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SHELLEY AND THE IDEA OF EPIC:  
A STUDY, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE  
TO THREE PRE-1818 NARRATIVES

by

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Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English and Comparative Literary  
Studies at the University of Warwick

May 1979

## SUMMARY

This study examines the idea of epic exemplified in Shelley's Queen Mab (1813), Alastor (1816), and Laon and Cythna (1817), whose epic dimensions are illustrated by placing the poems within three relevant contexts: modern twentieth century criticism on the Romantic epic; late eighteenth and early nineteenth century epic practice and criticism; the concepts of dream, vision and allegory in relation to epic, found in contemporary sources of Shelley's day.

Part I of the thesis establishes these three contexts, being directly supported by Appendix 2 which contains evidence suggesting Shelley's access to many of the primary sources cited. Part II is an individual reading of the three narratives; the manuscript investigation into Laon and Cythna, summarized in Appendix 1, complements the dream/vision discussion in Chapter 6.

Shelley wrote three narratives before 1818 of epic dimension. The idea of epic they represent can only be adequately defined by referring to classical and renaissance epic practice and criticism, contemporary sources, twentieth century criticism, the concepts of dream, vision and allegory. The latter concepts are incorporated into the narratives in a distinctive way.

Queen Mab has to be read within the context of epic represented by Joel Barlow's epic The Columbiad (1807). Alastor is a quest epic whose individualised imaginative strategy is based upon vision and myth. Laon and Cythna, although lodged within a recognizable classical epic tradition, reflects innovatory contemporary epic criticism and transcends accepted modes of heroic characterization and structural organization.

The contribution to Shelley studies lies in a demonstration that the idea of epic embodied in these narratives is considerably more specific and complex than has hitherto been recognized by commentators who have either simply designated the narratives as epics in a cursory phrase or have discussed the question solely in terms of classical and renaissance epic. The narratives reflect issues, unity in epic for example, which were of fundamental importance to contemporary practitioners and critics of epic. Shelley had definite access to an extensive body of writing concerning epic from contemporary sources.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For kind permission to consult, quote and reproduce unpublished manuscript materials I should like to thank: the Bodleian Library and the Clarendon Press, Oxford; the Right Hon. Lord Abinger; the Keeper of Manuscripts, University of Edinburgh Library.

For permission to reproduce Leigh Hunt's marginalia on his copy of H. J. Todd's 1805 edition of Spenser's Works I am pleased to thank A. P. Burton, Assistant Keeper, Forster Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum.

For information regarding various Shelley and Godwin MSS in the United Kingdom and the United States of America I am grateful to: Dr. Bruce Barker-Benfield, Assistant Librarian, the Bodleian Library, Oxford; T. A. J. Burnett, Assistant Keeper, Department of Manuscripts, the British Library; Dr. Philip Gaskell, Librarian, Trinity College Library, Cambridge; E. D. Yeo, Assistant Keeper, The National Library of Scotland; Ann D. McDermott, Special Collections Librarian, Texas Christian University Library; Ellen S. Dunlap, Research Librarian, Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin; Donald H. Reiman, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, New York; Professor Lewis Patton, Duke University, North Carolina.

I would also like to thank the staff and services of the Library, the University of Warwick, and the Library, West Sussex Institute of Higher Education. Finally, my thanks are due to Angela Bell for her meticulous typing and infinite patience in handling the earlier drafts of this thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELH:	<u>English Literary History</u>
JEGP:	<u>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</u>
Julian:	<u>The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley</u> , edited by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols, New York, 1965 (Reprint).
K-SJ:	<u>Keats-Shelley Journal</u>
KSMB:	<u>Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin</u>
Letters:	<u>The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley</u> , edited by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols, Oxford, 1964.
MLQ:	<u>Modern Language Quarterly</u>
MP:	<u>Modern Philology</u>
MSJ:	<u>Mary Shelley's Journal</u> , edited by Frederick L. Jones, Norman, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1947.
N & Q:	<u>Notes and Queries</u>
PMLA:	<u>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</u>
PQ:	<u>Philological Quarterly</u>
R.E.S.:	<u>Review of English Studies</u>
SIR:	<u>Studies in Romanticism</u>
SP:	<u>Studies in Philology</u>
TLS:	<u>Times Literary Supplement</u>

## CHAPTER 1

### RECENT CRITICAL DEBATE: THE IDEA OF A 'ROMANTIC EPIC'

It is only during the last two decades that sympathetic consideration has been given to the idea that the Romantic poets attempted to write long verse narratives of an epical nature, distinctive and characteristic of their own aesthetic and literary preoccupations. The purpose of this first chapter is to introduce and review some of this recent criticism concerning the Romantic epic. The critical debate has specific relevance to my reading of Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna in Part II. Certain issues, e.g. the internalization of epic, the use of myth, and the identity of the epic hero, are discussed there with reference to individual poems. It is significant also that writers on the Romantic epic have rarely invoked the contemporary epic criticism of Shelley's period in their discussions. This contemporary material is crucial to my reading of Shelley's pre-1818 narratives and is presented in Chapter 2.

The present chapter is concerned chiefly with the major and recurring topics of the Romantic epic debate: the problem of definition; Milton and romantic poetry; the internalization of epic and the myth of reintegration; the identity of the epic hero; the journey and quest motif, and finally the concept of universality in epic poetry. I shall discuss these topics in this order presently, but wish initially to place them within an introductory context of epic criticism which dates from the early part of this century.

The following three statements illustrate the general shift in attitude towards Romantic long verse narratives which has taken place:

It may be suggested, then, that the excellence of the lyrical poetry of Wordsworth's time, and the imperfection of the long narratives and dramas, may have a common origin.

(A. C. Bradley, 1909)

One striking feature of the Romantic poets is their resistance to fragmentation: their compulsion, almost, to express themselves in long continuous poems is quite as remarkable as their lyrical gifts.

(N. Frye, 1963)

... every Romantic poet who wrote an epic - and all the major ones did - defended a post-Miltonic conception of the genre as the repository of their culture's highest, if often least observed, spiritual truths.

(S. Curran, 1975)<sup>1</sup>

Bradley's view of the long verse narratives written by the Romantic poets is based on the position taken by Matthew Arnold some fifty years previously: these poems lack the dimension of serious intellectual concern. Arnold's description of Shelley as an 'ineffectual angel' provides a useful keynote for Bradley, who asks whether the 'inward world of the poet's soul and its shadowy adventures' could be the 'world of what we call emphatically a "great poem?"'. Frye allows equal status to lyrics and long poems alike, something which Bradley could not do in 1909: 'But the songs [of Shelley] were more perfect than the symphonies'.<sup>2</sup> The characteristic of subjectivity has recently

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<sup>1</sup>A. C. Bradley, 'The Long Poem in the Age of Wordsworth', Oxford Lectures on Poetry, 1917 (Reprint), p. 184; N. Frye, 'The Drunken Boat: the Revolutionary Element in Romanticism' in N. Frye, ed., Romanticism Reconsidered: Selected Papers from the English Institute, New York, Columbia University Press, 1966 (Reprint), pp. 15-16; S. Curran, Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: the Maturing of an Epic Vision, California, Huntington Library, 1975, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Bradley, pp. 187, 197.

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<sup>2</sup>Bradley, pp. 187, 197.

been considered a virtue rather than a vice - Curran's statement is evidence of a much changed critical viewpoint, sympathetic to the quality of these long verse narratives.

Bradley's reluctance to consider these poems 'great' was part of a general unease about the status and value of post-Miltonic epic verse narratives held by early twentieth-century writers on epic. The work of these critics - Clark, Abercrombie, Bradley, Routh and Dixon<sup>3</sup> - covers a wide range of opinion as regards what constitutes an epic poem, and evidences varying degrees of scepticism about the continuance of an epic tradition after Milton. Clark, for example, says that 'the age of epic poets is past'<sup>4</sup>, while Dixon adopts an Arnold-Bradley position quite clearly:

The subjective and passionate lyrists, like Shelley, on the other hand, avoid the large objective canvas of epic. They sympathise with feeling, with action they have little sympathy. And the epic hero, a man of deeds not of feeling ... cannot be made the mouthpiece of their poignant and soulful intensities. The individualism of the early nineteenth-century poets forbade success in the objective style.<sup>5</sup>

These remarks reveal Dixon's neoclassical formulation of what constitutes an epic poem: 'large objective canvas', 'the epic hero' remind us of current eighteenth-century preoccupations. Dixon's views were by no means unrepresentative of his period: disappointed at not finding in nineteenth-century verse narratives by the Romantics obvious neoclassical models, he concludes that the category of epic 'has broken down',

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<sup>3</sup>J. Clark, A History of Epic Poetry, 1900; L. Abercrombie, The Epic. Art and Craft of Letters Series, No. 5, 1914; H. V. Routh, God, Man and Epic Poetry: A Study in Comparative Literature, 2 vols, Cambridge University Press, 1927; W. M. Dixon, English Epic and Heroic Poetry. New York, 1973 (Reprint).

<sup>4</sup>A History of Epic Poetry, p. 152.

<sup>5</sup>English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 295.

that 'epic, if the word be any longer employed, is bereft of meaning'.<sup>6</sup>

Dixon and Bradley were unsympathetic to Shelley's longer poems, partly because of Aristotelian and neoclassical assumptions about the nature of epic poetry. Dixon is prepared to afford Byron and Scott, individually, the status of epic poets, simply because their longer narratives contain the pillars of action and character. However, when he takes a comprehensive view of nineteenth-century poetry, he rules out any 'age of epic' and concludes that 'few, if any, of these stories in verse will fall within it'.<sup>7</sup>

One of Bradley's charges against Romantic verse narratives is the criticism that they were divorced from contemporary events. For Bradley, a 'great' poem must be connected with the present, something he found lacking in Wordsworth's age; he admits that the age of Wordsworth breathed the 'atmosphere of revolution', but finds the longer poetry insensitive to it. Dixon shares Bradley's misgivings:

Epic narrative, which carries the imagination into the past, leaning upon that only, and invests its hero in the flowing robes of fable, is eminently of a dream-like texture, which may charm and gratify, but can hardly agitate the soul.<sup>8</sup>

Abercrombie also demands that the epic poet express the Zeitgeist of his age:

All the great epics of the world have, however, perfectly clearly a significance in close relation with the spirit of their time; the intense desire to symbolize the consciousness of man as far as it has attained, is what vitally inspires an epic poet.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup>The Epic, p. 88.

This issue, the historicism or anti-historicism of epic poetry raises an important point: the dissatisfaction with the subjectivity of Romantic verse stems from an ontological base with its roots in the empiricism of Locke - the contemporary world, observably 'real', is seen by Bradley and Dixon as the obvious referent of epic narrative, rather than any narrative with a 'dream-like texture'. Nevertheless, as I argue in Chapter 6, Shelley's Laon and Cythna is precisely a poem of 'dream-like texture' which firmly asserts the ideas of freedom and liberty so pivotal to the consciousness of the early nineteenth century.

The writers I have been discussing concerned themselves chiefly with trying to define and elucidate the epic quality of long narrative poems, taking an unsympathetic view of early nineteenth-century poets, as a rule, like Shelley. Another reason for refusing to consider the idea of a 'Romantic epic' was the argument that the rise of the novel saw a re-alignment in serious attempts at epic after Milton into another genre. Fielding's case for Joseph Andrews as a 'comic epic in prose' was argued initially as a case for a new form, 'hitherto unattempted in our language'. Fielding's claim that the long prose narrative could be epical is of course reflected in eighteenth century criticism, and used by Raymond Havens in 1922 in his comments on the direction that epic took after Milton: 'Indeed, it may be urged with considerable justice that Tom Jones is a truer epic than any of its ponderous verse-contemporaries that claimed the title.'<sup>10</sup> Havens, like Dixon, admits individual attempts at epic e.g. Keats's Hyperion and Southey's Madoc, but turns away from any consideration of a 'Romantic epic'. His view is that any writer with the ability to sustain narrative power had in fact turned to the novel as his chosen form: narrative power is the vital element of

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<sup>10</sup>R. D. Havens, The Influence of Milton on English Poetry, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1922, p. 279.

epic, and this quality is lacking in the long verse narratives of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

If Havens saw the inability to sustain narrative as the fundamental weakness of the long verse narrative, Tillyard, writing in 1954, had a more serious charge. In the locus classicus for the death of epic after Milton, Tillyard maintains that 'in the eighteenth century the epic impulse left poetry for the novel'.<sup>11</sup> The charge is more serious than in Havens, because Tillyard suggests that the impulse or desire to write epic in verse disappeared entirely. His view seems to be based on the assumption that the epic and the novel share certain formal characteristics similar enough to allow the 'epic impulse' adequate expression in either - this would clearly be less strong an argument than that of Fielding, and relies implicitly on defining the epic impulse in Aristotelian terms.

Peter Hägin adopted, in 1964, a similar view to Tillyard with respect to the epic and the novel. Focusing upon the neoclassical conception of the epic hero, he argues that the eighteenth-century novel ensured 'the continuation of the epic intention in a metamorphosed form' after its decline in verse. He sees both Southey's and Byron's heroes as 'Robinsons, or Tom Joneses', fundamentally at home in a realistic narrative. The new epic spirit, according to Hägin, was embodied in the ordinary people of Milton's Paradise Lost. Adam and Eve as 'ordinary' heroes: 'There we have the new epic spirit ... yet the new spirit was revived elsewhere - in the novel of the early eighteenth century'.<sup>12</sup>

Until the early 1960's, then, considerable doubts existed in the minds of critics about the continuance of the epic after Milton as a major verse genre, and discussion of Romantic verse narratives confined

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<sup>11</sup>E. M. W. Tillyard, The English Epic and Its Background, 1954, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup>The Epic Hero and the Decline of Heroic Poetry. Cooper Monograph 8, Bern, 1964, pp. 9, 11, 168-169.

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itself to individual examples: Southey's long poems, Keats's Hyperion and Wordsworth's The Prelude were considered epic, along with Byron's Don Juan as a satiric inversion of epic. The first important study to raise the question of a 'Romantic epic' appeared in 1960: Karl Kroeber's Romantic Narrative Art.<sup>13</sup> Kroeber's book considers three narrative forms: the ballad, realistic tale, and imaginative story. He argues that Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats developed poetic narrative 'in the direction of epic' and, importantly, uses the term Romantic epic to introduce a cohesive group of poems of the Romantic period: 'Romantic epics, however, are not like the traditional epics of the Renaissance and antiquity'.<sup>14</sup>

Much earlier, in 1912, Dixon had also used the term Romantic epic;<sup>15</sup> however, Dixon was referring to the chivalric epic, the epic of romance. Kroeber's book is significant because it directed attention away from individual Romantic verse narratives considered in isolation as epics to an approach which viewed some of them as a group. Thereafter, a number of critics began to refer explicitly to Romantic epic in their discussions of Romantic poetry, notably Brian Wilkie, Northrop Frye, Stuart Curran and Antony Wittreich.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Romantic Narrative Art, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.

<sup>14</sup>Romantic Narrative Art, 1966 (Reprint), p. 84.

<sup>15</sup>English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 146.

<sup>16</sup>Brian Wilkie, Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1965, p. 4; N. Frye, A Study of English Romanticism, New York, 1968, p. 38; S. Curran, Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, p. 9; J. A. Wittreich, Jr., in 'Domes of Mental Pleasure: Blake's Epics and Hayley's Epic Theory' SP, LXIX, No. 1 (January 1972), 110 note and also in his 'Opening the Seals: Blake's Epics and the Milton Tradition', in S. Curran and J. A. Wittreich, Jr., eds., Blake's Sublime Allegory: Essays on 'The Four Zoas', 'Milton', 'Jerusalem', Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1973, p. 23 note.

This discussion has been, in general, favourable to the idea of a 'Romantic epic' - in great contrast to the critical orthodoxy of the earlier part of the century. Curran's statement at the beginning of this chapter shows a very positive degree of support for the notion, in common with Karl Kroeber and J. A. Wittreich. This group of scholars have concentrated on the Romantic epic and it is they who have provided a great deal of stimulus for discussion in recent years. Two other writers who have concerned themselves importantly with the question are Brian Wilkie and Thomas Vogler.<sup>17</sup> Wilkie devotes individual chapters of his book on the Romantic poets and epic to Southey, Landor, Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron; Vogler's study does not attempt to determine any classical or renaissance concept of epic in Blake, Wordsworth or Keats, but views their long verse narratives as preparatory poems attempting to achieve or to preserve what he calls a vision 'of epic scope'. Wilkie, Curran and Kroeber try to define and to identify the characteristics of Romantic epic. Wittreich gradually reveals his assumptions about its defining characteristics in his discussions of one particular poet, William Blake.

The major and recurring topics of this debate may be isolated as follows: the problem of definition; Milton and the Romantic epic; the internalization of epic and the myth of reintegration; the role of the hero; the journey or quest motif; the theme of good and evil. Discussion has centred on these topics, all of which are relevant in some degree to Shelley.

Several writers have confronted the problem of definition and have found, not surprisingly, that there are numerous criteria and characteristics to consider; each writer will have a slightly different list of poems for discussion, selected in accordance with a

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<sup>17</sup>Wilkie, op.cit; T. A. Vogler, Preludes to Vision: The Epic Venture in Blake, Wordsworth, Keats and Hart Crane, California, University of California Press, 1971.

particular critical viewpoint. Vogler, for example, admits to using a set of what he calls 'intuitive criteria',<sup>18</sup> whereas Kroeber states explicitly what kind of poem a Romantic epic is:

Romantic epics, however, are not like the traditional epics of the Renaissance and antiquity. They express personal rather than social experience; their truth is not that of reason but of supra-rational vision; their manner is mythical and dynamic, not formal and conventional. No single form is more characteristic of Romantic poetry than these personal epics, but like all types of Romantic verse they originate in reactions against specific Neo-classic theories.<sup>19</sup>

As Kroeber's definition shows, the argument about what constitutes a Romantic epic may be based upon assumptions of what constitutes a traditional epic, initiating a discussion which is ultimately regressive. It is more profitable to view the critics' attempts at definition as rationalizations of their own imaginative responses to the poetry, a convenient way of drawing the reader's attention towards modes of feeling and expression in these verse narratives which is particular, if not exclusive, to a Romantic sensibility. In this way, it is possible to see the preoccupation with definition as a preoccupation with the organization of a complete range of responses rather than as an exercise in prescription. Certainly, the topics outlined above, which emerge repeatedly in the discussion, are invoked frequently enough to suggest that the term Romantic epic is a worthwhile one to use.

Even if objections are raised against Kroeber's definition because it presupposes agreement on the form and content of classical and renaissance epics and assumes that they themselves do not express 'personal experience' etc., phrases like 'supra-rational vision', 'mythical and dynamic', and 'personal' invite the reader to look closely

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<sup>18</sup>Preludes to Vision, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup>Romantic Narrative Art, pp. 84-85.

at these characteristics in the longer verse narratives of the Romantics. My reading of Alastor in Chapter 5, for instance, employs Kroeber's definition as a suitable context for discussion. Wilkie, in his introductory chapter, deals with the problem of definition in a way which exposes him to the criticism that his argument is really circular. He chooses not to define the Romantic epic in terms of genre, but rather to describe it as belonging to a tradition; his view is that epic theory depends less on techniques of definition than on identification. Inherent in his method, he explains, is a paradox:

The present study assumes that we can best understand epic not as a genre governed by fixed rules, whether prescriptive or inductive, but as a tradition. It is a tradition, however, that operates in an unusual way, for although, like any tradition, it is rooted in the past, it typically rejects the past as well, sometimes vigorously and with strident contempt. The great paradox of the epic lies in the fact that the partial repudiation of earlier epic is in itself traditional.<sup>20</sup>

Wilkie proceeds to show how Virgil, Tasso and Milton repudiated inherited traditions of epic, devoting subsequent chapters of his book to an examination of a number of Romantic poems from this 'paradox of epic' viewpoint. His premises, however, seem the same as his conclusions. One of his premises is 'that the epic tradition was alive in at least the early nineteenth century' (p. 3) but as a conclusion he will 'maintain that, although they were radically original, the Romantic poets, to the extent that they were heirs of the epic tradition, used that tradition much as earlier poets had done' (p. 4). Despite his intention to discuss a group of poems with their own particular epic qualities ('Thus the reader, especially if he does not share the view that the Romantic epic is a contradiction in terms, may be able to read the later chapters sympathetically', *ibid.*) Wilkie's set of criteria for identifying an epic are based entirely upon classical and renaissance practice: similarities to episodes in

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<sup>20</sup> Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, p. 10.

previous epics, various imitative devices, heroism, length, the ordeal journey, purposefulness of action, all are cited. In contrast to Kroeber, Wilkie's approach does not seek to isolate any characteristics particular to the Romantic poems, but rather to concentrate on their similarities to previous epics.

Several critics have, since Kroeber, approached the problem of definition with special emphasis upon genre study. They view the Romantic epic as a major form of Romantic narrative, a distinctive type of epic. Stuart Curran's 1975 statement quoted above<sup>21</sup> repeated his view of the Romantic epic made some four years earlier in his essay on Milton and Romantic poetry entitled 'The Mental Pinnacle' where he wrote: 'The epic is, in fact, the major poetic genre of the Romantic period, attempted - and generally more than once - by every major poet writing between 1795 and 1825'.<sup>22</sup> In this essay Curran also comments upon the Romantic 'capacity for projecting philosophical unity in encyclopedic form' (p. 135). The word 'unity' is significant with reference to Shelley's Laon and Cythna, as I demonstrate in Chapter 6: yet it is structural rather than philosophical unity which preoccupied Shelley - a topic hitherto generally disregarded by commentators on the Romantic epic. The reference to 'encyclopedic' probably takes up Northrop Frye's suggestion that 'The epic differs from the narrative in the encyclopaedic range of its theme, from heaven to the underworld, and over an enormous mass of traditional knowledge'.<sup>23</sup> It would be inappropriate to detail the context within which Frye distinguishes epic from narrative, yet it is noticeable that his vocabulary has been

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<sup>21</sup> See above, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Mental Pinnacle: "Paradise Regained" and the Romantic Four-Book Epic', in J. A. Wittreich Jr., ed., Calm of Mind: Tercentenary Essays on 'Paradise Regained' and 'Samson Agonistes' in Honor of John S. Dieckhoff, Cleveland, Case Western Reserve University Press, 1971, p. 134.

<sup>23</sup> Anatomy of Criticism, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 318.

used by more than one writer on the Romantic epic. Vogler, for example, agrees that 'the epic is in some sense encyclopaedic'.<sup>24</sup> In Chapters 4 and 6 I introduce this encyclopaedic quality of epic as a topic for discussion in my remarks on Queen Mab and Laon and Cythna.

Another of Frye's suggestions is that 'The Romantic movement transforms all the generic plots of literature: there is a new and Romantic form of tragedy, of irony, of comedy'.<sup>25</sup> Both Curran and Wittreich explore the implications of this suggestion for epic in particular. Wittreich, in his article on Blake and Hayley, cites Frye in support of his own contention that 'there is even further, in fact there is centrally, a new form of epic poetry that emerges concomitantly with the new mythology'. This new form embraces what he understands by the 'revolutionary character of the Romantic epic'.<sup>26</sup>

Curran takes up the argument, too, but carries it much further, and his approach illustrates the dangers of talking about a new form. In his 1971 essay 'The Mental Pinnacle' he had argued for a new form of epic genre, based on his study of Endymion, Jerusalem and Prometheus Unbound. Here he had faced the generic problem of Keats's subtitle 'a Poetic Romance' and also that of Shelley 'A Lyrical Drama' with little success in terms of form, since the basic distinctiveness of the Romantic epic for him was clearly not demonstrable by recourse to structural features.

By 1975, the problem of defining the new form of the Romantic epic genre had become so acute - or embarrassing - that he abandoned the attempt, seeking refuge in Angus Fletcher's attractive conceptual

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<sup>24</sup> Preludes to Vision, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> A Study of English Romanticism, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> 'Domes of Mental Pleasure: Blake's Epics and Hayley's Epic Theory', p. 110 note.

perspective on problems of form by stating that Shelley's Prometheus Unbound 'is indeed the epitome of that literary phenomenon Angus Fletcher terms transcendental form: "any poetic structure that by design includes more than its traditionally accepted generic limits - the classical limits of the genre - would allow it to include"'.<sup>27</sup> Fletcher understands 'transcendental form' as a form based upon some traditional features associated with particular poetic structures, however, so Curran's attempt to sustain his view in the face of the explicit references in Keats and Shelley to 'Romance' and 'Lyrical Drama' is difficult to justify. Indeed, his reading of Prometheus Unbound in the latter chapters of Shelley's Annus Mirabilis shows him gradually discarding the earlier 1971 genre approach to Romantic epic. The reference to 'transcendental form' is pertinent to Shelley's Laon and Cythna, in some degree, as I argue in Chapter 6: Shelley transcends the formal twelve canto division of his poem with his novel use of conventional structural devices.

Complementing the genre approach in criticism concerning the Romantic epic is the recently developed view that Milton is an important individual poetic influence for any study of Romantic narratives with claims to an epic dimension. Great stress has been laid in this recent debate on the significance of Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained; attention has been paid to Miltonisms and allusions to Milton's epics in many Romantic narratives, but also on what critics have interpreted as Milton's own view of himself as a revolutionary epic poet. Little, if any, attempt has been made to establish whether the Romantic poets had available to them, or themselves worked out, a detailed conception of Miltonic epic as distinguishable from Homer, Virgil and Tasso etc. which in fact influenced their own practice.

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<sup>27</sup>Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, p. 112.

It is more accurate to say that critics have taken a view of Miltonic epic and then interpreted certain Romantic verse narratives in the light of this view.

Wittreich, writing in 1973 on Blake and Milton, recognizes what he takes to be a fundamentally important essay on Milton and the Romantic epic by Stuart Curran. In a footnote at the beginning of his own study, Wittreich refers to several 'incisive statements on the Romantic epic'<sup>28</sup> and comments:

The first three studies, all of them intelligent pieces of criticism, share a common fault: they attribute to the Romantics what should rightly be attributed first to Milton. Curran's essay sets the record straight and, in doing so, becomes the starting point for any future study of the Romantic epic.<sup>29</sup>

Curran, in his essay 'The Mental Pinnacle', had begun by challenging the commonly held belief that the epic tradition ended with Milton. He counteracts it sharply with the weighty claim that the Romantic period 'represents the heyday of the English epic', adopting the view that the Romantic attempts at epic were indebted to Milton for what he terms its 'aesthetic base',<sup>30</sup> he then proceeds to argue that Milton's Paradise Regained is a clear prototype for Keats's Endymion, Blake's Jerusalem and Shelley's Prometheus Unbound. His general argument identifies certain characteristics common both to Milton's poem and the ones he has chosen e.g., internalization of the epic action and the hero as Christ figure. He introduces Milton's terms 'brief epic' and 'diffuse epic', terms which Milton had used to characterise The Book of Job and the epics of Homer,

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<sup>28</sup> i.e. K. Kroeber, Romantic Narrative Art; B. Wilkie, Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition; T. A. Vogler, Preludes to Vision; S. Curran, 'The Mental Pinnacle: "Paradise Regained" and the Romantic Four-Book Epic'.

<sup>29</sup> 'Opening the Seals: Blake's Epics and the Milton Tradition', p. 24 note.

<sup>30</sup> 'The Mental Pinnacle: "Paradise Regained" and the Romantic Four-Book Epic', p. 134.

Virgil and Tasso. Although Curran's essay has been highly influential, inconsistencies have appeared subsequently in the development of his views. In the 1971 'Mental Pinnacle' essay he referred to Shelley's Prometheus Unbound as a 'brief epic', arguing that 'In contracting the grand stage of encyclopedic thought and action to the epitome of sublime awareness, it [the Romantic brief epic] destroyed the diffuse epic'.<sup>31</sup> In 1975, however, he wrote 'Encyclopedic in knowledge and in structure, Prometheus Unbound derives its ethos from the Miltonic epic ... from Paradise Lost, an epic diffuse in generic reflections as in its subject'.<sup>32</sup>

The case made by Curran for Milton's importance in the discussion was furthered in 1972 by Wittreich's article on Blake and Hayley referred to earlier.<sup>33</sup> Wittreich avoids the genre problems which Curran had found so intractable in Keats and Shelley, and examines Blake's The Four Zoas, Milton and Jerusalem. His article is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, he qualifies Wilkie's position on epic and tradition. Secondly, he focuses more attention on one of the crucial elements, the prophetic element, invoked in discussions of the Romantic epic. On the first point he agrees with Wilkie that the relationships between the Romantics and Milton and between Milton and his predecessors have certain similarities; yet he does not concede that every poet is the member of a long, unbroken tradition in which each poet paradoxically rejects previous conventions. He believes that the Miltonic tradition of epic constitutes a break with previous epic conventions and that the Romantics identified themselves with Milton's stance. It is this 'new form of epic poetry',<sup>34</sup> which is

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 136, 160.

<sup>32</sup>Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup>'Domes of Mental Pleasure: Blake's Epics and Hayley's Epic Theory'.

<sup>34</sup>See p. 110 note.

particularly Romantic. On the second point, Wittreich draws more attention to the prophetic nature of epic poetry, providing a sound basis for future discussion.

The importance of prophecy for an understanding of Milton's epic poetry and also that of the Romantics is given fuller treatment by Wittreich in his 1973 essay on Blake and Milton. He states explicitly what had previously only been implicit: 'Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, therefore, are more than epics that contain prophecies - they are epic prophecies'.<sup>35</sup> This assertion could be interpreted as a claim for a new genre, a 'new form of epic'; Wittreich does not discuss genre, but his identification of epic with prophecy does bring Shelley into the discussion: the relationship between epic and prophecy had already been established in the criticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as I show in Chapter 3. It is significant, for example, that in Laon and Cythna one of Cythna's roles is that of a prophetess, a point developed in my discussion of this poem in Chapter 6.

Two closely related topics - the internalization of epic and the myth of reintegration - are essential to discussions concerning the Romantic epic, and have become important foci of attention. These particular perspectives may be traced back to the criticism of Northrop Frye. In 1968 Frye had discussed the uses of myth in certain periods of cultural history: in the Romantic period, he argues, there is an internalization of two basic patterns of myth. These two patterns are the creation-fall pattern and the redemption-reintegration pattern. In his view, Romantic literature internalizes these patterns, translating them into different forms particular to a Romantic sensibility. Man has 'fallen' into a state of self-consciousness from which he sees the external universe mirrored as a universe of fragmentation, and he

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<sup>35</sup>'Opening the Seals: Blake's Epics and the Milton Tradition', p. 32.

achieves his own reintegration or redemption through an expansion of his own self-conscious human idealism. The restoration of Paradise is, therefore, a mental act, and Romantic poems e.g., Wordsworth's The Prelude, are to be interpreted as clearly mind-centred, revolving around the problem of lost identity: 'In Romanticism the main direction of the quest of identity tends increasingly to be downward and inward, toward a hidden basis or ground of identity between man and nature.'<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Romantic poetry has as its great theme 'the attaining of an apocalyptic vision by a fallen but potentially regenerate mind'. Frye explores the quest motif in the romance form, arguing that the Romantics transformed the conventions of this form by retaining the quest idea but by internalizing it: Wordsworth's The Prelude, according to Frye, is a poem of 'expanded consciousness', it is 'the great Romantic epic of English literature'.<sup>37</sup> This argument for internalization as a specific characteristic of Romantic poetry is given a Freudian bias by Harold Bloom, whose essay 'The Internalization of Quest Romance' makes essentially the same point as Frye: 'The high cost of Romantic internalization, that is, of finding paradises within a renovated man, tends to manifest itself in the arena of self-consciousness'.<sup>38</sup>

Writers on the Romantic epic have used Frye's interpretation of Romantic mythology as the cornerstone of their own attempts to define the distinctive characteristics of the epic during the Romantic period. Thomas Vogler's book Preludes to Vision is based on a reading of Blake's Milton, Wordsworth's The Prelude and Keats's Fall of Hyperion - which is Frye's list of poems expressing the 'great

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<sup>36</sup> A Study of English Romanticism, p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 37, 38.

<sup>38</sup> The Yale Review, LVIII, No. 4 (June 1969), 527.

Romantic theme', with the exception of Jerusalem and Prometheus Unbound. Vogler regards these poems as significant attempts at epic poetry, and analyses 'the primary internal nature of these epics of consciousness'.<sup>39</sup> He believes that the poetry of Blake marks a movement away from the Christian epics of Dante, Spenser, and Milton towards what he terms the Romantic 'epic of consciousness'.

Neither Wittreich or Curran would agree with Vogler that the Romantic epic represents such a shift away from Milton. They would probably argue that this shift, or rather concentration, upon self-consciousness is a feature of Miltonic epic; Vogler's 'epic of consciousness' phrase presumably defines Blake's own private mythology, which distinguishes his poetry from the obvious Christian mythology of Milton. Curran's 1971 position is unequivocal: 'The romantic brief epic, in following Milton's example, concentrated on the metaphysical as well as aesthetic possibilities of a form thus defined. It was, to them as to Milton, an internalized genre'.<sup>40</sup> Wittreich believes that the purpose of Blake's epics was to achieve an 'expansion of consciousness', following Milton's example where, Wittreich says, in "Paradise Regained", Milton had stripped away many of the encumbering conventions of epic poetry; he had also achieved full internalization of the epic "action".<sup>41</sup>

Critics like Curran and Wittreich apply Frye's conclusions about Romantic mythology first to Milton, and then see the Miltonic and Romantic epics as fundamentally mind-centred, epics of consciousness whose 'action' is internalized. They part company with Vogler only on

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<sup>39</sup> Preludes to Vision, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Mental Pinnacle: "Paradise Regained" and the Romantic Four-Book Epic', p. 160.

<sup>41</sup> 'Domes of Mental Pleasure: Blake's Epics and Hayley's Epic Theory', pp. 112, 114.

the role assigned to Milton as an influence on Romantic practice. The Miltonic epic considered most important is Paradise Regained, not Paradise Lost. The reason for this is to be found again in Frye's tendency to emphasize the Romantic pattern of redemption-reintegration rather than that of the creation-fall. It had been customary to stress the importance of the latter poem in discussions of epic. By reversing this emphasis, Wittreich, for example, sees in the Romantic epic what he calls 'a shifting away from the traditional emphasis on the myth of creation and fall ... the accents fall in characteristic Romantic fashion, on the myth of reintegration.'<sup>42</sup> Bloom mentions the 'humanizing hope that approaches apocalyptic intensity'.<sup>43</sup> Another writer, M. H. Abrams, notes that a small group of Romantic poet-bards, some working within the epic form, undertook to 'recast, into terms appropriate to the historical and intellectual circumstances of their own age, the Christian pattern of the fall, the redemption, and the emergence of a new earth which will constitute a new paradise'.<sup>44</sup> Abrams, too, lets his accents fall upon the myth of reintegration. I take up these two topics of the Romantic epic debate, the internalization of epic and the myth of reintegration, in Part II with reference to Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna: there I argue the centrality of internalization in each poem and discuss the degree to which the myth of reintegration underpins these poems.

This recent concentration on the internalization and mind-centered aspects of the Romantic epic has been accompanied by a discussion of the role and identity of the epic hero, another important topic in the Romantic epic discussion. If the externals of physical prowess and

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<sup>42</sup>'Domes of Mental Pleasure: Blake's Epics and Hayley's Epic Theory', p. 110 note.

<sup>43</sup>'The Internalization of Quest Romance', p. 526.

<sup>44</sup>Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature, New York, 1971, p. 29.

heroic action are absent or unimportant in an 'internalized' epic, does this mean that the hero as a character in the epic poem no longer exists? It is clear, from recent discussion, that the concept of the hero has not become superfluous, rather the contrary - most critics on the Romantic epic assume the presence of a hero, if not a physically active and heroic character comparable to an Odysseus or Aeneas.

One distinguishing characteristic of the Romantic poet, according to Frye, is that he sees himself as a spiritual focus of the society in which he lives, a more significant force than its physically active leaders who were the heroes of the literature of previous ages. In consequence, the poet 'himself steps into the role of the hero, not as personally heroic, but simply as the focus of society. For him, therefore, the real event is no longer even the universal or typical historical event but the psychological or mental event'.<sup>45</sup> Frye, in this general thesis about Romantic poetry, is moving towards the position adopted earlier by Kroeber in his particular discussion of the early nineteenth-century verse narrative in Romantic Narrative Art:

It is a form characterized by its tendency to find the profoundest order, significance, and satisfaction in individual experience, in the fulfillments or defeats of the soul operating amidst the chaotic impersonalities of modern civilization. Its hero rejects, or is rejected by, his civilization; hence his journey is above all a spiritual journey through 'The Heart of Darkness' to a personal salvation that may - but need not be - a Christian salvation.<sup>46</sup>

Kroeber uses the vocabulary appropriate to the classical and Renaissance epic hero i.e., 'individual experience', 'fulfillments

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<sup>45</sup>A Study of English Romanticism, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup>Romantic Narrative Art, p. 103.

or defeats', but his attention is primarily upon a psychological or spiritual journey rather than a physical one. Curran characterizes the Romantic 'brief epic' by a similar emphasis upon the spiritual biography of the hero; the Romantic epic adopts 'as hero a type of Christ', equating 'his ritual of self-purification with the regaining of Paradise on earth'.<sup>47</sup> Curran differs from Kroeber in asserting the Christian identity of the hero, but in other respects his position is based on the same assumptions that Kroeber makes.

The notion of the hero, integral to this discussion, takes on particular significance in the debate. The question is not whether the Romantics presented heroes in their attempts at epic, but simply what sort of heroes they were. As Peter Høgin quite rightly points out, the long Romantic verse narrative expresses 'the first outspoken acknowledgment of the death of the traditional hero since Milton',<sup>48</sup> but the idea of the hero still survived in a radically altered form. The concept of heroism embodied in the epic practice and criticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is discussed in Chapters 2, 5 and 6: my readings of Alastor and Laon and Cythna invoke the idea of the hero centrally in discussion.

Another topic in discussions of the Romantic epic has been the question of the journey motif. Kroeber's hero undertakes a 'mythical journey', a journey of the individual soul rather than of the physical body. The journey motif is, of course, common in epic poetry, and it is discussed by critics in their interpretations of individual Romantic poems claimed to be epics; no-one has, to date, argued for the journey motif as a defining characteristic of the Romantic epic -

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<sup>47</sup>The Mental Pinnacle: "Paradise Regained" and the Romantic Four-Book Epic', p. 160.

<sup>48</sup>The Epic Hero and the Decline of Heroic Poetry. p. 12.

unlike the arguments for internalization and the reintegration myth - but comments on individual poems have been illuminating. R. A. Foakes treats Wordsworth's The Prelude as an epic journey in The Romantic Assertion,<sup>49</sup> making suggestive comparisons to Coleridge and The Ancient Mariner. This latter poem has been interpreted explicitly as an epic by Kroeber, whose paper "'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as Stylized Epic'<sup>50</sup> argues persuasively that the poem is analogous to the quest epic, e.g., Homer's The Odyssey and the Babylonian Gilgamesh.

These interpretations of individual Romantic poems become more significant when viewed against Frye's understanding of the basic ethos of Romantic poetry. This understanding has itself particular relevance to the idea of a 'Romantic epic'; Frye states 'The typical theme of successful heroic action is the quest, the deliverance of the king's daughter from the dragon by the virtuous and punctual stranger-knight'.<sup>51</sup> In Romantic poetry, however, the epic quest is different because 'the main direction of the quest of identity tends to be increasingly downward and inward, towards a hidden basis or ground of identity between man and nature'.<sup>52</sup> The epic journey or quest, analogous to the journey of Odysseus or the quest of Aeneas, becomes spiritual in import, not physical. It moves towards the innermost being of man's own nature. The journey motif is certainly relevant to any consideration of the Romantic epic. In Chapter 5, for instance, I argue that Alastor is a poem based upon

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<sup>49</sup>The Romantic Assertion: A Study in the Language of Nineteenth Century Poetry. 1958, Chapter 4.

<sup>50</sup>Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. XLVI (1957), 179-187.

<sup>51</sup>A Study of English Romanticism, p. 108.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

a journey with considerable mythical resonances; in Chapter 6 the deployment of the journey motif in Laon and Cythna is discussed and interpreted as integral to the structural coherence of the poem.

One further quality associated with epic poetry is that of universality. On one view, the epic is the most encyclopaedic form in poetry. Another way of expressing the universality of epic poetry is to recognize its thematic universality, as Kroeber and Curran do in their readings of individual poems. Kroeber, for instance, concentrates on Coleridge's The Ancient Mariner and suggests that it is an epic poem because its theme is epical, dealing as it may be seen to do 'with fundamental problems of good and evil, with near universal human experience'.<sup>53</sup> The theme of good and evil is seen by Kroeber as characteristic of the epic. Similarly, Curran finds the internalized conflict between good and evil in the Romantic epic form: he writes 'The struggle between good and evil, which is the basic component of all epics, becomes centered in a single individual representative of man, and from his internal conflict emerges the scope of human life, its triumphs and its limitations'.<sup>54</sup> The topic of universality, seen from both of these perspectives, has not been extensively discussed by readers of long romantic verse narratives; nevertheless, it is of importance for an interpretation of Shelley's Queen Mab and Laon and Cythna, as Chapters 4 and 6 illustrate.

Recent critical debate on the Romantic epic has gone some way beyond what appear to be certain neoclassical assumptions held by early twentieth century commentators on the long verse narrative. Although recent criticism has involved the consideration of different sets of

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<sup>53</sup> 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' as Stylized Epic', p. 179.

<sup>54</sup> 'The Mental Pinnacle: "Paradise Regained" and the Romantic Four-Book Epic', p. 136.

poems, certain distinguishing features of the long Romantic verse narratives assumed to be epics have emerged: a tendency towards the internalization of the epic action, and a basic mythopoetic structure based on a so-called 'myth of reintegration'. In addition to these, critics have invoked the more traditional features of epic in their discussions i.e., the hero and the journey motif. Sympathy with the idea of a 'Romantic epic' is by no means unanimous, of course: the opinion that 'the death of epic was, in Milton's hands, a glorious and perfectly staged suicide' is a recent one;<sup>55</sup> Brioch argued in 1968 that the impossibility of writing an epic poem was finally recognized in the Romantic era, '... und erst in der Romantik die Zeit für die Einsicht in die endgültige Unmöglichkeit des Epos als literarischer Form war'.<sup>56</sup> This uneasiness has not, it must be said, been frequently expressed.

As I point out in Part II, the recent positive attitude to the idea of a 'Romantic epic' is reflected in the designation by modern critics of Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna as poems of epic dimension. Nevertheless, however incisive and suggestive the comments of the Romantic epic commentators have been with regard to Shelley, little attention has been paid by them to the contemporary epic criticism available to Shelley. Since Shelley was quite possibly aware of current epic criticism, this is a surprising omission and it provides another illuminating context for a study of the idea of epic represented by Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna. This is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>55</sup>T. J. B. Spencer, "'Paradise Lost': The Anti-Epic", in C. A. Patrides, ed., Approaches to 'Paradise Lost'. 1968, p. 98.

