), and J. Hillis Miller's *The Linguistic Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

24. My use of the concept of "equivalence" follows Roman Jakobson's definition in "Linguistics and Poetics": in *Language in Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). However, I also wish to explore Jakobson's own indecision as to whether such an equivalence characterizes only the signifier's phonetic or also its semantic structure. In this context, see especially Anthony L. Johnson's essay on "Jakobsonian Theory and Literary Semiotics: Toward a Generative Typology of the Text," *New Literary History*, 14 (1982), 33-61.

25. Already Gotthold E. Lessing notes, and explores in the dramatic context of his tragedy *Emilia Galotti*, the coexistence of "similarity" and "indifference" in the German term *Gleichgültigkeit* ("equivalence"). See the speech from Act IV, scene iii, by the Countess Orsina: "Equivalence

the same time, however, each signifier that enters the narrative already carries a historically determined signified that, in turn, exhibits an analogous indifference to the semantic goal (that is, to represent the identity between the poet and his vision) on behalf of which it was invoked.

The reliance of Shelley's poem on figural or substitutive activity thus results in a twofold interference, a formal one between signifiers as positional or formal entities and a historically grounded indifference of the very union of signifier and signified (what Saussure calls the sign) to its figural deployment in the narrative context. What determines the constant formal and temporal reorganization of Shelley's *Epipsychidion*, then, is the narrative consciousness that recognizes how both, the formal indifference of the signifier and the historical indifference of the sign, (re)open a void between its desire for self-identity and such an identity itself. It is, perhaps, no accident that Shelley would speak of this gap as an "insufficient void." For as a result of a twofold interference—formal and historical, that is, within language and between language and consciousness—this void can no longer be recovered as an idea or as a "purely" theoretical experience of negation. Rather, Shelley's poem demonstrates not only the indispensable function of rhetorical structures for human consciousness and their mutual incommensurability, but its narrative reconstitutes itself time and again in response to the recognition that the *text* of figuration reopens the "insufficient void" in the self the *act* of figuration (inward desire) had meant to overcome.²⁶

Responding to the countless figural prisms that disperse its desire for self-identity, self-consciousness in Shelley's poem is suggestive of the extent to which structures of consciousness remain the focal point of Romanticism's pervasive aesthetic and philosophical preoccupation with the status of the human subject.²⁷ For linguistic aporias disclose them-

[*Gleichgültigkeit*] instead of love? That is, nothing in place of something. Then be told by a woman that 'equivalence' is an empty word, mere sound, without anything corresponding to it whatsoever": Emilia Galotti, in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Das Dichterische Werk* (Munich: 1979), II, 180 (translation mine).

26. Elsewhere, I have elaborated this distinction between the psychological and rhetorical dimension of figuration with reference to Romantic hermeneutics: "Immediacy and the Text: Friedrich Schleiermacher's Theory of Style and Interpretation," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 51 (1990), 51-73.

27. "Shelley was more interested in reconstituting the initial state out of which the poem came and less interested in the total structure extrapolated from inconstant and unremembered begin-

selves only in relation to a structure of consciousness that, precisely because of its intrinsically deficient constitution, is constrained to represent itself for itself in such representations. Hence to dispute the self-presence of subjectivity on the grounds of its intrinsically aporetic relation to the linguistic still does not entail an outright conflation of both structures. Self-consciousness is a deficitary structure, thus existing in a *dependency* on structures of representation, though *it is not a mere effect of language*.

The first draft for the "Advertisement" of *Epipsychidion* provides us with a subtly ironic image for this theoretical constellation. There the image introduced by the *post mortem* editor of the subsequent narrative aligns a specific state of mind with the doomed edifice of the tower of Babel, thus anticipating the troubled naturalism of the "pleasure house" to which the reader of *Epipsychidion* will be introduced later on. As we learn, the poet

had framed to himself certain opinions, founded no doubt upon the truth of things, but built up to a Babel height; they fell by their own weight, & the thoughts that were his architects, became unintelligible one to the other, as men upon whom the confusion of tongues has fallen. (Julian, II, 375)

Any architectonic that conceives of consciousness as pure thought is bound to collapse due to its lack of commitment to the linguistic figures of the poetic text itself. Thus there obtains, within the image, an amassing of thoughts reminiscent of the tower of Babel.

Evidently, then, the metaphor of an unrestrained idealism reinstates figuratively (a "confusion of tongues") what its proper meaning wishes to efface most, namely, the linguistic contingency in the poet's relation to his vision. Indeed, *Epipsychidion* will explore a similar figural nexus when the exasperated poet claims to have "questioned every tongueless wind that flew / Over my tower of mourning" (lines 236-237). Inadvert-

nings." D. J. Hughes later expands this observation, stating that "*Epipsychidion* is Shelley's most movingly human poem, while, at the same time, it throws considerable light on the relationship between thinking and the writing of poetry. If each poem exists as a recreative act of language—and if it does not what is poetry for?—this poem with its constant searchings for its origins should help, if read correctly, to illuminate the very sources of expression." ("Coherence and Collapse in Shelley with Particular Reference to *Epipsychidion*," *ELH*, 28 [1961], 261, 281.)

tently, an unrestrained idealist architectonic, such as the towering edifice of opinions and thoughts, discloses its dependency on figures that prove perturbingly indifferent or outright detrimental to the systematic interests they are meant to support. Thus the subject's thoughts become "unintelligible one to the other" due to an excess analogous to that which caused the confusion of tongues. The strength of *Epipsychidion* lies more in its uncovering the full extent of this problematic than in providing a solution to it. Reading Shelley, then, yields not some anemic, overly intellectualized theoretical position; on the contrary, in demonstrating the contingent interrelation between desire, rhetoric, and human identity, *Epipsychidion* suggests that—at a fundamentally anthropological level—any "edifice" of pure thought (Grk. *theorein*) remains but a form of disburdenment of consciousness from the "void" that is delineated by the contingent nexus of literal, figurative, and proper significations. It is part of the honesty of *Epipsychidion* and of Shelley's greatness that the relation between consciousness and this linguistic web is not reduced to an intuition or natural trope but instead remains, perhaps forever, out of joint.

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