<sup>56</sup>Studien zum komischen Epos, 1680-1800, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1968, p. 16: '... and it was first in the Romantic era that the final impossibility of epic, as a literary form, was recognized' (my translation).

## CHAPTER 2

### SHELLEY AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES: LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY VIEWS OF EPIC

In the first chapter I suggested that the doubts of early twentieth century commentators concerning the continuance of an epic tradition after Milton had been to some extent neutralised by recent criticism. A distinctive 'Romantic epic' form of narrative has become one focus of attention in the study of the major Romantic poets: any reading of Shelley's narratives as poems of epic dimension is enhanced by the insights that this recent debate has been able to provide.

In this second chapter I present another critical context, hitherto largely neglected in discussions of the Romantic epic and Shelley. This is the criticism on epic available to Shelley from several contemporary sources. The period 1780 to 1817 witnessed the publication and reprinting of numerous periodical reviews, essays and critical volumes on the epic in addition to the publication of many poems designated epics by both poets and reviewers. A considerable quantity of this material was available to Shelley through the circulating library and bookshop of Thomas Hookham and sons and also from the libraries of Shelley's friends.<sup>1</sup> The degree of

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<sup>1</sup>I will not burden the discussion in this chapter with a presentation of the evidence for Shelley's contact with the Hookhams: this is given in Appendix 2.

probability for Shelley's reading and the influence of these contemporary publications on Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna will be assessed in Part II.

This chapter proceeds by isolating three areas for discussion. First, I attempt to demonstrate the importance with which Shelley's contemporaries regarded endeavours to compose epic. Second, I explore several significant innovatory attitudes towards epic poetry in current criticism. Third, I show that these innovatory attitudes were easily balanced by a solid body of critical opinion based firmly on Aristotelian and neoclassical concepts of epic. Shelley's Queen Mab, Alastor, and Laon and Cythna may be read, in part, as responses to contemporary ideas of epic.

In introducing the first area of discussion in this chapter it is necessary to refer to the views of one modern student of early nineteenth-century epic criticism, Donald M. Foerster. This writer has articulated what are now familiar reservations regarding the prestige of the epic, in the opinions of Shelley's contemporaries. He argues that 'during the Romantic period ... the epic in general, and the epic of antiquity in particular [was] open to serious challenge as a worthwhile type of poetry.'<sup>2</sup> He asserts 'At worst the heroic tradition almost ceased to exist as a recognizable tradition, and at best it did cease to have any essential value that was peculiarly its own.'<sup>3</sup>

Now, while there is certainly evidence to suggest that Shelley's contemporaries made positive or negative evaluations, based on

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<sup>2</sup>'The Critical Attack upon the Epic in the English Romantic Movement', PMLA, LXIX, [1] No. 3 (June 1954), 433.

<sup>3</sup>'Critical Approval of Epic Poetry in the Age of Wordsworth', PMLA, LXX, [2] No. 4, Part I (September 1955), 705.

Aristotelian or neoclassical precepts, of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century epics, it is also the case that they established innovatory attitudes with respect to epic poetry. Neither critical perspective, however, sustains Foerster's view that the epic had ceased to be a 'worthwhile type of poetry'. Indeed, the desire to write epic and the numerous attempts at composing heroic poems were both conspicuously evident.

First and foremost the epic was seen as the ultimate challenge for any serious writer of poetry. Robert Southey looked back upon his youth and wrote: 'Young poets are, or at least used to be, as ambitious of producing an epic poem, as stage-stricken youths of figuring in Romeo or Hamlet. It had been the earliest of my day-dreams. I had begun many such.'<sup>4</sup> Byron, it may be observed, once described even Southey's appearance as 'epic'.<sup>5</sup> The young poet John Keats revealed his ambitions when commenting 'a long Poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder. Did our great Poets ever write short Pieces?'<sup>6</sup> It was not uncommon for the Romantics to urge each other to contemplate writing an epic. Lamb invoked the name of Milton in suggesting that Coleridge start on an epic poem,<sup>7</sup> and Shelley's letter to Byron shortly after their Geneva meeting in 1816 recognised Byron's poetic powers as 'astonishingly great ... they ought to be exerted to their full extent ... I would not that you should immediately apply yourself to the composition of an Epic Poem'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The Poetical Works, 1837, I, p. xvii.

<sup>5</sup>Leslie A. Marchand, ed., Byron's Letters and Journals, 1974, III, 127.

<sup>6</sup>H. E. Rollins, ed., The Letters of John Keats, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1976 (Reprint), I, 170.

<sup>7</sup>E. V. Lucas, ed., The Letters of Charles Lamb, 1935, I, 85.

<sup>8</sup>Letters, I, 507.

(This particular letter has special significance for Shelley's own intentions in writing Laon and Cythna, as I note in Chapter 6).

It was also generally agreed that epic aspirations of the highest order had to be channelled into a rigorous programme of writing, possibly spanning a number of years. John Aiken, contributor to the Monthly Review and the Annual Review, defined the epic as 'the most arduous effort of human invention'<sup>9</sup> in 1796, and expressed satiric astonishment at Robert Southey's ability to produce his Joan of Arc, an Epic Poem (1796) within the period of six weeks. To Aiken, the idea of running a race with the printer in the composition of an epic poem was strange indeed. Coleridge, in a typically flamboyant gesture, wrote to his friend Joseph Cottle (a friend of Southey and himself the author of three 'epic' poems) that he judged twenty years to be the minimum time for completing an epic poem: ten years were to be spent reading in preparation, five years in composition, and five years in correction.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that these poets saw themselves or their friends as attempting a species of composition demanding the highest and most exacting standards; in this respect Shelley, as critic in A Defence of Poetry, is prepared to consider only Homer, Dante and Milton as epic poets in the 'highest sense' of epic: Virgil, Ariosto, Tasso, Camoëns and Spenser do not, in Shelley's view, reach the highest level of achievement.<sup>11</sup> Yet the impulse to try, to

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<sup>9</sup>Monthly Review, n.s. XIX (April 1796), 361.

<sup>10</sup>E. L. Griggs, ed., The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1966 (Reprint), I, 320-321.

<sup>11</sup>'For if the title of epic in its highest sense be refused to the Aeneid, still less can it be conceded to the Orlando Furioso, the Gerusalemme Liberata, the Lusiad, or the Fairy Queen.' Julian, VII, 130.

attempt the epic, is apparent in the frequent publication of poems titled epics or treated as epics by the reviewers between the years 1780 to 1817. An 'epic' poem appeared, on average, once every two years during Shelley's lifetime, not including the further editions published of earlier eighteenth century epics. As I indicate in later discussion of Laon and Cythna, Shelley may have been referring to these contemporary epics when he wrote to Godwin concerning Laon and Cythna in 1817:

I never presumed indeed to consider it anything approaching faultless, but when I considered contemporary productions of the same apparent pretensions, I will own that I was filled with confidence.<sup>12</sup>

In 1801, the year before Shelley entered Syon House Academy at the age of ten, four epic poems made their appearance. The reviewer of one of them, Britannia: A National Epic Poem, by J. Ogilvie, summarized the contents of each of the poem's twenty books and then concluded: 'It is saying little to add, that the Britannia is not inferior to any one of the numerous works of the same class which have lately made their appearance'.<sup>13</sup> One could take a positive or negative view of the number of epics coming before the public over these years, advocates for and against the quality of these poems could be found. In the Edinburgh Review for January, 1808, for instance, a notice of the appearance of Charles Hoyle's Exodus, an Epic Poem (1807) commented:

A correspondent wrote us lately an account of a tea-drinking in the west of England, of which there assisted no fewer than six epic poets - a host of Parnassian strength, certainly equal to six-and-thirty ordinary bards; and Mr. Hoyle, we believe, was not of the party. How unreasonable it is to complain, that poetry is on the decline among us!<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>December 11, 1817: Letters, I, 577.

<sup>13</sup>Critical Review, XXXII (August 1801), 403.

<sup>14</sup>Edinburgh Review, XI (January 1808), 362.

A certain 'Lover of the Muses' addressed a letter to the editor of The Spirit of the Public Journals, expressing his generally favourable attitude towards the trend which saw four epics produced in 1801:

Although every lover of the literature of his country, and every man ambitious that his country should stand pre-eminent in the display of genius, must naturally rejoice that Epic Poetry is rearing its head among us, and hail as a happy omen that no less than four poets have dared a flight to the upper regions of Parnassus; yet this just feeling is not unaccompanied with an alloy of regret.<sup>15</sup>

The subject range embraced by these numerous attempts at epic has been usefully summarized by A. D. Harvey in a recent article on the epics of Shelley's contemporaries.<sup>16</sup> There were national or patriotic epics (e.g. J. Ogden's The Revolution, 1790); Biblical epics (e.g. C. Hoyle's Exodus, 1807); chivalric epics (e.g. Southey's Roderick, the Last of the Goths, 1814); epics of exploration (e.g. Southey's Madoc, 1805) and finally the oriental epic (e.g. Landor's Gebir, 1798).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1801, V, (1802), 333.

<sup>16</sup>'The English Epic in the Romantic Period', PQ, LV, No. 2 (Spring 1976), 241-259.

<sup>17</sup>Here are some further examples which have been collated from Harvey (*ibid*), from R. D. Havens, The Influence of Milton on English Poetry, p. 278, and from my own study of contemporary reviews and booksellers' catalogues:

John Trumball, M'Fingal, A Modern Epic Poem in Four Cantos, Connecticut, 1782.

Richard Cumberland, Calvary; or the Death of Christ, a Poem, in Eight Books, London, 1792.

Robert Southey, Joan of Arc, an Epic Poem, Bristol, 1796.

James Ogden, Emanuel; or Paradise Regained, An Epic Poem, Manchester, 1797.

W. Hildreth, The Niliad, an Epic Poem in Honour of the Victory off the Mouth of the Nile, London, 1799.

Joseph Cottle, Alfred, an Epic Poem in Twenty-Four Books, London, 1800.

Henry James Pye, Alfred, an Epic Poem in Six Books, London, 1801.

John Thelwall, The Trident of Albion, an Epic Effusion, Liverpool, 1805.

W. H. Drummond, The Battle of Trafalgar, Belfast, 1806.

J. W. Croker, The Amazoniad; or Figure and Fashion, an Heroic Poem, Dublin, 1806.

J. F. Pennie, The Royal Minstrel; or the Witcheries of Endor, an Epic Poem in Eleven Books, Dorchester, 1817.

H. H. Milman, Samor, Lord of the Bright City, An Heroic Poem, London, 1818.

A studied imitation of stylistic features readily associated with the epic were commonplace. The proposition, for example, was a consciously imitated feature:

Alfred, victorious over the Danes, I sing.

(Joseph Cottle, Alfred, an Epic Poem,  
2nd edn., 1804, Book I, p. 2)

Israel from Egypt through the parted deep  
Securely led (the type of man redeem'd)  
I enterprise to sing.

(Charles Hoyle, Exodus, an Epic Poem,  
1807, Book I, 1-3)

War's varied horrors, and the train of ills  
That follow on Ambition's blood-stained path  
And fill the world with woe; of France preserv'd  
By maiden hand, what time her chiefs subdued,  
Or slept in death, or lingered life in chains,  
I sing: nor wilt though FREEDOM scorn the song.

(Robert Southey, Joan of Arc,  
an Epic Poem, 1796, Book I, 1-6)

Hither, O Epic Muse, fresh laurels bring,  
For William's bust, we praise a patriot king;  
Grateful to freedom's ear, is William's praise,  
Begin the song, a shepherd's rustic lays  
Suit not this theme, though pitched to choicest reeds,  
Fame's trumpet best records heroic deeds.

(James Ogden, The Revolution, 1790, p. 5)

The use of the Homeric simile was not uncommon:

Before the hero fall'n the warriors stand,  
Firm as the chains of rock which guard the strand;  
Whose rooted strength the angry ocean braves,  
And bounds the fury of his bursting waves.  
So Sparta stood.

(William Wilkie, The Epigoniad,  
2nd edn., 1769, p. 39)

The impulse to write epic poems, then, was certainly very strongly present at the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth. The statements by Southey and Keats already cited demonstrate this, and the evidence afforded by the appearance of numerous poems entitled 'epic' or designated as such by reviewers dramatizes it. The Shelley letters to Byron and Godwin quoted above<sup>18</sup> articulate an epic intention with regard to Laon and Cythna, as I suggest in Chapter 6. Also, as I show in Chapter 4, Shelley's Queen Mab has definite affinities to one early nineteenth-century epic: Joel Barlow's The Columbiad (1807) is a poem with which Shelley was probably acquainted.

There were several innovatory attitudes towards epic in current epic criticism: this second area of discussion is particularly relevant to Alastor and Laon and Cythna, and constitutes the next section of this chapter. A number of specific trends may be isolated. There was a widening of scope in the discussion of epic to include the epics of Ariosto, Tasso and Spenser, a flexibility which now also emphasized the biographical approach to epic. Doubts began to be expressed as to the desirability of genre distinctions and the applicability of Aristotelian and neoclassical prescriptivism to epic. The possibilities for future epic practice suggested by William Hayley in his Essay on Epic Poetry (1782) stimulated critical attention. Finally, the growing importance attached to the sublime and moving elements in epic poetry became a marked feature of epic criticism.

The revival of interest in Ariosto and Tasso during the latter half of the eighteenth century is a noticeable feature of the epic criticism of the period. H. F. Cary, the translator of Dante,

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<sup>18</sup>See pp. 27 and 29.

believed that the extracts given by William Hayley in his Essay on Epic Poetry from Spanish and Italian epic poetry gave a 'decisive impulse',<sup>19</sup> in this connection. I shall comment upon the relevance of Hayley's work to Shelley later in this chapter: certainly, Shelley and his contemporaries were well acquainted with the poems of Ariosto and Tasso, particularly through the translations of Fairfax and, more recently, John Hoole: the latter's translations of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso and Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered had appeared in 1783 and 1763 respectively. Tasso's poem, in English, went through several editions between 1763 and 1821; Leigh Hunt dismissed Hoole's translation of Ariosto as 'a miserable business, like all the other translations of this rival of Fairfax',<sup>20</sup> but Hoole's translations were widely known and circulated. Peacock owned the 1785 edition of the Orlando Furioso,<sup>21</sup> for example, and Southey owned Hoole's two volume translation of Jerusalem Delivered in the 1783 edition.<sup>22</sup>

Southey's interest in the Italian poets and in epic was centred firmly on Ariosto and Tasso. He wrote 'Early as my hopes had been directed toward the drama, they received a more decided and more fortunate direction from the frequent perusal of Tasso, Ariosto, and Spenser ... The first of my Epic Dreams was created by Ariosto.'<sup>23</sup> Leigh Hunt's sensitive appraisals and translations of Italian literature in the early part of the nineteenth century did much to extend the contemporary reader's awareness of Ariosto and Tasso; when Hunt was committed to prison in February 1813 for insulting the Prince Regent in the columns of the Examiner, he took with him a number of volumes of Italian poetry, determined to improve

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<sup>19</sup>The Lives of the English Poets, 1846, p. 347.

<sup>20</sup>Thornton Hunt, ed., The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt, 1862, I, 80.

<sup>21</sup>A. N. L. Munby, ed., Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons, 1971, I, 159, item 37.

<sup>22</sup>Roy Park, ed., Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons, 1974, IX, 221, item 2778.

<sup>23</sup>C. C. Southey, ed., The Life and Correspondence of the late Robert Southey, 1849, I, 117, 118.

his Italian and to study epic poetry: '... I mean to add, if possible, a course of epic poetry from Homer to Virgil, and so through the Italian school to the English ... and getting a fuller mastery of my Italian;' <sup>24</sup> Hunt was an eager translator of Italian verse as well as a composer of it, as numbers of the Examiner, Indicator and Liberal testify; in 1820 he published a separate translation of Tasso's Aminta, for example.

Shelley's own studies of Ariosto and Tasso date from the summer of 1813, when he was introduced by the Newtons into the society of Mrs. Boinville and her daughter Cornelia. The Shelleys settled themselves at 'High Elms' in Bracknell, a small house belonging to Mrs. Boinville. The Boinvilles, according to Hogg, first stimulated Shelley's interest in Italian literature, and both friends embarked upon a study of Italian together. Hogg maintained that Shelley made little systematic use of 'the sufficient apparatus of approved grammars and dictionaries' <sup>25</sup> when reading, preferring to plunge headlong into Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, fired by the adventures of Roland and Angelica. He did, however, dutifully keep pace with Hogg in their joint reading of Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered. Shelley's attitude towards the Italian poets was enthusiastic, and continued through into the following year, when he wrote to Hogg from Bracknell that he had started learning Italian again, assisted by Cornelia Turner. <sup>26</sup>

Mary Shelley's journal, and note to the 1814 and 1815 Poems, <sup>27</sup> testifies to the fact that Shelley's reading during these years included Tasso and Ariosto in Italian; Tasso seems to have been

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<sup>24</sup>Thornton Hunt, ed., The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt. I, 79.

<sup>25</sup>Humbert Wolfe, ed., The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley. 1933, II, 61.

<sup>26</sup>Letters. I, 384.

<sup>27</sup>MSJ. p. 49, Julian, III, 120.

Shelley's preferred reading in Italian up to his final departure for Italy. Despite his busy journeys between Bath and London in October and November in 1816, he still had time to read Tasso: Mary's journal for Saturday, October 5th and Sunday, the following day, runs 'Shelley reads Tasso'.<sup>28</sup>

The critical interest in Tasso in particular has an important bearing on my reading of Shelley's Alastor and Laon and Cythna.<sup>29</sup> The attention paid to Tasso was two-fold: his Jerusalem Delivered was studied because of a concern with its structural merits or demerits and the adventures of its leading pair of romantic lovers, but there was also a fascination with the details of the poet's own biography. Coleridge neatly summarized the distinguishing characteristics of various epic poets in a letter to John Thelwall, late in 1796 when he wrote 'Homer is the Poet for the Warrior - Milton for the Religionist - Tasso for Women - Robert Southey for the Patriot'.<sup>30</sup> His view of Tasso, if not of Southey, is uncontentious: the adventures and loves of Tancredi and Clorinda, Rinaldo and Armida, Olindo and Sofronia were chosen by Leigh Hunt for his selection of Tales from the Italian Poets in 1846. Shelley's characters Laon and Cythna, as I remark in Chapter 6, may well derive part of their complex significance from this typical pairing in the Italian romance epic.

Opinions regarding Tasso's stature as an epic poet differed widely. Criticism of the Jerusalem Delivered in the Edinburgh Review for 1815<sup>31</sup> should be seen against the positive evaluation expressed by a critic writing for Le Beau Monde, who considered that Tasso had,

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<sup>28</sup>MSJ, p. 65.

<sup>29</sup>See Chapter 5, pp. 172-181, and Chapter 6, pp. 227, 237, 253.

<sup>30</sup>E. L. Griggs, ed., The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. I, 258.

<sup>31</sup>XXV (June 1815), 56.

'by many persons, been placed above Homer himself, for the plot and interest of his work, even while his style has been always confessed inferior to Homer's'.<sup>32</sup>

A fascination with Tasso's life was an important preoccupation of readers, critics and reviewers. This perspective was indicative of the biographical trend in criticism, emanating from Germany in the writings of Wolf and Heyne, which sought to confront the problem of authorship of both the Iliad and the Odyssey. The alleged madness of Tasso was widely discussed. Tasso became a dominant figure in the Romantics' conception of the sensitive - and unhappy - creative artist at odds with his environment. Goethe's play Torquato Tasso (1789) was not translated into English until 1827, but the history of Tasso's life was well-known in England before that. The image of the poet, distraught for the love of Leonora d'Este, and imprisoned by her brother Duke Alfonso of Ferrara was a popular, if not altogether accurate one: Shelley praised Byron's 'Lament of Tasso' in 1817. (The significance of this concern with Tasso biography for Shelley is that Alastor may be read as a study of the solipsistic imagination prompted by Shelley's knowledge of Tasso's life, a view which I propose and discuss in Chapter 5).

The chief source for the legends of Tasso's suffering and derangement come from the biography of Tasso's friend Giovanni Battista Manso, lord of Bisaccio and Pisa. This biography appeared in 1621, and first linked Tasso to Leonora d'Este. Manso dates Tasso's madness at the age of thirty-two, two years after the publication of the Jerusalem Delivered, and attributes his mental disturbance to the hostile reaction to the poem and the required re-writing of it, coupled with Tasso's melancholic nature. Manso's account was used in three studies of Tasso by late eighteenth and

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<sup>32</sup>III (March 1808), 134.

early nineteenth century writers: Nathan Drake's Literary Hours (1798), Robert Heron's essay on Tasso in his Letters of Literature (1785), and John Black's Life of Torquato Tasso (1810).<sup>33</sup> Black's Life was extensively reviewed in the Eclectic Review for November and December 1810.<sup>34</sup> Thomas Hookham kept both Black's Life and Heron's Letters of Literature available to subscribers in his circulating library. These are specific sources from which Shelley could have gleaned information about Tasso long before his decision to write on Tasso in Italy after his final departure from England.<sup>35</sup>

John Black had carefully researched Tasso's life from Manso's biography and other sources. He came also to Manso's conclusion that Tasso's mental state was not a result of his love for Leonora, but was occasioned by the stress of having to revise his poem. However, the emphasis that Black places upon the creative sensitivity of the poet is significant: he explores the consequences of extreme sensitivity for the mental stability of the individual poet, especially when the individual finds himself in a condition of solitude and isolation; he also quotes from William Smellie's The Philosophy of Natural History (2 vols, 1790) to reinforce this point; Smellie's book was also available to Shelley.<sup>36</sup> Black quotes one particular section from Smellie's study at the end of the

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<sup>33</sup>N. Drake, 'On the Government of the Imagination; on the Frenzy of Tasso and Collins' in Literary Hours, pp. 29-44; R. Heron, Letter XLIII 'On the causes and nature of the madness of Tasso' in Letters of Literature, pp. 374-382; J. Black, The Life of Torquato Tasso, 2 vols, 1810.

<sup>34</sup>VI, 961-975, 1083-1096.

<sup>35</sup>See Appendix 2.

<sup>36</sup>See below, p. 96 and Appendix 2.

following remarks:

The fame of the poet is, of all kinds of literary glory, the most popular and extensive; but it rests upon titles, the legitimacy of which it is in the power of the meanest and most ignorant to contest. That sensibility, too, which seems necessary for a high superiority in any of the fine arts, is commonly the scourge and torment of its possessor; and it has been well remarked by Mr. Smellie, that a sentient being, with mental powers much superior to those of man, could not live and be happy in the world.

'If such a being really existed, his misery would be extreme. With senses more delicate and refined, with perceptions more accurate and penetrating, with a taste so exquisite, that the objects around it would by no means gratify it, obliged to feed on nourishment too gross for his frame, he must be born only to be miserable, and the continuation of his existence would be utterly impossible. Even in pursuits, the futility of pleasure, and the infinite sources of excruciating pain, are supported with great difficulty by refined and cultivated minds. Increase our sensibilities, continue the same objects and situation, and no man could bear to live.'

(J. Black, Life, I, 182)

The point of Black's use of Smellie in this extract is to demonstrate the 'General infelicity of men of genius' (Black, loc. cit.) citing Tasso as a primary example. Black observed later in his biography that this infelicity was particularly characteristic of epic poets, 'Of the epic poets in general, it may be remarked, that their destinies appear to have been far from happy' (II, 341). Nathan Drake warned of similar consequences for sensitive souls in his discussion of Tasso:

But should the brilliant fancy be nurtured on the bosom of enthusiasm, or romantic expectation, or be left to revel in all its native wildness of combination, and to plunge into all the visionary terrors of supernatural agency, undiverted by the deductions of truth, or the sober realities of existence, it will too often prove the cause of acute misery, of melancholy, and even of distraction.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Literary Hours. p. 29.

Leigh Hunt wrote a few lines on Tasso's derangement in

The Reflector:

No wonder poor Torquato went distracted,  
On whose gall'd senses just such pranks were acted,  
When the small tyrant, God knows on what ground,  
With dungeons and with doctors hemm'd him round.

He added an illuminating footnote:

... One can never hear without indignation, of the state to which this unfortunate genius was reduced by a petty Italian prince, the Duke of Ferrara, who, from some mysterious jealousy, chose to regard his morbid sensibility as madness, and not only locked him up, but drenched him with nauseous medicines.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that T. L. Peacock was also interested in Tasso's life and work, possibly because of his own researches in preparation for The Philosophy of Melancholy (1812). He ordered a 'well-printed edition' of Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered from Edward Hookham while he was in Wales in February, 1810, and wrote a few weeks later

Such is the disposition of all votaries of the muses, and, in some measure, of all metaphysicians: for the sensitive and the studious are generally prone to melancholy, and the melancholy are usually subject to intervals of boisterous mirth. Poor Cowper was a lamentable instance, and Tasso...<sup>39</sup>

The status of Edmund Spenser as an epic poet, with particular reference to The Faerie Queene, also became a topic of critical attention. Spenser's poem offered a worthwhile opportunity to critics of the epic in their comments on structure in epic poetry. The latter half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth saw the publication of several editions of Spenser's work.

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<sup>38</sup>I (October 1810-March 1811), p. 362 and note.

<sup>39</sup>H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones, eds., The Halliford Edition of the Works of Thomas Love Peacock. 1934, VIII, 180, 183-184.

These editions were invariably prefaced by essays reprinted from earlier editions. It is not known for certain which edition of Spenser Shelley owned. He requested the 'Cheapest poss edit.' from Thomas Hookham in December, 1812, and an edition was presumably acquired for him on the receipt of the order, since the item is crossed through in the manuscript.<sup>40</sup> It has been suggested that Shelley had a four volume edition of Spenser's Works in his library by the autumn of 1819.<sup>41</sup> R. Church's four volume edition of 1758-59, also owned by Godwin<sup>42</sup> is the most likely candidate, although Hookham would have been able to supply Shelley with the six volume Hughes edition, which was one of the cheapest on the market at eighteen shillings for the set.<sup>43</sup> Apart from the Church and Hughes editions, J. Upton's 1758 edition was popular, and Southey acquired it for his library.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps the most critically comprehensive edition of Spenser to appear at the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, was the sumptuous - and expensive - version by H. J. Todd.<sup>45</sup> Hookham

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<sup>40</sup>Letters, I, 342.

<sup>41</sup>Jean de Palacio, 'Shelley's Library Catalogue', Revue de Littérature Comparée, XXXVI (1962), 271, 273.

<sup>42</sup>Seamus Deane, ed., Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons, 1973, VIII, 309, item 694.

<sup>43</sup>See Appendix 2.

<sup>44</sup>Roy Park, ed., Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons, 1974, IX, 218, item 2720.

<sup>45</sup>H. J. Todd, ed., The Works of Edmund Spenser, 8 vols, 1805.

offered this for sale at four pounds four shillings,<sup>46</sup> and Leigh Hunt owned it.<sup>47</sup> Todd's edition is significant because it was available to Shelley to read or browse through at Leigh Hunt's or for perusal in Hookham's reading rooms: importantly, it contained a comprehensive reprinting of discussions pertaining to epic structure and allegory in Spenser. I consider the topic of epic structure towards the end of this chapter and the topic of allegory fully in Chapter 3. Both are prominent in my reading of Queen Mab and Laon and Cythna, as Chapters 4 and 6 demonstrate.

Spenser, like Tasso, was admitted to the ranks of the epic poets, albeit with reservations. As I have noted, Shelley considered Spenser an epic poet, but not of the highest order. Mickle's essay prefacing his translation of Camoëns' The Lusiad in the 1809 edition allowed Spenser the title of epic poet:

The term Epopoeia is derived from the Greek Ἔπος, discourse. and hence the epic, may be rendered the narrative poem. In the full latitude of this definition ... Telemachus and the Fairie Queene are also epic poems.<sup>48</sup>

Wilkie's preface to The Epigoniad considers the allegorical element of Spenser's epic (op. cit. x-xi), and Upton's preface to his Spenser maintains that it was Sir Philip Sidney who prompted Spenser to 'leave his rural retreats for the court, and his rustic for the Epic Muse.'<sup>49</sup>

Ariosto, Tasso and Spenser began to figure more prominently in discussions about epic poetry towards the end of the eighteenth century, as is evidenced by the increased volume of translations and

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<sup>46</sup>See Appendix 2.

<sup>47</sup>Leigh Hunt's autograph copy of Todd's The Works of Edmund Spenser is now in the John Foster Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, no. 8307.

<sup>48</sup>Camoëns' The Lusiad. or, the Discovery of India, translated by W. J. Mickle, 1809, p. lxxix. First published in 1776.

<sup>49</sup>J. Upton, ed., The Faerie Queene. 1758, I, pp. xv-xvi.

new editions being published during this period. The widening of scope from an established centre of criticism focusing primarily on classical epic brought with it a growing scepticism: doubts as to the inviolability of the genre and rule distinctions, entrenched in critical thinking about epic since Aristotle, began to arise.

It became difficult to think of the epic as a distinct genre at all for some critics, while others questioned the desirability of genre criticism, allowing the creative artist more freedom to write in his own individual 'epic' style. Much depended upon the critic's own views about the business of writing poetry. One writer might regret the inapplicability of a classical paradigm for judging what appeared to be an 'epic' but censure it for not following classical models, another might recognise some epical quality in a long narrative poem without wishing to classify it at all. Lord Kames adopted a non-formalist position in his Elements of Criticism (1762) when he spoke of the 'shallow critics', who

... always take for granted, without the least foundation, that there must be some precise criterion to distinguish epic poetry from every other species of writing. Literary compositions run into each other, precisely like colours: in their strong tints they are easily distinguished; but are susceptible of so much variety, and take on so many different forms, that we never can say where one species ends and another begins.

(7th edn., 1788, II, 371, note)

Blair echoed Kames' view in his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783). After stating that Homer, Virgil and Tasso represent the most regular epic productions, he says 'to exclude all Poems from the Epic Class, which are not formed exactly upon the same model as these, is the pedantry of Criticism' (2nd edn., 1785, III, 207). In this way, he is able to go on to consider a number of poems which, for him, are epic: Milton's Paradise Lost, Lucan's Pharsalia, Statius' Thebaid, Ossian's Fingal and Temora, Camoën's The Lusiad, Voltaire's Henriade, Cambray's Telemachus, Glover's Leonidas, and Wilkie's The Epigoniad.

The tolerance of Kames and Blair is reflected at the beginning of the nineteenth century: Charles Bedford, Southey's former school friend at Westminster School, reviewed Southey's poem Roderick, the Last of the Goths (1814) very favourably in the April 1815 number of the Quarterly Review. After commenting on Southey's versification and language, he adds 'For the mode in which Mr. Southey has treated his subject he alone is answerable; it is built upon no model, there is nothing which even the rage for classification can class with it.'<sup>50</sup>

The second half of the eighteenth century saw an increasing tendency towards questioning the role and relevance of Aristotelian and neoclassical precepts, both in the practice and in the criticism of epic poetry. H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., in a survey of epic criticism in England from 1650 to 1800, has argued that there is a correspondence between this critical scepticism and certain changes in literary writing towards the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>51</sup> Such a conclusion is readily available from the evidence presented on the basis of some critical writings, but it is perhaps more accurate to argue that the reaction against the 'rules' was less pervasive and certainly more equivocal than appears at first sight.

Whatever the intensity of opposition to the 'rules', this opposition was usually motivated by a number of different factors: the desire to retain artistic freedom, to avoid becoming a servile imitator of Homer and Virgil and a slave of the critics when writing epic; a wish to accommodate as epic poets those who did not fit readily into the Aristotelian mould. The current of critical feeling

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<sup>50</sup>XIII, 113.

<sup>51</sup>'Rules and English Critics of the Epic 1650-1800', SP, XXXV, No. 4 (October 1938), 587.

running against the applicability of genre and rule criticism was balanced, as I show in the latter part of this chapter, by an equally well articulated body of opinion for them.

Robert Southey exemplifies the paradoxical nature of these cross-currents of critical opinion. He obviously sympathised with the idea that an adherence to the 'rules' could unfairly discriminate against those works which clearly demonstrate epical quality. In his preface to Joan of Arc he asserted:

The lawless magic of Ariosto, and the singular theme as well as the singular excellence of Milton, render all rules of epic poetry inapplicable to these authors; so likewise to Spenser, the favourite of my childhood, from whose frequent perusal I have always found increased delight.

(1796 edn., vii)

In general, Southey seems to have felt quite keenly that prescriptive rules which hampered the free play of creative talent should be abandoned. There is little doubt that he aspired to the title of 'epic poet'; also, that a section of contemporary critical opinion perhaps celebrated the laws of epic poetry too enthusiastically for his liking. He clearly designated the first edition of Joan of Arc (1796) an 'Epic Poem', and in the preface called his prospective Madoc 'an Epic Poem on the discovery of America'. Yet the work which immediately succeeded Joan of Arc, his Thalaba, the Destroyer (1801) was sub-titled 'a Metrical Romance' and thereafter Southey would have little to do with the term epic as a description of his work, even if contemporary reviewers regarded them as epics.

Southey may have adopted this attitude because, in his opinion, the standard of the increasing number of poems entitled 'epic' was shallow, and he wished no comparisons to be made; possibly, he was also averse to the idea of his work being evaluated according to rules that he did not recognize. The announcement in 1804 of the

forthcoming publication of Kadoc as an epic poem prompted Southey to comment somewhat defensively 'the name, of which I was once over-fond, has nauseated me, and, moreover, should seem to render me amenable to certain laws which I do not acknowledge.'<sup>52</sup> The unhappiness stated some eight years previously about the laws of epic poetry is still present, but now is expressed in forthright terms. It is worth noting that Southey's rejection, in prose comment, of the 'rules' was not necessarily borne out in poetic practice: one neoclassical rule, that the epic poem should begin with a proposition of the epic action, is followed by Southey in Joan of Arc, as I have noted ('... of France preserv'd/By maiden hand.../I sing.').

There is a significant appendage at the end of William Wilkie's epic poem The Epigoniad, in the 1769 edition, which appears to demonstrate the concern of late eighteenth century writers of epic with the weight of neoclassical rules applied by critics to their work. In Wilkie's poem, the critic is Homer himself. Wilkie added 'A Dream: in the Manner of Spenser' to The Epigoniad, a fairly lengthy poem written in Spenserian stanzas. In this dream, Wilkie imagines himself falling asleep, only to awake in the midst of a classically pastoral scene, suspiciously similar to the Vale of Tempe in ancient Greece. He is then spoken to by Homer, who reproaches him for the lack of variety in his poem. Wilkie defends himself:

Certes, quoth I, the critics are the cause  
Of this, and many other mischiefs more;  
Who tie the Muses to such rigid laws,  
That all their songs are frivolous and poor.  
They cannot now, as oft they did before,  
Ere pow'rful prejudice had clipt their wings,  
Nature's domain, with boundless flight explore,  
And traffick freely in her precious things:  
Each bard now fears the rod, and trembles while he sings.

(Verse VI, p. 222)

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<sup>52</sup>C. C. Southey, ed., The Life and Correspondence of the late Robert Southey, II, 274-275.

He continues, complaining that his age is 'our dull, degenerate, age of lead' (Verse VII). Homer retorts that the poet as creative artist should exercise his own individuality:

I ween, quoth he, that poets are to blame  
When they submit to critics tyranny:  
For learned wights there is no greater shame,  
Than blindly with their dictates to comply.

(Verse VIII, p. 223)

Homer then advises Wilkie to follow the light of his own genius when composing:

Therefore each bard should freely entertain  
The hints which pleasing fancy gives at will;  
Nor curb her sallies with too strict a rein,  
Nature subjecting to her hand-maid Skill:  
And you yourself in this have done but ill;  
With many more, who have not comprehended  
That Genius, cramp't, will rarely mount the hill,  
Whose forked summit with the clouds is blended:  
Therefore, when next you write, let this defect be mended.

(Verse IX, p. 224)

Now, whether Wilkie's Dream is an apologia designed to forestall further criticism of his poem, or an open rejection of the critics' 'rules', it is difficult to say: yet the concern with neoclassical laws for writing epic poetry is clearly articulated.

Some illuminating comments on the shortcomings of both genre and rule criticism were made in the Retrospective Review for 1823 by a reviewer of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, who began by questioning the authority of Homer and Virgil as models for epic writers to imitate:

Homer and Virgil are authorities only to those who tread in their footsteps, but that an epic poet should be obliged to tread in their steps, is a theory founded upon erroneous principles, or at least on principles which we cannot reconcile with our ideas of narrative poetry, which is only another name for epic poetry.

(VIII, p. 146)

The reviewer goes on to expose the essential circularity of critical judgements based upon genre criticism, judgements which hold good for rule criticism as well:

It [the Orlando Furioso] evidently belongs to none of the acknowledged species of poetry; but the critics, finding it approached nearer to the heroic epic than to any other, have called it an heroic poem ... Hence they have condemned it almost from beginning to end, because from beginning to end, it transgresses every law of heroic poetry.

(p. 149)

This point-of-view leads the critic to the formulation of his own rule; his rejection of one established 'rule' is accompanied by the adoption of another:

The only rule, however, which nature obliges him to observe, is consistency, that is, to take care that no part of his poem should be at variance with what he proposes at setting out.

(p. 159)

Another critic who objected to any rigid adherence to the 'rules' was William Hayley. His Essay on Epic Poetry (1782)<sup>53</sup> is central to my discussion of innovatory attitudes to epic. Hayley's Essay, a poem on the subject of epic poetry, with copious notes, discussed issues and stimulated thinking with regard to epic poetry. Although Hayley presented some already familiar ideas, he also suggested several new departures, e.g. the use of non-classical and non-Christian mythologies in the writing of epic. It is worth examining Hayley and his Essay in a little detail, since his work does focus on several issues already discussed or mentioned. It is also to be noted that Hayley's Essay was available to Shelley, since Thomas Hookham offered it for sale at thirteen shillings; the work was a popular text, being regularly stocked by Hookham over a number of years.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>All my references are to Sister M. Celeste Williamson, ed., An Essay on Epic Poetry, Scholars' Facsimilies and Reprints, Gainesville, Florida, 1968.

<sup>54</sup>See Appendix 2.

William Hayley was the object of largely disparaging criticism from his contemporaries; his uneasy patronage of William Blake, whose unflattering epigrams have been taken as definitive statements on their relationship, is perhaps the best known example of this. Hazlitt dealt slightly with Hayley, happy that he had 'out-lived one generation of favourite poets',<sup>55</sup> and Leigh Hunt dismissed him completely as 'a sort of powder-puff of a man, with no real manhood in him, but fit only to suffocate people with his frivolous vanity, and be struck aside with contempt.'<sup>56</sup> Hunt's comments are personal, not critical of Hayley's work.

Two of Hayley's contemporaries, Southey and Coleridge, had only positive things to say about the notes to Hayley's Essay. Coleridge asserted that they were read by 'almost every literary man ... with pleasure & gratitude',<sup>57</sup> and Southey reviewed Hayley's Memoirs in 1825, remarking 'greater effect was produced upon the rising generations of scholars, by the Notes to his Essay on Epic Poetry, than by any other contemporary work the Relics of Ancient Poetry alone excepted.'<sup>58</sup>

Hayley was praised not only for his stimulating observations on epic poetry, but also for the qualities of judgement and fairness that his work revealed. John Ogilvie, although taking issue with Hayley on the matter of epic machinery in the epic poem, had this to say about the tone and presentation of Hayley's arguments:

In the critique of Mr. Hayley, there is an apparent candour and impartiality, which impressed upon my mind a favourable pre-possession of his character. And I am pleased to find,

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<sup>55</sup>P. P. Howe, ed., The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, 1930-1934, V, 146.

<sup>56</sup>John Morpurgo, ed., The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt, 1949, 224.

<sup>57</sup>E. L. Griggs, ed., Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, II, 963.

<sup>58</sup>Quarterly Review, XXXI (December 1824 and March 1825), 283.

that after having in this candid spirit given fair play to modern authors on both sides of the question; he seems to suspend pronouncing a final judgement, with a mind open (as that of every dispassionate inquirer will be) to the suggestions of unbiassed reflection.

('A Critical Dissertation on Epic Machinery',  
The Britannia, 1802, p. 31)

Hayley's Essay is composed of five Epistles, each of which deals with one significant aspect of the practice or criticism of epic poetry in Europe from Homer to the eighteenth century. Epistle I focuses uncompromisingly upon the fetters that criticism places on the aspiring epic poet; Epistle II and Epistle III trace the development of the epic from Homer through to Milton; Epistle IV discusses the nature of poetic genius; Epistle V considers the role of the supernatural in epic and suggests some new lines of departure for the epic poet. The notes which gloss the text of the poem contain a fund of discussion on critical epic theory and epic practice, and also give Hayley the opportunity to insert his own translations from the Italian and Spanish epic poets who he considers in the poem: he includes, therefore, his versions of sections from Dante's 'Inferno' and Ercilla's La Araucana.

Hayley's motives for embarking upon the Essay are partly set forth in note VII to the first Epistle:

My serious desire is to examine and refute the prejudices which have produced, as I apprehend, the neglect of the Heroic Muse: I wish to kindle in our Poets a warmer sense of national honour, with ambition to excel in the noblest province of poesy.<sup>59</sup>

Hayley was anxious to point out that criticism did not help the potential epic poet, a view similar to that expressed by Wilkie in his Dream. Most of the first Epistle is taken up with this theme:

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<sup>59</sup>An Essay on Epic Poetry, p. 137.

Let us, and Freedom be our guide, explore  
 The highest province of poetic lore,  
 Free the young Bard from that oppressive awe,  
 Which feels Opinion's rule as Reason's law,  
 And from his spirit bid vain fears depart,  
 Of weaken'd Nature and exhausted Art!

(29-34)

The two main targets for Hayley's censure are William Warburton, whose Dissertation on the sixth Book of Virgil is cited;<sup>60</sup> and also the French neoclassical critic Le Bossu: in Hayley's view, the 'cold comments of this Gallic judge' (Epistle I, 240) have dampened rather than revived the spirits of young poets. Hoole was later to praise Hayley for taking this line in the preface to his 1807 translation of Ariosto, '... an elegant poet of our own time, who, in taking a review of several epic writers, where, in a most spirited manner, he asserts the superiority of genius and fancy over rule and system.'<sup>61</sup> Shelley also recognized the potentially oppressive nature of criticism in his Preface to Laon and Cythna:

But in this, as in every other respect, I have written fearlessly. It is the misfortune of this age, that its Writers, too thoughtless of immortality, are exquisitely sensible to temporary praise or blame. They write with the fear of Reviews before their eyes ... this species of criticism never presumed to assert an understanding of its own: it has always, unlike true science, followed, not preceded the opinion of mankind, and would even now bribe with worthless adulation some of our greatest Poets to impose gratuitous fetters on their own imaginations, and become unconscious accomplices in the daily murder of all genius.

(Julian, I, 245)

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>61</sup>L. Ariosto, Orlando Furioso, translated by J. Hoole, 1807, I, 31. First published in 1783.

The second and third Epistles of Hayley's Essay considerably extended the field of epic poetry for the late eighteenth century reader. Hayley's lines on Trissino, Spenser, Ariosto, Dante and Tasso, for example, attempted to encourage the reader to take a more tolerant and liberal view towards poets hitherto discounted by many as epic poets. It can be said, therefore, that Hayley's poem and its notes at least complemented the claims made by some contemporary critics for the status of epic to be awarded to the work of Ariosto, Spenser and Tasso, and contributed to the revival of interest in these poets. Hayley takes up the subject of Tasso, in particular, and in a note to the third Epistle records with satisfaction that Tasso has been ably defended in Hurd's Letters of Chivalry and Romance (1762) against the criticisms of Voltaire and Boileau.

There are three respects in which Hayley's Essay makes recommendations for the future development of epic poetry. The first is his suggestion that epic poets should be female and a corollary to this, that women in epic poetry should be elevated to the status of major characters. Hayley discounts the prejudice against female epic poets:

Thou braggart, Prejudice, how oft thy breath  
Has doom'd young Genius to the shades of death!  
How often has thy voice, with brutal fire  
Forbidding Female hands to touch the lyre,  
Deny'd to Woman, Nature's fav'rite child,  
The right to enter Fancy's opening wild!

(Epistle IV, 81-86)

In note XIII to two lines from the third Epistle

So, haughty Gallia, in thy Epic school,  
No great Examples rise, but many a Rule,

(301-302)

Hayley introduces 'the very curious question, ... whether the action of a woman can be sufficiently splendid to prove a proper subject for

an Epic poem.' (p. 278). He takes as his starting point the views of the Jesuit priest Mambrun, whose Dissertatio Peripatetica de Epico Carmine (1652) had invoked Aristotle in deciding the question against the inclusion of the female character. Hayley is not satisfied with this, and his research uncovers a response by the French critic and epic poet Chapelain to the 'ungallant maxims of Mambrun and Aristotle'. Chapelain is quoted by Hayley as arguing that heroic virtue has nothing to do with physical strength:

Ils se devoient souvenir que cette vertu n'a presque rien à faire avec le corps, et qu'elle consiste, non dans les efforts d'un Milon de Crotone, où l'esprit n'a aucune part, mais en ceux des ames nées pour les grandes choses.

(ibid., p. 279)<sup>62</sup>

It is absurd to suppose, Chapelain says, that heroic virtue should exist in the soul of man and not also in that of woman.

Hayley's 'curious question' arises from his previous citation and note to Ercilla's La Araucana in the third Epistle:

The brave ERCILLA sounds, with potent breath,  
His Epic trumpet in the fields of death.

(239-240)

He summarizes Ercilla's poem and gives translated extracts in note X of the third Epistle. Ercilla's poem is based upon the struggles between the Indians and Spaniards in Arauco, Chile, during the sixteenth century. In canto VII the Spaniards abandon the city of Concepcion. At this point, Hayley says, 'the Poet introduces the following instance of female heroism' with the figure of 'the lovely

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<sup>62</sup>They ought to bear in mind that this virtue has almost no connection with the physical body, and that it is not exemplified in the struggles of a Milo of Crotone /Olympic athlete in the 6th century B.C., renowned for his strength/ where the spirit plays no part, but rather in those of souls born for higher things'.  
(my translation)

Mencia, an accomplished Dame', who urges the Spaniards to return and confront the Indians. Hayley's translation of these lines runs:

More poignant grief see generous Mencia feel,  
 More noble proof she gives of patriot zeal:  
 Waving a sword in her heroic hand,  
 In their tame march she stopt the timid band;  
 Cross'd the ascending road before their van,  
 And, turning to the city, thus began:  
 'Thou valiant nation, whose unequalled toils  
 Have dearly purchas'd fame and golden spoils,  
 Where is the courage ye so oft display'd  
 Against this foe, from who ye shrink dismay'd?'

(p. 230)

Hayley's interest in the notion of female heroism, as demonstrated by his references to Chapelain and La Araucana was shared by Shelley. In Laon and Cythna the female character in the title is presented as an heroic figure like Mencia and Shelley also made an explicit memorandum reference to Ercilla in one of the working notebooks used for drafts of the poem. I discuss these points in Chapter 6.

The second respect in which Hayley suggests a future approach to epic poetry is his recommendation regarding the choice of mythology to be used in epic. The importance of this recommendation is that he turns away from the traditional practice of praising Classical and Christian mythology. In the fifth Epistle he asserts of the Epic Muse:

That Heaven and Hell can yield her nothing more;  
 Yet may she dive to many a secret source  
 And copious spring of visionary force:  
 India yet holds a Mythologic mine,  
 Her strength may open, and her art refine:  
 Tho' Asian spoils the realms of Europe fill  
 Those Eastern riches are unrifled still;  
 Genius may there his course of honour run,  
 And spotless Laurals in that field be won.

(268-276)

Hayley glosses this passage in a note to the last line:

The Indian mythology, as it has lately been illustrated in the writings of Mr. Holwell, is finely calculated to answer the purpose of any poetical genius who may wish to introduce new machinery into the serious Epic Poem. Besides the powerful charm of novelty, it would have the advantage of not clashing with our national religion;

(Note III, p. 297)

Again, Hayley's Essay provides a relevant context for reading Shelley: in Alastor and Laon and Cythna Shelley makes use of non-Christian mythologies, quite possibly taking up Hayley's recommendations directly from a knowledge of the Essay.

The last respect in which Hayley's Essay provoked fresh thinking on the epic was his emphasis upon freedom and the opposition to repression as a major theme for epic poetry. This suggestion was not original, of course, many late eighteenth century epics could have derived their exhortations to freedom from much earlier examples of this. Hayley, however, emphasizes freedom as a major theme for epic and keeps this idea firmly in front of the reader:

Tho' like thy CATO thy stern Muse appear,  
Her manners rigid, and her frown austere;  
Like him, still breathing Freedom's genuine flame,  
Justice her idol, Public Good her aim,

(Epistle II, 248-251)

In these lines Hayley is praising Lucan - 'Thou Bard of Freedom!' - but he sees a patriotic context for this theme of freedom, an epic poem which would celebrate Britain's history and people:

Yet nobler aims the Bards of Britain court,  
Who steer by Freedom's star to Glory's port;  
Our gen'rous Isle, with far superior claim,  
Asks for her Chiefs the palm of Epic fame.

While, led by Fancy thro' her wide domain,  
 Our steps advance around her Epic plain;  
 While we survey each laural that it bore,  
 And every confine of the realm explore,  
 See Liberty, array'd in light serene,  
 Fours her rich lustre o'er th'expanding scene!

(Epistle V, 277-280, 305-310)

The ideals of freedom and liberty are thematic centres in Queen Mab and Laon and Cythna also, but Shelley's treatment of them extends their significance into wider contexts than those normally invoked by contemporary epics (see Chapters 4 and 6).

Hayley's Essay on Epic Poetry was praised for its presentation of epic criticism commended by Southey, Coleridge, Hoole and Ogilvie, and undoubtedly contained implications for the writing of epic which did not pass unnoticed by Hayley's contemporaries. Peter Hegin has maintained that Hayley's views were disregarded by his contemporaries.<sup>63</sup> Shelley, however, may well have known of the Essay on Epic Poetry from Hookham's circulating library and pursued Hayley's suggestions regarding the female heroine, mythology and freedom in his poems Alastor and Laon and Cythna.

Brian Wilkie's study of the Romantic poets and epic<sup>64</sup> makes no mention of Hayley. Wittreich links Hayley specifically to Blake, but his paper makes some puzzling claims about Hayley's views which do not appear to be confirmed or substantiated by a close reading of the Essay.<sup>65</sup> Swedenberg, however, does recognize the significance of Hayley for epic theory, even if one might wish to argue that there is more subtlety in Hayley's approach than the

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<sup>63</sup>The Epic Hero and the Decline of Heroic Poetry. p. 69.

<sup>64</sup>Romantic Poets and the Epic Tradition, 1965.

<sup>65</sup>'Domes of Mental Pleasure: Blake's Epics and Hayley's Epic Theory'; see also J. A. Wittreich, Jr., Angel of Apocalypse: Blake's Idea of Milton. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1975, in which he repeats these claims.

'violent frontal attacks'<sup>66</sup> which Swedenberg defines as Hayley's reaction to many of his contemporaries' views.

The final innovatory attitude towards epic relevant to Shelley in the epic criticism of the period is the growing importance attached to the sublime and moving elements in epic poetry. In his Preface to Laon and Cythna Shelley wrote:

I would only awaken the feelings, so that the reader should see the beauty of true virtue, and be incited to those inquiries which have led to my moral and political creed, and that of some of the sublimest intellects in the world.

(Julian, I, 239)

Shelley stresses here that his aim is to stimulate or move his readers' sensibilities, to awaken the feelings as a necessary stage in the process of reaching certain intellectual conclusions about morality and politics. The twin elements of this process are summarized in the phrase 'sublimest intellects'. It is worth noting, therefore, that contemporary epic criticism recognized the growing importance of the beautiful and moving elements in epic poetry.

Hugh Blair had emphasised these elements in his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, using the phrase 'awaken the feelings', which is repeated in Shelley. Blair urged the epic poet not to write continually on the same plane of heroic action, presenting deeds of valour and battles, but '... he must study to touch our hearts,' because 'The more an Epic Poem abounds with situations which awaken the feelings of humanity, the more interesting it is; and these form, always, the favourite passages of the work. I know no Epic Poets so happy in this respect as Virgil and Tasso.' (op.cit. III, p. 219).

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<sup>66</sup> H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., The Theory of the Epic in England, 1650-1800, University of California Publications in English, XV, New York, 1972 (Reprint), p. 94.

Writers of, and about, epic after Blair echoed these views. Joseph Cottle, in his preface to the first edition of Alfred, an Epic Poem, (1800), took pains to point out to his readers the following:

The unchangeable, inexhaustible, and only true sources of interest, are our feelings and passions. With this conviction, I have been more solicitous to find an avenue to the heart, than to invent systems of machinery.

(p. iii)

The sublime element in epic poetry came to be highly valued, and discussions of epic poetry frequently brought in sublimity and grandeur as desired characteristics of epic. The aim was not simply to present the reader with a grand arena for acts of heroism but rather to achieve an emotional sublimity which would engage the feelings profoundly, on a level deeper than that of mere interest. Henry Fuseli described epic as 'the loftiest species of human conception, ... the sublime allegory of a maxim'<sup>67</sup> and Wordsworth wrote to Southey in 1815 'Epic poetry, of the highest class, requires in the first place an action eminently influential, an action with a grand or sublime train of consequences;'<sup>68</sup>

Critics differed, of course, in their opinions as to the relative importance of the sublime to the other elements of the epic poem, even though it became more frequently discussed. John Ogilvie placed great importance on it, asserting 'Such is the base of two pillars that support the superb mansion of the Epic Queen; the Sublime, and the Marvellous'.<sup>69</sup> Lucien Bonaparte, French author of

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<sup>67</sup>J. Knowles, ed., The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, 1831, II, 196.

<sup>68</sup>The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, edited by Ernest de Selincourt, 3 vols, 2nd edn., rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill, 1970, III, 268.

<sup>69</sup>'A Critical Dissertation on Epic Machinery' in Britannia: a National Epic Poem, 1801, p. 13.

the epic poem Charlemagne (2 vols, 1815) had ample time to reflect on such matters as he finished his poem in England during a period of captivity in the Napoleonic Wars. He considered sublimity to be the defining poetic virtue of Homer and Virgil: 'The admirable beauties of Virgil, and especially of Homer, consist in sublime traits taken from nature.' (Preface, I, p. xvii). The sublime in epic poetry became a highly valued feature: Fuseli's phrase 'sublime allegory' is explicated in the next chapter and examined in relation to Alastor and Laon and Cythna in Part II.

To summarize this section of the chapter, it has been argued that innovatory attitudes towards epic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century embraced a revival of interest in the Italian romance epic and Spenser's The Faerie Queene, a biographical approach to epic poets, Hayley's Essay, scepticism with regard to the 'rules' and a concern with the sublime. Shelley's Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna reflect, in part, these attitudes as Chapters 4 to 6 seek to demonstrate.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to suggest that there was a largely one-sided movement against Aristotelian and neoclassical epic theory and practice during the period. Donald M. Foerster argues that this was the case: 'The critical writings of the Romantic period reveal, almost without exception, a quite definite break with the older conception of epic.'<sup>70</sup> Yet cross-currents of epic criticism also ran strongly in favour of Aristotelian and neoclassical precepts. These are equally significant in my appraisal of Shelley's narratives, as Part II makes clear. The pro-Aristotelian and neoclassical views directly relevant to Shelley concern the

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<sup>70</sup>'The Critical Attack upon the Epic in the English Romantic Movement', p. 434.

question of epic unity and structure, the centrality of a hero in epic poetry, and the topic of probability in epic. A discussion of these forms the concluding section of this chapter.

Those of Shelley's contemporaries who adopted an established approach to epic theory and practice derived their standards and models directly or indirectly from two works: Aristotle's Poetics and René Le Bossu's Traité du poème épique (Paris, 1693). The latter, translated into English in 1695 by a certain 'Mr. W. J.',<sup>71</sup> was republished in two volumes in 1719, and became a standard work of epic criticism used throughout the eighteenth, and into the nineteenth, centuries. Thomas Hookham the bookseller, for example, kept the 1719 edition available to his subscribers for a number of years, so Shelley had access to it.<sup>72</sup>

Aristotle was frequently invoked as the most reliable authority and standard by which poetry claiming epic status was judged. A poem with pretensions to epic identity would stand or fall according to its conformity or non-conformity with Aristotelian rules. The reviewer of Charles Hoyle's Exodus (1807) was favourably impressed with this Christian epic, declaring

... we resolved to ... apply our aged eyes to the task of measuring Mr. Hoyle's poetical altitude, not by the random glass of our own calculation, but by the quadrant and plummet of Aristotelian criticism. After applying this surer test to the performance, our veneration for the poem has considerably increased.<sup>73</sup>

Aristotle's mantle of authority was taken over by Le Bossu at the end of the seventeenth century. Despite attacks on his work in

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<sup>71</sup>All my references are to Stuart Curran, ed., Le Bossu and Voltaire on the Epic. Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, Gainesville, Florida, 1970.

<sup>72</sup>See Appendix 2.

<sup>73</sup>Edinburgh Review. XI (January 1808), 363.

Voltaire's Essay on Epic Poetry (1727), Le Bossu's treatise was highly influential and widely read. A critic of Wilkie's The Epigoniad regretted that Wilkie had 'paid little respect to Bossu's rule', in 1757;<sup>74</sup> and John Ogilvie quoted Le Bossu on 'Whether the presence of a God dishonours a Hero?' - a frequent topic of discussion - in 'A Critical Dissertation on Epic Machinery' (p. 10) prefacing his Britannia: A National Epic Poem (1802).

Le Bossu defined the epic poem as follows:

The EPOPEA is a Discourse invented by Art, to form the Manners by such Instructions as are disguis'd under the Allegories of some one important Action, which is related in Verse, after a probable, diverting, and surprizing Manner.

(p. 6)

Le Bossu's most important contribution to epic theory is his emphasis upon the moral and allegorical elements of epic poetry: I shall examine the latter in the next chapter. He raises some issues crucial to Aristotle's treatment of epic in the Poetics i.e. unity of action and plot, character and probability: these were to become central, even though modified, to later eighteenth century discussions of epic. They bear importantly upon Shelley's Queen Mab and Leon and Cythna, the question of epic unity and overall structure being of particular interest.

The question of unity in the epic poem is a highly complex one, which Le Bossu discusses and develops in the second book of his Treatise. It is a question which was taken up in Shelley's day, and which figured prominently in discussions of one poet in particular: Edmund Spenser. Contemporary editions of Spenser's works e.g. the 1805 Todd edition, contained essays on unity in the epic poem by earlier commentators.

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<sup>74</sup>Rev. Wilkie, 'A Critical Essay on the Epigoniad', 1757, p. 12.

Aristotle had defined that essential element of tragedy and epic, the plot, in the twenty-third chapter of the Poetics. The plot 'should centre upon a single action, whole and complete, and having a beginning, a middle, and an end, so that like a single complete organism the poem may produce its own special kind of pleasure.'<sup>75</sup>

Unity in the epic poem, it came to be recognized, was best achieved by adhering to the Aristotelian idea of imitative action: unity of action was a prime requisite of epic poetry. Closely related to this was the requirement that the plot should present the action in a poem which constituted a unified whole, in which all the constituent parts and incidents were patterned in a connected relationship. There were, therefore, two problems involved in this question of unity. First, since poetry is a mimetic or representational art, how does the epic poet represent the action of his poem as a unified action? Second, how does the plot of the poem contribute to the overall and structural wholeness of the work, so that 'like a single and complete organism the poem may produce its own special kind of pleasure'?

Attempts to answer questions about epic unity had been made, of course, as early as the sixteenth century in Italy; Trissino and Cinthio had argued the relative merits of Virgil and Ariosto as epic poets: Virgil was seen as exemplifying the Aristotelian unity of action, Ariosto as multiplying the action of the poem. In England, the question of unity began to centre on an examination of Spenser's The Faerie Queene and Ariosto's Orlando Furioso.

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<sup>75</sup>Aristotle, 'On the Art of Poetry', Classical Literary Criticism, edited by T. S. Dorsch, Baltimore, Maryland, 1967 (Reprint), p. 65.

Todd's 1805 edition of Spenser brought together for the first time in one edition the major critical debate on unity in Spenser since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Dr. Hurd, for example, in his Remarks on the Plan and Conduct of the Faerie Queene, suggested two ways in which Spenser might have achieved unity of action in his poem. Hurd sees that Spenser has not followed Aristotle, by allowing the action of his poem to develop into twelve separate knightly adventures. Spenser might have done otherwise, and adhered to classical rules: 'No doubt Spenser might have taken one single adventure, of the Twelve, for the subject of his Poem; or he might have given the principal part in every adventure to Prince Arthur. By this means his fable had been of the classick kind, and its unity as strict as that of Homer and Virgil.'<sup>76</sup> Unity of action, according to Hurd, could be achieved by following through and continuing one single subject of adventure; or, in keeping the hero of the poem - in this case Arthur - constantly before the reader.

John Hoole conceded Ariosto's lack of Aristotelian unity by the first method, consequent upon the interruption of the action. The Orlando Furioso, said Hoole, 'sets forth one great action, the invasion of France by the Saracens, and concludes with the victory of the Christians by the death or defeat of all the pagan leaders, although the great action is broken and interrupted, from time to time, by an infinity of episodes and romantic adventures'.<sup>77</sup>

Some critics and writers of epic in the late eighteenth century agreed with Hurd's second method of achieving unity of action: the continual presence of the hero. James Ogden, for example, in 1790,

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<sup>76</sup>H. J. Todd, ed., The Works of Edmund Spenser. II, p. clxiii.

<sup>77</sup>L. Ariosto, Orlando Furioso, translated by J. Hoole, 1807, I, 14.

wrote in the introductory essay to his The Revolution, an Epic Poem, the following: 'Another principal character of the epic is, unity of Action, which is here maintained throughout; for the principal Hero, or his Rival, are never out of sight.' (op.cit. xvii).

One of Thomas Warton's chief objections to the claim for unity in Spenser was based on this idea of unity through the presence of the epic hero. Warton observed that Spenser did not seem to have due regard for unity of action, since King Arthur was not the 'leading adventurer' in the poem, exemplifying the twelve moral virtues. Instead, says Warton, Spenser allows Arthur to play a definitely subordinate role in the poem: the difficulties and obstacles which should have been confronted by the king being resolved by St. George and Britomart.<sup>78</sup> Of course, Aristotle had warned against interpreting unity solely in terms of one character in Chapter 8 of the Poetics. ('A plot does not possess unity, as some people suppose, merely because it is about one man').<sup>79</sup>

Upton exploited this point against the detractors of Spenser: 'Homer sings the anger of Achilles and its fatal consequences to the Grecians: nor can it be fairly objected to the unity of the Iliad, that, when Achilles is removed from the scene of action, you scarcely hear him mentioned in several books ... What therefore you allow the old Grecian, be not so ungracious as to deny your own countryman.'<sup>80</sup>

An interesting case for unity in Spenser was made by Hurd, whose essay on The Faerie Queene was reprinted in Todd's 1805 edition,

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<sup>78</sup>Todd, II, p. lviii.

<sup>79</sup>Classical Literary Criticism, p. 42.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. lxiv.

together with those of Warton and Upton. Hurd approached Spenser's poem as an essentially 'Gothick' production which, if lacking in classical unity of action, nevertheless exhibited a unity of purpose, 'an unity resulting from the respect which a number of related actions have to one common purpose', this purpose being 'the completion of the Fairie Queene's injunctions'.<sup>81</sup> Clearly, the kind of unity Hurd proposes here is conceptual rather than demonstrably structural: if all the episodes and individual incidents in The Fairie Queene could be identified as figuring the moral virtues of Holiness, Temperance, Chastity etc., then, despite disruptions in the narrative sequence, the poem would have unity of purpose. Hurd does not mean by unity of purpose or design a unity of structural design: this latter interpretation has been frequently made by commentators, but Hurd does not discuss overall structural patterning.

The relationship of the individual parts of the epic poem to each other concerns the unity of the plot, which represents the action. It is this aspect of Aristotelian unity that occurs frequently in discussions of the overall narrative structure of the epic in the writings of Shelley's contemporaries. Aristotle had prescribed that the epic poem should be 'whole and complete', the action being represented by a plot whose arrangement of incidents into a 'unified whole' was of primary importance. Le Bossu commented 'Aristotle finds fault with Incidents that are without any Consequence or Connexion.'<sup>82</sup> It is precisely this word 'connexion' that recurs again and again in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century criticism dealing with the overall structural pattern of epic poetry, as I show presently in this chapter. Also, in Part II it will

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. clviii.

<sup>82</sup> Le Bossu and Voltaire on the Epic, p. 71.

be seen that Shelley's repeated references in his letters to these topics in epic criticism define a more than cursory interest in the problems of epic unity and structure which are directly relevant to Queen Mab and Laon and Cythna.<sup>83</sup>

Ten years before Shelley composed Laon and Cythna ... A Vision of the Nineteenth Century, but only a few years before Queen Mab, a certain Joel Barlow from Philadelphia published The Columbiad (1807), characterised by the Edinburgh Review as a 'transatlantic Epic'.<sup>84</sup> This poem celebrates the discovery of America by Columbus, and ranges backwards and forwards in time to encompass the presentation of an ideal world, free of prejudice and composed of enlightened federated states.

The structural principle that Barlow uses to organize the pattern of the poem into an entity with overall unity and completeness is the vision device, slightly referred to by the reviewer as 'the clumsy and revolving form of a miraculous vision.'<sup>85</sup> Further, the reviewer dismisses the very idea that the poem could have any structural unity if based on a vision form:

It is plain, that in a poem constructed upon such a plan, there can be no development of character, no unity, or even connexion of action, and consequently no interest, and scarcely any coherence or contrivance in the story.<sup>86</sup>

There is in this early nineteenth-century view a useful contrast with a twentieth-century position articulated by Northrop Frye which I quoted previously in Chapter 1: the Romantics' resistance to fragmentation, it could be argued, is illustrated by Barlow's choice

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<sup>83</sup>See below, Chapter 4, pp. 124-130 and Chapter 6, section iii, pp. 261-285.

<sup>84</sup>XV (October 1809), 25.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

of the vision frame as basic organizing structure for The Columbiad. For the early nineteenth century, however, a poem whose fundamental organizing principle is a vision, could not have any 'connexion of ideas' or 'coherence' and consequently fell far short of the Aristotelian requirements.

Southey's Madoc and Walter Scott's Marmion - both of which were treated as epics by the following reviewers - elicited also adverse comment with regard to their coherence and ordering of individual incidents. Southey's poem was divided into two distinct parts, representing Madoc's exploits in Wales and South America. Our reviewer here is clearly reluctant to accept Southey's own opinion that the poem should not be examined as an epic; he summarizes the narrative line of the poem and then observes that it

disdains the 'degraded title of Epic', and pretends not to be 'constructed according to the rules of Aristotle'! The adventures of Madoc in Wales have little interest or coherence in themselves, and bear no relationship whatsoever to his exploits among the savages. The European story, moreover, is not only quite unconnected with the American one, but it is unfinished and imperfect.<sup>87</sup>

The review of Scott's Marmion in the columns of the Edinburgh Review three years later described the poem as an 'epic narrative', objecting to the 'imperfect manner' in which the incidents were developed, finally remarking 'no long poem, however, can maintain its interest without a connected narrative.'<sup>88</sup>

There were poems, however, which were reviewed very favourably as regards their unity and coherence: Hoyle's Exodus survived the measuring instruments of Aristotelian criticism, as I have noted. The

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<sup>87</sup>Edinburgh Review, VII (October 1805), 9.

<sup>88</sup>XII (April 1808), 8.

reviewer approvingly observes:

The subject ought to have unity, greatness and interest; - in two of these respects, Mr. Hoyle is remarkably classical. As the hero of epic song is in the hands of the poet not a drudge of all work, who is to shift from one unconnected adventure to another, but an articulated apprentice, who is to be kept strictly to one business, with the exception of a few episodes intervening like holidays; so the hero of the Exodiade attends, during ten thousand lines, very soberly to the main chance.

(Edinburgh Review, XI, January 1808, 363)

The Italian poets and Spenser were invariably, and for obvious reasons, judged by the Aristotelian critics irregular as regards controlling unified structure. Various charges were levelled, the most common being that the romance epic lacked the narrative continuity of imitative action, and that the complexity of incident and episode led to confusion and obscurity. In Mickle's 'Observations upon Epic Poetry' which prefaced his 1809 translation of Camoëns' The Lusiad, the suggestion that Dante and Ariosto were epic poets is rebutted, because, in Mickle's view, their poems 'consist of various detached actions, which do not constitute one whole' (p. lxxix).

When Percivale Stockdale's two volume Lectures on the truly Eminent English Poets was published in 1807, an opportunity was afforded to the reviewer of the Edinburgh Review to comment upon the arrangement of incidents in Spenser's The Faerie Queene. He remarked:

The story of the Fairy Queen is more like a succession of triumphal arches, than a regular building. We pass on with admiration and delight; but yet both are occasionally cooled by the labyrinthical irregularity of the design.<sup>89</sup>

Aristotle's view that the epic poem should resemble a 'single, complete organism' led both critics and practitioners of epic to look closely at the connexions between individual books of the epic poem, which involved an exploration also of the relationship of

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<sup>89</sup>XII (April 1808), p. 64.

episodic materials to the defined main action of the poem. It was considered a grave defect if any book appeared complete in itself, unconnected with the rest of the poem. This particular criticism was made of Spenser's The Faerie Queene and Joseph Cottle's Alfred (1800): in both poems it was felt that the first book was really an independent and distinct poem.

Thomas Warton's essay on The Faerie Queene discusses this question in his consideration of the views of John Hughes. Hughes had defended the independence of the first book on the grounds that it represented one complete action: 'If we consider the first Book as an entire work of itself, we shall find it to be no irregular contrivance' (Todd, II, p. lix). Warton responds to this by invoking Aristotle's precept:

As the heroick poem is required to be one WHOLE, compounded of many various parts, relative and dependant, it is expedient that not one of those parts should be so regularly contrived, and so completely finished, as to become a WHOLE of itself. For the mind, being once satisfied in arriving at the consummation of an orderly series of events, acquiesces in that satisfaction.

(ibid.)

This problem, discussed in an edition of Spenser readily available to Shelley and his contemporaries, occupies the attention of Joseph Cottle in his epic poem Alfred. In the first edition of the poem, Cottle had attempted to anticipate any adverse criticism of its coherence:

My deviation in the first book ... arose from the particular scope to the imagination which the wildness of the Gothic superstitions afforded. But although this book, in many respects is of an opposite character to the rest, yet, the accurate observer will find in it, certain links and ramifications, which intimately connect it with the remainder of the work.

(Preface, 1800, p. iv)

As I observe in more detail in Chapter 6, Shelley appears to echo these remarks directly in his description of Laon and Cythna in a letter to Longman & Co.:

The first Canto is, indeed, in some measure a distinct poem, tho' very necessary to the wholeness of the work.

(Letters, I, 563)

The severe criticism which Alfred encountered on publication led Cottle to write a lengthy preface to the second edition of 1804. In this preface, he explained that the first book of his poem was necessary to the organic unity of the work:

My first book, by some, has been deemed inconsistent with the rest, and an excrescence which should be sacrificed... I admit that it is different from, but I do not think that it is inconsistent with the remainder of the poem.

(p. x)

Cottle explicitly states his belief that coherence and consistency have been achieved:

But the grand link which connects it [Book One] with the remainder of the poem, arises from the punishment which Ivar experienced, after having murdered a Mariner, and which, contrary to his former thoughts and habits, occasioned him to swear, that, on his arrival in England, he would never again take away the life of an unarmed person.

(ibid.)

In addition to the critical discussions of unity in the epic poem, Shelley's contemporaries considered the identity of the epic hero and the topic of probability in epic. Heroism is generally agreed to be central to any discussion of the epic, although in strictly Aristotelian terms the leading epic character is never described as a hero, but rather referred to simply as 'a man'. Aristotle terms The Odyssey a poem in which 'A man is kept away from

his home for many years'.<sup>90</sup> Neoclassical critics used the word 'hero', however, as did Shelley's contemporaries. It has been pointed out, with some justice, that the eighteenth century had modified the concept of the epic hero away from the idea of the traditional classical hero as conspicuous individual, noble in spirit and dignity, behaving in accordance with his personal sense of freedom.<sup>91</sup>

It is this concept of the Homeric hero that Shelley inclines to in his Defence of Poetry, where he describes the Homeric character as as 'the ideal perfection of his age', the embodiment of 'the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism, and persevering devotion to the object',<sup>92</sup> qualities which transcend history. The neoclassical hero, however, and the type of hero to be found in many late eighteenth century epics, was much more closely identified with a specific national, political or religious cause, and his status depended upon social rank or historically known eminence rather than a nobility of soul or energy of action. One consequence of this was the loss of individual action on the part of the hero: the multiplicity of roles which he was obliged to play - warrior, statesman, moralist - replaced individual heroic action with the collective heroism of large bodies of men.

Historically famous personages were popular as epic heroes. Pye's epic poem Alfred (1801) was certainly not the last in a line of poems whose hero was the English king: Joseph Cottle, James Montgomery, John Fitchett and R. P. Knight all attempted epics with Alfred as the epic hero. The hero of James Ogden's The Revolution (1790) is William, Prince of Orange, much of whose time is taken up with the

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<sup>90</sup>Classical Literary Criticism, p. 55.

<sup>91</sup>Peter Hägin, The Epic Hero and the Decline of Heroic Poetry, pp. 38-44.

<sup>92</sup>Julian, VII, 116.

minutiae of government matters and party politics. In Book XI of this poem, William joins his army in Ireland after regulating his political affairs in England, thereby missing the heroic raising of the siege of Londonderry. The individuality of the leading epic character was gradually eroded by the growing number of other characters involved in the main action. John Ogilvie defined the foundation of the epic fable as a 'mighty event, in which a whole people are involved as having general concern.'<sup>93</sup>

Another important feature of the neoclassical hero was his clearly defined role as an actor in the poem, assisted or hindered by the gods. He was in no sense a projection of the poet's own personality or an embodiment of any psychological complexity: his character was constant, it did not change in any fundamental respect throughout the poem, although development on the publicly observable level was admissible. In Chapters 5 and 6 on Alastor and Laon and Cythna I consider the Poet of Alastor and the title figures of Laon and Cythna. It will be seen that Shelley's conception of the hero in these two poems both shares and diverges from the type of hero familiar in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century epic.

Le Bossu's definition of epic poetry had included the requirement that the action of the poem should be presented in a 'probable' manner. The probability and credibility of incidents and episodes in the epic was a topic connected with the question of the machinery of epic and the element of the marvellous - about which I shall have more to say in the next chapter. Critics usually approached the probability question as an ontological one; the episodes of an epic poem were acceptable in so far as they conformed to a pattern of Lockean realism, and reflected human experience. Allowance was made, of course,

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<sup>93</sup>'A Critical Dissertation on Epic Machinery', p. 13.

for the operation of celestial machinery and scenes of 'pleasing wonder' designed to awaken the sensibilities of the reader, but the basic framework and structure of the epic poem had to adhere to standards of empirical realism. This was viewed by some critics as a test of inventiveness and originality for the epic poet. The reviewer of Southey's The Curse of Kehana, who classified the poem as an epic, recognized this point when he wrote 'The great problem is, to devise incidents that shall be new and striking, and yet conformable, in their great outlines, to truth and human experience.' (Edinburgh Review, XVII, February 1811, p. 451).

Southey's Madoc and Walter Scott's Marmion, besides being attacked on the grounds of general coherence, were also felt to be lacking in probability. Southey's Madoc was considered to have exceeded the limits of 'pleasing wonder' and probability:

In addition to the gross improbabilities resulting from dressing the Welch adventurer in the victories of the Spaniard, there are several of Mr. Southey's fictions, which appear to us to exceed the just limits of 'pleasing wonder'.

(Edinburgh Review, VII, October 1805, p. 13)

Similar sentiments were expressed in the discussion of Scott's Marmion: 'In the third place, we object to the extreme and monstrous improbability of almost all the incidents which go to the composition of this fable'. (Edinburgh Review, XII, April 1808, p. 9).

There were writers, however, who were prepared to lay less emphasis upon an ontological approach, and more on the ethical. A series of articles on epic poetry in Le Beau Monde, running over several months in 1807 and 1808, included a discussion of this point; the writer commences with a definition of epic poetry which he then proceeds to explicate: 'We may therefore define epic poetry to be the recital in verse of an action probable, heroic, and interesting.

We say probable, because the epic poet is not obliged to conform himself to historical truth, but merely to moral probability.<sup>94</sup>

This suggestion adds a further perspective to the issue, since it allows a form of probability in epic poetry other than that of strict empirical reality - the epic poet may concentrate on the moral probability of his characters' actions. Moral probability is quite appropriate to an epic poem, and the writer goes on even further to argue that the poet's business is to make use of ideas, not to prove or disprove them. He introduces the following remarks on the moral beliefs of the ancients:

And, surely, as these traditional tales have been engrafted on the belief of every religious system, a poet may employ them without incurring the charge of absurdity, or inconsistency. They are tales and hypotheses that may be denied by a philosopher which rejects all kinds of miracles: but ought such a philosophy to be the philosophy of poets? Let this philosophy amuse itself with refuting the fables of ancient nations, that is its business; but the business of poetry is to profit by them.

(ibid. p. 232)

Any discussion of the topic of probability in epic which involves Shelley's pre-1818 narratives, however, has to take into account a specific passage in Alastor which was criticized by contemporary reviewers for its apparently improbable character. I take this point up in Chapter 5.

Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century views of epic were not established exclusively along Aristotelian and neoclassical lines. Nevertheless, the rule and measure of Aristotelian based criticism still figured prominently in writings on epic during the period. The issues raised in this chapter have been selected from an extensive

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<sup>94</sup>Le Beau Monde, II (December 1807), 230.

body of material on epic and are relevant to my consideration of the idea of epic exemplified in Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna.

These three pre-1818 narratives have not, hitherto, been read against any background of contemporary epic practice and criticism. This is surprising: Shelley had access to a number of the texts and other sources cited in this chapter and the three poems discussed in Part II appear in many respects to reflect issues of fundamental importance to contemporary practitioners and critics of epic.

The concepts of dream, vision and allegory are also integral to a study of the idea of epic in Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna. The next chapter considers the significance of these concepts to Shelley and his contemporaries, invoking in the discussion several epic poems which, with a reasonable degree of certainty, it is known that Shelley had read.

### CHAPTER 3

#### SHELLEY AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES: DREAM, VISION, AND ALLEGORY IN RELATION TO EPIC.

In Rome, on May 29, 1819, Shelley composed a dedicatory epistle to preface his tragedy The Cenci, addressed to Leigh Hunt. The opening lines, conscious of the public scrutiny under which they would fall, comment upon Shelley's previous poems Queen Mab (1813), Alastor (1816) and Laon and Cythna (1817) in the following terms:

Those writings which I have hitherto published, have been little else than visions which impersonate my own apprehensions of the beautiful and the just. I can also perceive in them the literary defects incidental to youth and impatience; they are dreams of what ought to be, or may be.<sup>1</sup>

Shelley's general characterization of his earlier works as mere 'visions' or 'dreams' of a youthful and idealistic mind does less than full justice to the significance of the concepts of dream and vision in Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna. The first part of this chapter delineates several relevant contexts within which the relationship between dream, vision, and epic may be profitably explored. This is undertaken here in order to test, in later chapters, one of the main hypotheses of this study: that the concepts of dream and vision in these pre-1818 narratives are crucially important to establishing the idea of epic represented by them.

Further, the dream and vision usages typical of classical and renaissance epic and inherited by contemporary writers are refined, extended and re-deployed by Shelley so as to transcend their

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<sup>1</sup>Letters, II, 96.

origins, being placed in his poetry at the centre rather than at the margin of imaginative concern. This is particularly true of Alastor and Laon and Cythna: in Chapters 5 and 6 I argue that the Poet's vision of the 'veiled maid' in Alastor is pivotal to the 'crisis of consciousness' which the poem as a whole expresses, and in Laon and Cythna I emphasize that dream and vision are central to both characterization and unity in the poem.

The concept of allegory in relation to epic occupies my attention in the second part of this chapter. As with dream and vision, the concept of allegory is integral to the distinctive epic dimensions of Shelley's three narratives. It will be suggested in Chapters 4 and 6 that a traditional use of allegory in Queen Mab changes in Laon and Cythna to a considerably more sophisticated usage, the chief features of which may be detected in contemporary criticism.

To Shelley and his contemporaries the words 'dream' and 'vision' in relation to epic defined certain literary conventions and features familiar in classical and renaissance epic: they were often imitated by late eighteenth and early nineteenth century writers of epic poetry. These familiar characteristics included divine poetic inspiration, the appearance of a good or evil spirit, the terrifying vision apparition (linked by commentators to the visions of biblical prophecy) and the cosmic vision convention. Shelley's contemporaries also rarely distinguished the status of a vision or dream in a literary epic context from its status in a philosophical one.

I shall develop each of these topics in turn, beginning with the visionary aspect of divine poetic inspiration in epic. All of the topics discussed in this chapter have direct relevance and critical implications for my reading of Queen Mab, Alastor, and Laon and Cythna, as I demonstrate more fully in Part II.

In Epistle III of Hayley's Essay on Epic Poetry, the epic poet and his poem are associated with visionary experience. Both Dante and Ercilla are invoked as Hayley conducts his historical survey of the epic from classical times to the present:

At length, fair Italy, luxuriant land,  
Where Art's rich flowers in earliest bloom expand,  
Thy daring DANTE his wild Vision sung,  
And raised to Epic pomp his native Tongue.

(79-82)

Ercilla's La Araucana is praised, for in it the poet presents

His strongly-colour's scenes of sanguine strife,  
His softer pictures caught from Indian life,  
Above the visionary forms of art,  
Fire the awaken'd mind and melt the heart.

(255-258)

The 'wild Vision' and 'visionary forms of art' of the epic poet refer to the traditions in epic poetry of divine inspiration and the invocation to the Muse. The theory of 'poetic madness', derived ultimately from the Platonic interpretation in the Phaedrus of inspiration and enthusiasm, was applicable to all poets, whatever genre or mode of composition they chose to use. Yet it became a commonly recognizable feature of epic poetry. The poet as narrator was an inspired man, deriving his song from a pagan or Christian spiritual source. The Homeric poet represents himself as owing the inspiration of his narration to the Muses in The Odyssey, as does Virgil in The Aeneid and Tasso in his Jerusalem Delivered:

O heavenly muse, that not with fading bays  
Deckest thy brow by th' Heliconian spring,  
But sittest, crown'd with stars' immortal rays,  
In heaven, where legions of bright angels sing,  
Inspire life in my wit, my thoughts upraise,

(Jerusalem Delivered, translated by  
Edward Fairfax, Book I, ii, 1-5)

Tasso invokes the Muse not only at the beginning of his poem, but also before narrating significant events or before giving a catalogue of combatants: the line between literary convention and genuine inspirational experience is difficult to draw, but claims to inspiration are typical in epic poetry.

Early in the eighteenth century, Shaftesbury put the Platonic case quite strongly in his 'Letter concerning Enthusiasm', remarking of poets in general:

No Poet (as I ventur'd to say at first to your Lordship) can do anything great in his own way, without the Imagination or Supposition of a Divine Presence, which may raise him to some degree of this Passion we are speaking of.<sup>2</sup>

Richard Hurd, commenting on the dreams of the 'epick muse' in his essay on Spenser, makes a spirited defence of the dreamlike quality of Spenser's epic:

You may call them, as one does, 'extraordinary dreams, such as excellent poets and painters, by being over studious, may have in the beginning of fevers.' The epick poet would acknowledge the charge, and even value himself upon it. He would say, 'I leave to the sage dramatist the merit of being always broad awake, and always in his senses: The divine dream, and delirious fancy, are among the noblest of my prerogatives.'

(Todd, II, pp. clxii-clxiii)

Hazlitt's third lecture on the English Poets delivered at the Surrey Institution in 1818 was published in the same year by Taylor and Hessey. This lecture, on Shakespeare and Milton, recognized the inspiration claimed by Milton in his epic compositions. Milton, said

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<sup>2</sup>Antony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftesbury, Characteristiks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, 5th edn., 1773, I, 51-52. First published in 1711.

Hazlitt, had a mind which 'appears to have held equal communion with the inspired writers, and with the bards and sages of ancient Greece and Rome;'<sup>3</sup> Milton had claimed his epic inspiration while asleep:

If answerable style I can obtain  
Of my celestial patroness, who deigns  
Her nightly visitation, unimplored,  
And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires  
Easy my unpremeditated verse:  
Since first this subject, for heroic song,  
Pleased me, long choosing, and beginning late.

(Paradise Lost, IX, 20-26)

Two of Shelley's contemporaries had invoked a visionary inspirational source at the beginning of their poems. William Blake, in Jerusalem (recognized as an attempt at epic by many Blake scholars), etched the following lines, in expression and phrase reminiscent of Milton, on the fourth plate:

Of the Sleep of Ulro! and of the passage through  
Eternal Death! and of the awakening to Eternal Life.  
This theme calls me in sleep night after night, & ev'ry morn  
Awakes me at sun-rise, then I see the Saviour over me  
Spreading his beams of love, & dictating the words of this  
mild song.

(Plate 4, 1-5)

Charles Hoyle's epic poem Exodus (1807) begins with the traditional epic proposition of the subject, which is shortly followed by a statement of its inspirational source:

Israel from Egypt through the parted deep  
Securely led (the type of man redeem'd)  
I enterprise to sing ...

Oft such vision crowd  
My slumber, and such musing oft beguile  
Nocturnal watchings, or awake my soul  
Earlier than suns in summer, to renew,  
The blissful theme.

(Exodus, Book I, 1-3, 12-16)

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<sup>3</sup>P. P. Howe, ed., The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, V, 57.

The dream or vision experience was one in which the epic poet received, or at least claimed to receive, inspiration for his poem; the tradition may be traced from classical times to the practice of epic writers contemporary to Shelley. I argue in Chapter 5 that in Alastor Shelley's lines at the beginning of his poem ('Enough from incommunicable dream,/ And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought,/ Has shone within me', 39-41) are patterned upon the classical invocation, but differ in several crucial respects from it.

Dreams and visions in Greek epic poetry were closely associated with the appearance of a δαίμων or daemon, a messenger from the gods. As is well known, the Greeks had a sustained and serious belief in the supernatural; Pythagoras, for example, held that the air was full of such spirits bringing dreams to human beings concerning future disease or health.<sup>4</sup> These daemons could be 'good bad or indifferent', as Shelley noted in one of his notebooks when commenting upon Christian miracles:

They [miracles] may have been produced by a peculiar agency of supernatural intelligences, analogous of what we read of animal magnetism and daemons good bad or indifferent who from caprice or motives inconceivable to us may have chosen to sport with the astonishment of mortals.<sup>5</sup>

Particularly, but not exclusively in classical epic, the appearance of a vision would comfort the epic protagonist or perhaps spur him on to future action. In Book IV of The Odyssey the goddess Athene sends a vision in the figure of Iphthime to comfort Penelope and to assure her that Telemachus will continue under her divine protection; Aeneas is encouraged to pursue his journey with his

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<sup>4</sup>Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Eminent Philosophers, translated by R. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, 1950 (Reprint), II, 347-349.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted by Neville Rogers, Shelley at Work, 2nd edn., 1967, p. 67.

fellow Trojans by the vision of Anchises in Book V of The Aeneid.

In the epics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the appearance of a guardian angel before an epic protagonist was clearly based on the above type of classical vision but it constituted the Christian equivalent of the benevolent classical apparition and could be traced back to Milton in the Christian tradition of epic. The fairy queen in Queen Mab, as I suggest in Chapter 4, has affinities to the guardian angels to be found in the epics of Shelley's contemporaries.

In epic poetry, pagan or Christian, a daemonic spirit often comes not to guide or comfort the epic protagonist but to delude him. The dream which Zeus sends to deceive Agamemnon into immediately attacking Troy appears in the wraith-like form of Neleus' son Nestor, who pretends to represent the honourable intentions of Zeus:

In Nestor's likeness the divine Dream spoke to him:  
'Son of wise Atreus breaker of horses, are you sleeping?  
He should not sleep night long who is a man burdened with  
counsels  
and responsibility for a people and cares so numerous.  
Listen quickly to what I say, since I am a messenger  
of Zeus, who far away cares much for you and is pitiful.

(The Iliad, II, 22-27)<sup>6</sup>

In Virgilian epic the Greek *κακὸς δαίμων* may assume the form of a fury. In Book VII of The Aeneid Juno enlists the aid of the fury Allecto to instigate war. Allecto appears before Turnus in the form of Calybe, aged priestess of Juno's temple, and persuades him that his honour has been impugned, causing Turnus to attack Latinus.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The Iliad of Homer, translated by R. Lattimore, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969, pp. 76-77.

<sup>7</sup>Virgil, The Aeneid, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library, 1969, II, 31-35.

In Christian epic the infernal spirit is generally set against the Christian order. Tasso uses the spirit Alecto in Jerusalem Delivered to suggest to Argillan, one of Godfrey's knights, that the headless body of Rinaldo is Godfrey's doing: Argillan is provoked into a vindictive rage, and dissension rages in the Christian camp.<sup>8</sup>

Of particular interest to the reader of Shelley's Alastor from the perspective of the misleading or daemonic dream in epic is the infernal dream sent by Archimago in Spenser's The Faerie Queene. The dream is sent by Archimago (a figure identified by one contemporary review of Laon and Cythna as the old man, otherwise William Godwin<sup>9</sup>) to part the Redcrosse knight from Una in his quest for Holiness. Archimago devises a plan: he obtains a false dream from Morpheus, which he has placed at the knight's head while he is sleeping. It is a lustful vision in which the chaste Una makes sexual advances to the knight.

In Todd's 1805 edition of Spenser the line 'The one upon his hardie head him plaste' (Book one, canto I, xlvii, 3) is annotated with Upton's comment:

Archimago bids the idle Dream fly away, Βάσκα ἴδι, ἔλε Ὀνειρε.  
The Dream goes and places himself upon the Knight's  
head, the seat of the soul and the imagination. Στῆ δὲ ἄρ  
ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς, Il. β. 20. Who can doubt but our poet had Homer  
in view? [sic]

(Todd. II, p. 45)

Upton unequivocally traces Spenser's dream back to Homer. When the Redcrosse Knight wakes up, pricked by conscience, another false Una is sent by Archimago to tempt him, but he sends her away. Although the whole sequence functions in the traditional epic convention of the dream sent in the form of a delusive shape from

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<sup>8</sup>T. Tasso, Jerusalem Delivered, translated by E. Fairfax, introduced by Roberto Weiss, 1962 (Reprint), pp. 214-215.

<sup>9</sup>Quarterly Review. XXI (April 1819), 467, reprinted in Donald H. Reiman, ed., The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers, New York, 1972, Part C, II, 774. Unless otherwise indicated, all my references to contemporary reviews of Shelley's poetry will be given from this edition.

'outside' the sleeper's brain, it may also be interpreted subjectively: the dreams of the Redcrosse knight represent his own erotic impulses, the hindrances within his own soul to achieving Holiness. It could be argued that Dante's dream on Mount Purgatory of the ugly Siren who is transformed into a beautiful woman is of the same kind. Another major example of this type of delusive dream is of course Eve's dream in Paradise Lost, in which Eve is spoken to by someone telling her to walk and enjoy the garden; Satan is the generator of this dream in Milton's epic.

It is interesting to note that biographical studies of the epic poet Tasso had uncovered a malevolent daemon. According to Manso, Tasso's biographer, the Italian poet felt himself irritated and annoyed by a daemon after the composition of the Jerusalem Delivered. Manso gave the stages of Tasso's derangement as:

1. 'MELANCHOLY' and 2. 'DELIRIUM' followed by 3. 'MADNESS;' accompanied with the belief of his being 4. 'UNDER the influence of witchcraft;' and 5. 'ATTENDED by an apparition.'

Manso's opinion is quoted in Robert Heron's essay 'On the causes and nature of the madness of Tasso' (1785). Heron also cites Tasso's own views of this 'enchantment':

I would likewise write a few words respecting my daemon:  
the rascal hath lately robbed me of many crown pieces; ...  
I know not whether my disease proceeds from frenzy, or not.<sup>10</sup>

Shelley himself referred directly to ambiguous or misleading daemonic pronouncements in his preface to the first part of 'The Daemon of the World' in 1815. He quoted from Book V, verse 176 of Lucan's epic poem Pharsalia:

Nec tantum prodere vati,

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<sup>10</sup>Letters of Literature, 1785, Letter XLIII, pp. 377, 378.

Quantum scire licet. Venit aetas omnis in unam  
Congeriem, miserumque premunt tot saccula pectus.<sup>11</sup>

(Julian, II, 209)

Phemonoë, inspired into a state of prophetic fury, foretells in ambiguous terms the death of Appius at Luboaea: Lucan then goes on to sceptically question Appius' trust in the oracle.

Shelley was almost certainly acquainted with the misleading or delusive dream from his reading of Homer, Virgil, Tasso, and Spenser, the poets used to gloss this point. In Chapter 5 I suggest that the Poet's vision of the 'veiled maid' in Alastor - a centrally important passage - resembles specific vision and dream episodes in Lucan's Pharsalia and Spenser's The Faerie Queene, although Shelley's handling of this epic motif is highly individual.

The terrifying vision in epic was discussed by one early nineteenth-century writer, interestingly within the context of biblical exegesis. J. Good, in his commentary on The Book of Job (1812) - Milton's example of a 'brief epic' - glosses the line from Job 'Amidst tumults, from visions of the night' (Ch 4, verse 13) by referring to Virgil's The Aeneid and Mickle's translation of Camoëns' The Lusiad. He argues that the biblical visions are superior to the epic ones in their capacity to evoke terror:

The description of the apparition of Creusa, in the Aeneid, bears some resemblance to it, but will by no means stand a comparison; lib ii 772.

Infelix simulacrum atque ipsius umbra Creusae  
Visi mihi ante oculos, et nota major imago.  
Obstupui: steteruntque comae, et vox faucibus haesit.  
Tum sic affari. ...

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<sup>11</sup>... is not permitted to reveal as much as she is suffered to know. All time is gathered up together: all the centuries crowd her breast and torture it; Lucan, The Civil War (Pharsalia), translated by J. D. Duff, Loeb Classical Library, 1969 (Reprint), p. 251.

'Creŭsa still I call:- at length she hears,  
 And sudden through the shades of night appears, -  
 Appears no more Creŭsa, nor my wife,  
 But a pale spectre, larger than the life.  
 Aghast, astonish'd, and struck dumb with fear,  
 I stood:- like bristles rose my stiffen'd hair.  
 Then thus the ghost.'

DRYDEN

Mr. Mickle, with more propriety, compares the present description with the Phantom of the Cape of Good Hope in Camoens' *Lusiad*, a bold and terrific picture; but which he admits, at the same time, to be inferior to that before us. Canto v. 39.

Good quotes from the original Portuguese text, and then gives the English translation by Mickle:

I spoke:- when, rising through the darken'd air,  
 Apall'd, we saw a hideous phantom glare;  
 High and enormous o'er the flood he tower's.  
 And, thwart our way, with sullen aspect lour'd:  
 An earthly paleness o'er his cheeks was spread,  
 Erect uprose his hairs of wither'd red:  
 Writhing to speak, his sable lips disclose,  
 Sharp and disjoin'd, his gnashing teeth's blue rows:  
 His haggard beard flow'd quivering on the wind;  
 Revenge and horror in his mien combined:  
 His clouded front, by withering lightnings scared,  
 The inward anguish of his soul declared. [sic]

(Good, The Book of Job. 1812, 51-52)

The dramatic potential of this presentation is considerable, and although the phantom or vision is not rendered with any kind of psychological sophistication, its very appearance terrifies by the attenuation of physical detail counterpointing the obviously intense degree of mental anguish.

The phantom of Ahasuerus that Mab calls up in canto VIII of Queen Mab belongs to this line of tormented visions in epic poetry, as I observe in Chapter 4; the terrifying appearance of Cythna as a phantom in Leon and Cythna is noted in Chapter 6.

When J. Good chose to illustrate his commentary of Job's 'visions of the night' with passages from Virgil and Camoëns he focused upon the terrifying dream or vision, emphasizing its importance as a suitable vehicle for introducing the emotional element of fear into the poem or the Bible. However, there was a further dimension to the awe-inspiring visions of epic and the Bible in that their occurrence in each form of literature was interpreted by one late eighteenth century critic as evidence of the prophetic nature of epic and the epical nature of the Bible.

This link between epic and prophecy, implicit in J. Good's commentary on Job, is made explicit by Anselm Bayly, who described the Book of Revelation as 'one grand epic poem', suggesting that the 'Poetic Prophecies' of Virgil's epic may be seen as counterparts to Biblical examples; his discussion of both Homer and Virgil is illustrated by reference to Old Testament and Hebrew prophecy.<sup>12</sup> The element of prophecy in epic poetry that Bayly pinpoints here, conveyed by a dream or vision, is relevant to a reading of Laon and Cythna: several twentieth century critics of Romantic poetry have interpreted Romantic poems as belonging to the tradition of prophecy; Abrams has suggested that the epic is suitable as a form for the 'persona of the visionary poet-prophet' fairly recently.<sup>13</sup>

With some notable exceptions (e.g. William Blake), Shelley's contemporaries understood prophecy to mean the prediction of a specific event in future time. In 1814, the year of Shelley and Jane Clairmont's 'ritual horror sessions', the Rev. J. Brown published a two-volume Dictionary of the Holy Bible in which he defined prophecy as

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<sup>12</sup> The Alliance of Musick, Poetry & Oratory, 1789, pp. 132-133, 135.

<sup>13</sup> See M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, p. 332; Murray Roston, Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1965, p. 35 et seq; F. A. Pottle, 'The Case of Shelley', EMLA, LXVII, No. 5 (September 1952), p. 592.

'A declaration of future things', and the prophet as 'One who foretells future events', inspired by God who has 'revealed his mind to his prophets by dreams, voices, visions'.<sup>14</sup>

Shelley was acquainted with these contemporary views, and scrutinized them carefully in his prose essays. He applies Hume's argument on miracles in the note 'I will beget a son' to Queen Mab: 'But prophecy requires proof in its character as a miracle; we have no right to suppose that a man foreknew future events from God until it is demonstrated ...'.<sup>15</sup> In A Refutation of Deism he brings objections to those who would use miracles and prophecies as evidence of God's existence:

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, or that a lucky conjecture of events should have justified the conjecture of the prophet, than that God should communicate to a man the discernment of future events.

(Julian, VI, 40)

Shelley goes on to point out that most prophecies in the Bible are obscure, and thus easily applicable to any number of events. The habit of interpreting them as illustrative of historical events of localized importance was widespread: prophecy meant the fulfilment in history of a particular pronouncement.

For Blake and Shelley, however, a prophet voiced the timeless, eternal and imaginative realities of life. There is an interesting parallel here in both Blake and Shelley's rejection of contemporary views. Blake annotated Bishop Watson's Apology for the Bible (1797)

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<sup>14</sup>II, 356.

<sup>15</sup>Julian, I, 155.

with 'Prophets in the modern sense of the word have never existed. Jonah was no prophet in the modern sense for his prophecy of Nineveh failed.'<sup>16</sup> Shelley wrote:

Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events; such is the pretence of superstition which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry.<sup>17</sup>

Shelley's attribution of prophecy to poetry in general has particular relevance to the epic poem in which prophetic visions and dreams of the prediction type are generic; yet this resistance in Shelley's prose to 'gross sense of the word' prophecy is patterned also in his poetry.

Although Shelley himself made no explicit statement connecting epic to prophecy I shall argue in Chapter 6 that his characterization of Cythna as a figure receptive to visionary experience suggests such a connection: it should be added that Anselm Bayly's work was available to Shelley at Hookham's library.<sup>18</sup>

The cosmic vision convention in epic poetry invariably takes the form of a journey in which an epic character achieves a visionary perspective upon the earth, enabling the poet to discourse upon subjects of philosophical and moral importance. This type of vision or dream convention was probably adapted for use in epic poetry from Cicero's dream of Scipio.<sup>19</sup> An example of this is to be found in

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<sup>16</sup>Annotations to Bishop Watson's An Apology for the Bible. 1797, in D. V. Erdman, ed., The Poetry and Prose of William Blake. New York, Doubleday, 1968 (Reprint). p. 606.

<sup>17</sup>A Defence of Poetry, in Julian, VII, 112.

<sup>18</sup>See Appendix 2.

<sup>19</sup>Macrobius, Commentary on the Dream of Scipio, translated by W. H. Stahl, New York, 1952, pp. 70-77.

Tasso: The Christian hero Godfrey is transported into the realm of the heavenly spheres:

All what was wondrous, uncouth, strange and rare,  
 All in that vision well presented were;  
 His dream had plac'd him in a crystal wide,  
 Beset with golden fires, top, bottom, side:

(Jerusalem Delivered, trans. Fairfax,  
 Book XIV, iv, 5-8)

He is met by a former comrade, Hugo of Vermandois, and they attempt to embrace in the traditional epic manner - this is a vain attempt, and Hugo emphasizes his ethereal nature, for 'This place is heav'n, and here a room for thee/Prepared is'. Godfrey is urged by Hugo to look down at the earth, a tiny circle which 'doth our pride contain' and he feels a contemptus mundi, reflecting upon the avarice and folly of man. Hugo advises Godfrey to recall Rinaldo from exile so that the two Christians can fight as allies in establishing a line of future heroes. Godfrey wakes up, his former anxieties banished, resolved to join again with Rinaldo.

Tasso's manipulation of this dream device to give Godfrey a distanced perspective on the moral frailty of mankind and to strengthen his own sense of virtue and Christian endeavour operates as a localized instance, described during the course of a few stanzas at the beginning of Book XIV. It is, therefore, of more than incidental significance for Shelley's Queen Mab that Joel Barlow's epic poem The Columbiad (1807) made use of a similar device to that of Tasso: the significance for Shelley's poem inheres in the interesting point that Barlow, like Shelley, generates a comprehensive poetic framework, an overriding structural frame from a short vision episode.

The whole of Barlow's poem is a vision of America revealed to Columbus by Hesper, the Guardian Angel of America. In the Edinburgh Review for 1809 the reviewer characterized Barlow's work a 'transatlantic Epic' - a classification which is suggested and then made explicit in the preface by Barlow - before giving a summary of the poem.<sup>20</sup> His remarks are worth quoting in full, since they articulate a sense of disquiet about exploiting the vision device as an organizing principle in epic poetry:

Columbus, it is well known, was repaid for his great discovery with signal ingratitude; and was at one time loaded with chains, and imprisoned on the instigation of an envious rival. The poem opens with a view of his dungeon, and a long querulous soliloquy addressed to its walls. All on a sudden the gloom is illuminated by the advent of a celestial personage; and the Guardian Angel of America is introduced by the name of Hesper, who consoles and soothes the heroic prisoner, by leading him up to a shadowy mount, from which he entertains him with a full prospect of the vast continent he had discovered, and sets before him in a long vision which lasts till the end of the poem, all the events which had happened, and were to happen, in that region, or in any other connected with it.<sup>21</sup>

Barlow's vision of the continent of America, if not patterning the cosmic dimensions of Scipio's dream, certainly surveys a substantial territorial domain, and includes virtually all the known history of the Americas, as the reviewer somewhat acidly observes:

Here is a poem of some seven or eight thousand verses, containing a sketch of universal history, from the deluge to the final conflagration, with particular notices of all the battles, factions, worthies, and improvements in America, for the last half century; and when we complain of the enormous extent and confusion of this metrical chronicle, we are referred to some fifty forgotten lines at the outset,

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<sup>20</sup>XV (October 1809), 27-28.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

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<sup>20</sup>XV (October 1809), 27-28.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

from which, it appears, that Columbus came to the knowledge of these fine things by seeing them rehearsed before him one dark night on the top of a mountain in Spain.

(Edinburgh Review, XV, October 1809, p. 27)

The reviewer is clearly affronted at Barlow's use of the vision as a frame for his epic poem, since he approaches his critical task from a perspective that is primarily philosophical, unable to endorse his reading of the poem's initial lines in terms other than those appropriate to a discussion of an ontological statement.

A review of The Columbiad which appeared in the Eclectic Review for 1810 adopted a similar position:

The author adds, that 'in no poem are the unities of time, place, and action more rigidly observed; the action, in the technical sense of the word, consisting only of what takes place between Columbus and Hesper, which must be supposed to occupy but a few hours, and is confined to the prison and to the mount of Vision'. He might have well as said that the action of the Pilgrim's Progress consists in John Bunyan's falling asleep. There might be some plausibility for this plea, if Columbus and Hesper were the Hector and Achilles of the tale; but in reality they are only the showman and spectator of the shifting scenes of a poetical phantasmagoria, the details of which, comprehending all time and occupying all space, form the action of the piece, while the abstruse and metaphysical dialogues between the aforementioned pair are only tedious interludes or impertinent digressions.

(Eclectic Review, VI, Part I, May 1810, 404-405)

In many important respects, Shelley's Queen Mab exhibits similarities to this early nineteenth century attempt at epic by the American Joel Barlow, not the least being the dream or vision frame as a controlling structural principle: I discuss this more fully below, in Chapter 4. Suffice it here to record that Barlow's poem was in Thomas Hookham's circulating library and available to

subscribers - of whom Shelley was one - at the beginning of the century;<sup>22</sup> its notice by both the Edinburgh Review and the Eclectic Review is evidence of a more than incidental impact upon the reading public, especially in view of the fact that its republican sentiments had earned it a place in one of the largest circulating libraries in London.

I suggested in Chapter 2 that to many of Shelley's contemporaries the literary productions of their own age were scrutinized with an eye open to 'improbabilities' and offences against observable human experience, critical attitudes being strongly informed by modes of philosophical thought derived from an empiricist tradition in ontology. Crabb Robinson judged Blake's poem Jerusalem to be the product of a deranged mind, reporting that Blake 'shewed S/outhey/ a perfectly mad poem called Jerusalem. Oxford Street is in Jerusalem.'<sup>23</sup> The Edinburgh Review's critic of Barlow's The Columbiad objected to 'the clumsy and revolving form of a miraculous vision ... the mask of the grossest and most palpable fiction.'<sup>24</sup>

The source for this prevailing critical orthodoxy in the works of John Locke is not difficult to find; however, it would be useful at this point to demonstrate some eighteenth and early nineteenth century views of the words 'dream' and 'vision', since this next section of the chapter will attempt to place Shelley's own preoccupation with the supernatural and ordinary dream experiences against a background of opinion generally dismissive as to their significance. My

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<sup>22</sup>See Appendix 2.

<sup>23</sup>Crabb Robinson's diary entry for July 24, 1811, given in E. J. Morley, ed., Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, etc: being Selections from the Remains of Henry Crabb Robinson, 1922, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup>Edinburgh Review, XV (October 1809), 26.

suggestion that Shelley was, at times, deeply engrossed in this subject has other than purely biographical ramifications, as Part II illustrates.

For the Greeks, of course, a belief in the supernatural was basic to their culture; later commentators had classified dreams into five types:

1. insomnium, nightmare, or troubled dream.
2. visum, apparition or hallucination.
3. somnium, ordinary or enigmatic dream.
4. oraculum, oracular or prophetic dream.
5. visio, prophetic vision or visionary dream.<sup>25</sup>

Dreams or visions constituted an integral part of the ancient and medieval consciousness, and were studied closely. However, Samuel Johnson's dictionary definition in 1755 of the word 'vision', for instance, was, in part, the heritage of a Lockean sense-data epistemology and shows how far the ontological status of visions had fallen by the middle of the eighteenth century. Johnson's entry for 'vision' records:

1. Sight, the faculty of seeing. / Johnson quotes from Newton's Opticks /
2. The act of seeing.
3. A supernatural appearance; a spectre; a phantom.
4. A dream; something shewn in a dream. A dream happens to a sleeping, a vision may happen to a waking man. A dream is supposed natural, a vision miraculous; but they are confounded.

The majority of Shelley's contemporaries reflected Johnson's views, reinforcing the idea of the inconsequence of visions and dreams. The reviewer in the British Critic of A. Tucker's An Abridgement of the

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<sup>25</sup>Macrobius, Commentary on the Dream of Scipio, pp. 87-92.

Light of Nature Pursued (1807) noted:

In the twelfth chapter we have a long and particular description of the vehicular state, to which the author was transported, in a vision; but this description displays neither genius, taste, nor judgement. A system of metaphysics is not a proper place for the introduction of such reveries; there are a thousand sources from which he might derive the thought of exhibiting his waking dreams in the form of a vision.

(British Critic, XXXI, January 1808, p. 515)

Only on one occasion in his prose writing does Shelley appear to suggest that dream and vision experiences are experiences of little consequence or significance. Writing to Hogg from Bracknell in 1814, he includes a number of lines in a stanza probably addressed to Cornelia Turner, observing:

This is the vision of a delirious and distempered dream,  
which passes away at the cold clear light of morning. Its  
surpassing excellence and exquisite perfections have no  
more reality than the colour of an autumnal sunset.

(Letters, I, 384)

Even here, Shelley may be adopting an ironical stance towards his own verse, or simply implying the transience of beauty.

Shelley's contemporaries were, then, highly sceptical as to the reality of visions, whether occurring during a dream or waking state. One context in which the matter was frequently discussed was the religious one; claimants to visions from God were usually dismissed as mentally unstable. One John Engelbrecht is cited in J. Arnold's Observations on the Nature, Kinds, Causes, and Prevention of Insanity, (2 vols, 1806) - a book stocked by Thomas Hookham<sup>26</sup> - as claiming that he died in his sleep at about midnight, being carried in a trance or vision first to Hell and then to Heaven; this lasted only a moment, 'and that when the watchman cried twelve o'clock the ecstatic

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<sup>26</sup>See Appendix 2.

rapture had fully passed upon him.'<sup>27</sup> A certain Henry Hardy, of Liverpool, claimed to have seen God and Christ descend to him as he lay in his bed one Sunday morning, in 1787. He called this experience his 'morning vision' and published an account of it in 1792 in a small sixpenny pamphlet entitled 'A Vision from the Lord God Almighty'. A reviewer for the Analytical Review suggested that the money raised from the sale of this pamphlet 'cannot be better bestowed, than in providing the poor man a comfortable retreat, where he may pursue his reveries without disturbing the public' (XV, March 1793, p. 352).

Other writers were prepared to concede that on rare occasions such experiences might be interpreted as evidence of God's existence, an alternative to Hume's strictures on miracles. D. Simpson, in his A Discourse on Dreams and Night-Visions, (1791), concluded 'God doth still, upon proper occasions, make known His will to His creatures by dreams and visions of the night', but 'I readily grant, with all our best writers on these subjects, that the greatest part of our dreams or night-visions are the mere creatures of the imagination, wild and extravagant as the power that brings them forth.'<sup>28</sup>

Simpson's attitude here was echoed in commentary on the literary imagination and its operations. Nathan Drake's essay on the 'Frenzy of Tasso and Collins' in his Literary Hours (1798) warns:

But should this brilliant fancy be nurtured on the bosom of enthusiasm, or romantic expectation, or be left to revel in its own native wildness of combination, and to plunge into all the visionary terrors of supernatural agency, undiverted by the deductions of truth, or the sober realities of existence, it will too often prove the cause of acute misery, of melancholy, and even of distraction.

(p. 29)

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<sup>27</sup>I, 295: quoted in Brienne de Boismon, On Hallucinations, translated by R. R. Hulme, London, 1859, pp. 195-196. First published in Paris, 1845.

<sup>28</sup>pp. 11, 36.

As far as ordinary 'natural' dreams were concerned, some observers were ready to accept a degree of allegorical significance in them, but also wary of acting upon their content; James Beattie, in his Dissertations Moral and Critical (2 vols, 1783) was of the opinion that:

In dreams, we mistake our thoughts for real things. While the dream lasts, it appears a reality; at least it generally does: but the moment we awake, we are conscious, that the whole was imaginary, and that our waking perceptions, and they only, are real, and such as may be depended on.

(I, 258)

An opposite view was put by William Smellie in The Philosophy of Natural History (1790), under the chapter 'Of Sleep and Dreaming'. I have referred to this work before, in connection with Black's Life of Tasso (1810).<sup>29</sup> It is of added interest, because it is known that Jane Clairmont was reading Smellie's book during the last week of September, 1814, amid packing up activities for the move to Somers Town with the Shelleys:<sup>30</sup> it was, therefore, available for Shelley to read even though Mary's journal makes no mention of it. Smellie held that 'Dreams, on the contrary, are as characteristic of the genius or dispositions of any individual as his waking thoughts', and advised his readers to keep a diary - or 'Nocturnal' as he called it - of their dreams because 'To know oneself is the most important of all knowledge ... This end, I presume, may be accomplished by a modest attention to our dreams.' He went further than the majority of his contemporaries in asserting 'To deny the possibility of supernatural suggestions either when asleep or awake would be both presumptuous and absurd.' (II, 363, 375, 381).

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<sup>29</sup>See above, pp. 37-38.

<sup>30</sup>Marion Kingston Stocking, ed., The Journals of Claire Clairmont 1814-1827. Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 46.

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<sup>29</sup>See above, pp. 37-38.

<sup>30</sup>Marion Kingston Stooking, ed., The Journals of Claire Clairmont 1814-1827. Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 46.

Shelley's fascination with ghosts, dreams, and the supernatural in general is of course reflected in his early gothic romances, and his interest in 'speculations ... of the world beyond the grave' at Eton were recorded years later by a schoolfellow, Walter S. Halliday.<sup>31</sup> He seems to have started taking a sustained interest in dreams immediately following his expulsion from Oxford in 1811. If one can rely on the testimony of his cousin Thomas Medwin, Shelley began to note down his dreams at this time, recording them in a 'Nocturnal' as Smellie would say; according to Medwin, Shelley distinguished dreams as either 'Phrenic' or 'psychic', and had experienced on more than one occasion a 'dream within a dream - a dream of the soul, to which the mind was not privy.'<sup>32</sup>

Medwin is certainly accurate in stating that Shelley 'left some as a catalogue of the phenomena.' Mary Shelley included Shelley's Catalogue of the Phenomena of Dreams, as connected with Sleeping and Waking under the Speculations on Metaphysics published in 1840 in Essays, Letters from Abroad, etc. No manuscript for the Catalogue has been traced, but Mary Shelley dated its composition as 1815. The rest of the prose fragments which constitute the Speculations on Metaphysics may have been composed between 1815 and 1819.<sup>33</sup>

The subject that Shelley explores in the Catalogue is the nature of 'the connection of sleeping and of waking', and he gives an example of a recurrent dream experience and the impression made on him by scenes which, at the time of their perception in the waking state, produced no feelings, but which recurred vividly in dream some years later. He stressed particularly the similarity of effect

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<sup>31</sup>Quoted by K. N. Cameron, The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical. New York, 1973 (Reprint), p. 10.

<sup>32</sup>H. Buxton Forman, ed., The life of Percy Bysshe Shelley: By Thomas Medwin, revised edn., Oxford University Press, 1913, p. 89.

<sup>33</sup>See Roger Ingpen's discussion in Julian, VII, 341.

generated by the dream experience and the waking visual apprehension of a scene, and their necessary connection: 'Neither the dream could be dissociated from the landscape, nor the landscape from the dream, nor feelings, such as neither singly could have awakened, from both.'<sup>34</sup> One possible link between the Catalogue and the Speculations on Metaphysics may lie in the remarks by Shelley on the mind in the latter work. He adopts an empirical analysis of 'Thoughts, or ideas, or notions' but significantly enough assigns the same ontological status and validity to dreams as to external objects:

It has commonly been supposed that those distinct thoughts ... which are called real, or external objects, are totally different in kind from those ... such as hallucinations, dreams, and the ideas of madness. No essential distinction between any one of these ideas, or any class of them is founded on a correct observation of the nature of things.

(Julian, VII, 59-60)

This view is parallel to Smellie's comments, and may reasonably be taken as an indication that dreams and abnormal mental states were indeed of consequence to Shelley, who developed a serious and discriminating study of them; he would, one imagines, have strongly resisted the current notion of a vision or dream as a 'palpable fiction'.

The journals of Mary Shelley and Jane Clairmont for late Autumn 1814 provide some evidence of Shelley's engagement with dream episodes and the supernatural. A recent biography by Richard Holmes has read sexual connotations into a strange incident involving Shelley and Jane on the night of October 7, 1814.<sup>35</sup> The two of them had sat up late that night, the conversation turning, as Jane's diary recalls, 'upon those unaccountable & mysterious feelings about

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<sup>34</sup>Julian, VII, 67.

<sup>35</sup>Shelley, the Pursuit, 1974, pp. 257-261.

supernatural things that we are sometime subject to - Shelley looks beyond all passing strange - a look of impressive deep & melancholy awe.<sup>36</sup> Jane retired to bed, only to reappear minutes later, her face contorted in horror, convinced that some supernatural agency had moved her pillow from her bed to a nearby chair.

The whole episode may have resulted from Jane's own nervousness, although Holmes makes a case for auto-suggestion by Shelley, and he notes the regularity of these 'ritual horror sessions', as he terms them, at Church Terrace.<sup>37</sup> On the 18th of October, Mary's journal records 'I go to bed soon, but Shelley and Jane sit up, and, for a wonder do not frighten themselves.'<sup>38</sup> Jane noted this late night session in her own diary, 'Talk over the fire till two - Hogg - his letter - friendship - Dante - Tasso & various other subjects.'<sup>39</sup> Perhaps one of the subjects which Mary was surprised did not frighten Jane and Shelley was the daemon of Tasso - one can only speculate here. A week or so earlier - Holmes is in error in attributing it to the 18th<sup>40</sup> - Jane had written in her diary the following: 'sit up with Shelley over the fire - get rather in a horrid mood - go to bed at eleven thinking of ghosts cannot sleep all night.'<sup>41</sup>

Nearly two years later, in August 1816, Shelley and Byron turned to the subject of ghosts in the company of Monk Lewis at Diodati. Shelley's entry in the diary for Sunday, August 18 runs 'I do not think that all the persons who profess to discredit these visitations really discredit them, or, if they do in the daylight,

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<sup>36</sup>The Journals of Claire Clairmont, p. 48.

<sup>37</sup>Shelley, the Pursuit, p. 260.

<sup>38</sup>MSJ, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup>The Journals of Claire Clairmont, p. 52.

<sup>40</sup>Shelley, the Pursuit, p. 261.

<sup>41</sup>The Journals of Claire Clairmont, p. 49.

are not admonished by the approach of loneliness and midnight to think more respectably of the world of shadows.<sup>42</sup> Monk Lewis related five ghost stories to Shelley and Byron, 'all grim' according to Shelley.<sup>43</sup> In his biography, Holmes suggests that Shelley's 1814 ghost sessions with Jane Clairmont are 'of great interest in connection with the development of his poetry',<sup>44</sup> and develops an argument in which this idea is applied with sexual undertones to Shelley's Alastor: without wishing to subscribe to Holmes' particular analysis of Alastor, it will be demonstrated in Part II that both Alastor and Laon and Cythna may well owe aspects of their imagery to Shelley's particular transmutation of specific dream or vision conventions commonly found in epic. His personal interest in dreams and visions, therefore, provides an illuminating context for a study of dreams and visions in the narratives.

The concept of allegory is another valuable context within which to consider the idea of epic embodied in these poems. A discussion of this relationship between epic and allegory occupies the concluding section of this chapter.

According to Le Bossu's neoclassical definition of epic, allegory is an essential element: 'The EPOPEA is a Discourse invented by Art, to form the Manners by such Instructions as are disguis'd under the Allegories of some one important Action, ...'<sup>45</sup> This general view of epic poetry as didactic naturally encompassed a statement of its allegorical nature, and the critical debate concerning allegory and the didactic in epic poetry continued well into the beginning of the nineteenth century. Many critics took the view that the epic poem

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<sup>42</sup>MSJ, p. 57.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>44</sup>Shelley, the Pursuit, p. 261.

<sup>45</sup>Stuart Curran, ed., Le Bossu and Voltaire on the Epic, p. 6.

was one continued allegory in which the poet masked genuine historical events and personages under the cover of pleasing fiction in order to convey moral lessons; others, unable to accept that the gods, supernatural machinery, or any unnatural and non-human figures in epic could be 'probable' characters, allowed their presence as allegorical personages only, along with personified abstractions, whose function was merely to teach the reader. Some critics were averse to the idea that allegorical figures could have any 'real' i.e. human, part in the action at all.

The mode of allegory assumed in these discussions was a simple translation model: figures and events in epic could be translated back into an accepted system of belief or known fact. Coleridge, in the famous passage which distinguishes allegory from symbol, put his distinction this way, in 1816:

Now an Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is in itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses;<sup>46</sup>

On this view, the interpretation of allegory was essentially a cognitive operation: allegory in epic would, therefore, function as a didactic mode of poetic expression engaging only the conceptual faculties of the reader.

Now, the adverse comments passed by both Hayley and Fuseli are directed towards this 'translation' view of allegory. Hayley spoke of the epic poet of true genius in his Essay on Epic Poetry:

His genius, by no vain conceits betray'd,  
May spurn faint Allegory's feeble aid.

(Epistle V, 181-182)

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<sup>46</sup>The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. 'Lay Sermons', edited by R. J. White, VI, 30.

Fuseli commented on Poussin's painting of Coriolanus in the Volscian camp: 'Shall we disgrace with the frigid conceit of an allegory the powerful invention which disclosed to the painter's eye the agitation in the Roman's breast and the proper moment for fiction?'<sup>47</sup> Both men indicate their dissatisfaction with the view of allegorical interpretation which seemed to suggest that a conceptual operation by the reader exhaustively defined the type of response evoked by a line of poetry or an oil-painting or fresco.

Yet this method of exegesis was predominant in allegorical interpretation of epic, and few critics looked further than for a handy and serviceable number of interpretative levels to transpose individual characters, episodes and events, whose significance lay only in their historical, moral or religious meaning. Leigh Hunt recorded the 'frigid conceit' view of allegory in marginalia to his copy of Todd's 1805 edition of Spenser. These annotations, hitherto unpublished, give a precise idea of early nineteenth-century views of allegory. Hunt made the following notes in a left hand margin, against a paragraph from J. Hughes' 'Essay on Allegorical Poetry' in which Hughes mentions allegory in Virgil and in Aesop's fables:

Allegory (αλληγορία) - other-speaking may, in ancient times, have included every species of moral fable, and literally, would apply to irony itself: but the modern sense of the word limits it to spiritual things personified, as Hope with her anchor, or real actions shadowed forth by fictions, as English history under Elizabeth by Spenser's Land of Faerie.

(II, p. vi)

In this essay, Hughes distinguishes two types of allegory. The first type is the literal, defined by Hunt as one aspect of 'the modern

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<sup>47</sup>J. Knowles, ed., The Life and Writings of Fuseli, II, 200.

sense of the word'; it is the kind, Hughes says,

in which the story is framed of real or historical persons, and probable or possible actions; by which, however, some other persons and actions are typified or represented. In this sense the whole Aeneid of Virgil may be said to be an Allegory, if we consider Aeneas as representing Julius Caesar.

The second type of allegory is that 'in which the fable or story consists for the most part of fictitious persons or beings ... without the bounds of probability or nature.' Here, Hughes cites the story of Circe in Homer as an example of a moral episode in which the hero is 'obstructed by the allurements of pleasure.'

This second type, 'of fictitious persons or beings' naturally introduces the topic of the gods and epic machinery in epic criticism. Hughes does not refer to the gods and goddesses of epic poetry in classical times, but rather to the 'creatures which are out of nature, as goblins, chimeras, fairies and the like.' However, he does suggest later that all 'persons of this imaginary life are to be excluded from any share of action in epick poetry',<sup>48</sup> which would include the Homeric deities.

The point that allegorical figures, or 'spiritual things personified' as Hunt describes them, should not be permitted any role in the action was made often enough: Johnson censured Milton for his use of the allegories of Sin and Death in epic:

Milton's allegory of Sin and Death is undoubtedly faulty. Sin is indeed the mother of Death, and may be allowed to be the portress of Hell; but when they stop the journey of Satan, a journey described as real, and when Death offers him battle, the allegory is broken.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Todd, II, pp. vi, vii, viii, x, xi.

<sup>49</sup>Lives of the Poets: a Selection, edited by J. P. Hardy, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 108.

Those actors in the epic poem who do patently affect the action are the mythological beings, the gods and goddesses of Homer and Virgil, Japhetiel in Ogden's The Revolution (1790) and Azrael and Uzziel in Ogilvie's Britannia (1801) for example. Le Bossu, following the critical tradition of Boileau, accepted mythological actors as necessary to epic, and developed an allegorical interpretation of them. He divided them into three types:

Some are Theological, and were invented to explain the Nature of God: others are Physical, and they represent Natural things: the last are Moral, and they are the Representations of Vertues and Vices.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, Jupiter represents in this translation allegory the power of God, Juno is Justice, Aeolus the power of nature, and the furies who distract Turnus are the agents of his conscience. This last example is an interesting one, since it translates the furies into psychological projections of Turnus' mind: Richard Heinze, in his seminal work on Virgil's epic technique makes the same point.<sup>51</sup> Anselm Bayly reiterated Le Bossu late in the eighteenth century:

The mythology of the poets, their interposing machinery, will indeed be 'feeble, tedious, oppressive and un instructive', if understood grossly and literally; but not so, when viewed allegorically and philosophically, as descriptions of natural phaenomena, human passions, appetites, actions, intellectual faculties, and divine attributes.<sup>52</sup>

Those writers who adopted an historical point of view in epic criticism often argued that the mythological figures of a poem were acceptable if seen as allegorical representations of the religion of the epic poet, thereby emphasizing Le Bossu's first type of allegorical being. John Black pursued this question in an appendix 'Of the

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<sup>50</sup> Le Bossu and Voltaire on the Epic, p. 215.

<sup>51</sup> Virgils Epische Technik, 4th edn., Stuttgart, 1957, p. 305.

<sup>52</sup> The Alliance of Musick, Poetry & Oratory, p. 263.

Allegorical meaning of Romantic Poems' to his The Life of Torquato Tasso (1810). Black quotes the defence of allegory which Mickle uses to justify Camoëns' mythological agents in The Lusiad and comments:

The bard of Portugal has made a strange mixture of Christian doctrine and pagan mythology, has represented the Lusitanian heroes as protected by Venus, and persecuted by Bacchus. Mr. Mickle first argues that Camoëns has an equal right with the ancients to adopt these personages: 'Let our critic', says he, 'be told that through the sides of Camoëns, if his blow will avail, he has murdered both Homer and Virgil. What condemns the council of Jove in the Lusiad ... condemns the councils of Jove in these models of the epopeia. What condemns Bacchus and the Moor, condemns the part of Juno in the Eneid and every interposition of Juno and Neptune in Homer.

Black then develops a critique of Mickle's defence:

Nothing surely can be more absurd than this. Homer employed the mythology of his own country, Camoëns the mythology of a country not his own, and which is absurd and ludicrous when mingled with the objects of the Christian faith.<sup>53</sup>

Black objects here not only to the mixing of pagan and Christian mythology, but also to the use of a mythology other than that of the poet - in this case non-Christian mythology.

The revival of interest in Spenser and Tasso as epic poets brought the problem of the relationship between epic and allegory sharply into focus: Tasso had been reproached for inventing an allegory for Jerusalem Delivered after its completion, and Spenser's dominant allegorical mode presented contentious issues like probability in epic to Shelley's contemporaries. He was criticised for his 'unfortunate adoption of extravagantly allegorical machinery' in 1808,<sup>54</sup> and Ogilvie voiced doubts about Spenser's 'mere creatures of

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<sup>53</sup>I, 402-403.

<sup>54</sup>Edinburgh Review, XII (April 1808), 64.

imagination, whom we cannot trace to any original' in his 'rich allegories' when discussing Spenser as an epic poet in the 'Critical Dissertation on Epic Machinery' prefacing the Britannia.<sup>55</sup> Hazlitt praised the 'originality, richness, and variety in his allegorical personages and fictions', but clearly thought this an element of gross improbability, since Spenser 'waves his wand of enchantment - and at once embodies airy beings, and throws a delicious veil over all actual objects.'<sup>56</sup> Ogilvie's characterization of Spenser's allegories as 'rich' and 'extravagant' certainly invoked the question of probability in epic, but also hint obliquely that the translation model of allegorical interpretation may be inappropriate ('rich allegories') as a totally satisfactory response to Spenser's imaginative fictions.

It is almost a platitude of criticism today that there was a 'renascence of wonder'<sup>57</sup> and an increasing study of the role of the imagination as a receptive capability of the reader during the Romantic period, in addition to an exploration of the concept of the creative literary imagination as a productive agency: yet this is of crucial importance with regard to allegory and epic, since there were definite indications that the mythological element in epic was also being investigated in terms other than those of simple equivalence allegory. Indeed, it was gradually suggested that the kind of allegory operative in epic mythology should be seen as 'sublime allegory', which performed a didactic function by arousing the passions of the reader rather than by affecting only his understanding; thus the imaginative identity of mythological image patterns in

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<sup>55</sup>p. 16.

<sup>56</sup>P. P. Howe, ed., The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, V, 35.

<sup>57</sup>H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., The Theory of the Epic in England 1650-1800, p. 245.

literature should be understood less as dependent upon conceptual abstractions - moral or otherwise - and more as autonomous, with their own imaginative life and a potential for engaging a whole range of emotional complexity in the reader's consciousness.

In the early part of the eighteenth century, Thomas Blackwell's Letters concerning Mythology (1748) had derived Homer's mythology from Egypt, drawing attention to the anthropological origins of myth and refuting the narrow rationalistic view of myth as fiction; A. W. Schlegel pointed out the depth of imaginative complexity in mythology, attempting to define the power of myth from a non-rational perspective:

The ancient mythology is in general symbolical, although not allegorical; for the two are quite distinct. Allegory is the personification of an idea, a fable solely undertaken with such a view; but that is symbolical which has been created by the imagination for other purposes, or which has a reality in itself independent of the idea, but which at the same time is easily susceptible of a symbolic explanation; and even of itself suggests it.<sup>58</sup>

Schlegel's distinction, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, of the symbolical rather than the allegorical nature of mythology, constitutes a significant step away from the then predominant equivalence view of allegorical interpretation in mythology, with obvious implications for mythology in epic: if the marvellous and the supernatural in epic were seen in terms other than as vehicles for abstract ideas only, and invested with their own imaginative power to move the reader, then the mythological basis of epic would assume a greater significance than generally recognized, and the strength of the 'probability' criterion diluted.

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<sup>58</sup> A. W. Schlegel, A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, translated by J. Black, 1815, I, 105.

Leigh Hunt's annotations to Spence's 'Dissertation on the Defects of Spenser's Allegory' are salutary: Spence divided the faults of Spenser's allegories into five classes, with the purpose of demonstrating that Spenser deviated from the practice of Homer and Virgil. Hunt marked Spence's fourth class with an asterisk in the right-hand margin of his copy of Todd's 1805 edition of Spenser's Works:

Spence wholly loses sight of the supernatural, as an allowed and most effective addition to the natural.

(II, p. xlvi)

Hunt's notes to Warton on Spenser also reveal an emphasis on imaginative variety in epic: Warton began his essay by taking Ariosto and Boyardo to task for spurning 'the propriety and uniformity of the Grecian and Roman models.' Leigh Hunt put a cross against the word 'models' and observed:

I am ashamed to see Warton talking in this manner. Was the world then to have no poetical variety? no diversity of what is charming? The world decided and still decides otherwise. It knew its own very self better for is not the world itself, is not real life, full of the strangest mixtures of grave + gay, of probable + improbable, of the classic and the romantic? not to mention the romances of the classics themselves, of ogres, harpies, roaring bulls on the spit etc etc.

(II, p. liv)

In a series of articles on epic poetry cited above,<sup>59</sup> the writer made a spirited defence of the marvellous and epic machinery, stressing particularly the imaginative rather than the allegorical element:

Ought the marvellous, of necessity, to enter into epic poetry? Yes; unless the subject be incapable of it - for it would be absurd to expect in a modern subject the intervention of the Gods of antiquity. Tasso and Milton

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<sup>59</sup>p. 71.

have substituted such intermediate agents as are admitted to our religion ... As to that of Tasso, we are at a loss to understand the reproaches which have been hurled at his fame for the employment of magic ... Let us not be so ready to slander the marvellous: so dearly do we love it, and so deeply do we need it.

(Le Beau Monde, II, December 1807, 231-232)

William Duff, in his Critical Observations on the Writings of the Most Celebrated Original Geniusses in Poetry (1770), discussed the nature and operation of allegorical poetry, distinguishing it from the 'strict and proper sense' of epic; significantly enough, Duff finds the chief distinguishing characteristic of allegorical poetry to be its improbability of incident and character; however, as his argument proceeds, he gradually reveals his belief in the didactic role of allegory as a non-cognitive mode, teaching by means of imaginative stimulus:

... allegory acquires the dignity and importance of the epic action; the events related are aggrandized by the characters employed in effectuating them; curiosity is at once excited and gratified by the novelty and marvellousness of the object presented to the imagination; and instruction is conveyed to the mind with greater efficacy as well as pleasure through the medium of poetic description, accompanied with the pompous narration and action of the epopaea.

(p. 202)

Duff's suggestion here that allegory might function in poetry - in particular in epic, to which he specifically refers - by affecting the imagination, indicates a fresh approach to the 'frigid conceit' view of allegory, especially illuminating when considered with the comments cited from Hunt and the review above. If allegory is to be viewed as a means of access to the inner spiritual and imaginative life of man, which teaches by sublimely moving the reader, then we may expect a more liberal conception of the mode than that which focuses exclusively upon its cognitive aspect;

such a view of allegory would require a different approach when considering the mythology of epic. Several eighteenth century critics and artists however, including Duff, were articulating this kind of conception of allegory: some of them pursued the discussion specifically in the area of epic.

Robert Lowth's series of lectures on Hebrew poetry, given in Oxford in the 1740's and published in 1775, discourse relevantly on epic and allegory. These lectures were decisive in drawing attention to the style and originality of Hebrew poetry, ranging as they do over topics like sublimity in poetry, prophetic poetry, epic and allegory. Shelley ordered the Latin edition of the lectures from Lackington on December 5, 1815,<sup>60</sup> but an English edition was available from 1787.

Lowth devotes two of his lectures to the subject of allegory: Lecture X, 'Of Allegory', and Lecture XI, 'Of the Mystical Allegory'. The latter contains the phrase 'this sublimer kind of allegory' which, as I will show presently, is almost exactly duplicated by Henry Fuseli and William Blake. Lowth's translator, G. Gregory, betrayed a typically rationalist distaste for the 'fictions' of allegory in a note on the first page of Lecture X, describing allegory as 'a mere play of the fancy, and such as requires not enough of exertion to occupy those who have been accustomed to the exercises of Reason.'<sup>61</sup> In this lecture, Lowth shows how Hebrew prophetic poetry makes use of allegory of a parabolic nature, whose purpose is 'to withdraw the truth for a moment from our sight, in order to conceal whatever it may contain ungraceful or disgusting, and to enable it secretly to insinuate itself.' This sentence contains an

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<sup>60</sup>Letters, I, 437.

<sup>61</sup>Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews, translated by G. Gregory, 2nd edn., 1816, I, 214-215 note. First published in English in 1787.

interesting verbal echo of Lowth's expression used in Lecture I, where he defines the nature of epic poetry:

The Epic accomplishes its design with more leisure, with more consideration and care, and therefore probably with greater certainty. It more gradually insinuates itself, it penetrates, it moves, it delights; now rising to a high degree of sublimity, now subsiding to its accustomed smoothness.

The form of allegory which Lowth concentrates upon in Lecture XI is what he terms mystical allegory, exclusive to Hebrew poetry he believes, and to be found particularly in the Psalms. He finds that this type of allegory is common in prophetic poetry also, and defines it as

when a double meaning is couched under the same words; or, when the same prediction, according as it is differently interpreted, relates to different events, distant in time, and distinct in their nature.

In itself, this definition is quite familiar and invokes the varying contexts of allegorical exegesis in epic renaissance criticism, e.g. 'moral', 'historical', etc. The interesting point, however, lies in Lowth's further development of this idea of allegory:

There is likewise this further distinction that, in those other forms of allegory, the exterior or ostensible imagery is fiction only; the truth lies altogether in the interior or remote sense, which is veiled, as it were, under this thin and pellucid covering. But in the allegory of which we are now treating, each idea is equally agreeable to truth. The exterior or ostensible image is not a shadowy colouring of the interior sense, but is in itself a reality.

He cites the second Psalm as an example of this mystical allegory: here, he says, the figure of David the king may be interpreted both as an historical figure but also as a Christ figure, i.e. the image

has both particular and universal significance, both senses are agreeable to truth. Lowth does not say that David represents Christ, nor that David is Christ, but indicates an imaginative potential in the image which allows of an harmonious agreement in interpreting either resemblance.

This form of allegory is not, then, solely keyed or convertible into single and separable dimensions of interpretative significance historical or otherwise: the capacity of the image to evoke layers of simultaneous awareness from the reader is crucial to this perspective on allegory, which resists the single dimension of equivalence allegory so frequently appealed to in discussions of its mode of operation, where the emphasis is more upon the set of abstractions or facts into which the image may be converted than in the image itself. The potential of this form of allegory to move the imagination of the reader is fundamental to the effect desired by the poet, who thereby links the human, or temporal, with the divine, or eternal: 'a degree of dignity and importance is added to the sentiments, whilst they gradually rise from human to more elevated subjects, from human to divine.' Direct translation allegory becomes a more ambivalent mode of expression in prophetic poetry, suggestive rather than definitive:

For, as the imagery of nature is equally celebrated to express the ideas of divine and spiritual, or of human things, a certain analogy being preserved in each; so it easily admits that degree of ambiguity which appears essential to this figure.<sup>62</sup>

Henry Fuseli's series of lectures on painting, delivered at the Royal Academy from the beginning of March, 1801, make an explicit connection between epic and the kind of allegory that Lowth describes. Lectures III and IV are on Invention in painting, and include a discussion of allegory in relation to epic. Fuseli's

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<sup>62</sup>Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews, pp. 19-20, 234, 235, 239, 244, 245-256.

remarks are made primarily with reference to visual art but are meant also to be appropriate to poetry, since he cites examples from Homer and Milton and refers to 'reading or contemplating' during the course of his discussion. His views need to be outlined with careful attention paid to the contexts within which they occur. In his fourth lecture, Fuseli distinguishes four branches of invention in painting, the human, historic, dramatic and above all 'the epic with its mythologic, allegoric, and symbolic branches.'<sup>63</sup> The epic, for Fuseli, is essentially didactic:

Of the epic plan, the loftiest species of human conception, the aim is to astonish whilst it instructs; it is the sublime allegory of a maxim. Here Invention arranges a plan by general ideas, the selection of the most prominent features of Nature, or favourable modes of society, visibly to substantiate some great maxim. If it admits history for its basis, it hides the limits of its grandeur; if it selects characters to conduct its plan, it is only in the genus, their features reflect, their passions are kindled by the maxim, and absorbed in its universal blaze: at this elevation heaven and earth mingle their boundaries, men are raised to demigods, and gods descend. This is the sphere of Homer, Phidias, and Michael Agnolo. [sic]

Fuseli's suggestion that the 'sublime allegory' of epic joins the human with the divine is reminiscent of Lowth on mystical allegory; Fuseli also emphasizes the timeless element in epic allegory, which 'breaks the fetters of time, it unites with boundless sway the mythologic, feodal [sic], local incongruities.'

Then confronting the question of whether the mythological beings in epic are 'sometimes to be real beings, and sometimes abstract ideas?' he proposes Zeus in Homer as an example and argues that they can be both at the same time, therefore disposing of the probability issue so central in epic criticism:

As well might we say, that Milton, when he called the porteress of hell, Satan's daughter Sin, and his son and

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<sup>63</sup>J. Knowles, ed., The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, II, 193.

dread antagonist, Death, meant only to impress us with ideas of privation and nonentity, and sacrificed the real agents of his poem to an unskilful choice of names? Yet it is their name that has bewildered his commentator and biographer in criticisms equally cold, repugnant and incongruous, on the admissibility and inadmissibility of allegories in poems of supposed reality. What becomes of the interest the poet and the artist mean to excite in us, if, in the moment of reading or contemplating, we do not believe what the one tells and the other shows? It is that magic which places us on the same basis of existence, and amalgamates the mythic or the superhuman, and the human parts of the *Ilias*, of *Paradise Lost*, and of the Sistine Chapel, that enraptures, agitates, and whirls us along as readers or spectators.

Fuseli's 'same basis of existence' and Lowth's 'equally agreeable to truth' parallel each other, and stress once again that the aim of epic is to instruct by moving the spirit, by concentrating upon the mythical dimensions of a poem or painting rather than by presenting a set of allegorical abstractions amenable only to the intellect. There may be an abstract moral principle to be taught, which could be conveyed by ordinary allegory, which Fuseli defines as 'the personification of invisible physic and metaphysical ideas',<sup>64</sup> but the effect of 'sublime allegory' is to invest all abstractions with imaginative life and an energetic reality, a 'reality in itself independent of the idea' as Schlegel described symbol in myth, clearly beyond the scope of ordinary allegory or a 'frigid conceit'.

A view of allegory as sublime, a view which understood even personified figures at the gates of Milton's Hell as something more than bloodless abstractions, or supernatural agents like Zeus as more than vehicles for abstract ideas about the religion of the Greeks might well be productive in exploring the mythological dimensions of certain Romantic poems. William Blake spent his

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<sup>64</sup>The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli. II, 196-197, 197 note, 198, 199-200.

Felpham years in the composition of 'an immense number of verses on One Grand Theme, Similar to Homer's Iliad or Milton's Paradise Lost, the Persons & Machinery intirely new to the Inhabitants of Earth', which he termed 'a Sublime Allegory, which is now perfectly completed into a Grand Poem'.<sup>65</sup> This poem, probably Milton, contained, according to Blake, 'Machinery intirely new'.

The references to 'sublime allegory' by Fuseli and Blake were almost certainly unknown to Shelley, although he did order Lowth's lectures on Hebrew poetry from Lackington in 1815,<sup>66</sup> a source for the suggestion that both literal and metaphorical senses of mystical allegory have equal ontological validity. My reading of Alastor and Laon and Cythna in Part II will seek to demonstrate that the 'sublime allegory' approach to exploring the dimensions of myth and the significance of mythological machinery is an appropriate and relevant one for these two Shelley poems.

These last two chapters have been primarily concerned with both outlining and exploring a number of contexts relevant to a study of the idea of epic embodied in Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna. The emphasis has been upon contemporary epic criticism and practice, together with a presentation of some characteristics of classical and renaissance epic, and apposite biographical information about Shelley. A judicious balance has been striven for, between presenting major topics in epic criticism relevant to Shelley e.g. unity, and a

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<sup>65</sup>Letters to Thomas Butts, April 25 and July 6, 1803 in William Blake: The Complete Writings, with Variant Readings, edited by Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford University Press, 1974 (Reprint), pp. 823, 825.

<sup>66</sup>December 5, 1815; Letters, I, 437.

particular focus on concepts integral to epic e.g. dream, vision, and allegory. It is not unlikely that Shelley was acquainted with the work of a number of writers used to gloss the various areas of discussion selected for inclusion in these two chapters.

Considered in conjunction with the critical perspectives on the Romantic epic examined in the first chapter, Chapters 2 and 3 provide a suitable framework within which Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna may be read as poems of epic identity. The degree of relevance which these three chapters have to Shelley's poetry is demonstrated in the interpretative part of this thesis which now follows.

The second part of this thesis concentrates upon a study of three individual poems: Queen Mab (1813), Alastor (1816), and Laon and Cythna (1817). The discussion in each chapter draws upon the critical perspectives presented in Part I in a variety of ways: modern participants in the Romantic epic debate e.g. Karl Kroeber, have suggested certain defining characteristics of the Romantic epic applicable, it will be argued, to a reading of Shelley; specific issues and topics in contemporary epic criticism and practice were, I suggest, known to Shelley who reflected them in his poetry; the concepts of dream vision and allegory realized in classical, renaissance and contemporary epic are central to the three poems under consideration.

Queen Mab is a poem whose epic identity is explored with particular reference to an early nineteenth century epic, Joel Barlow's The Columbiad (1807). The discussion invokes specific themes dealt with in Chapter 1 and undertakes a reading of the poem which reflects the consideration of allegory, unity, and vision apparitions in epic which was investigated in Chapters 2 and 3.

Alastor is read from the viewpoint of Karl Kroeber's definition of the Romantic epic. This provides an appropriate context within which the poem is viewed as a narrative with familiar epic characteristics e.g. the journey or quest motif, but which, nonetheless, is a highly individualised work: the concepts of dream and vision are integral to its thematic focus and there are several respects in which it reveals a conscious awareness of contemporary writing on epic, for example William Hayley's recommendations concerning the choice of myth and the biographical interest in Tasso, topics which have been introduced in Chapter 2.

Laon and Cythna, the longest of the poems to be examined, is a narrative whose epic identity may, like that of the other two poems,

be examined with reference to the discussion pursued in Chapters 1 to 3. It is a poem whose dreamlike texture, characterization and structure reflect Shelley's preoccupation with the validity of visionary experience and which demonstrates his probable knowledge of, and reaction to, contemporary views of epic: he recasts the current notion of the heroic protagonist in important ways and engages with the problem of epic unity and structure in an original manner.

I have not attempted in Part II to argue for any developmental coherence in the three poems considered as a group, except to indicate that from Queen Mab to Laon and Cythna it is possible to detect an increasing sophistication in the mode of allegory. Certain aspects of interrelatedness are, however, evident in all three poems, and where this is the case I have discussed them.

PART II

## CHAPTER 4

### QUEEN MAB

At the turn of this century a German critic, L. Kellner, isolated Queen Mab, Alastor, and Laon and Cythna from the rest of Shelley's canon to observe that these poems seem to resist categorization into traditional genre divisions, and to enquire whether they should be regarded as lyric or as epic poetry.<sup>1</sup> Kellner did not meet the challenge of his own question, but recent commentators have at least confronted it: with regard to Queen Mab in particular, M. H. Abrams suggested that the poem is written in the 'suitably grandiose' form of epic,<sup>2</sup> and Stuart Curran claimed that the poem should be regarded as an 'epic of social vision', commenting further on its 'encyclopedic and essentially epic form'.<sup>3</sup> Such remarks certainly draw our attention to the length of the poem and to the considerable eclectic scope of its social, political and religious reference; but are such observations upon it anything more than laudatory? What grounds, if any, are there for supposing that 1813 saw the appearance of an 'epic' poem from the pen of Percy Bysshe Shelley?

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<sup>1</sup>L. Kellner, 'Shelleys "Queen Mab" und Volneys "Les Ruines"', Englische Studien. XXII (1895-1896), 9.

<sup>2</sup>Natural Supernaturalism, p. 332.

<sup>3</sup>Shelley's Annus Mirabilis. pp. 13, 18.

## CHAPTER 4

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<sup>2</sup>Natural Supernaturalism, p. 332.

<sup>3</sup>Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, pp. 13, 18.

I will endeavour to establish a number of grounds for this supposition. The chapter will proceed initially by locating Queen Mab within a particular context of epic, that represented by J. Barlow's early nineteenth-century epic The Columbiad (1807). Similarities and parallels in e.g. structure and thematic concern will be argued, but I will also suggest that Queen Mab is nonetheless distinctive in its sensitivity to the metaphorical resonance of language. I then consider Shelley's own dissatisfaction with the style of his poem in relation to its subject - a topic of neoclassical epic criticism - and discuss the use of personification with reference to the practice of contemporary epic.

I conclude the chapter by commenting upon Shelley's deployment of supernatural machinery in the poem, drawing comparisons with both classical and contemporary epic. Queen Mab also represents certain viewpoints which Chapter 1 introduced from modern critical writing on the idea of a 'Romantic epic': i.e. the poem may be seen as an 'epic of consciousness' because of its internalized structure, the feature of apocalyptic renewal reminds the reader of Frye's comments on the redemption-renewal myth and the poem's scope - as noted by Stuart Curran in the preceding paragraph - is quite clearly encyclopaedic.

In format and production Shelley's poem was suitably impressive. In March, 1813 he instructed Thomas Hookham to have 250 copies printed, a volume of 'small neat Quarto, on fine paper & so as to catch the aristocrats.'<sup>4</sup> Walter Peck has described it thus:

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<sup>4</sup>Letters. I, 361.

'Queen Mab' was printed with a fine, clear font of type on a beautiful cream wove paper. There are generous margins; and if a canto ends on the recto of a sheet, the verso is left blank, an unusual proceeding indeed in printing a book which does not contain a series of separate title pages indicating its various divisions. The little volume was bound in boards, was without a printed label, and consisted of 123 pages of text, and 216 pages of notes.<sup>5</sup>

The title page of the poem reads 'QUEEN MAB; A PHILOSOPHICAL POEM: WITH NOTES.' The poem is thus described as philosophical, the notes are an addition to it. It cannot be argued that its philosophical character is constituted by the notes alone. As K. N. Cameron rightly observes, 'The poem gives a predominantly creative impression, the Notes an expository one,'<sup>6</sup> and Shelley himself stressed that the reasoned exposition of his principles was something that he declined to do 'syllogistically in a poem. A poem very didactic is I think very stupid.'<sup>7</sup> The philosophical tenor of Queen Mab is one of its obvious and salient features, consistently invoked in criticism from the first public notice in the Theological Enquirer for March, 1815: 'The author has made fiction, and the usual poetic imagery, the vehicles for his moral and philosophical opinions.'<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the inflammatory nature of these opinions would have exposed both author and publisher to prosecution had the poem been published and offered for sale to the public. It was for this reason that Thomas Hookham declined to publish it. Shelley distributed some seventy copies to his friends, in most cases carefully removing the title page which carried his name, together with the dedication and imprint. In this way he hoped to preserve his anonymity and avoid prosecution.

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<sup>5</sup>Shelley: His Life and Work, Boston and New York, 1927, I, 301.

<sup>6</sup>The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical, p. 264.

<sup>7</sup>Letters, I, 350.

<sup>8</sup>Donald H. Reiman, ed., The Romantics Reviewed. Part C, II, 850.

The ideas that the poem would express were indicated in two letters, to Elizabeth Hitchener and to Thomas Hookham. Writing to the former late in 1811, Shelley intimated that he had in mind a poem 'to be by anticipation a picture of the manners, simplicity and delights of a perfect state of society; tho still earthly.'<sup>9</sup> Six months later, these hints at Godwinian perfectibility had received concrete expression. Not long after his return to England from Ireland he enclosed all of the Queen Mab manuscript completed to that date in a letter to Thomas Hookham on August 18, 1812 from Lynnmouth:

You will perceive that I have not attempted to temper my constitutional enthusiasm in that Poem ... The Past, the Present, & the Future are the grand & comprehensive topics of this Poem. I have not yet half exhausted the second of them.<sup>10</sup>

The phrase 'grand & comprehensive' may point to an epic intention - Blake at least described his Milton as a 'Grand Poem' - it is on these grounds of encyclopaedic comprehensiveness that Curran calls Queen Mab an epic. The creative problem most pressing for Shelley, however, was to organize his topics and opinions into a coherent whole: the structure and framework that he chose was the vision.

The vision form offered Shelley a frame within which his narrator, Queen Mab, could initiate both reader and the soul of Ianthe into the secrets of past, present, and future time; often Shelley's own strident voice is an obvious intrusion into the narration of his persona, eroding any sustained attempt at an objective or dispassionate philosophical tone. Nevertheless, the vision afforded to the soul of the sleeping Ianthe is offered as the method of presentation, and its origin has occasioned a number of source studies.

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<sup>9</sup>Letters. I, 201

<sup>10</sup>Letters. I, 324.

Carlos Baker sees the poem as 'a late example of the Spenserian allegory of the eighteenth century,'<sup>11</sup> based upon a framework of the type found in Pope's Temple of Fame, Thomas Denton's House of Superstition, Sir William Jones's Palace of Fortune in poetry, and Count Volney's Ruins; or Meditations on the Revolution of Empires in prose. A. M. D. Hughes turns to Book XI of Paradise Lost and the discourse of Michael with Adam as a parallel instance of 'a mode of didactic poetry nameable as the Vision.'<sup>12</sup> K. N. Cameron looks to Jones and Volney as models,<sup>13</sup> and most recently S. Curran has proposed Young's Night Thoughts, Langland's Piers Plowman, and Milton's Paradise Regained as sources for the poetical basis of Shelley's 'vision frame.'<sup>14</sup> These suggestions embrace an interesting range of candidates for the structural heritage of Queen Mab. A number of allegorical poems with no pretensions to epic; a prose work of the French revolution; a localized vision episode in Milton's epics; a meditative poem of the night; a medieval dream-vision.

The relative claims of these sources are not easily aligned, and recourse to them illustrates the range of interpretative possibilities inherent in any reading of Shelley's poem which considers his use of a vision-frame. The probable influence of Volney's Ruins has been argued most sustainedly over a number of years ever since the pirated versions of Queen Mab in 1821 occasioned two critics to suggest

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<sup>11</sup>Spenser, the Eighteenth Century, and Shelley's "Queen Mab", MLQ, II, No. 1 (March 1941), 83; see also Shelley's Major Poetry: the Fabric of a Vision. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973 (Reprint), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup>The Nascent Mind of Shelley. Oxford University Press, 1971 (Reprint), p. 184.

<sup>13</sup>The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical, p. 244 and note.

<sup>14</sup>Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, p. 13.

Volney's use by Shelley.<sup>15</sup> Both Hogg and Medwin recorded Shelley's access to Volney;<sup>16</sup> their accounts suggest that Shelley knew of Volney's Ruin at the time at which he was composing Queen Mab. It is often forgotten, however, that a vision-frame similar in important respects to that used in Queen Mab was used by Shelley prior to the composition of this long poem. The juvenile piece 'Fragment Supposed to be an Epithalamium of Francis Ravallac and Charlotte Corday', first published in Oxford by Slatter and Munday as one of the Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson (1810) is an embryonic example. The narrator of the poem, pondering upon 'the woes of lost mankind' and 'ceaseless rage of kings', resigns himself hopelessly to death, only to be transported away in a heavenly sleep. He witnesses a spiritual union between two French tyrannicides, Francois Ravallac and Charlotte Corday, a vision experience which comprehends the fall of despots into Satan's Hell.

This early poem is interesting for two reasons: it is cast in the form of a vision, and it is illustrative of Shelley's revolutionary ideals. The revolutionary content controlled by the structure of a vision prefigures the later Queen Mab. It is not unlikely that Shelley simply returned to the Epithalamium for the outline of his longer poem. Yet the comprehensive scope and length of Queen Mab demands

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<sup>15</sup> See the anonymous review which appeared in Wooler's British Gazette on May 6, 1821, reprinted by Lewis M. Schwartz, 'Two New Contemporary Reviews of Shelley's Queen Mab', K-SJ, XIX (1970), 83; also, 'An Answer to "Queen Mab"', reprinted in N. I. White, The Unextinguished Hearth: Shelley and His Contemporary Critics, New York, 1972 (Reprint), p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> H. Buxton Forman, ed., The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 92; Humbert Wolfe, ed., The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, II, 3.

some consideration of its possible epic nature and it is here that one of Shelley's letters provides a useful comment upon it. In a letter to Byron in 1817, Shelley wrote that in comparison with the earlier poem, Laon and Cythna was composed 'with more attention to the refinement and accuracy of language, and the connexion of its parts.'<sup>17</sup> The latter phrase 'connexion of its parts' defines, as I noted in an earlier chapter,<sup>18</sup> a frequently discussed aspect of unity in epic considered by Shelley's contemporaries in their writings on epic. A central problem for the aspiring writer of epic was to organize and structure the elements of his long poem into a coherent whole.<sup>19</sup>

The same type of problem faced Shelley, and his approach to it was to use a vision framework. In Queen Mab he extended the localized use of the vision episode, characteristic of classical and renaissance epic, into a general structural frame capable of organizing the diverse temporal and conceptual dimensions he wished to present to his readers. With the exception of a few lines at the beginning and end of the poem, Queen Mab is a vision of past, present and future narrated chiefly, but not exclusively, by a fairy queen of hierophantic powers to the soul of Ianthe. The question naturally arises as to the relevance of this form to epic, and in particular to the issue of epic unity.

An intriguing possibility presents itself. One reviewer of Charles Hoyle's epic poem Exodus (1807) had taken a decidedly lukewarm attitude to it in the British Critic for 1808, indicating how feeble

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<sup>17</sup>Letters, I, 557.

<sup>18</sup>See above, pp. 64-69.

<sup>19</sup>Edgar Allen Poe entered a provocative caveat with respect to the idea that a long poem could sustain any unity of impression: 'What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones - that is to say, of brief poetical effects ... For this reason, at least one half of the Paradise Lost is essentially prose' ('The Philosophy of Composition', Poems and Essays, 1972, Reprint, p. 166).

a competitor for epic laurels the contemporary writer must be when compared to his distinguished predecessors. In order for any contemporary attempt at epic to secure attention, he argued, 'Perhaps also something of novelty in its design or form is necessary to make a long poem attractive.'<sup>20</sup> There is one early nineteenth-century epic poem with a novelty of form similar in many important respects to Shelley's poem: Joel Barlow's The Columbiad, published in 1807 in Philadelphia, which combines considerable length with an overall vision-frame within which the encyclopaedic past, present and future of the Americas is reviewed. It was poorly received by an 'Aristotelian' critic of the Edinburgh Review, who was clearly not prepared to contemplate the novelty of a vision as a structural device of epic unity.<sup>21</sup> Shelley's 1817 remark to Byron, that in Laon and Cythna more attention had been paid to the 'connexion of its parts' than had been the case with Queen Mab is, therefore, of significance.

Shelley may have known of Barlow's poem at the time he was composing Queen Mab, either from a direct reading or from this review; conceivably he may have known both. Certainly, there are affinities in subject and language between the two poems which suggest his acquaintance with it, as I shall presently try to demonstrate. The external evidence, based upon the fact that Thomas Hookham kept The Columbiad as one of the volumes available to subscribers to his circulating library is suggestive, but not conclusive.<sup>22</sup> I shall now place Shelley's poem in relation to Barlow's 'transatlantic epic' in

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<sup>20</sup>XXXI (May 1808), 497.

<sup>21</sup>XV (October 1809), 27.

<sup>22</sup>See Appendix 2.

order to delineate one distinctive and hitherto overlooked context for the epic identity of Queen Mab.

Certain features of Barlow's poem duplicate the stylistic formulae typical of the epic poems by Hoyle, Ogden, Pye, Cottle and other of Shelley's contemporaries who attempted epic: the poem is divided into books, each prefaced by an outline of the action handled there in the form of an 'Argument'. The poem begins with the traditional epic proposition 'I sing'. It is to be noted here that Shelley's Dedication to Harriet which prefaces Queen Mab also invokes the oral tradition exemplary of epic for its inspirational source, a source found not in divine or pagan traditions but in Shelley's love for Harriet:

HARRIET! on thine:- thou wert my purer mind;  
Thou wert the inspiration of my song.

(9-10)

Barlow's The Columbiad is longer than Queen Mab, comprising 382 pages of quarto, as against Shelley's 123, with 61 pages of notes. Barlow's Preface discusses the issues of structural organization in heroic poetry. Shelley, as I will demonstrate, was also preoccupied with matters of structural organization and didacticism in Queen Mab, topics which he raises also in his letters.<sup>23</sup>

The vision device that Barlow adopts is the central point of comparison between the two poems; Barlow vigorously defends it against Aristotelian censure in his Preface. In the poem, Columbus is described at the beginning as sitting disconsolate in a Spanish

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<sup>23</sup>Letters. I, 361, 557.

prison. Hesper, the Guardian Angel of America, transports him up and along a heavenly road until he achieves a spatial perspective upon the whole American continent:

Led by the Power, the Hero gain'd the height,  
 New strength and brilliance flush'd his mortal sight;  
 When calm before them flow'd the western main,  
 Far stretch'd, immense, a sky-encircled plain.  
 No sail, no isle, no cloud invests the bound,  
 Nor billowy surge disturbs the vast profound;  
 Till, deep in distant heavens, the sun's blue ray  
 Topt unknown cliffs and call'd them up to day.

(Book I, 197-204)

The soul of Ianthe is conveyed in a 'magic car' by the fairy queen to the latter's palace, from which vantage point the whole universe may be surveyed:

The Fairy and the Spirit  
 Approached the overhanging battlement.-  
 Below lay stretched the universe!

(canto II, 68-70)

Shelley's choice of source for the ascent to heaven and the contemptus mundi perspective upon the earth has been comprehensively discussed by Peck, Baker and Kellner,<sup>24</sup> whose excursions into Southey's epics, Jones and Volney are all helpful in demonstrating in general terms the common use of this motif. I have noted elsewhere the disdainful cosmic view of the earth shared by Godfrey and Hugo in Tasso's epic Jerusalem Delivered.<sup>25</sup>

In Barlow's epic and Queen Mab, however, there is a precise parallelism in that a pair of characters, one the vision narrator,

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<sup>24</sup>Shelley: His Life and Work, I, 311; Shelley's Major Poetry, p. 25; 'Shelleys "Queen Mab" und Volneys "Les Ruines"', pp. 31-37.

<sup>25</sup>See above, p. 89.

the other a recipient of the vision, journey together to an aerial point from which they have a spatial and temporal view: the vision presented is able to accommodate a complex narrative of varied temporal, spatial and conceptual dimensions. None of the poetic sources cited concerning these aspects of Shelley's poem has the range and length of Barlow's poem.

The narrative, spoken by Hesper, surveys the present appearance of the American continents in Book I; explains the past origin of the Indian races, the peopling of America and the rise of the Incas in Books II and III; foretells the destruction of Peru and the settling of America by the Europeans in Book IV; describes the American War of Independence and its aftermath in Books V to VIII and, after allaying Columbus's doubts concerning the future progress of society in Book IX, gives in Book X a preview of future earthly bliss in which all prejudices are resigned by mankind. Shelley's poem deploys a similar range of contexts: most of canto II is a review of past civilizations, cantos III to VII present the contemporary political, religious and economic evils of the world, and cantos VIII and IX imagine a future for mankind patterned by necessity as an inexorable force for perfection.

At the beginning of his Preface to The Columbiad, Barlow tries to forestall any criticism which might seek to evaluate his poem along strictly Aristotelian lines; he proposes to his readers the idea that the considerable range of subject in the poem necessitates a vision structure:

The subject indeed is vast; far superior to any one of those on which the celebrated poems of this description /i.e. epic/ have been constructed; and I have no doubt but that the form that I have given to the work is the best that the subject would admit. It may be added that in no poem are the unities of time, place and action more rigidly

observed: the action, in the technical sense of the word, consisting only of what takes place between Columbus and Hesper; which must be supposed to occupy but few hours, and is confined to the prison and the mount of vision.

But these circumstances of classical regularity are of little consideration in estimating the real merit of any work of this nature.

(Preface, vi)

Shelley also thought of his subject as vast in Queen Mab, writing to Thomas Hookham in 1812 of the 'grand & comprehensive topics of this Poem', and to Hogg in 1813 of its 'cosmopolity.'<sup>26</sup> His thoughts upon its defects are interesting also: having adopted the same formal framework as Barlow, Shelley expressed his dissatisfaction with its unity, as I have noted, reinforcing this view a month or so after the letter to Byron with an observation upon the deficiencies in a 'connected plan' for the poem in a letter to Waller.<sup>27</sup> It is possible that Shelley read the adverse criticism on Barlow's solution to epic unity in the Edinburgh Review, deciding subsequently when composing Leon and Cythna to focus more closely upon matters of structural organization. This point will be taken up again in Chapter 6.

A useful distinction is made by Barlow between the didactic and moral purpose of epic poetry, and its poetical purpose. In discussing the former he is, of course, voicing the dominant neoclassical view which I indicated in Chapter 2 when quoting Le Bossu's definition of the epic poem. Barlow illustrates his distinction with reference

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<sup>26</sup>Letters, I, 324, 352.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., I, 566.

to Homer:

There are two distinct objects to be kept in view in the conduct of a narrative poem; the poetical object and the moral object. The poetical is the fictitious design of the action; the moral is the real design of the poem.

In the Iliad of Homer the poetical object is to kindle, nourish, sustain and allay the anger of Achilles.

(Preface, vii)

The moralistic element is integral to Shelley's description of Queen Mab as a philosophical poem, and he uses the adjective 'didactic' twice in his letters to characterize it: among more recent commentators, Gerald McNeice and Richard Holmes have stressed this aspect of the poem.<sup>28</sup> Barlow particularly emphasized the moral object of epic poetry, and it is significant for a consideration of Queen Mab that Barlow invited his prospective reader to look at The Columbiad from a didactic, i.e. political, point of view:

But the real object of the poem embraces a larger scope; it is to inculcate the love of rational liberty, and to discountenance the deleterious passion for violence and war; to show that on the basis of the republican principle all good morals, as well as good government and hopes of permanent peace, must be founded; and to convince the student of political science that the theoretical question of the future advancement of human society, till states as well as individuals arrive at universal civilization, is held in dispute and still unsettled only because we have had too little experience of organized liberty in the government of nations to have well considered its effects.

(Preface, x)

Three subjects that are given extended didactic treatment in Queen Mab are introduced here: opposition to dictatorial government, an

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<sup>28</sup> Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea. Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1969, pp. 141, 152; Shelley, the Pursuit, pp. 201-202.

abhorrence of war, and the future progress of society to 'universal civilization'. These three topics occur consistently in the Shelley letters which mention Queen Mab. The 1811 letter to Elizabeth Hitchener contemplates a poem which anticipates 'a perfect state of society';<sup>29</sup> Shelley wrote to Hookham in 1812 'I have not attempted to temper my constitutional enthusiasm in that Poem';<sup>30</sup> and to Waller in 1817 that Queen Mab was devoted to 'the doctrines of equality & liberty & disinterestedness, & entire unbelief in religion of any sort.'<sup>31</sup>

A few weeks before Shelley's first named reference to Queen Mab he wrote to Elizabeth Hitchener of an imaginary age 'ere Man had lost reason, and lived an happy happy race. - No Tyranny, no Priestcraft, no War. - Adieu to the dazzling picture.' Jones defines these as 'the embryonic ideas of Queen Mab'.<sup>32</sup>

The two subjects of tyranny and war preoccupy Shelley in cantos III and IV of Queen Mab. Barlow's understanding of the moral object of the Iliad centred upon tyranny and war:

But the real design in the Iliad was directly the reverse. Its obvious tendency was to inflame the minds of young readers with the enthusiastic ardor for military fame; to inculcate the pernicious doctrine of the divine right of kings; to teach both king and people that military plunder was the most honorable mode of acquiring property; and that conquest, violence and war were the best employment of nations, the most glorious prerogative of bodily strength and cultivated mind.

(Preface. vii-viii)

With this view of Homer in mind, Books V to VIII of The Columbiad take as their subject the precipitation of war in the American

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<sup>29</sup>Letters, I, 201.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., I, 324.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., I, 566-567.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., I, 189 and note.

Colonies, the moral of these books clearly being that the republican doctrines of equality and liberty would obviate future strife by securing the eradication of tyranny. Barlow on tyranny in Book VIII of The Columbiad may be seen in relation to Shelley's lines from the beginning of canto III of Queen Mab. Barlow writes:

Tyrants are never free; and, small and great,  
 All masters must be tyrants soon or late;  
 So nature works; and oft the lordling knave  
 Turns out at once a tyrant and a slave,  
 Struts, cringes, bullies, begs, as courtiers must,  
 Makes one a god, another treads in dust,  
 Fears all alike, and filches all he can,  
 But knows no equal friend, finds no friend in man.

Ah! would you not be slaves, with lords and kings,  
 Then be not masters; there the danger springs.

(Book VIII, 345-355)

The interpolation of dependence into the idea of petty tyranny is striking here, although the final couplet draws the moral with a heavy editorial intrusion.

Shelley's lines on the monarch tortured by the scorpions of conscience in canto III of Queen Mab make an interesting comparison:

The King, the wearer of a gilded chain  
 That binds his soul to abjectness, the fool  
 Whom courtiers nickname monarch, whilst a slave  
 Even to the basest appetites - that man  
 Heeds not the shriek of penury;

(canto III, 30-34)

Although both passages operate at levels of awareness which more than simply endorse a moral point, Shelley's lines demonstrate and consciously exploit a recognition of metaphoric reverberation in language which is conspicuously lacking in Barlow. The paradoxical nature of power is structured in both pieces through a series of

antitheses turning on the contrast between tyrant and slave. Barlow's couplets constitute a sequential progression whose cumulative repetition results in poetry of overtly moralistic statement. Shelley's verse achieves its effect differently; antithesis is figured not through counter-balanced phrases alone, but by a careful and adroit handling of metaphor: 'the wearer of a gilded chain/ That binds his soul to abjectness', 'whilst a slave/Even to the basest appetites.' The ornamental chain of office constricts and decorates simultaneously, the hierarchical position of power can never dispose of the weaknesses of man's essential mortality.

In his Preface Barlow links political tyranny inextricably with the violent exercise of power. Citing Virgil's Aeneid, he writes:

The real design of his poem was to increase the veneration of the people for a master, whoever he might be, and to encourage like Homer the great system of military depredation.

(ix)

This view of war and combat as ultimately unheroic questioned the idea of violent conflict in epic. Barlow does not attempt to resolve this issue in his Preface, preferring to express his views in the text of his poem: 'How far the majesty or interest of epic song really depends upon the tumultuous conflicts of war I will not decide' (xv).

Shelley's treatment of the subject of war in canto IV was to be taken up and explored at greater length in Laon and Cythna: in Queen Mab, however, Shelley's lines on war are of uneven texture. Poetry of direct statement, glossed by a prose Note, intrudes upon a carefully controlled opening which focuses historically upon the burning of Moscow. As in Barlow, violence is seen as endemic to

oppression, although Shelley widens the sphere of reference to include religious and judicial dictatorship:

War is the statesman's game, the priest's delight,  
The lawyer's jest, the hired assassin's trade.

(canto IV, 168-169)

In his Note to the lines 'These are the hired bravos who defend/ The tyrant's throne' which closely follow the above, Shelley presents an extract from Godwin's Enquirer (1797) in which the unheroic and 'ridiculousness of the military character'<sup>33</sup> is argued. In poetic technique, however, the presentation of the essential iniquity of war at the beginning of canto IV demonstrates Shelley's developing independence from what Carlos Baker has termed 'a considerable amount of second-hand lumber, on which the stamp of the eighteenth century was prominent.'<sup>34</sup>

Barlow, for instance, begins Book IX of The Columbiad with a night scene, whose lines are firmly located within an eighteenth-century mode of description:

But now had Hesper from the Hero's sight  
Veil'd the vast world with shades of night.  
Earth, sea and heaven, where'er he turns his eye,  
Arch out immense, like one surrounding sky  
Lamp'd with reverberant fires. The starry train  
Paint their fresh forms beneath the placid main.

(Book IX, 1-6)

Shelley also begins with a night scene in canto IV of Queen Mab:

Heaven's ebon vault,  
Studded with stars unutterably bright,  
Through which the moon's unclouded grandeur rolls,  
Seems like a canopy which love had spread  
To curtain her sleeping world.

(canto IV, 4-8)

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<sup>33</sup>Julian, I, 136.

<sup>34</sup>Shelley's Major Poetry. p. 23

The mimetic character of both pieces is evident: the studied phrases 'Studded with stars' and 'starry train', for instance, represent the constellations fixed within a spherical frame and projected in the familiar imagery of vault, canopy and enclosing arch. Baker has drawn a parallel between Shelley's description of the deceptive calm that precedes a storm in lines 19 to 33 of canto IV with Thomson's shipwreck passage in *Summer* (980-1000), to develop his argument for the literary debts of *Queen Mab*.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, Shelley's opening section to canto IV promises the evolution of an individual voice:

Hark to that roar, whose swift and deaf'ning peals  
 In countless echoes through the mountains ring,  
 Startling pale midnight on her starry throne!  
 Now swells the intermingling din; the jar  
 Frequent and frightful of the bursting bomb;  
 The falling beam, the shriek, the groan, the shout,  
 The ceaseless clangor, and the rush of men  
 Inebriate with rage:- loud, and more loud  
 The discord grows; till pale death shuts the scene,  
 And o'er the conqueror and the conquered draws  
 His cold and bloody shroud.

(canto IV, 38-48)

The insistent effort at alliteration in the fifth and seventh lines and the formality of 'intermingling' and 'inebriate' pattern the derivative character of this passage, which is illustrated also by adjectival repetition in the personification of 'pale midnight' and 'pale death'. The dramatic energy of military combat, however, abruptly disturbs any complacency suggested by the personification, conveying an individual urgency of tone. Shelley's careful placing of these lines after the restful and seeming tranquillity of winter

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<sup>35</sup>Spenser, *the Eighteenth Century, and Shelley's "Queen Mab"*, p. 92.

('Yon gentle hills/Robed in a garment of untrodden snow') ensures this disturbance, as the cruelty of Napoleon's Russian campaign is consciously contrasted to the harmony of winter snow pictured so frequently in early eighteenth century nature poetry. In Shelley, the robe of snow is transformed into a 'cold and bloody shroud'.

The third subject that Barlow mentions in his Preface to The Columbiad, in addition to tyranny and war, is the condition of 'universal civilization'; he deals with this in Book X of his epic, as does Shelley in canto VIII of Queen Mab. At the end of The Columbiad a statue to the genius of humanity is erected, before which the sages of mankind gather from all parts of the globe to resign their prejudices:

Beneath the footstall all destructive things,  
The mask of priesthood and the mace of kings,  
Lie trampled in the dust; for here at last  
Fraud, folly, error all their emblems cast.

(Book X, 599-602)

This range of destructive prejudices and forces of oppression are familiar to the reader of Queen Mab, whose attention is readily drawn to the interdependence of various kinds of tyranny.

One aspect of the vision presented to Columbus is the pastoral harmony of the earth in future time; Shelley also invokes a pastoral mode in the fairy queen's reassuring picture of the future in canto VIII. In Barlow's poem, Hesper paints the following scene:

Earth, garden'd all, a tenfold burden brings;  
Her fruits, her odors, her salubrious springs  
Swell, breathe and bubble from the soil they grace,  
String with strong nerves the renovating race,  
Their numbers multiply in every land ...

(Book X, 239-243)

Canto VIII of Queen Mab images a world of Godwinian perfection and pastoral bliss:

Those lonely realms bright garden-isles begem,  
With lightsome clouds and shining seas between,  
And fertile vallies, resonant with bliss,  
Whilst green woods overcanopy the wave,  
Which like a toil-worn labourer leaps to shore,  
To meet the kisses of the flowers there.

All things are recreated, and the flame  
Of consentaneous love inspires all life:  
The fertile bosom of the earth gives suck  
To myriads, who still grow beneath her care,  
Rewarding her with their pure perfectness:

(canto VIII, 101-111)

A comparison reveals similarities in image and feeling between the two passages by Barlow and Shelley. The earth as a fruitful garden is the realm of rebirth in nature and in man where the propagation of all the species is an assured and continuous process. Shelley's lines, however, are interpolated by the power of love as transforming power; a pivotal stage in the poem is marked here, according to Neville Rogers,<sup>36</sup> as Shelley's Platonism becomes a significant force in line 108. In terms of imagery, both poems may owe their sense of a pastoral utopia to Thomson's The Seasons and Milton's Eden, but there are suggestions that Shelley is striving for a distinctive tone nevertheless: his use of the word 'begem', for example, is possibly unique in the early nineteenth-century.<sup>37</sup> Also, the deliberate choice of 'lightsome' to convey its possible but rarely

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<sup>36</sup>The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. 1972, I, 389.

<sup>37</sup>Although the O.E.D. cites one example of 'begem' from the Odes of Anacreon, translated by Thomas Moore, 1800, I have been unable to locate it in this edition.

invoked meaning 'absence of care and sorrow' signifies the unity that Shelley was striving for here: in this utopia of universal civilization even the clouds themselves are invested with perfect emotional happiness.

There is, however, a broader significance to the passage, which places Shelley within a wider Romantic context. As I noted in Chapter 1, M. H. Abrams has argued fairly recently that a small number of Romantic poets writing epic deployed patterns of regeneration imagery to suggest the evolution of a Paradise upon earth;<sup>38</sup> Frye also writes of the Romantic myth of redemption-reintegration.<sup>39</sup> Neither Shelley nor Barlow structure their poems on the mythical patterns discussed by Abrams and Frye and Shelley's poem is trenchantly anti-Christian, but the final emphasis in both does fall upon a type of apocalypse: the attainment of many kinds of spiritual freedom, imaged here by a natural paradise on earth.

Barlow's epic is concerned primarily with political rather than with social, economic or religious change. His poem lacks the authority of philosophical thought which marks both text and Notes to Queen Mab, whose amalgam of Godwin, Concordet, Paine, Holbach, Drummond et alii is the product of years of sustained reflection on these topics. In this respect the conceptual range of Barlow's poem is more limited than that of Shelley, whose articulation of the doctrine of Necessity, for example, embraces political, social and religious issues. Barlow does touch upon economic activity in Book IV of his poem, predictably enough praising the value of commerce and free trade, but warning his reader of the dangers which arise from a

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<sup>38</sup> Natural Supernaturalism. p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> A Study of English Romanticism. p. 33.

lust for gold. Shelley writes an entire canto on the theme of the corrupting power of wealth, since he sees it as a prime source of exploitation, producing inequality and social evil of all kinds. Canto V of Queen Mab, with its demonstration of the whole world degenerating into a gigantic market, contains many of the most moving lines in the poem. The control of wealth by an aristocratic minority and commercial monopoly ultimately degrades both state and individual, and the capacity of the latter for creative expression is crushed by the deadening repetition of factory work. The equation of economic with moral enslavement and corruption is, of course, hardly original: nevertheless, Shelley and Barlow make the same point, both using similar terminology in 'enslave' and 'virtue':

Commerce has set the mark of selfishness,  
The signet of its all-enslaving power  
Upon a shining ore, and called it gold:  
Gold is a living god, and rules in scorn  
All earthly things but virtue.

(Queen Mab, canto V, 53-55, 62-63)

Be thou, my Seer, the people's guardian friend,  
Protect their virtues and their lives defend;  
May wealth and wisdom with their arts unfold,  
Yet save, oh, save them from the thirst of gold.  
Think not the lust for gold shall here annoy,  
Enslave the nation and its nerve destroy.

(The Columbiad, Book IV, 311-314, 377-378)

I have endeavoured to suggest so far in this chapter that an enquiry into the epic identity of Queen Mab has to recognize its close relationship to Joel Barlow's epic The Columbiad. This latter poem was the work of an American poet whose inspiration derived from recent events in the American War of Independence: it is not improbable that Shelley was attracted to its revolutionary sentiments

and unusual vision-frame, and perhaps used the poem as a model for his own narrative. There are parallels between both poems in their use of a vision-frame, the themes of tyranny, war and the idea of a future condition of 'universal civilization.' There are differences, of course: the signs of precision and sensitivity in Shelley's language denote a level of sophistication which points beyond mere mimesis and polemic, and the philosophical dimensions of Queen Mab are clearly lacking in The Columbiad.

Some further affinities between the two poems, however, deserve attention: these include the appeal in both poems to the soul of the earthly recipient of the vision by the narrator, the theme of the transience of past glory, and one very close similarity in the use of a particular image. I shall consider each of these affinities between the two poems now before concluding the chapter with some observations concerning Shelley's use of personification in the light of contemporary epic practice and his presentation of supernatural machinery in the poem.

Barlow had stated in his Preface that the real object of The Columbiad was to 'inculcate the love of rational liberty',<sup>40</sup> to 'show' and 'convince' the reader of the value of republican principles. Shelley's didactic intentions, although focused upon a greater range of subjects, are directed similarly to the tasks of persuasion and changing peoples' attitudes. It is of some interest,

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<sup>40</sup>The association of reason with republicanism and liberty echoes Thomas Paine: '... Government in a well-constituted republic, requires no belief from man beyond what his reason can give ... When men are spoken of as kings and subjects, or when Government is mentioned under the distinct or combined heads of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, what is it that reasoning man is to understand by these terms?', Rights of Man, Part I, 1791 (edited by Henry Collins, Baltimore, Maryland, 1969, pp. 162, 164.)

therefore, to note that commentators on possible sources for Queen Mab have not delineated in any detail the careful distinction which Shelley makes, and in general maintains, between the body of the sleeping Ianthe and her soul, which is in fact the recipient of the vision narrated by the fairy queen. If spiritual change is to be effected, then this regeneration must originate within the soul of man:

Yet every heart contains perfection's germ.

(canto V, 147)

In Volney's Les Ruines, the narrator is approached among the ruins of Palmyra by the Genius, who releases him from his 'corporeal frame' and lifts him into the heavens, from which perspective he is able to view past, present and future. The narrator's soul is nowhere mentioned here, although it is reasonable to assume that it has been separated from his body: A. M. D. Hughes, for example, glosses this episode from the fourth chapter of Les Ruines by saying that 'at a touch of its/Genius/hand his soul is carried out of the body.'<sup>41</sup> Carlos Baker defines only 'The poet or his muse, or some male or female protagonist'<sup>42</sup> as the recipient of a moral lesson.

In both The Columbiad and Queen Mab explicit reference is made to the 'soul' by the narrator. In the former, it is Columbus who receives the vision, and Columbus who participates in the narrative: therefore the distinction between body and soul is not absolutely clear. In Queen Mab it is evident that Shelley is conscious of man possessing a soul, whereas in The Columbiad Barlow only edges

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<sup>41</sup>The Nascent Mind of Shelley, p. 184.

<sup>42</sup>Spenser, the Eighteenth Century, and Shelley's "Queen Mab", p. 85

towards this position. Yet Hesper, the Guardian Angel of America, appeals several times not to Columbus but to his soul, as the fairy queen addresses the soul of Ianthe.

At the beginning of The Columbiad, Hesper speaks to Columbus with these words:

Now raise thy sorrow'd soul to views more bright,  
The vision'd ages rushing on thy sight;  
Worlds beyond worlds shall bring to light their stores,  
Time, nature, science blend their utmost powers.

(Book I, 165-168)

The fairy queen also bids the soul of Ianthe to rise: 'Soul of Ianthe!/Awake! arise!' (I, 128-9). Hesper then continues, to present the soul of Columbus with a vision of both spatial and temporal dimensions:

Nature's remotest scenes before thee roll,  
And years and empires open on thy soul.

(Book I, 251-252)

At the end of The Columbiad, Hesper's final lines to Columbus emphasize the explorer's inner spiritual security, strengthened more by the vision:

Then let thy stedfast soul no more complain  
Of dangers braved and griefs endured in vain,  
Of courts insidious, envy's poison'd stings,  
The loss of empire and the frown of kings,  
While these broad views thy better thoughts compose  
To spurn the malice of insulting foes.

(Book X, 635-640)

The soul of Ianthe, like that of Columbus, has endured a struggle with the evils of life; it is for this reason that she is granted

a vision which encompasses perfection in the future:

Thou art sincere and good; of resolute mind,  
 Free from heart-withering custom's cold control,  
 Of passion lofty, pure and unsubdued.  
 Earth's pride and meanness could not vanquish thee,  
 And therefore art thou worthy of the boon  
 Which thou hast now received: virtue shall keep  
 Thy footsteps in that path that thou hast trod,

(canto IX, 200-207)

This passage, from the fairy queen's final impassioned speech to the 'human Spirit' of Ianthe, blurs the distinction between soul and body which is pivotal to the structural coherence of the poem as a whole. Shelley's appeal, at this point, is to the germ of virtue, to the potential of moral improvement in the individual; he has selected the Ianthe persona as a representative example of the progress to perfection in humanity. Nevertheless, both in Barlow and in Shelley the recipient of the vision is characterised by a tenacity and firmness of purpose: Barlow's Columbus is of 'stedfast soul', Shelley's human Spirit is of 'resolute mind'. They have each endured the prejudices and vices of humanity and now, having received the vision of past, present and future are able to draw upon an inner spiritual strength. The 'better thoughts' of Columbus and the 'lofty, pure and unsubdued' mind of Ianthe are qualities which should enable both to face the immediate future with renewed hope.

There is a shared insistence in both poems upon the power and grandeur of past civilizations, which is moderated by a comprehensive view of their subsequent decay. This topic of the past is a particularly significant and necessary element of the vision perspective in both poems. The passages in Barlow's epic which detail the past glories of previous cultures are included so

that the inherent possibilities for improvement in human beings may be projected into a temporal dimension of the future, where the stable condition of civilized behaviour is assured. In Book IX of the poem it appears at first sight that the invocation of the past serves only to reinforce an impression of mankind's eternal weaknesses: against Hesper's assertion of the future progress of society Columbus proposes a number of doubts, alleging the successive downfall of nations in support of them. This element of doubt, however, is assimilated into a context of more comprehensive scope, since the next Book of the poem envisages a future cosmos of perfection in which the temporary aberrations of previous imperfect civilizations vanish completely. The second canto of Queen Mab also includes a review of past empires by the fairy queen. These lines have generally received only brief treatment in studies of the poem. K. N. Cameron, understandably in respect of his own particular reading of the poem, underplays their importance within the total structure when he writes: 'The remaining 161 lines of Canto II contain a brief picture of the past - emphasizing dead civilizations - and the poem hastens on to its main section, the present, Cantos III - VII;'<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, in Shelley as also in Barlow, this perspective on the past is a necessary contrastive feature against which not simply the present and the future may be projected, but also the potential good of mankind may be emphasized; this is conditional upon an adherence to the philosophical and political principles adopted by both poets and, in the case of Shelley, upon the reader's degree of tolerance in accepting the metaphysical flaws in the philosophical

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<sup>43</sup>The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical, p. 242.

positions proposed. Shelley's reading of Volney, of Peacock's Palmyra (1806) and The Genius of the Thames (1810), undoubtedly influenced lines 109 to 181 of canto II, as both Cameron and Peck<sup>44</sup> have demonstrated: the choice of names, for example, illustrative of past empires - Palmyra, Salem, Athens and Sparta - clearly derives from Peacock's two poems.

Shelley's lines stand in firm contrast to those of Peacock, however. Whereas Peacock is concerned only abstractly with the historical process of the rise and fall of empires, Shelley is preoccupied with the concrete human cost of empire building:

Monarchs and conquerors there  
Proud o'er prostrate millions trod -  
The earthquakes of the human race;  
Like them, forgotten when the ruin  
That marks their shock is past

. . . .

Behold yon sterile spot;  
Where now the wandering Arab's tent  
Flaps in the desert-blast.  
There once old Salem's haughty fane  
Reared high to heaven its thousand golden domes

. . . .

Oh! many a widow, many an orphan cursed  
The building of that fane;

(canto II, 121-125, 134-138, 141-142)

Barlow's review of past grandeur serves as a useful contrast. The lines which narrate man's imperial activities lay their initial emphasis upon the human aspect, but move almost immediately into an evocation of simple regret at the transience of empires, reminiscent of Peacock's song of mourning over the demise of Palmyra. Certainly,

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 249 and note; Shelley: His Life and Work, I, 316-318.

the distinctive metaphorical quality achieved by Shelley with a line  
'The earthquakes of the human race' is absent:

What strides he took in those gigantic times  
That sow'd with cities all his oriental climes!  
When earth's proud floods he tamed, made many a shore,  
And talk'd with heaven from Babel's glittering tower!  
Did not his Babylon exulting say,  
I sit a queen, for ever stands my sway?  
Thebes, Memphis, Nineveh, a countless throng,  
Caught the same splendor and return'd the song;  
Each boasted, promised o'er the world to rise,  
Spouse of the sun, eternal as the skies.

Where shall we find them now? the very shore  
Where Ninus rear'd his empire is no more:  
The dikes decay'd, a putrid marsh regains  
The sunken walls, the tomb-encumber'd plains,  
Pursues the dwindling nations where they shrink,  
And skirts with slime its deleterious brink.

(Book IX, 329-344)

I will conclude my comparison of The Columbiad and Queen Mab by noticing one suggestive parallel of interest. Both poems, in accordance with their predominantly revolutionary tone, begin with an episode in which the witness to the vision is a prisoner who is released by the narrator. Columbus is sitting disconsolately in prison in Spain when Hesper frees him; the soul of Ianthe is imprisoned in her body until the fairy queen releases it to accompany her to the celestial palace. In both cases, chains are the means by which the prisoner is held: Columbus is literally chained, the soul of Ianthe metaphorically so:

So Hesper spoke; Columbus raised his head;  
His chains dropt off; the cave, the castle fled.

(Book I, 185-186)

The chains of earth's immurement  
Fell from Ianthe's spirit;  
They shrank and brake like bandages of straw  
Beneath a wakened giant's strength.

(canto I, 188-191)

My comparison of Barlow's epic with Queen Mab has revealed some suggestive similarities and preoccupations. These poems are revolutionary both in form and in content; Barlow and Shelley deliberately spurn the rules of classical regularity in epic, and in many respects Queen Mab reflects the subjects that Barlow discourses upon in the Preface and embodies in the text of his poem.

There are two further features of Shelley's poem, however, which merit consideration in my discussion of its epic quality. These are: first, a stylistic aspect of language use, considered in relationship to the 'refinement and accuracy of language' statement mentioned by Shelley in his 1817 letter to Byron;<sup>45</sup> second, the question of what one critic has termed 'the visionary machinery'<sup>46</sup> of Queen Mab.

In his Preface to The Columbiad Barlow had outlined the style of language that he considered appropriate for an epic poem:

the whole being clothed in language whose energy, harmony and elegance shall constitute a style every where suited to the manner they have to treat.

(vi)

The idea that a dignified action should be presented in elevated language was a common neoclassical assumption in epic criticism. In a broad sense, one could argue that the didactic tone of Shelley's narrative at least harmonised in some degree with his attitude and subjects. War, tyranny, wealth and religion were subjects presented in images of realistic and historical detail, but Shelley's concern

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<sup>45</sup>Letters. I, 557.

<sup>46</sup>Ross Greig Woodman, The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley. University of Toronto Press, 1966 (Reprint), p. 82.

with their implications and interdependence was explored from a philosophical and didactic perspective as well as from a literal and historical one. His 1817 statement to Byron which isolated the lack of 'refinement and accuracy in language' in Queen Mab may indicate a dissatisfaction with the general level and standard of 'energy, harmony and elegance' in the style. This, he may have felt, should be improved upon, and was inadequate for the 'grand & comprehensive topics of this Poem.'

My previous comparison of Shelley and Barlow earlier in this chapter showed some evidence of a developing discrimination and sophistication in the former's use of language. Yet passages such as the ones cited are rarely sustained at any length. Perhaps Shelley's incantatory voice and use of personification are more representative of a certain inelegance. The incantation of Shelley's verse is exemplified in its extreme form by a passage from the beginning of canto VI, in which the fairy queen continues her 'burning speech' to the spirit of Ianthe and takes up the subject of religion. These lines necessitate being quoted in full:

How bold the flight of passion's wandering wing,  
 How swift the step of reason's firmer tread,  
 How calm and sweet the victories of life,  
 How terrorless the triumph of the grave!  
 How powerless were the mightiest monarch's arm,  
 Vain his loud threat, and impotent his frown!  
 How ludicrous the priest's dogmatic roar!  
 The weight of his exterminating curse,  
 How light! and his affected charity,  
 To suit the pressure of the changing times,  
 What palpable deceit! - but for thy aid,  
 Religion!

(canto VI, 58-69)

The powerful incantatory effect of these lines is achieved by a predominantly phrasal syntax, which gives full weight to the semantic and didactic load carried by noun and adjective. The repetition of

phrases in 'How ...' moves in a sequence which has only the appearance of a development. What is evoked is in fact an impression of simultaneous awareness, keyed to the concessive 'but for thy aid,/Religion!'; the sequential progression that characterizes the lines which follow this passage is absent here, as Shelley's verse becomes overtly rhetorical, almost unrefined didacticism.

Shelley's tendency to interpolate into the narrative line of his poem a uniform tone of didacticism is a characteristic feature of it. No less noticeable is the liberal use made of personification throughout all of the cantos. In Queen Mab his handling of this form of prosopopoeia is imitative of eighteenth-century usage, many of the instances in the poem being found also in the Esdaille poems. Carlos Baker's observation that the dialogue between Vice and Falsehood in the Notes 'proves that Shelley was thinking in allegorical terms',<sup>47</sup> is reinforced by his list of other personified abstractions i.e. Time, Selfishness and Falsehood. The plane of allegory upon which most of Shelley's personifications operate is strictly one-dimensional: a comparison of Shelley's usage with examples from late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century epics reveals a uniformity of direct moral tone easily comprehensible in the picture language which conveys it.

Shelley exploits a range of personified abstractions, of which the most frequently used are Reason and Freedom, Death, Falsehood and Time. A repetition of these particular examples is to be expected: Godwinian rationality and the concept of liberty, for instance, are central concerns of the poem. Of the others, Shelley sometimes personified an abstraction of evil as a monster or fiend, in accordance with contemporary practice. Henry James Pye's epic

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<sup>47</sup>Spenser, the Eighteenth Century, and Shelley's "Queen Mab", p. 83.

Alfred (1801) begins with a reference to the wars that have ravaged England, of conflict precipitated by both internal and external forces:

Seen Desolation stalk with demon-form,  
O'er Albion's fields, and swell the ensanguined storm;

(p. 14)

Shelley uses a similar figure to embody pestilence in canto IV;

The pestilence that stalks  
In gloomy triumph through some eastern land  
Is less destroying.

(canto IV, 188-190)

The personification of religion as a fiend in canto VI is by no means particular to Shelley. Barlow's The Columbiad focuses upon the Spanish Inquisition in Book IV in order to demonstrate the intolerance of religion:

Led by the dark Dominicans of Spain,  
A newborn Fury walks her wide domain,  
Gaunt INQUISITION; mark her giant stride,  
Her blood-nursed vulture screaming at her side.  
Her priestly train the tools of torment brings,  
Racks, wheels and crosses, faggots, stakes and strings;  
Scaffolds and cages round her altar stand,  
And, tipt with sulphur, waves her flaming brand.  
Her imps of inquest round the Fiend advance,  
Suspectors grave, and spies with eyes askance.

(Book IV, 201-210)

Shelley's lines picture also a monster of religion with a similar parasitical appetite:

Religion! but for thee, prolific fiend,  
Who peoplest earth with demons, hell with men,  
And heaven with slaves!

. . . .

thou framedst  
 A tale to suit thy dotage, and to glut  
 Thy misery-thirsting soul, that the mad fiend  
 Thy wickedness had pictured, might afford  
 A plea for sating the unnatural thirst  
 For murder, rapine, violence, and crime.

(canto VI, 69-71, 124-129)

The figure of Freedom which Shelley uses in cantos II and VII is to be found at the beginning of Southey's epic Joan of Arc:

Through which the ghost of Freedom stalks

(canto II, 169)

That freedom's young arm dare not yet chastise

(canto VII, 244)

of France preserv'd  
 By maiden hand, what time her chiefs subdued,  
 Or slept in death, or lingered life in chains,  
 I sing: nor wilt thou FREEDOM scorn my song.

(Book I, 3-6)

Various of the personified abstractions in Queen Mab appear also in the Esdaile poems. This is particularly true of Oblivion, Death and Religion. A few examples may be cited for comparison:<sup>48</sup>

Cannot Oblivion's silent tauntings call

(A retrospect of Times of Old,  
15, Esdaile p. 95)

Oblivion will steal silently

(Queen Mab, II, 119)

From Death's pale front fades Pride's fastidious frown.  
In death's damp vault the lurid fires decay,

(To Death, 22-23, Esdaile p. 74)

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<sup>48</sup>I quote from K. N. Cameron, ed., The Esdaile Notebook, New York, 1964.

How wonderful is Death,  
 Death and his brother Sleep!  
 One, pale as yon waning moon.

(Queen Mab, I, 1-3)

For Religion more keen than the blasts of the North  
 Darts its frost thro' the self-palsied soul;  
 Its slaves on the work of destruction go forth;

('I will kneel at thine altar',  
 19-21, Esdaile p. 125)

Earth groans beneath religion's iron age.

(Queen Mab, VII, 43)

The extensive use that Shelley made of personification in the early minor poems is reflected in the verse of Queen Mab, to which he turned for a more comprehensive expression of his libertarian principles. Indeed, the Esdaile poems which have been dated as previous or contemporaneous with the composition of Queen Mab exhibit considerable dependence upon personification as a stylistic figure. The conception of allegory that such a usage embodies is simple rather than complex: although personified abstractions appear in the later Laon and Cythna, they are displaced in their didactic function by mythological figures of increasing allegorical sophistication and tending towards a symbolic complexity. I take up this point in Chapter 6.

The type of allegory which Shelley's personifications exemplify has been seen also in his choice of supernatural machinery for the poem, which is clearly didactic and lacking the dimensions of the 'sublime allegory' that Fuseli and Hayley regarded as characteristic of the epic mythology of Homer and Milton. It is possible to view some elements of Shelley's 'visionary machinery' entirely in the simplest of allegorical terms, as Carlos Baker has done: 'It is only because the central figures in the poem are called by unusual proper names

that their kinship with typical allegorical figures has been concealed.' Baker then makes the following identifications: Queen Mab is the 'omniscient Daemon of the World', Ianthe's spirit is 'the virtuous soul', Ahasuerus is 'the spiritual essence of all those who have been crushed beneath the heel of Church and State.'<sup>49</sup>

This view seems unnecessarily rigid, and would interpret the characters in Queen Mab, including the supernatural figures of the fairy queen and Ahasuerus, simply as disguised relatives of figures in the moral allegories of the eighteenth century. It is true that a simple allegorical model is an appropriate one to apply when seeking to establish the didactic significance of Shelley's supernatural actors: Queen Mab may be taken as a typical hierophant,<sup>50</sup> for example, and Ahasuerus a representative of the rebellious spirit in exile from established thought. Nevertheless, Shelley's supernatural machinery is most profitably discussed within the context of epic, and the use of allegorical figures in epic rather than in terms of purely allegorical poetry. To what extent does Shelley's supernatural machinery either reflect or deviate from the practice of contemporary epic writers?

One point of difference is immediately apparent. In contrast to the celestial spirits of good and evil in contemporary epic, Shelley's fairy queen and Ahasuerus play solely a didactic role in Queen Mab. They do not interfere in or affect any physical or human activity, as does Azrael, for example, in Ogilvie's Britannia (1801). This traditional function of the supernatural agent is not to be found

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<sup>49</sup>Spenser, the Eighteenth Century, and Shelley's "Queen Mab", p. 83.

<sup>50</sup>Baker, Shelley's Major Poetry, p. 24 and R. G. Woodman, The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley, p. 82, both make this identification.

in Shelley's poem where, apart from canto I and lines 1 to 69 of canto II, the action is completely internalized. It is conducted upon an intellectual and mental plane rather than upon a physical one. Having said this, though, it is noteworthy that Shelley's supernatural actors share certain affinities with the spirits of contemporary epic.

I noted in Chapter 3<sup>51</sup> that the appearance in a vision of a well or evil intentioned daemon sent by a god to an epic protagonist is a feature of classical epic adopted and developed by Spenser and Milton. In Paradise Lost, Eve's dream deceives her, and the appearance of Michael before Adam is a positive and revelatory episode in the poem. The epics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century continue a Miltonic tradition of the guardian angel: the figure is generally an allegorical representative of good, who appears to guide, advise, or to determine the course of the human action.

In The Columbiad Hesper appears as the Guardian Angel of America before Columbus, Britannia is the Guardian Angel of Britain in Ogilvie's epic, and a guardian angel visits Alfred in Joseph Cottle's poem of the same name. The fairy queen in Queen Mab may have her origin in Shakespeare, and travel the heavens like the heroines of Southey and Jones; yet she is a hierophant of good, whose presentation of the past, present and future to Ianthe's soul is a protective and monitory act of faith. As such, she belongs to the line of advisory and guardian angels which occur frequently in contemporary epic.

Her initial appearance in canto I of Queen Mab is described in language which may be usefully compared to that used to present the

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<sup>51</sup> See above, pp. 80-83.

female figure of Britannia in Ogilvie's epic:

The Fairy's frame was slight; yon fibrous cloud,  
That catches but the palest tinge of even,  
And which the straining eye can hardly seize  
When melting into eastern twilight's shadow,  
Were scarce so thin, so slight; but the fair star  
That gems the glittering coronet of morn,  
Sheds not a light, so mild, so powerful,  
As that which, bursting from the Fairy's form,  
Spread a purpureal halo round the scene.

(canto I, 94-102)

Ogilvie's Britannia is pictured upon the cliffs of Britain, awaiting the arrival of Brutus:

High on its summit stood the heavenly Power,  
And gave her green robe to the gale, and stretch'd  
Her wings expanded o'er the abyss that flamed  
With waving radiance as they moved: her front  
A starry crown emblaz'd. The Muse beheld  
The Shape, celestial, veil'd from mortal ken,  
She mark'd her port superiour, and her eyes.

(Book I, 30-36)

The immateriality of the fairy queen is conveyed by an extended comparison with the insubstantiality of clouds, and her light by a comparison with the stars. In contrast, Ogilvie's Britannia is a rather statuesque figure, whose role as the protectress of Britain is emphasized by images of power and authority.

The guardian angels in the epics of Shelley's contemporaries often have a didactic and advisory function, a feature which Queen Mab also shares. In Joseph Cottle's epic Alfred (1800), a guardian angel appears to Alfred at midnight in his tent, and advises him about his future conduct in a speech to which most of Book XXIII in the poem is devoted. The use of personified abstractions is marked:

Flee thou the monster, Pride. He robs the heart  
 Of comforts numberless, involving oft  
 In storms and tempests; driving Peace afar -  
 The blessing which the wise man values most.  
 Humility! fairest of mortal garbs,  
 And beautiful as morning! hold it dear!

(Book XXIII, 124-129)

The fairy queen, although presenting a vision of more comprehensive scope, is given lines similarly charged with moral abstractions:

Commerce! beneath whose poison-breathing shade  
 No solitary virtue dares to spring;  
 But poverty and wealth with equal hand  
 Scatter their withering curses, and unfold  
 The doors of premature and violent death.

(canto V, 44-48)

The other supernatural character of major importance in Queen Mab is Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. As an allegorical representative of rebellion, his prototype is of course Milton's Satan. The fairy queen conjures him up with a wave of her wand at the beginning of canto VII to answer the question 'Is there a God?', to which he responds with a narrative history of Christianity and the general development of Christian doctrine. The Wandering Jew figure had exercised a strong spell on Shelley's imagination as early as 1809, when he began a four canto narrative poem on the subject, which was completed in 1810. As Cameron points out, there are three prose versions of the Wandering Jew story by Shelley prior to 1814, quite apart from its poetical representation in 1810 and in Queen Mab.<sup>52</sup> One of these prose versions is the Note to line 67 of canto VII, 'Ahasuerus, rise!', which Shelley claimed was the translation of a fragment picked up at Lincoln's Inn Fields -

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<sup>52</sup>K. N. Cameron, ed., Shelley and his Circle 1773-1822, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1961, II, 652.

a dubious story, whose complexity Cameron explores elsewhere.<sup>53</sup> Shelley gives the Wandering Jew the name 'Ahasuerus', a Persian name, according to Hogg.<sup>54</sup> Whatever the origin of the story, the phantom of Ahasuerus is imaged by Shelley as a tortured shade; this type of visionary figure is not characteristic of contemporary epic, but is typical in that of antiquity and the Renaissance.

Two sources for the introductory description of Ahasuerus in canto VII have been suggested, both by Carlos Baker. Let me cite Shelley's passage:

A strange and woe-worn wight  
 Arose beside the battlement,  
 And stood unmoving there.  
 His inessential figure cast no shade  
 Upon the golden floor;  
 His port and mien bore mark of many years,  
 And chronicles of untold ancientness  
 Were legible within his beamless eye:  
 Yet his cheek bore the mark of youth;  
 Freshness and vigour knit his manly frame;  
 The wisdom of old age was mingled there  
 With youth's primaeval dauntlessness;  
 And inexpressible woe,  
 Chastened by fearless resignation, gave  
 An awful grace to his all-speaking brow.

(canto VII, 68-82)

Baker argues: 'The source of this passage may be located without difficulty in the second book of The Faerie Queene'.<sup>55</sup> and maintains that the description of Ahasuerus is modelled on Spenser's Eumnestes, the sage of the past in the House of Alma. This is a helpful piece of source criticism, especially since Baker emphasizes

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 657.

<sup>54</sup>Humbert Wolfe, ed., The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley. I, 122.

<sup>55</sup>Spenser, the Eighteenth Century, and "Queen Mab", p. 97.

the infinite memory of Eumnestes and his youth-age duality, two features which also characterize Ahasuerus. However, there is no indication in Spenser that Eumnestes is an anguished spirit: he is simply a mortal with an infinite capacity for remembrance, certainly not a phantom or vision. Baker also suggests that 'Into the picture of Ahasuerus may also have come a suggestion of Milton's Satan, whose thunder-scarred face and care-faded cheek do not prevent "dauntless courage" from looking out beyond his brows.<sup>56</sup> This idea has some force: Satan is a dominant character in Milton's epic machinery, and Shelley had earlier prefaced canto III of The Wandering Jew with the lines from Book I of Paradise Lost in which Satan's mental suffering is so powerfully expressed.

Individual details of Shelley's description may well be located in Spenser and Milton. But the central tradition to which Ahasuerus belongs is the tormented phantom of classical and renaissance epic, of whom the vision or phantom of Hector in Book II of Virgil's Aeneid is an early example. As I noted earlier,<sup>57</sup> the Phantom of the Cape of Good Hope in Camoëns The Lusiad, translated by Hickle, is another:

His haggard beard flow'd quivering on the wind;  
 Revenge and horror in his mien combined;  
 His clouded front, by withering lightnings scared,  
 The inward anguish of his soul declared.

Ahasuerus is a 'woe-worn wight', overburdened with 'inexpressible woe', like Camoën's Phantom; having narrated the history of Christianity according to Shelley's prescription, this 'phantasmal portraiture/Of wandering human thought' flees and disappears at the command of the fairy queen.

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 98

<sup>57</sup>See above, p. 85.

On May 21, 1813, Harriet Shelley wrote to Catherine Lugent from London:

Mr. Shelley continues perfectly well, and his Poem of 'Queen Mab' is begun /apparently, to be printed/, tho' it must not be published under pain of death, because it is too much against every existing establishment. It is to be privately distributed to his friends, and some copies sent over to America.<sup>58</sup>

One feels a certain amount of irony in acknowledging that the circulation of Shelley's earliest major revolutionary work was severely restricted during most of his lifetime, while Joel Barlow's American and republican epic The Columbiad rested comfortably upon one of Thomas Hookham's library shelves in London. The parallels between the two poems suggest an affinity in some of the subjects handled, and in structural organization; this separates both from the tradition in which contemporary productions were written, which was not 'against every existing establishment'. Any attempt to place Queen Mab as a poem of even modest epic pretension has to recognize its novel use of a vision-frame, its comprehensive and encyclopaedic scope, and its method of presenting supernatural actors within a recognizable context of epic. It is a poem which lies chiefly within the milieu of epic represented by The Columbiad, and its allegorical and moralistic element is characteristic of an epic modelled along the lines of prescriptive neoclassical theory of epic; the features of internalization, a figuring of apocalyptic renewal, and encyclopaedic scope have been met with before in twentieth-century writing on the Romantic epic.

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<sup>58</sup>Letters, I, 368, and note.

It is reasonable to infer from the language in Shelley's letters discussing Queen Mab that the topics of, for example, structure and language in contemporary epic practice and criticism, were known to him. His poem exhibits signs of an awareness of the possibilities of language, which would be developed in later work, moving his verse away from straightforward allegory towards a symbolic complexity and mythopoesis of considerable refinement. The public voice of social and political commitment would be heard again in Laon and Cythna, where the idea of epic is realized in yet another direction, although retaining the fundamentally important concepts of vision and dream integral to the three poems under discussion. In this respect of vision and dream, both Queen Mab and Laon and Cythna are 'epics of consciousness',<sup>59</sup> examples of internalized poetry. Before embarking on Laon and Cythna, however, Shelley pursued one private and internal journey of consciousness in Alastor: this is the subject of my next chapter.

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<sup>59</sup>T. A. Vogler, Preludes to Vision, p. 13.

CHAPTER 5

ALASTOR

Shelley's Alastor (1816) readily suggests to the reader kinship with one major type of epic, the epic of quest. G. R. Levy describes this type as one in which

Its heroes fight chiefly in solitude, against daemons who oppose their progress, 'monsters of their own spirit's making'. If they start their journey with companions, they lose them on the way, as Gilgamesh and Odysseus and Rama do. They always cross the sea and meet women on strange shores who enchant and prophesy, like Siduri, Circe, Medea and the Sibyl of Cumae. They navigate the waters of death to learn their destiny from an ancestor or prophet, as Gilgamesh, Odysseus and Aeneas did.<sup>1</sup>

Several essays on Alastor have noted its epic quest identity;<sup>2</sup> in 1933 H. L. Hoffman entitled his study of the poem 'An Odyssey of the Soul',<sup>3</sup> an Homeric allusion invoked later by Albert Gerard in 1954 in his discussion of Alastor.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Sword from the Rock: An Investigation into the Origins of Epic Literature and the Development of the Hero, London, 1953, p. 150.

<sup>2</sup>Carlos Baker, Shelley's Major Poetry, p. 43; Glenn O'Malley, 'Shelley's "Air-Prism": the Synesthetic Scheme of Alastor', MP, LV (February 1958), 182; W. H. Hildebrand, 'Shelley's Early Vision Poems', SIR, VIII, No. 4 (Summer 1969), 207; Bryan Cooper, 'Shelley's Alastor: the Quest for a Vision', K-SJ, XIX (1970), 63-76; William J. McTaggart, 'The Design and Unity of Shelley's Alastor Volume', KSMB, XXIII (1973), 13.

<sup>3</sup>An Odyssey of the Soul: Shelley's 'Alastor'. New York, 1966 (Reprint).

<sup>4</sup>Alastor, or the Spirit of Solipsism', PQ, XXXIII, No. 2 (April 1954), 172.

While it is reasonable to note affinities between Alastor and The Odyssey, for example, (both poems contain an epic invocation, a central 'hero', a quest, a journey) the primary purpose of this chapter is to argue that Alastor is a highly individualised expression of the Romantic epic as defined by Karl Kroeber:

They [Romantic epics] express personal rather than social experience; their truth is not that of reason but of supra-rational vision; their manner is mythical and dynamic, not formal and conventional.

[The Prelude] ... in fact, is one of the first representatives of a form created in the early years of the nineteenth century ... That form we may call the mythical journey.<sup>5</sup>

Alastor is a poem which pivots upon a crisis of consciousness in the Poet and it invokes the four features isolated by Kroeber: personal as opposed to social experience, vision, myth, and a journey. A consideration of these features will form the basis of subsequent discussion.

First, Alastor expresses 'personal rather than social experience': the chief character of the poem is a Poet of exceptional sensitivity whose quest for knowledge leads him beyond the circle of human sympathy. In the Preface<sup>6</sup> to the poem he is described as one of those 'luminaries of the world' who is awakened to 'too exquisite a perception of its influences.' Shelley may have been prompted to explore the hazards of the solipsistic imagination by contemporary

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<sup>5</sup>Romantic Narrative Art, pp. 84, 103; see also p. 206, note 14 on Alastor: 'But both Keats and Shelley attempted visionary personal epics ... Endymion and Alastor, moreover, originate in a confidence in the validity of personal vision'.

<sup>6</sup>Although it is generally assumed that the Preface was written after the poem, there is little or no evidence to support this view. To date, no manuscript drafts or fair copy for Alastor have been located.

biographical writing on the madness of the epic poet Tasso, whose mental instability had generated a number of studies on the dangers of a too refined mental sensitivity, especially in poets.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the 'truth' of the poem is one of 'supra-rational vision': the Poet's vision of the 'veiled maid' is a centrally important event which precipitates his early death, and which resembles one type of vision, the misleading or delusive dream, commonly found in epic poetry, as I observed in Chapter 3. It constitutes a crisis of consciousness in the poem. Thus, Alastor is one of those 'epics of consciousness', to use Thomas Vogler's phrase,<sup>8</sup> an epic whose thematic focus is predominantly internal, an epic of visionary experience.

Third, the manner of Alastor is 'mythical and dynamic': the poem exploits a complex range of Greek, Christian and Indian myths, whose purpose is to define and evaluate the progress of the Poet's quest. Shelley's usage of the Indian myth of the Caucasus, for example, is the result of careful reading, and appears to take up William Hayley's suggestion in the Essay on Epic Poetry that prospective epic poets should look to the East as a source for new mythologies.<sup>9</sup> The different contending mythological perspectives emphasise the symbolic rather than the allegorical nature of mythology.

Fourth, the Poet's 'mythical journey' may be keyed to precise geographical locations - again the result of Shelley's reading: these locations were consciously placed in the poem by Shelley to focus

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<sup>7</sup>See Chapter 2, above, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup>Preludes to Vision, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup>See Chapter 2, above, p. 54.

attention upon a variety of mythological associations, those relating to the Indian and Russian Caucasus being perhaps the most important. This chapter will consider initially the invocation at the beginning of Alastor, and then proceed to examine the poem within the context of Kroeber's defining characteristics of the Romantic epic outlined above.

Alastor begins with Shelley, as narrator, invoking the inspirational aid of 'our great Mother' before embarking upon the narrative proper. This epic convention is found in the most well known epic of quest, The Odyssey, in which the narrator exclaims 'The hero of the tale which I beg the Muse to help me tell ... This is the tale I pray the divine Muse to unfold to us.'<sup>10</sup> Prescriptive neoclassical theory of epic, as exemplified by Le Bossu, asserted the necessity of an invocation in the epic poem:

But let the way be how it will, the Poet cannot omit the Invocation. He speaks of things which he would know nothing of, unless some God or other had revealed them to him.<sup>11</sup>

Shelley was aware of both classical practice and neoclassical theory,<sup>12</sup> and adopted this particular formal feature of epic to begin his narrative. Yet the invocation suggests that the emphasis in the subsequent narrative will be predominantly introspective and internal, focusing upon vision and dream; unlike the poet of The Odyssey or Le Bossu, the narrator in Alastor has clearly struggled

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<sup>10</sup> Homer, The Odyssey, translated by E. V. Rieu, Baltimore, Maryland, 1969 (Reprint), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Le Bossu and Voltaire on the Epic, p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> Shelley's reading of The Odyssey dated from at least 1813 (Letters I, 380); for his access to Le Bossu see above, p. 59, and also Appendix 2.

in solitude for some time with the content of his narrative. More than merely the mouthpiece of a heavenly Muse, Shelley as narrator asks for assistance in giving utterance to 'the tale/Of what we are' (28-29), indications of which he has previously glimpsed in dream and vision. The invocation introduces the ideas of solitude and visionary experience, which foreshadow those of the following narrative:

I have made my bed  
 In charnels and on coffins, where black death  
 Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,  
 Hoping to still these obstinate questionings  
 Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost  
 Thy messenger, to render up the tale  
 Of what we are. In lone and silent hours,  
 When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness,  
 Like an inspired and desperate alchemist  
 Staking his very life on some dark hope,  
 Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks  
 With my most innocent love, until strange tears  
 Uniting with those breathless kisses, made  
 Such magic as compels the charmed night  
 To render up thy charge:... and, though ne'er yet  
 Thou has unveil'd thy inmost sanctuary;  
 Enough from incommunicable dream,  
 And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought,  
 Has shone within me,

(23-41)

The recognition that visions or dreams are inspirational sources ('Enough from incommunicable dream/And twilight phantasms') has been noted elsewhere as a feature of the epic invocations in Milton and in Shelley's contemporaries William Blake and Charles Hoyle.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of his epic poem Exodus (1807), Hoyle writes:

Oft such vision crowd  
 My slumber, and such musing oft beguile  
 Nocturnal watchings, or awake my soul  
 Earlier than suns in summer, to renew,  
 The blissful theme.

(Book I, 12-16)

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<sup>13</sup>See Chapter 3, above, p. 79.



Shelley's 'my strain' and 'may modulate' is reminiscent of Wordsworth's 'my Song' and 'may shine', a possible indication to the reader on Shelley's part that he shared one preoccupation with the elder poet: visionary experience. Wordsworth's lines continue a little further on by invoking the power of vision:

And if with this  
I mix more lowly matter; with the thing  
Contemplated, describe the Mind and Man  
Contemplating; and who, and what he was -  
The transitory Being that beheld  
This Vision,

(93-98)

Shelley's invocation may be seen as an exercise in the formal epic convention which differs however, from its classical model in several essential respects. The narrator is closely engaged with visionary rather than with discursive experience; he is no impartial observer distanced from the narrative which he unfolds. His invocation to the 'Great Parent' reveals a concern with introspection and mental reality, rather than with social and publicly observable reality. It belongs, most properly, to the Romantic epic.

The characteristic of 'personal experience' which Kroeber sees as fundamental to the Romantic epic is clearly a dominant feature in Alastor. Its central figure is the solitary Poet who, although not cast in the strictly classical mould of the physically active warrior, is presented at the outset as 'Gentle, and brave, and generous' (line 58); at the end of the poem, the narrator speaks of his 'high and holy soul' (line 628). He leaves his home 'To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands' (line 77) and his pursuit of Nature's

secrets is expressed in language which definitely conveys a degree of physical danger and heroic aspiration:

Nature's most secret steps  
 He like her shadow has pursued, where'er  
 The red volcano overcanopies  
 Its fields of snow and pinnacles of ice  
 With burning smoke, or where bitumen lakes  
 On black bare pointed islets ever beat  
 With sluggish surge, or where the secret caves  
 Rugged and dark, winding among the springs  
 Of fire and poison,

(81-89)

Nevertheless, Shelley's 'hero' is a poet, and the problem of his identity and possible prototype outside the imaginative universe of the poem has been the subject of discussion over a number of years. There have been two main approaches to the issue. One view is that the Poet is to be directly identified with Shelley, or at least with one aspect of Shelley's own character. The other view sees the Poet as modelled upon a figure other than Shelley, generally either Wordsworth or Coleridge. Advocates of the autobiographical interpretation include Frederick L. Jones, Carlos Baker, and Richard Holmes. Arguments for the identification of the Poet with Wordsworth and Coleridge have been presented by Paul Mueschke and Earl L. Griggs, and by Joseph Raban; a parallel between the Poet and Samuel Johnson's Imlac in Rasselas has been argued for by Kenneth Cameron.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Frederick L. Jones, 'The Inconsistency of Shelley's Alastor', ELH, XIII, No. 4 (December 1946), 294; Carlos Baker, Shelley's Major Poetry, p. 48 et seq; Richard Holmes, Shelley, the Pursuit, pp. 300-306; Mueschke and Griggs, op.cit., pp. 229-245; Joseph Raban, 'Coleridge as the Prototype of the Poet in Shelley's Alastor', R.E.S. n.s. XVII, No. 67 (August 1966), 278-292; K. N. Cameron, 'Rasselas and Alastor: A Study in Transmutation', SP, XL, No. 1 (January 1943), 60.

It is possible to associate the Poet with Shelley directly, and one reading of the poem has interpreted the narrative as Shelley's attempt to set forth a state of mind in which a lover evolves an ideal picture of a woman from a less than ideal earthly reality. Thus the vision of the 'veiled maid' in Alastor is based upon a state of mind which Shelley in real life believed was induced in him first by Harriet Grove and subsequently by others.<sup>18</sup> Richard Holmes has argued persuasively that Alastor constitutes Shelley's 'own comment, as a poet, on the inner significance of the events of 1814', that 'the value of the poem to him was the degree to which it allowed him to extend the investigations into his own psychology further than he had managed in prose.'<sup>19</sup>

While it is undoubtedly true that Shelley was interested in dream experiences prior to the composition of Alastor,<sup>20</sup> it would be misleading to draw too exact an equivalence between Shelley the man - and his psychological experiences - and the Poet. As Holmes recognizes, the poem resulted largely from Shelley's effort at distancing himself from his actual experiences.<sup>21</sup> A straightforward Shelley-Poet identification fails to explain why, since there are autobiographical allusions in the narrator's invocation, Shelley so carefully distinguishes narrator from Poet in the narrative.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Carlos Baker, Shelley's Major Poetry, pp. 49-52.

<sup>19</sup> Shelley, the Pursuit, pp. 300, 301.

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 3, above, pp. 97-100.

<sup>21</sup> Shelley, the Pursuit, p. 305.

<sup>22</sup> See O'Malley, 'Shelley's "Air-Prism": the Synesthetic Scheme of Alastor', pp. 182-184; Earl R. Wasserman, Shelley, a Critical Reading, pp. 11, 31-41; Norman Thurston, 'Author, Narrator, and Hero in Shelley's Alastor', SIR, XIV, No. 2 (Spring 1975), 119-131 for different discussions of Shelley's distinction between narrator and Poet in Alastor.

It undervalues the consciously achieved degree of ambivalence and equivocation which is present at significant points in the narrative, and in the Preface. Indeed, there is more directly autobiographical reference in the invocation than in the narrative itself. The narrative presents a carefully balanced exploration of excessive imaginative sensitivity in the poet figure, based on Tasso, rather than a record of Shelley's own specific psychological experiences; this will be shown presently.

A different approach to the identity of the Poet has tended to allegorize his journey as basically either the decay of Wordsworth's genius or as the 'fate' of Coleridge. Both forms of this approach were vigorously opposed almost immediately after their publication: Marcel Kessel formulated a comprehensive rebuttal of Mueschke and Griggs' attempt to show that Shelley had Wordsworth in mind as the prototype of the Poet in Alastor,<sup>23</sup> and Timothy Webb effectively countered Joseph Raben's article, which linked the Alastor Poet with Coleridge.<sup>24</sup> This approach needs little further comment: it virtually ignores the positive aspects of the Poet's quest in favour of a too one-sided interpretation of the poem which concentrates almost exclusively upon the Poet's decline and death.

The endeavours of the above group of critics to establish the identity of the Poet focus almost entirely upon specific poets and their work. This appears to narrow the imaginative scope of Alastor unnecessarily, by reading it as a sustained allegory of one person's

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<sup>23</sup>The Poet in Shelley's Alastor: A Criticism and a Reply', PMLA, LI (March 1936), 302-310.

<sup>24</sup>Coleridge and Shelley's Alastor: A Reply', R.E.S. n.s. XVIII, no. 72 (November 1967), 402-411.

particular biography. It may be more helpful to view the poem as prompted perhaps by the life of a particular figure, without offering the conclusion that this figure is to be identified with the Poet: Shelley himself widens the scope of interpretation in the Preface by viewing its subject as 'allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind'. Peter Butter has very sensibly suggested that the Poet is 'an idealized portrait of any highly intellectual, sensitive, and idealistic poet.'<sup>25</sup> The word 'any' discriminates justly: the Poet in Alastor is representative of any highly sensitized and intellectual poet, and the emphasis in the poem is upon the nature of the poet's imagination, rather than upon a particular biography.

Nevertheless, it may be argued, without actually identifying the 'hero' of Alastor with another figure, that Shelley could well have derived his interest in the workings of the poet's imagination partly from contemporary writing on the madness of Tasso, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter. Kroeber's 'personal experience' characteristic of the Romantic epic is expressed in Alastor very individually as a study of the exceptionally sensitive poetic mind, a topic of current interest to Shelley's contemporaries particularly focused upon the biography of the epic poet Tasso.

I observed in Chapter 2,<sup>26</sup> that the fascination which the life of Tasso exercised upon Shelley's contemporaries was indicative of a biographical approach to epic in the criticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It has generally been

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<sup>25</sup>Shelley's Idols of the Cave. Edinburgh University Press, 1954, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup>See above, p. 36.

assumed that Shelley's interest and knowledge of Tasso's life dates, at the earliest, from the publication of Byron's 'Lament of Tasso', parts of which Shelley admired,<sup>27</sup> and which was published by Murray on July 17, 1817. Shelley's letter to Byron, written at Leigh Hunt's some two months later, isolates the themes of genius and solitude in the Byron poem for praise - subjects which had already been imaginatively explored in Alastor:

'The Lament of Tasso' I do not think so perfect and sustained a composition. There are passages, indeed, most wonderfully impressive; and those lines in which you describe the youthful feelings of Tasso; that indistinct consciousness of its own greatness, which a heart of genius cherishes in solitude, amid neglect and contempt, have a profound and thrilling pathos which I will confess to you, whenever I turn to them, make my head wild with tears.<sup>28</sup>

The lines to which Shelley refers in this letter come from Section VI of Byron's poem; Tasso is described, projecting his own voice:

My soul was drunk with love, which did pervade  
And mingle with whate'er I saw on earth;  
Of objects all inanimate I made  
Idols, and out of wild and lonely flowers,  
And rocks, wherebye they grew, a paradise,

(150-154)

And then they smote me, and I did not weep,  
But cursed them in my heart, and to my haunt  
Return'd and wept alone, and dream'd again  
The visions which arise without a sleep.

(162-165)

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<sup>27</sup> Donald H. Reiman, ed., Shelley and his Circle 1773-1822. VI, 591.

<sup>28</sup> September 24, 1817, Letters. I, 556-557.

These lines are reminiscent of passages from Alastor.<sup>29</sup> and Shelley naturally drew attention to them in his comments to Byron. Either Shelley quite unconsciously featured in his 1815 poem certain aspects of the poetic sensibility which he was pleased to see in Byron's 1817 'Lament of Tasso' linked for the first time with the Italian epic poet; or he had some knowledge of the life of Tasso as early as 1815, and was pleased to see that Byron had chosen also to select Tasso as an example of 'a heart of genius', as he had done two years previously. The latter possibility is by no means remote, in spite of the fact that most scholars look to the period following his final departure for Italy for evidence of his acquaintance with Tasso's life. Reiman cites Shelley's reading of biographies on Tasso in April, 1818, and notes G. M. Matthews' article which dates the extant fragments of Shelley's projected drama on Tasso's life as between either May 10 and June 10, or June 12 and July 8.<sup>30</sup> It has also been suggested that Julian and Maddalo, composed at Este shortly after Shelley's first visit to Venice in the autumn of 1818 may be indebted to Shelley's earlier plans and fragments for his drama on Tasso.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Charles E. Robinson, Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 44, argues that Shelley's Alastor influenced Byron's 'Lament of Tasso'.

<sup>30</sup>Shelley and his Circle 1773-1822. VI, 590-591 and note 25; see also G. M. Matthews, 'A New Text of Shelley's Scene for Tasso'. KSMB. XI (1960), 46.

<sup>31</sup>See E. Dowden, The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, II, 238; N. I. White, Shelley. New York, 1940, II, 558-559 note 25; R. D. Havens, 'Julian and Maddalo', SP, XXVII, No. 4 (October 1930), 648-653; Bernard A. Hirsch also notes 'and in whose life Tasso and work Shelley was widely read and vitally interested', "'A Want of That True Theory": Julian and Maddalo as Dramatic Monologue', SIR. XVII, No. 1 (Winter 1978), p. 13.

However, Shelley's contact with Tasso as the focus of contemporary interest in the dangers of the ultra-sensitive poetic mind probably antedates the composition of Alastor, and may have stimulated its major themes of an 'indistinct consciousness of ... greatness' and of solitude in the aspiring Poet, with their attendant consequences. This can be shown both by a demonstration of Shelley's access to contemporary writing on Tasso and the poetic imagination and by a number of similarities between these writings and certain lines from the Preface and text of Alastor.

The most important biography of Tasso available to Shelley before he left England for the last time was John Black's Life of Torquato Tasso with an Historical and Critical Account of His Writings (2 vols, 1810), which Thomas Hookham had in his circulating library, and to which reference has already been made in Chapter 2.<sup>32</sup> D. H. Reiman is of the opinion 'It is likely that he acquired the biography by Black before leaving England', although no evidence is brought forward to support this view.<sup>33</sup> It is not unreasonable to suggest that Shelley may have studied Black's Life of Tasso while on a visit to the Hookhams. The biography was well known: Leigh Hunt owned a copy, which he annotated,<sup>34</sup> and the Eclectic Review published a comprehensive review of it in November and December, 1810.<sup>35</sup>

There are two key passages in the first volume of Black's biography under the heading 'General infelicity of men of genius' in which Tasso's own mental disturbances are placed within the

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<sup>32</sup>See above, pp. 37-38.

<sup>33</sup>Shelley and his Circle 1773-1822, VI, 591.

<sup>34</sup>British Library, C 61.k.4 with MS notes by Leigh Hunt.

<sup>35</sup>See Chapter 2, p. 36 and note.

context of a philosophical discussion concerning extreme artistic sensitivity. These passages are decisively important when considering a possible similarity to Black in the description of the figure of the Poet in the Preface and text of Alastor. They necessitate being quoted in full:

The fame of the poet is, of all kinds of literary glory, the most popular and extensive; but it rests upon titles, the legitimacy of which it is in the power of the meanest and most ignorant to contest. That sensibility, too, which seems necessary for a high superiority in any of the fine arts, is commonly the scourge and torment of its possessor; and it has been well remarked by Mr. Smellie, that a sentient being with mental powers much superior to those of man, could not live and be happy in the world.

'If such a being really existed, his misery would be extreme. With senses more delicate and refined, with perceptions more acute and penetrating, with a taste so exquisite, that the objects around it would by no means gratify it, obliged to feed on nourishment too gross for his frame, he must be born only to be miserable, and the continuation of his existence would be utterly impossible. Even in our present condition, the sameness and insipidity of objects and pursuits, the futility of pleasure, and the infinite sources of excruciating pain, are supported with great difficulty by refined and cultivated minds. Increase our sensibilities, continue the same objects and situation, and no man could bear to live.'<sup>36</sup>

(p. 182)

Happiness, also, seems to consist in a kind of conformity of our situation to our desires; a kind of equilibrium between our inclinations and the means of satisfying them ... he /i.e. the man of genius/ will be often the most restless and dissatisfied of mankind; tormented at once by a fretful impatience, and by a vacancy of heart amidst all the puerile enjoyments of life.

(p. 184)

There are three points of comparison between Black's sensitive poet (Smellie's 'sentient being') and the Poet in the Preface and text

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<sup>36</sup>Black cites William Smellie, The Philosophy of Natural History, 1790, I, 526; this work was also available to Shelley: see above, p. 37.

of Alastor; these are: his extreme psychological sensitivity and sense of the insufficiency of external objects to satisfy his imagination, a state of torment, and premature death.

Black argues that the sensibility of a man of genius in the arts is akin to the hypothetical being imagined by Smellie, 'With senses more delicate and refined, with perceptions more acute and penetrating with a taste so exquisite, that the objects around it would by no means gratify it,'. The Poet in Shelley's Preface is described as:

a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe. He drinks deep of the fountains of knowledge, and is still insatiate. 'The magnificence and beauty of the external world sinks profoundly into the frame of his conceptions, and affords to their modifications a variety not to be exhausted. So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured, he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed. But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice.

(Julian, I, 173)

In the narrative, the Poet expresses parallel sentiments: he articulates his sense of dislocation and disharmony, felt between his 'surpassing powers' and the external universe. After the vision episode, but immediately before he embarks upon his voyage, he observes a swan in flight and exclaims:

"And what am I that I should linger here,  
With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,  
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned  
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers  
In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven  
That echoes not my thoughts?"

(285-290)

The Poet in Alastor pursues a visionary reality which lies beyond the realms of empirical observation; Leigh Hunt had underlined the

phrase 'the objects around it would by no means gratify it' in his copy of Black's biography of Tasso, noting in the margin, of the 'sentient being', that 'He would see a great deal more in them than others did'.<sup>37</sup>

A highly developed imaginative faculty in the poet, according to Black, 'is commonly the scourge and torment of its possessor', the man of genius is 'the most restless and dissatisfied of mankind; tormented at once by a fretful impatience'. The Poet's restlessness and torment is particularly evident in a passage which follows his vision experience, from line 224 to 271:

At night the passion came,  
Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream,  
And shook him from his rest, and led him forth  
Into the darkness.-

(224-227)

thus driven  
By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,  
Beneath the cold glare of the desolate night,  
Through tangled swamps and deep precipitous dells,  
Startling with careless step the moon-light snake,  
He fled.

(232-237)

The Poet is described in imagery which suggests a tormented, spectral figure, almost a fleeting phantom which embodies care and suffering:

wildly he wandered on,  
Day after day, a weary waste of hours,  
Bearing within his life the brooding care  
That ever fed on its decaying flame.  
And now his limbs were lean; his scattered hair  
Sered by the autumn of strange suffering,  
Sung dirges in the wind; his listless hand  
Hung like dead bone within its withered skin;

(244-251)

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<sup>37</sup>Noted in ink in the left hand margin, I, 182.

The inevitability of death for such a highly sensitized 'sentient being' as the one imagined by Smellie ('the continuance of his existence would be utterly impossible') is the fate that awaits the Alastor Poet. In the words of the Preface 'he descends to an untimely grave'; in the poem, death is the last realm to be approached for a return of the vision:

Does the dark gate of death  
Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,  
O Sleep?

(211-213)

These points of comparison between Black's Tasso biography and Alastor strongly suggest that Shelley's poem may owe something in its conception to the problems of the highly developed poetic imagination discussed in relationship to Tasso. Another work, Nathan Drake's Literary Hours (1798),<sup>38</sup> may also have been known to Shelley. Drake's essay in this volume 'On the Government of the Imagination; on the Frenzy of Tasso and Collins' is suggestive when placed against certain phrases from Shelley's Preface. Two passages from the essay deserve comment:

But some there are gifted with an imagination of the most brilliant kind; who are accustomed to expatiate in all the luxury of an ideal world, and who possess a heart glowing with the tenderest sensations. These men too frequently fall a sacrifice to the indulgence of a warm and vigorous fancy, and which is, unhappily, not sufficiently corrected by a knowledge of mankind, or the rigid deduction of scientific study. The lovely scenes they had so rapturously drawn, and coloured, find no archetype in the busy paths of life, but fade away beneath the gloomy touch of reality, and leave to the astonished visionary, a cheerless and barren view;

(p. 31)

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<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 2, above, p. 38.

The fairy visions he /Chatterton/ had drawn were blasted by the hand of poverty and neglect, and conscious of the powers which animated his bosom, and despising that world which had failed to cherish them, and of which he had formed so flattering but so delusive an idea ... beheld in the grave alone a shelter from affliction.

(p. 42)

Drake's depiction of the poetic imagination shares with Shelley's Preface two interesting points: the visionary finds 'no architype in the busy paths of life', and 'the fairy visions ... were blasted by poverty and neglect and ... beheld the grave alone a shelter from affliction'. There is a similar verbal resonance in Shelley: the Poet 'seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception' and 'Blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave.'

It is worth pointing out that, among the contemporary reviews which greeted the publication of Shelley's Alastor, only one, the Eclectic Review, displayed any hint of comprehension - as against uncomprehending hostility - towards the poem. In its review of October, 1816, the Eclectic Review commented:

The poem is adapted to show the dangerous, the fatal tendency of that morbid ascendancy of the imagination over the other faculties, which incapacitates the mind for bestowing an adequate attention on the real objects of this "work-day" life, and for discharging the relative and social duties.<sup>39</sup>

Six years earlier, the same periodical had carried in its pages an exhaustive review of Black's biography; Josiah Conder's review here, by accident or design, takes up the theme of poetic sensitivity again.

The point of defining Shelley's Alastor as a poem which illustrates the 'personal experience' characteristic argued for by Kroeber is to suggest that it was probably written in response to

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<sup>39</sup>Donald H. Reiman, ed., The Romantics Reviewed, Part C, I, 328.

contemporary critical discussion about the hazards of the poetic imagination. Tasso was the figure most frequently invoked in this discussion.<sup>40</sup> While it is demonstrably the case that Shelley's own observations of his psychological condition provide a relevant context for reading the poem, the poem and its 'hero' are not based on the personal life of Shelley, nor on the lives of Wordsworth or Coleridge. Contemporary discussion on the 'morbid ascendancy of the imagination over the other faculties' invariably presented the Italian epic poet Tasso as a paradigm of this condition in some poets, and Shelley's interest in Tasso quite possibly found its first expression in Alastor.

Yet Shelley's poem does not present a one-sided warning against the dangers of excessive introspection; as I have already noted,<sup>41</sup> the Poet is presented quite positively in the narrative. In fact, Shelley probes more deeply into the world of vision and dream than any straightforward allegorical interpretation would allow. The poem's truth, to use Kroeber's expression, is 'of supra-rational vision'. This second characteristic of the Romantic epic, its visionary quality, merits close attention.

The central fact about Shelley's 'hero' in Alastor is that he is a visionary; both vision and dream are crucially important concepts in the poem from the very beginning. The narrator's invocation introduces them first, and then the Poet is described:

By solemn vision and bright silver dream  
His infancy was nurtured.

(67-68)

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<sup>40</sup>See Chapter 2, p. 37.

<sup>41</sup>See above, pp. 168-169.

The vision episode of the 'veiled maid' is the motivating force of the Poet's subsequent journey, and is commented upon quite explicitly by Shelley in the Preface. Indeed, the vision passage is pivotal to the structure of the poem as a whole, and provides strong evidence as to Shelley's intentions in it. Also, it is not the only reference to vision in the poem. Some critics, ignoring the visionary quality of Alastor, have been unduly concerned with the apparent inconsistencies between the Preface and the narrative: Mrs. Campbell, for example, wonders why Shelley chooses to condemn his hero in the Preface but glorify him in the poem.<sup>42</sup> Yet in a poem of 'supra-rational vision' it might be more profitable to examine the inconsistencies from an imaginative rather than from a logical perspective. The purpose of this second part of the discussion of Alastor is to show that Shelley used the concept of vision in the poem as the most effective method of exploring the ambivalent character of the poetic imagination. From a logical point of view, there are numerous inconsistencies between the Preface and the poem, and indeed within the poem itself. From an imaginative point of view, however, these appear as a number of ambivalent perspectives on the Poet's quest which Shelley asks the reader to weigh and balance, without necessarily accepting one at the exclusion of the other.

Soon after the Shelleys had settled in at their house in Bishopsgate, but a little time before the composition of Alastor, Shelley wrote a letter to Hogg in which he brought up the subject of ambition with respect to a fanatical missionary of whom Hogg had spoken in a

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<sup>42</sup>O. W. Campbell, Shelley and the Unromantics, 1924, p. 188; see also N. I. White, Portrait of Shelley, New York, 1945, p. 192.

previous letter. Shelley's comments are suggestive of the central concerns in Alastor:

It excites my wonder to consider the perverted energies of the human mind. That so much benevolence and talent as the missionary who travelled with you seemed to possess should be so wasted in such profitless endeavours, nor serve to any other end than to expose its possessor to perpetual disappointments. Yet who is there that will not pursue phantoms, spend his choicest hours in hunting after dreams, and wake only to perceive his error and regret that death is near?<sup>43</sup>

The sense of balance conveyed by this passage from the letter is intriguing. Although he acknowledges the 'perverted' nature of the human mind, its self torment and wasted efforts, there is nevertheless a recognition in 'Yet who is there that will not pursue phantoms' of man's Faustian instincts. Shelley's warning against the pursuit of phantoms is coupled with an implicit regard for aspiring effort. It is this ambivalence that informs both Preface and poem, and Shelley uses the vision idea as one of the means of sustaining it.

Perhaps one of the most relevant questions to ask about the poem is 'Are we supposed to pity or to condemn the Poet?' However, both Preface and poem maintain a sense of ambivalence towards it. Shelley's method of presenting this ambivalence to the reader is to focus his attention upon another question, 'Is the vision of the "veiled maid" a self-projection of the Poet's mind, or is it sent from outside to delude and to punish him?'<sup>44</sup> This question is most

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<sup>43</sup> Letters, I, 429-230.

<sup>44</sup> Albert Gérard, 'Alastor, or the Spirit of Solipsism', p. 173, also points out the ambivalence surrounding the origin of the vision, but his interpretative conclusion regarding the significance of the Poet's quest differs from mine.

crucial, since there is evidence to support both views in the poem and in the Preface, hence the critical concern over inconsistency.

The 'inconsistency', however, is purposive. By suggesting that the Poet's vision is a self-projection, Shelley is able to demonstrate the dangers of excessive poetic introspection and the undesirability of withholding one's love from fellow human beings - as the Poet rejects or ignores the Arab maiden. By suggesting also that the vision is sent from outside to delude, and consequently to punish, the Poet, Shelley is able to retain some sympathy and covert admiration for him as a laudable but misguided poetic idealist. He is a Faustian figure whose exercise of his imagination is in some sense heroic: to aspire is better than not to aspire at all.

The evidence that suggests that the vision is a self-projection may be reviewed first. In the Preface, Shelley writes of the Poet:

He images to himself the Being whom he loves. Conversant with speculations of the sublimest and most perfect natures, the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture. The intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense, have their respective requisitions on the sympathy of corresponding powers in other human beings. The Poet is represented as uniting these requisitions, and attaching them to a single image. He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception.

(Julian, I, 173)

This section clearly suggests a self-projected vision: the Poet 'images to himself', the vision is one 'in which he embodies his own imagination', he seeks 'a prototype of his conception'. The vision passage itself furnishes further and additional evidence. It begins with little to suggest the origin of the vision, since

the syntax of 'There came' is impersonal:

A vision on his sleep  
There came, a dream of hopes that never yet  
Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid  
Sate near him,

(149-152)

However, the following lines from the vision passage provide the reader with a definite indication as to its origin:

Her voice was like the voice of his own soul  
Heard in the calm of thought;

(153-154)

Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,  
Herself a poet. Soon the solemn mood  
Of her pure mind kindled through all her frame  
A permeating fire: wild numbers then  
She raised, with voice stifled in tremulous sobs  
Subdued by its own pathos:

(160-165)<sup>45</sup>

Sudden she rose,  
As if her heart impatiently endured  
Its bursting burthen: at the sound he turned,  
And saw by the warm light of their own life  
Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil

(172-176)

Although the pronominalisation serves to distinguish the Poet (e.g. 'his own soul', 'him', 'he') from the female figure (e.g. 'Her voice', 'Herself', 'her pure mind', 'she rose'), the lines are underscored by a suggestion that the Poet's imagination is in fact reflecting upon itself, and projecting itself as a separate person. The dream-maiden is in some respects a duplication of the Poet, with similar attributes. Her voice is 'like the voice of his own soul'; she, like him, is also a poet: 'Herself a poet'. In addition, the syntax of 'Subdued by its own pathos' and 'saw by the warm light of

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<sup>45</sup>I depart here from the Julian text 'Himself' in line 161 and adopt the original 1816 printing of 'Herself'. The difference in the reflexive pronoun is crucial for a reading of these lines.

their own life' denotes a reflexive locution, the verbal representation of the Poet's habitual tendency to project as an external object his own self. William Keach, who has explored this aspect of Shelley's language in some detail, observes of lines 174-176:

The point of saying that the wandering poet sees the dream-  
maiden's limbs 'by the warm light of their own life'  
is, I think, that the very same power is responsible for  
the life of those limbs and for the fact of their being  
'seen' - namely, the protagonist's imagination. The 'light'  
with which the dream-maiden's limbs 'glow' comes from the  
mind which perceives them; the reflexive locution dramatizes  
a self-enclosed psychic experience.<sup>46</sup>

There are, as my subsequent discussion of myth in the poem will indicate, other points in the narrative where Shelley makes use of reflexive imagery to represent the Poet's imaginative acts of projection.

Shelley's Poet embarks upon his voyage after the vision episode; as he does so, the narrative endorses the sense of self-projection found in the lines quoted above:

Startled by his own thoughts, he looked around.  
There was no fair fiend near him, not a sight  
Or sound of awe but in his own deep mind.

(296-298)

Later, this is reinforced by 'Following his eager soul', and also by 'Obedient to the light/That shone within his soul' (lines 311, 492-493).

Most readers of Alastor have agreed that the Poet's vision is self-created, and the predominant interpretation placed upon it has been Platonic. Evan Gibson, William H. Hildebrand and Carlos Baker<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>'Reflexive Imagery in Shelley', K-SJ, XXIV (1975), 51.

<sup>47</sup>'Alastor: A Reinterpretation', PMLA, LXII No. 4, Part I (December 1947), 1023-1024; A Study of 'Alastor'. Kent State University Bulletin XLII, Kent Ohio, 1954, p. 18 and also 'Shelley's Early Vision Poems', p. 207; Shelley's Major Poetry, p. 53.

have all traced the vision to the Platonic concept of the epipsyche, and, despite the problems of dating the manuscript,<sup>48</sup> have invariably used Shelley's Essay on Love to explicate the conception of love as sympathy, or a thirsting after its own likeness by man's soul. Other commentators have chosen to stress the erotic elements of the vision, seeing the dream-maiden as partly a projection of Shelley's own sexual desires.<sup>49</sup> The evidence in both poem and Preface which suggests a self-projection is, therefore, quite substantial.

Yet Shelley's consciously achieved ambivalence also allows an interpretation of it as sent into the Poet's consciousness from 'outside' his psyche.<sup>50</sup> The key statement for this view, supported in the Preface also, occurs soon after he awakens from his sleep:

The spirit of sweet human love has sent  
A vision to the sleep of him who spurned  
Her choicest gifts. He eagerly pursues  
Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade;  
He overleaps the bounds.

(203-207)

In the first paragraph of the Preface, the Poet's mind 'is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself': the passive construction placed upon the verb 'to awake' by Shelley determines the significance of this part of the sentence. The Poet's consciousness is activated by the external agency of 'The spirit of sweet human love' which,

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<sup>48</sup>See James A. Notopoulos, 'The Dating of Shelley's Prose', PMLA, LVIII, No. 2 (June 1943), 491.

<sup>49</sup>R. Holmes, Shelley, the Pursuit, pp. 303-305; Earl R. Wasserman, Shelley, a Critical Reading, pp. 23-25.

<sup>50</sup>Frederick L. Jones, 'The Vision Theme in Shelley's Alastor and Related Works', SP, LXIV, No. 1 (January 1947), 109-110, is one of the few critics to recognize that the Poet's vision may have been sent to punish him.

in the words of the second paragraph, 'strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction, by awakening them to too exquisite a perception of its influences,'. The Preface enforces this idea in its comment upon lesser mortals, those who lack the heroic dimensions of the Poet's character: 'They who, deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition, loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond,'. The Poet's heroism is expressed by 'generous', 'sacred thirst', 'illustrious' and 'hopes beyond', while his delusion is conveyed in 'deluded', 'doubtful', and 'duped'. Shelley recognizes in the Preface that the greater the knowledge acquired by someone in the Poet's situation, the lesser his chances of being able to sympathise or communicate with his fellows; the Poet becomes self-centred, he ignores the Arab maiden who performs the basic human act of bringing him food. As a consequence 'The Poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin.'

On this view, the vision is sent by the 'spirit of sweet human love' to punish the Poet's tendency towards solipsism. It is reasonable to argue that the dream-maiden of the Poet's vision is in fact an alastor, a daemon of vengeance sent by the spirit of love to pursue the Poet to his death. As Marion Clyde Weir has pointed out,<sup>51</sup> the word *ἀλαστωρ* has two connotations: a spirit of retribution, and a person who becomes an alastor or wanderer because he is accursed. At the risk of peopling the poem with alastors, the former sense could apply to the Poet's vision, the latter to the Poet himself, subsequent to it. If one interprets the dream-maiden as a malevolent daemon, it becomes clear that the Poet is deceived and led to his death.

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<sup>51</sup>'Shelley's "Alastor" again', *PMLA*, XLVI No. 3 (September 1931), 947-950.

The Poet's vision, then, is to be viewed as a crucially important episode in the poem, which should be approached with a sympathetic awareness of its ambivalence. It is significant in another way, however: any exploration of the epic dimensions of Alastor needs to examine the vision in its relationship to the vision episodes of classical and renaissance epic.

It is strange that hitherto only one reader of the poem has sought to place the vision passage in an epic context. Luther L. Scales, Jr. has recently suggested a parallel in Milton's Paradise Lost: Adam's picture of Eve, a creature 'so lovely fair', who he sees in his sleep in Book VIII of the poem.<sup>52</sup> Shelley's vision has largely been approached from outside the epic tradition. Kenneth Cameron cites the vision seen by Rasselas in the Happy Valley, Joseph Raben points to Coleridge's 'damsel with a dulcimer' in Kubla Khan and S. R. Swaminathan conjectures that Luxima, the Indian priestess in Miss Owenson's novel The Missionary may be a model for Shelley's dream-maiden. Lastly, John V. Murphy suggests that the vision should be located within a Gothic tradition.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, Shelley's use bears an intriguing resemblance to certain vision episodes in epic which have been noted in Chapter 3.<sup>54</sup> One of these is the dream of the Redcrosse Knight in

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<sup>52</sup>'The Poet as Miltonic Adam in Alastor', K-SJ, XXI-XXII (1972-1973), 134.

<sup>53</sup>'Rasselas and Alastor: a Study in Transmutation', p. 71; 'Coleridge as the Prototype of the Poet in Shelley's Alastor', p. 288; 'Possible Indian Influence on Shelley', KSMB, IX (1958), 30-31; The Dark Angel: Gothic Elements in Shelley's Works, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1975, p. 67.

<sup>54</sup>See above, p. 82.

Spenser's Faerie Queene, where Archimago sends a lustful vision to the Knight while he is asleep (Book I, Canto I, xlvi). In Spenser, the context clearly demonstrates that the vision is sent by Archimago, whereas in Alastor there is equivocation on this point. Nevertheless, even in the Faerie Queene example, it is at least possible to read the passage as demonstrating also that the Redcrosse Knight projects his own sexual desires in his sleep - an interpretation applicable to Alastor.

The misleading or daemonic dream is frequent in epic: a spirit is sent to falsely assert something to an epic protagonist, and disaster or at least confusion generally ensues. If the vision of the dream-maiden is interpreted as sent from 'outside' in Shelley's poem, then Shelley appears to have further refined this epic type by giving the dream-maiden the additional function of an alastor, or spirit of vengeance. It is of interest to observe, therefore, that in August 1815 - shortly before he embarked upon the composition of Alastor - Shelley was reading Lucan's epic poem the Pharsalia.<sup>55</sup> in which both a delusive dream and a vision figure of vengeance occur. Shelley was an attentive reader of Lucan - he used a quotation from the Pharsalia as an epigram to preface 'The Daemon of the World'.<sup>56</sup> If one accepts Kenneth Cameron's dating of the latter as December 1815,<sup>57</sup> it would appear that Shelley's interest in Lucan may well have been sustained throughout the period of composition of Alastor and then on until the end of 1815.

In the Pharsalia, Pompey's dream of triumph and of welcome in Rome at the beginning of Book VII proves to be misleading, and he

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<sup>55</sup>Letters, I, 429.

<sup>56</sup>See Chapter 3, above, pp. 83-84.

<sup>57</sup>Shelley and his Circle 1773-1822, IV, 497.

is ultimately defeated at the hands of Caesar.<sup>58</sup> At an earlier point in the poem, in Book III, the visionary phantom of Pompey's former wife Julia appears before him in his sleep, in the form of a Fury. The word 'furialis' is used because, as she tells him, it is her errand to follow him as a spirit of vengeance throughout the Civil War until he joins her again in death. One interesting point of comparison with Alastor is that Julia dissolves into nothingness at the embrace of her former husband: 'Thus speaking, the ghost fled away, dissolving in the arms of her eager husband.'<sup>59</sup> Despite the complexity with which the dream-maiden stands in relation to the Poet in the Alastor vision passage, a similar event occurs. The dream-maiden

drew back a while,  
Then, yielding to the irresistible joy,  
With frantic gesture and short breathless cry  
Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.

(184-187)

I have tried to show in this part of the discussion that Alastor is a work of 'supra-rational vision'. This second characteristic of Kroeber's Romantic epic is expressed in Shelley by means of an ambivalent attitude towards the origin of the Poet's vision; Shelley's handling of the vision episode is highly individual, but nonetheless it bears some affinity to classical and renaissance epic practice. It is at least possible that Shelley's reading of Lucan's Pharsalia from August to December 1815 kept the ideas of misleading dream and daemon of vengeance in epic firmly in mind during the period of the poem's composition.

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<sup>58</sup>The Civil War (Pharsalia), translated by J. D. Duff, pp. 369-371.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., pp. 116-117.

Kroeber's third and fourth characteristics of the Romantic epic may be usefully considered together: the 'mythical' manner and the 'mythical journey' of Alastor are closely interrelated, since the significance of the Poet's journey is to be fully appreciated only by a consideration of the myths that underline it. In view of the complex nature of Shelley's mythopoesis in Alastor it might be helpful to outline at this point the lines of argument which this final section of the chapter seeks to pursue, before proceeding to a detailed discussion.

Shelley makes use of precise geographical locations for the Poet's journey in order to invoke a number of mythological associations keyed to specific place names mentioned in the narrative. This journey has as its focal point the vision experience in Cashmire, the Indian paradise. After the disappearance of the vision, the Poet wanders away from this Indian paradise, and continues his journey to somewhere in the Russian Caucasus, which also has mythological associations of paradise. Unlike Cashmire, however, the Russian Caucasus is at best a precarious and illusory paradise. This is made clear by an allusion to the myths of Noah's Ark and Narcissus, and by the imagery of the 'musical woods' passage in the narrative. The images of procreation, for instance, are an ironic comment upon the Poet's rejection of the Arab maiden who brought him food earlier in the poem. The Poet finally dies in a region remote and far removed from Cashmire.

The overall pattern in the poem of the Poet's journey away from Cashmire to his death in the Russian Caucasus constitutes a rejection by Shelley of the Christian myth of redemption and reintegration at this point in his exploration of mythology. As I

noted in Chapter 1, some twentieth century critics like Northrop Frye, Joseph Antony Wittreich and M. H. Abrams see this myth as informing many of the longer Romantic narratives.<sup>60</sup>

Shelley's choice of mythological perspectives to convey a sense of ambivalence in the Poet's quest enables him to further reinforce the 'inconsistencies' associated with the vision experience. It also reveals Shelley's increasing awareness of the imaginative and non-rational complexity of myth. His 'sublime allegory' approach, as opposed to the use of equivalence allegory, places him outside the traditional understanding of allegory as one-to-one translation which dominated the epic practice and criticism of his contemporaries.

The Poet's journey, from 'has visited/The awful ruins of days of old' (107-108) to the 'silent nook' (line 572) where he dies, is plotted with particular care by Shelley.<sup>61</sup> It is a journey whose geographical route is documented by a number of place names. The significance of some of these place names and the direction of the route have been consistently disregarded by readers of the poem, who have largely ignored the geographical facts in favour of interpreting the journey solely as a metaphorical exploration of the Poet's mind. O'Malley's comment is typical: 'In the story of the hero's preparation for vision, his travels were obviously amid spiritual landscapes, not to any geographical Thebes or Kashmir.'<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>See above p. 19.

<sup>61</sup>I dissent from Lisa M. Steinmann's view: 'The exemplary portion of the visionary's tale is, then, his quest after embarking in the shallop', ('Shelley's Skepticism: Allegory in Alastor', ELH, XLV, No. 2 (Summer 1978), p. 262).

<sup>62</sup>Shelley's "Air-Prism": The Synesthetic Scheme of Alastor', p. 185.

While it is clearly the case that some of the passages in lines 107 to 572 are representations of the Poet's doubts and hopes, his actual route is charted with scholarly attention in order to suggest a number of mythological contexts. These are further reinforced by other myths that Shelley introduces into his poem which are not associated with particular places. However, it is the mythological aspect of the journey in relation to the place names which has, hitherto, received little attention.<sup>63</sup>

The opening section of the Poet's journey is to the eastern Mediterranean and the near-East, a series of wanderings designed to emphasise his acquisition of knowledge concerning the ancient civilizations:

His wandering step,  
Obedient to high thoughts, has visited  
The awful ruins of the days of old:  
Athens, and Tyre, and Balbec, and the waste  
Where stood Jerusalem, the fallen towers  
Of Babylon, the eternal pyramids,  
Memphis and Thebes, and whatsoe'er of strange  
Sculptured on alabaster obelisk,  
Or jasper tomb, or mutilated sphinx,  
Dark Ethiopia in her desert hills  
Conceals.

(106-116)

Shelley's references to Balbec, Babylon and Thebes may be an echo of Peacock's Palmyra (1806), stanza xii, but the reader is immediately reminded in this passage of Queen Mab, lines 109-181 of canto II in which the Fairy shows Ianthe's Spirit the ruins of the past. In contrast to the sense of man's temporality and weakness conveyed in Queen Mab, in the later poem the passage emphasises the 'thrilling secrets of the birth of time': the satisfaction of an individual intellectual curiosity displaces any consideration of the social or

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political implications of empire-building. The Poet travels south into Ethiopia and then turns north to traverse Arabia, moving in an easterly direction.

It is at this point that the direction of his route becomes significant, since he now moves towards the vale of Cashmire in India, where the vision of the dream-maiden takes place:

The Poet wandering on, through Arabia  
 And Persia, and the wild Carmanian waste,  
 And o'er the aërial mountains which pour down  
 Indus and Oxus from their icy caves,  
 In joy and exultation held his way;  
 Till in the vale of Cashmire, far within  
 Its loneliest dell, where odorous plants entwine  
 Beneath the hollow rocks a natural bower,  
 Beside a sparkling rivulet he stretched  
 His languid limbs.

(140-149)

The Poet's vision of the 'veiled maid' is a vision of beauty and of perfection, a synthesis of 'Thoughts the most dear to him' (line 160); his subsequent quest for its return, which ends in failure, takes him steadily away from this focal point of his journey, Cashmire: why should Shelley choose this particular location for the vision episode?

The answer to this question lies in the mythological associations of Cashmire. The valley of Cashmire lay in the Indian Caucasus, and was cited by many contemporary researchers into Indian myth as the site of paradise. Robert Orme, for instance, quotes N. B. Halhed's translation of a relevant Indian text<sup>64</sup> in his Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire, of the Morattoes, and of the English concerns in

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<sup>64</sup>i.e. The Preface to The Upanishads: this work of Hindu theology in Sanskrit was translated into Persian in 1656 by the command of Sultan Darah. Halhed translated it from Persian into English, probably at the end of the eighteenth century (Orme, op. cit., p. 239 and note).

Indostan from the year MDCLIX (1805):

Whereas the unsollicitous Fakeer Mohammed Dara Shēkoh, in the 1050th year of the Hejrā, went to Cashmeer, the resemblance of Paradise, by the attraction of the favour of God, and the blessing of the Infinite.

(p. 240)

William Robertson's Historical Disquisitions concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India (1791) maintains:

The third kingdom was Cachemire. Massoudi, as far as I know, is the first author to mention this paradise of India, of which he gives a short and just description.

(4th edn., 1804, p. 332)

One of the most well known texts on the mythology of the Caucasus was Francis Wilford's essay 'On Mount Caucasus', which appeared in the sixth volume of that major organ of the early nineteenth century orientalists, the Asiatic Researches (12 vols, Calcutta, 1788-1816; vol VI, 1799). Cashmire lay in the area mentioned by Wilford in his discussion:

... the progenitors of mankind lived in that mountainous tract, which extends from Balkh and Candahar to the Ganges; we may then reasonably look for the terrestrial paradise in that country; for it is not probable, that ADIMA and ADIMA or IVA should have retired to any great distance from it.

(485-486)

Shelley's knowledge of Indian mythology has been recognized by e.g. Stuart Curran and Joseph Raben.<sup>65</sup> The former focuses upon Prometheus Unbound, however, rather than on Alastor: he often reveals a curious lack of confidence in assessing degrees of

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<sup>65</sup>Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, Preface and Chapter 2: 'Shelley's Prometheus Unbound: why the Indian Caucasus?' K-SJ, XII (1963), 95-106.



**Plate i**

probability and evidence for Shelley's reading. For example:

In particular, it seems likely that Shelley had access to the dissertation 'On Mount Caucasus' by that enterprising orientalist Francis Wilford, either as originally published in the Asiatic Researches or as condensed by Faber in his Origin of Pagan Idolatry.<sup>66</sup>

In fact, it is certain that Shelley had access to Wilford's essay, as well as to a considerable body of writing on Indian mythology. He could have seen the Asiatic Researches at Hookham's circulating library. Hookham stocked a large number of books on India: in addition to the works quoted above by Robert Orme and William Robertson, Hookham's library contained Sir William Jones, Works (1799), Charles Wilkins' translation of the Bhagvat-Geeta (1785), Alexander Dow's History of Hindostan (1768), Thomas Maurice's History of Hindostan, (1802) and Edward Moor's Hindu Pantheon (1810).<sup>67</sup> It is possible that this selection of works on India attracted Shelley's attention. He neither read nor bought books of peripheral interest, and ordered Edward Moor's Hindu Pantheon from Hookham and the works by Jones and Robertson from Rickman in December, 1812.<sup>68</sup>

In Alastor, then, the Poet's eastwards movement into the Indian paradise is probably the result of studious attention paid by Shelley to contemporary writing on Indian myth. It is illuminating to trace the Poet's journey on the map of Asia which prefaces Robertson's Historical Disquisitions.<sup>69</sup> Since Shelley owned this book, he would have studied the map. Certainly, the lines quoted above which trace the Poet's journey to Cashmire include a number of place names, all

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<sup>66</sup> Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, p. 78.

<sup>67</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>68</sup> Letters, I, 342, 344.

<sup>69</sup> Plate 1

of which are featured on Robertson's map, and which show the sweeping movement towards Cashmire i.e. 'Arabie', 'Persia', 'the wild Carmanian waste' (i.e. the Carmanian desert), the rivers of the Indian Caucasus, 'Indus' and 'Oxus'. The Poet travels due east through the Carmanian desert, then north-east into the 'aërial mountains' of the Indian Caucasus, and finally into the region of Cashmire.

The Poet's vision is followed by the dawn of a new day, during which he asks himself whether Death holds the answer as to the source of his vision. The question explicitly links the vision with paradise:

Does the dark gate of death  
Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,  
O Sleep?

(211-213)

During the following night, however, the Poet is shaken and wakened by some power, which is compared to (although not identified with) 'the fierce fiend of a distempered dream' (line 225). His flight begins, and is imaged by a mythological motif which will figure importantly in the first canto of Laon and Cythna: the eagle and the serpent:

As an eagle grasped  
In folds of the green serpent, feels her breast  
Burn with the poison, and precipitates  
Through night and day, tempest, and calm and cloud,  
Frantic with dizzying anguish, her blind flight  
O'er the wide aëry wilderness: thus driven  
By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,

(227-233)

The eagle-serpent conflict is to be found in a variety of classical sources: Homer, Aeschylus, Ovid and Virgil are all examples, and

Spenser uses it in The Faerie Queene.<sup>70</sup> In Shelley's day, Blake engraved an eagle with a serpent in its talons on Plate 15 of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell to represent the Eagle of Genius and the Serpent of Reason.<sup>71</sup> Shelley's usage, as in Laon and Cythna, carefully readjusts and thereby annihilates the straightforward allegorical qualities traditionally associated with the eagle as good and the snake as evil. The Poet is identified with the eagle, and the 'lovely dream' with the snake in Shelley's comparison. Our moral judgements are suspended, and the image of eagle-snake that is used to represent the Poet's struggle with his vision suggests instead a morally neutral ambivalence: the snake's 'poison' is not necessarily evil since the snake represents the Poet's 'lovely' dream. The motif, placed in its correct relation to the line 'thus driven/By the bright shadow of that lovely dream', serves to convey the ambivalence of the vision: it is something attractive, which the Poet pursues, a 'lovely dream', but it is also something before which he flees, a 'poison' burning within his breast.

Having introduced this further mythological context into the narrative in order to suggest the simultaneity of pursuit and flight in the Poet's quest after the vision episode, Shelley plots a route for the Poet which gradually takes him away from Cashmire:

He wandered on,  
Till vast Aornos, seen from Petra's steep,  
Hung o'er the low horizon like a cloud;  
Through Balk, and where the deserted tombs  
Of Parthian kings scatter to every wind  
Their wasting dust, wildly he wandered on,

(239-244)

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<sup>70</sup> Iliad, XII, 200-207; The Choephoros, 247-249; The Metamorphoses, IV, 361-364, 714-717; The Aeneid, XI, 751-756; The Faerie Queene I, v, 8-9.

<sup>71</sup> Geoffrey Keynes, ed., The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Trianon Press Facsimile, Oxford University Press, 1975, Plate 15.

The Poet's journey now is slightly northwards to Balk, and then west into Parthia. The references to 'Aornos' and 'Petra' are general rather than specific. 'Aornos' means 'without birds', and could refer to any natural feature above which birds would not fly, such as a salt lake, a cave or a mountain. 'Petra' denotes any town or city built upon a large rock. 'Balk' and 'Parthia' both appear on Robertson's map of Asia. In particular, Balk is referred to by Wilford in his essay 'On Mount Caucasus':

Bhálac or Bamiyan are both situated in the country of Váhlaca or Váhlaca;... Bactra, which seems to be derived from the Sanskrit Váhlicter or Balc-ter, which signifies the country about Váhlaca, or Balk.

(Asiatic Researches, VI, 471)

From Parthia, the 'spectral form' of the Poet hastens north, until he finds himself on the shores of a vast lake:

At length upon the lone Chorasman shore  
He paused, a wide and melancholy waste  
Of putrid marshes. A strong impulse urged  
His steps to the sea-shore.

(272-275)

His path has led him away from the Indian Caucasus to the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, across which he will shortly sail to the Russian Caucasus. Although Donald Reiman maintains that the Poet goes 'back into the heart of the Indian Caucasus',<sup>72</sup> Shelley's precise geographical course affirms a western movement in the opposite direction. Chorasmia included the southeastern shore of the Caspian, and was stated by many authorities as stretching from the Oxus to the eastern limits of Persia. Alexander Dow, who

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<sup>72</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley. New York, 1969, p. 38.

collected accounts of Hindostan from various Persian authors, wrote in his History of Hindostan:

... it may not be improper, in this place, to take a cursory view of the present state of Hindostan. To begin with the northern provinces. We have already observed, that Candahar, Cabaul, Ghizni, Pishawir, with a part of Moutan and Sind, are under the dominion of Ahmet Abdulla. That great prince possesses also, upon the side of Persia, the greatest part of Chorassan [Chorasmia] and Seistar.

(2nd edn., 1770, II, 382)

Shelley's Poet embarks in a 'little shallop' (line 299), and his voyage across the Caspian Sea is violent and stormy. The Caspian is a proverbially stormy sea,<sup>73</sup> and Shelley introduces the eagle-serpent image again to remind the reader that the struggle between boat and waves is a projection in physical terms of the Poet's continuing conflict with the content of his dream:

A whirlwind swept it on,  
With fierce gusts and precipitating force,  
Through the white ridges of the chafed sea.  
The waves arose. Higher and higher still  
Their fierce necks writhed beneath the tempest's scourge  
Like serpents struggling in a vulture's grasp.

(320-325)

The suggestions of death, which had marked the description of the Poet as a 'spectral form' are reinforced by his terrifying voyage and the phrase 'that frail and wasted form' (line 350). Yet the boat flees 'safely' before the storm and reaches the shores of the Russian Caucasus. It is driven into a cavern at the base of the Caucasian cliffs, and follows a winding tunnel, at the end of

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<sup>73</sup>, nor the rough blasts always fret the Caspian waves', Horace, Odes. Book II, Ode ix, 1-2.

which is a gaping chasm exposed to the sky:

At midnight  
The moon arose: and lo! the etherial cliffs  
Of Caucasus ...

Where the mountain, riven,  
Exposed those black depths to the azure sky,  
Ere yet the flood's enormous volume fell  
Even to the base of Caucasus,

(352-353, 374-377)

The chasm contains a whirlpool, which lifts both boat and Poet upwards to the top of a mountain summit in the Russian Caucasus range, and then safely through an opening in the rock:

Seized by the sway of the ascending stream,  
With dizzy swiftness, round, and round, and round,  
Ridge after ridge the straining boat arose,  
Till on the verge of the extremest curve,  
Where, through an opening of the rocky bank,  
The waters overflow, and a smooth spot  
Of glassy quiet mid those battling tides  
Is left, the boat paused shuddering. Shall it sink -  
Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress  
Of that resistless gulf embosom it?  
Now shall it fall? A wandering stream of wind,  
Breathed from the west, has caught the expanded sail,  
And, lo! with gentle motion between banks  
Of mossy slope, and on a placid stream,  
Beneath a woven grove, it sails, and, hark!

(386-401)

These lines have puzzled many readers of the poem. The British Critic, reviewing the Alastor volume in May, 1816, observed satirically:

We cannot do sufficient justice to the creative fancy of our poet. A man's hair singing dirges, and a boat pausing and shuddering, are among the least of his inventions; nature for him reverses all her laws, the streams ascend. The power of the syphon we all know, but it is for the genius of Mr. Shelley to make the streams run up hill.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Donald H. Reiman, ed., The Romantics Reviewed, Part C, I, 210.

However, Shelley's lines have mythological, not rational, authority. The Poet is borne upwards in his boat on to a mountain top in the Caucasus, and then both are wafted gently through a rocky opening into a peaceful and beautiful terrain. Since the Poet's boat is deposited upon the top of a mountain, the myth of Noah's Ark is invoked. One of the ironies of the Poet's quest is that he enters here another region with intimations of paradise, he is apparently saved by a redemptive Deity. Yet the paradise is only a temporary refuge, his avoidance of death merely a delay. The Noachian myth was associated with certain mountains in both the Russian and Indian Caucasus;<sup>75</sup> nevertheless, Shelley's imaginative re-working of this myth in Alastor as a boat carried upwards by an ascending stream in the Russian Caucasus accords with the careful and accurate plotting of the Poet's journey in a westerly direction away from Cashmere.

Mary Shelley's note on the early poems of Shelley refers to his reading during the years 1814 and 1815. She cites a number of works, and then observes, 'To these may be added several modern books of travels.'<sup>76</sup> One travel book, on the Russian Caucasus in particular, was available to Thomas Hookham's subscribers: this was Travels in the Caucasus and Georgia 1807 and 1808 by Heinrich Julius von Klaproth, translated into English by F. Schoberb and published in 1814. Klaproth recounts that

The loftiest mountains in the snowy chain are the Kasi-beg and the Elbrus; but the latter is by far the highest, and a little inferior in elevation to Mount Blanc. It has never yet been ascended, and the Caucasians have a notion that no person can reach its summit without the special permission of the Deity. They likewise relate that here Noah first grounded with the ark, but was driven further to Ararat.

(p. 168)

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<sup>75</sup>Stuart Curran, Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, pp. 61-65.

<sup>76</sup>Julian, III, 120.

Although Shelley could not have known of it when composing Alastor, an article in the Edinburgh Review, XXVIII (August 1817) reviewed Klaproth's Travels in addition to two other books of travel concerning visits to the Russian Caucasus. One of them, Lettres sur le Caucase et la Georgie ... en 1812, by the wife of a Russian government official, also notes the connection between the Elbrus and the Noah myth. The reviewer writes, 'Elbrus, "the gracious, holy mountain", is also venerated, because the Ark of Noah first drifted there.' (p. 320).

In Alastor, then, after both boat and Poet have been lifted up to the top of a mountain, they drift calmly into 'the musical woods' (line 403). The imagery used to describe these woods is suggestive of another haven or paradise. One context invoked is that of the garden of Eden in Milton's Paradise Lost. Shelley's recurrent image patterns of shade and bower in lines 404-468 remind one of Milton:

The noonday sun  
Now shone upon the forest, one vast mass  
Of mingling shade, whose brown magnificence  
A narrow vale embosoms.

(421-423)

Both where the morning sun first warmly smote  
The open field, and where the unpierced shade  
Embrowned the noontide bowers; thus was this place,  
A happy rural seat of various view;

(Paradise Lost, IV, 244-247)<sup>77</sup>

Yet this forest which the Poet enters is imaged as an ironic comment upon the Poet's search for a return of his vision. The natural life

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<sup>77</sup>Robert Pelletier, 'Shade and Bower Images in Milton and Shelley', N & Q, CCVI (January 1961), 21-22, lists a number of other parallels.

in it is ideal and blissful, pictured in images of sexual procreation, of fertility and of family harmony:

Like restless serpents, clothed  
In rainbow and in fire, the parasites,  
Starr'd with ten thousand blossoms, flow around  
The grey trunks, and, as gamesome infants' eyes,  
Fold their beams round the hearts of those that love,  
These twine their tendrils with the wedded boughs  
Uniting their close union;

(438-445)

Thus the Poet is placed in ironic contrast to this activity. He is alone, he lacks a partner; the seeming paradise is an illusion with no hope of regeneration for him. He approaches a well, and another mythological context is suggested, that of Narcissus:

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld  
Their own wan light through the reflected lines  
Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth  
Of that still fountain; as the human heart,  
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,  
Sees its own treacherous likeness there ...

A Spirit seemed  
To stand beside him - clothed in no bright robes  
Of shadowy silver or enshrining light,  
Borrow'd from aught the visible world affords  
Of grace, or majesty, or mystery; -

(469-474; 479-483)<sup>78</sup>

The reflexive locution of 'His eyes beheld/Their own wan light' is reminiscent of certain lines in the dream-maiden passage quoted earlier,<sup>79</sup> and is further reinforced by the image of 'through the reflected lines/Of his thin hair'. Like Narcissus, the Poet appears

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<sup>78</sup>The Narcissus myth has been mentioned by several readers of the poem, e.g. Peter Butter, Shelley's Idols of the Cave, p. 13 note, and Charles E. Robinson, Shelley and Byron, p. 45.

<sup>79</sup>See above, pp. 185-186.

to fall in love with his own image reflected in the water:

two eyes,  
Two starry eyes, hung in the gloom of thought,  
And seemed with their serene and azure smiles  
To beckon him.

(489-492)

The Poet's pursuit of 'The rivulet/Wanton and wild' (ll. 494-495) is a continuation of his journey through a series of landscapes which become now purely projections of his own consciousness, devoid of any geographical or mythological context. The land of rocks and stones into which he travels represents the land of sleep and death which has for so long dominated his consciousness, polarized between hope and despair, pursuit and flight, peace and terror:

It was a tranquil spot, that seemed to smile  
Even in the lap of horror.

(577-578)

The Poet finally reaches the end of his quest, which remains unresolved. His final condition is simply one of exhaustion:

Hope and despair,  
The torturers, slept;

(639-640)

Shelley's 'mythical' manner in Alastor reveals a deepening awareness of the possibilities for poetry inherent in Christian, Greek and Indian mythologies. He invests the Poet's journey with a number of imaginative allusions by contrasting various mythologies against each other. The Christian myths of redemption and regeneration are posited as illusory for a person in the Poet's situation; his belief is in an Indian paradise, but he travels away from it with every step after the vision episode. A sense of ambivalence, necessary to the poem's essential poise between pursuit and flight, is maintained by

the intimations of paradise in India and in the Russian Caucasus. The allusions to the latter constitute an ironic comment upon the futility of the Poet's quest. The ambivalence indicates a more complex handling by Shelley of the mode of allegory than most of his contemporaries were able to appreciate.

Alastor illustrates the characteristics which Karl Kroeber sees as typical of the Romantic epic: it is a poem of 'personal experience', of 'supra-rational vision', and it is based upon a 'mythical journey'. Shelley's exploration of the poetic consciousness in the person of the Poet may serve as a warning against solipsism and lack of sympathy. Yet, having said this, it is important to recognize that the poem is controlled also by a recognition that the attempt to attain knowledge is heroic; hence it is structured upon a principle of ambivalence which informs both the apparent inconsistencies regarding the source of the Poet's vision and its working out of a mythological framework involving different myths.

The motifs of the quest-journey, vision, invocation and a 'hero' are all features of classical and renaissance epic. Shelley's poem, however, reflects some of the issues discussed by contemporary critics on epic: his mythopoesis avoids equivalence allegory in favour of symbolic complexity, and a major mythological context is drawn from contemporary research on Indian myth.

The direction suggested by Alastor, whose Poet exhibits the sensitivity and inward torture of a Tasso - and probably of Shelley himself - was abandoned on the poem's completion in 1815. Shelley's first major poem, Queen Mab, had been socially and politically orientated. Alastor represents only a temporary departure from this orientation. In Laon and Cythna, the subject of the next chapter, Shelley retained the idea of a mythical journey informed by various vision episodes, but re-introduced the social and political orientation which is characteristic of Queen Mab. Alastor is Shelley's only attempt to sustain an epic narrative based upon the journey of an artist into the interior of his own mind.

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## CHAPTER 6

### LAON AND CYTHNA

As I concluded at the end of the last chapter, Shelley's Alastor is an attempt at epic narrative whose imaginative direction is focused upon the workings of one individual mind. Its central thematic interest is entirely internal and develops entirely in isolation from any social or political milieu. Alastor represents a departure from the public scene of action; a context to which Shelley returns in Laon and Cythna. This latter poem, the longest of Shelley's pre-1818 narratives, is the subject of my final chapter.

I have divided this chapter on Laon and Cythna into three sections. The first section deals with the visionary characteristics of the poem, the second with its hero and heroine, and the third with the problem of epic unity. The first section is concerned with establishing the visionary qualities of the poem, which I see as integral to any reading of it as an epic. The other two sections explore the notion of heroism as exemplified in the characterization of Laon and Cythna, and the topic of structural organization in the poem; both of these sections invoke the visionary dimensions of Laon and Cythna during the course of the discussion.

## SECTION I

## 'A CLINGING DREAM'

Shelley had completed his poem by September 23 1817, but had still not decided upon a title for it. Mary wrote to him a few days later, inquiring 'What of Frankenstein? and your own poem - have you fixed on a name?'<sup>1</sup> This Shelley was to do over the ensuing three weeks, a busy period in which he was engaged, among other things, in finding a publisher for the work. On October 13 he sent four proof sheets to Longmans from Leigh Hunt's house in Paddington enclosing a letter whose first sentence declared: 'I send you the 4 first sheets of my Poem, entitled "Laon & Cythna, or the Revolution of the Golden City."<sup>2</sup> Longmans did not accept the poem for publication, but Charles Ollier agreed to publish it with Shelley's full title 'Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: a Vision of the Nineteenth Century.' The history of the poem's subsequent revisions and Shelley's resistance to them has been a theme rehearsed often enough by a number of commentators, who have explored Shelley's attitude towards Ollier's refusal to publish the poem in its original form.<sup>3</sup> In discussing the poem, however, I shall prefer what Shelley himself initially preferred, and comment upon the text of the poem as first printed: Laon and Cythna.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick L. Jones, ed., The Letters of Mary Shelley. Norman, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1944, I, 35.

<sup>2</sup> Letters, I, 563; Donald H. Reiman in Shelley and his Circle 1773-1822, V, 154 suggests that the unidentified publisher could have been Longman or Sherwood, Neely and Jones of Paternoster Row, or even Taylor and Hessey.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick L. Jones, 'The Revision of Laon and Cythna', JEGP, XXXII No. 3 (July 1933), 366-372; Marcel Kessel, 'The Revising of Shelley's "Laon and Cythna"', TLS, September 7, 1933, p. 592 and 'Shelley's "Laon and Cythna"', ibid., November 9, 1933, p. 774; H. F. B. Brett-Smith, 'Shelley's "Laon and Cythna"', ibid., September 21, 1933, p. 631; Donald H. Reiman, ed., Shelley and his Circle 1773-1822, V, 160-167.

The original title articulates the central concerns of the poem. There are two main protagonists, Laon and Cythna, who initiate a revolution. Swinburne, in his 'Notes on the Text of Shelley', objected to the revised title and to the revised text:

... I have to express a hope that a final edition of Shelley's works will some day, rather sooner than later, restore to it /The Revolt of Islam/ the proper title and the genuine text. Every change made in it was forced upon the author by pressure from without; every change is for the worse. Has no reader ever asked himself what can be the meaning of the second title? What is the revolt of Islam? Islam is not put forward as the sole creed of the tyrants and slaves who play their parts here with such frank ferocity; Persian and Indian, Christian and Mahometan mythologies are massed together for attack. And certainly Islam is not, as the rules of language would imply, the creed of the insurgents. Could the phrase "revolt of the Christians" be taken to signify a revolt against the Christians? There is at least meaning in the first title - "Laon and Cythna, or the Revolution of the Golden City."<sup>4</sup>

The revised title of the poem, The Revolt of Islam, a Poem in Twelve Cantos, completely omits Shelley's original sub-title phrase 'A Vision of the Nineteenth Century'. This is a crucial omission, since it withholds any reference to the hero and heroine and more importantly disregards the visionary aspects of the poem.<sup>5</sup> One obvious meaning of 'vision' is 'ideal picture': certainly, this is the sense conveyed by Shelley's letter to Longman & Co which accompanied the first four proof sheets:

It is in fact a tale illustrative of such a Revolution  
as might be supposed to take place in an European nation ...

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<sup>4</sup>Fortnightly Review, V, New Series, No 29 (May 1, 1869), 544.

<sup>5</sup>It is interesting to note that William Godwin's copy of the poem was described by Sotheby's in their sales catalogue as 'Shelley's Laon and Cythna, a Vision, 1818', Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons, edited by Seamus Deane, 1973, VIII, 308, item 668.

It is a Revolution of this kind, that is, the beau ideal as it were of the French Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

Yet an understanding of 'vision' as meaning 'ideal picture' defines the central imaginative direction of the poem only partially. Laon and Cythna is indeed a poem of vision and dream: the words 'vision' and 'dream' in the poem are not, however, merely surface metaphors of the poem's verbal texture. In contrast to e.g. Southey's

There stood Ladurlad, with loose-hanging arms,  
And eyes of idiot wandering.  
Was it a dream? alas,

(The Curse of Kehama, II, 172-174)

the words 'vision' and 'dream' in Shelley often define for the reader an ontology, a form of reality different in kind but as equally valid as empirical sense-data reality. I shall pursue this point later in the chapter, since it is particularly significant in exploring the poem from the point of view of epic.

It is surprising that none of Shelley's interpreters who have designated Laon and Cythna an epic have referred in any sustained analysis to the visionary dimensions of the poem.<sup>7</sup> Discussion has generally confined itself to invoking a variety of

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<sup>6</sup>Letters, I, 564.

<sup>7</sup>A majority of commentators writing on the poem have either called it an epic directly or have characterized it as a poem of epic quality, for example: Brian Wilkie, Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, Chapter 4; James Rieger, The Mutiny Within: the Heresies of P. B. Shelley, New York, 1967, p. 13; Gerald McNiece, Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea, p. 190; Carl Woodring, Politics in English Romantic Poetry, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 254; Donald H. Reiman, ed., Shelley and his Circle 1773-1822, V, 141; Richard Holmes, Shelley, the Pursuit, p. 401; K. N. Cameron, Shelley, the Golden Years, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1974, p. 311; Stuart Curran, Shelley's *Annus Mirabilis*, p. 29; Timothy Webb, Shelley, a Voice not Understood, 1977, p. 111.

epic conventions illustrated in the poem, and Shelley's claimed epic intentions posited by drawing upon certain observations on epic poetry in his critical prose and letters. Brian Wilkie, in a carefully argued assessment, discerns a typical epic quality in the poem's use of human and universal planes of action; he points out a number of epic conventions and recognizes that Shelley never explicitly referred to his poem as an epic, but considers 'there can be very little doubt that he meant it to be one.'<sup>8</sup> More recently, Charles E. Robinson has advanced the view that Shelley did not wish Byron to embark upon an epic poem

because Shelley himself at this time /September, 1816/ was apparently planning to become a 'parent of greatness' by writing his own epic poem on the 'master theme' of the French Revolution.<sup>9</sup>

Robinson supports this reference to Laon and Cythna by citing Shelley's letter of September 29, 1816 to Byron, in which Shelley urged 'I would not that you should immediately apply yourself to the composition of an Epic Poem;'<sup>10</sup> Stuart Curran has also recently characterized the poem 'a political epic': in contrast to Queen Mab, he argues, Shelley's Laon and Cythna has 'shifted the focus away from a metaphorical internalization.'<sup>11</sup>

However, there are reasons for supposing that in Laon and Cythna Shelley focuses more directly upon the concept of internalization than is generally allowed. In Queen Mab a vision-frame is a useful organizational device for enclosing a

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<sup>8</sup>Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, p. 114.

<sup>9</sup>Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup>Letters, I, 507.

<sup>11</sup>Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, pp. 24, 29.

variety of spatial and time dimensions; in Alastor a particular vision experience provides the narrative with a pivotal episode which raises ontological issues of great significance. In Laon and Cythna, a longer narrative than either of these, the concepts of vision and dream are again central to the possible epic identity of the poem.

Some idea of the importance to Shelley of vision and dream in the poem may be derived from a study of the extant manuscripts which cover roughly three-quarters of the poem. Shelley's working notebooks for the drafts and other manuscript materials for Laon and Cythna<sup>12</sup> provide the basis for a comparison between Shelley's initial word choices during composition and his final choices as represented by the text of the first printed copy of the poem. Trelawny's description of the draft for 'With a Guitar to Jane' accords with the appearance of many pages in the working notebooks:

It was a frightful scrawl; words smeared out with his finger, and one upon the other, over and over in tiers, and all run together in most admired disorder.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Neville Rogers has demonstrated the difficulties in reading Shelley's drafts.<sup>14</sup> Despite the problems of distinguishing rough draft from intermediate draft or fair copy, however, it is possible to discern Shelley's intentions with respect to the 'vision' and 'dream' instances contained in his manuscripts for Laon and Cythna. The importance of the concepts of vision and dream to Shelley may be judged from the fact that of the 57 known drafts for the 'vision' and 'dream' printed occurrences in Laon and Cythna,

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<sup>12</sup>See Appendix 1.

<sup>13</sup>John Morpurgo, ed., The Last Days of Shelley and Byron: Being the Complete Text of Trelawny's 'Recollections', 1952, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup>Shelley at Work, pp. 1-14.

51 were initial choices which remained uncanceled or otherwise unrevised from first draft through to their final published form in the first printed text of Laon and Cythna.<sup>15</sup> This invariance is significant when one considers a typical Shelley draft, in which word cancellations, deletions, interlinear and intralinear revisions are frequent. It is one reason for suggesting that the concepts of dream and vision were central to Shelley's intentions when he embarked upon the composition of the poem.

The drafts also provide evidence which strengthens the argument in Chapter 3 that Shelley was profoundly interested in vision and dream experiences, that these experiences were as ontologically valid for him as ordinary empirical reality and that he transmuted them into an imaginative universe of poetic discourse. The third stanza of the Dedication to Laon and Cythna is generally read, for example, as an autobiographical statement:<sup>16</sup>

Thoughts of great deeds were mine, dear Friend, when  
first  
The clouds which wrap this world from youth did pass.  
I do remember well the hour which burst  
My spirit's sleep: a fresh May-dawn it was,  
When I walked forth upon the glittering grass,  
And wept, I knew not why: until there rose  
From the near school-room voices, that, alas!  
Were but an echo from a world of woes -  
The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes.

In drafting the first two lines of this stanza, however, Shelley initially thought of stating that he, as a youth, was subject to vision and dream experiences from a divine source. There are three

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<sup>15</sup>See Appendix 1.

<sup>16</sup>Claude C. Brew, Shelley and Mary in 1817: a Critical Study of the Text and Poetical Evolution of the 'Dedication' of 'The Revolt of Islam'. Based on a new Examination of the Manuscripts, Keats-Shelley Memorial Association, 1971, p. 18.



[iii]

Great aspirations have been mine since first  
 This veil which hid this world of human things  
 Was rent, <sup>soul</sup> ~~my heart by high ambi- tions~~  
~~by gentlest~~ heart had nursed  
 and dreams divine my soul

As the drafts show, Shelley had written 'visions' and 'dreams divine', deleting 'visions' in favour of 'dreams divine' in draft, but finally omitting any reference to them in the first printed text. In all likelihood, Shelley chose finally not to refer to any visionary autobiographical experiences in the Dedication, since to do so would identify him directly with the character of Laon whose own hopes of liberty and freedom are defined in canto II as conveyed 'In vision or in dream' (xv, 132).

A reading of the printed text of Laon and Cythna reveals that the concepts of dream and vision are embodied in the narrative in a number of different forms. It is noticeable that two of the most significant episodes in the poem - Laon's imprisonment and Cythna's imprisonment - are presented as dream or vision events, and that both characters are intimately associated with dreams and visions in a variety of ways. Laon and Cythna frequently experience dreams or visions in sleep; these may take the form of nightmare visions, prophetic visions, dreams of future bliss and liberty. Cythna is characterized as a phantom or vision figure in the poem, and often uses a dream-metaphor in her speeches. Laon enters the Golden City as if in a dream, and the Altar of the Federation episode is described as a vision. In the first canto of the poem, the Woman's history is characterized by vision episodes, the serpent-eagle struggle is a 'warning vision' (xxxviii, 464), and the voyage to the Temple of the

Spirit 'divine and strange' (xxi, 315): the narrator falls into a trance just before approaching the Temple. In an important sense, much of the poem is a dream experience in the mortal lives of Laon and Cythna, and it is this receptivity to a spiritual reality which differs in extent and degree from that experienced by ordinary humans which is largely responsible for Shelley's originality in his characterization, as I shall later show.

The continual insistence in the poem on visionary experience which this brief sketch has indicated should warn the reader against viewing Shelley's sub-title, 'A Vision of the Nineteenth Century' purely as a metaphor for a future idealism: it is certainly that on one level, but the texture of the poem reveals also a conviction on Shelley's part that the ontological status of a dream or vision, so ill considered by the received opinion of the majority of his contemporaries, should be elevated to a more respectable position of authority and respect.

Shelley directed the reader's attention explicitly to the visionary quality of Laon and Cythna by the original sub-title; the dream and vision episodes, similarities drawn between certain events and dream or vision experiences and other declarative representations of these concepts in the narrative confirm Shelley's preoccupation with them, pointing towards a central imaginative concern. However, there are several features of the poem, not keyed specifically to any 'vision' or 'dream' word occurrence in the narrative which reinforce the dreamlike resonance that the poem as a whole conveys to the reader. Some of these features are comparable to certain characteristics of Spenser's epic The Faerie Queene, a poem which Shelley was reading fairly intensively during the period at Marlow

when he composed Laon and Cythna.<sup>18</sup> Richard Holmes has suggested that Shelley's poem has as 'its literary model, in so far as it has one, Spenser's The Faerie Queen.'<sup>19</sup> It is likely, as I shall demonstrate later, that Shelley used Spenser's poem directly in his description of the Temple of the Spirit in canto I. Yet any exercise in source criticism which argues for Spenser's influence upon Shelley in terms of particular images and episodes is less valuable than attempting to elucidate the specific relationship in which Laon and Cythna stands to The Faerie Queene as a poem of epic pretension. In the context of epic, Spenser's The Faerie Queene is distinctive since its narrative strategy may be seen as analagous to a dream experience;<sup>20</sup> I now want to suggest that Laon and Cythna, a more assertive work in its presentation of a dreamlike experience to the reader, may be lodged in the same tradition as Spenser's epic.

John Gibson Lockhart, in his review of Laon and Cythna in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine for January 1819, commented:

the Revolt of Islam, although a fine, is, without all doubt, an obscure poem. Not that the main drift of the narrative is obscure, or even that there is any great difficulty in understanding the tendency of the undercurrent of its allegory - but the author has composed his poem in much haste, and inadvertently left many detached parts, both of his story and his allusion, to be made out as the reader best can, from very inadequate data.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Shelley records Shelley's reading of Spenser in April, May, June and July 1817, MSJ, pp. 78-79, 82-83.

<sup>19</sup> Shelley, the Pursuit, p. 401; see also Brian Wilkie, Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, p. 135, and G. M. Matthews, Shelley, (Writers & their Work Series) 1970, 13.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Graham Hough, A Preface to 'The Faerie Queene', 1968, (Reprint), pp. 95-99, 131-137.

<sup>21</sup> Donald H. Reiman, ed., The Romantics Reviewed, Part C, I, 97.

Lockhart's particular unease concerning obscurity was echoed three months later by John Taylor Coleridge in the Quarterly Review: he called the poem 'laboriously obscure'.<sup>22</sup> It is to be noted, however, that Lockhart's judgement is not applied comprehensively to the poem: he recognizes the 'main drift of the narrative' and the general 'undercurrent of its allegory'. Opacity seems to inhere in a certain abstruseness in the texture of the narrative and a degree of inadequately disclosed allusiveness. Lockhart might indeed be discussing a dream experience in which events and episodes may follow the one upon the other in a plausible sequence, but whose dimensions of allusiveness and inexplicitness, of spatial and temporal dislocation, are also very strongly present. The reader - or dreamer - is solicited by the experience to unravel an enigmatic complexity. A deeper probing into the structure of the narrative, as I shall show in Section III, reveals Shelley's artistry in constructing a poem which presents a dreamlike experience based, however, upon a carefully controlled and organized plan.

The 'main drift' of the narrative, to use Lockhart's phrase, is surely quite clear. The narrative action of each canto follows sequentially, if not temporally, upon its predecessor in a lucid and straightforward sequence. It might be useful at this point, in view of the length of the poem, to outline the progression of the narrative with its major episodes.

Canto I begins with the narrator's ascent of a promontory, from which vantage point he observes the struggle between an eagle and a serpent; the serpent drops into the sea, and when the narrator

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<sup>22</sup>The Romantics Reviewed, Part C, II, 772.

descends to the sea-shore he perceives a woman sitting there who takes the serpent to her breast. They all embark in a mysterious boat and the woman explains the serpent-eagle conflict as one of cosmic significance recounting also something of her personal history. As they approach a temple, the woman utters a cry and disappears, whereupon the narrator sees two figures, one of whom begins to speak.

This figure is Laon, who begins canto II by recounting the history of his own youth together with his sister Cythna, in Argolis. Both brother and sister are inspired to pursue the ideals of freedom and equality, and return home at the end of this canto, to sleep. Canto III commences with Laon's dream of an attempt to abduct Cythna. He wakes up to find Cythna being taken away by the tyrant's men, which he tries to prevent by killing three of them. In punishment, he is chained to the top of a column where he loses his senses and has nightmare visions, but is rescued by a hermit who takes him by boat to his home, a ruined tower on the edge of a lake. They arrive at this place at the beginning of canto IV. Then the hermit explains his own history and Laon emerges from his madness - a recovery which lasts seven years - to depart in search of Cythna.

He arrives on the plain outside the Golden City at the start of canto V, where a revolutionary movement is under way. Although they are attacked by the tyrant's men, the insurgents enter the city and then the palace, where Laon encounters the tyrant Othman, who is accompanied by a child, apparently devoted to him. A festival, in which an Altar of the Federation is erected, ensues. This event is

attended by Laone, the young maiden who has initiated the revolutionary movement. Laone is Cythna, who Laon resolves to meet next day.

Canto VI commences the following morning with a struggle in which the patriots are driven out of the city and forced to retreat. Laon is rescued by a phantom like figure mounted upon a fierce horse, who turns out to be Cythna. They retreat to a ruin. Laon forays for food and is confronted by the figure of Pestilence. Canto VII opens with Laon's brief account to Cythna of his adventures since their parting. Cythna then tells of her adventures during the previous seven years. This story occupies the rest of canto VII, continues into canto VIII and forms part of canto IX. Cythna relates how she was confined in an underground prison by the tyrant's slaves, suffered mentally like Laon with strange visions, but was subsequently released by an earthquake. She was picked up by a slave-ship, whose crew she converted to the idea of freedom, and upon their arrival at the Golden City began a revolution. Her tale ends at stanza xix in canto IX with the line to Laon "'The rest thou knowest"' (164). The canto concludes with her speech on the posited future perfection of man.

Laon resumes his search for food in canto X, and brings back news of counter-revolution, of famine and plague, and of the Christian priest's demand that Laon and Cythna be sacrificed upon a pyre in expiation. Laon resolves to leave Cythna at the beginning of canto XI, and presents himself disguised as a hermit before the tyrant, bargaining his life for that of Cythna. At the end of this canto he throws off his disguise and reveals his identity. Canto XII commences with Laon bound and ready to be sacrificed. Cythna suddenly appears and they are both committed to the flames. The scene changes

abruptly as Laon and Cythna awake in Paradise to witness the approach of a 'divine canoe', a boat with the spiritual form of the child aboard. They embark, and all three spirits journey to the Temple.

The narrative continuity of the poem, then, is presented to the reader in an ordered sequence of episodes, within a number of cantos whose overall narrative movement is not difficult to follow. Shelley was accurate in his Preface when he referred to Laon and Cythna as 'a succession of pictures' and in his letter to Longman & Co. when he commented 'tho it is the story of violence & revolution, it is relieved by milder pictures of friendship & love & natural affections'.<sup>23</sup> As in a dream, a succession of pictures unfolds to fascinate the reader.

Nevertheless, the attention drawn to the series of sequential relationships which hold between the cantos marks out only one part of the dreamlike complexity which constitutes the poem. An accompanying initial response to Laon and Cythna might understandably choose to specify the degree to which the poem refuses to explain or explicate apparently illogical or random events by discursive verbalization. This characteristic of dream experiences is marked in Spenser's epic The Faerie Queene, as Graham Hough has pointed out: although, for example, in Spenser's poem Guyon is strongly attracted to the Bower of Bliss, he knows it has to be destroyed and proceeds to destroy it.<sup>24</sup> In Laon and Cythna the narrative is highly charged with incidents and episodes whose causes are inadequately explicated or glossed, hence the effect of an obscure dream which tests the reader's patience and ingenuity.

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<sup>23</sup> Julian, I, 239; Letters I, 563.

<sup>24</sup> A Preface to 'The Faerie Queene', p. 136.

In his brilliant analysis of epic styles, Erich Auerbach has contrasted the foregrounded and palpably externalized aspects of the Homeric style against the Biblical.<sup>25</sup> In the latter, paratactic, style the reader has to construe meaning from the unexpressed relations concealed by counterpointed syntactic forms. The often inexplicit and allusive nature of the narrative action of Laon and Cythna, not its style only, is perhaps paratactic in Auerbach's sense, and contributes importantly to the intrinsic dreamlike quality of the poem. No part of this argument, however, is meant to suggest the total absence or lack of reasons and motives in the narrative; the subtlety of Shelley's art in providing structural patterns which invest the narrative with significance, as I mentioned earlier, will be taken up later in this chapter.

Numerous episodes in the poem have inadequately explained features on a first reading. The earthquake, for instance, which releases Cythna in canto VII, xxxii is presented as 'sudden'; its timing appears fortuitous. Equally surprising is the coincidental arrival of the slave-ship upon the scene to pick Cythna up. In canto I there is an abrupt transition within stanza xxiii, which describes the magic boat:

A boat of rare device, which had no sail  
 But its own curved prow of thin moonstone,  
 Wrought like a web of texture fine and frail,  
 To catch those gentlest winds which are not known  
 To breathe, but by the steady speed alone  
 With which it cleaves the sparkling sea; and now  
 We are embarked,

(xxiii, 199-205)

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<sup>25</sup>Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, translated by W. R. Trask, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971 (Reprint), pp. 3-23.

The brevity of the expression 'and now/We are embarked' is dramatic but, as in Auerbach's example 'Dixitque Deus: fiat lux et facta est lux',<sup>26</sup> the parataxis 'and' in Shelley suppresses the logical and causal relation of a 'how?' entirely.

The often unexpected appearance, disappearance and then reappearance of certain personages, as in Spenser, invests Shelley's narrative with a dreamlike sense of unexplained identity and mobility in its mode of characterization. At the beginning of canto V Laon reaches the plain outside the Golden City where the rebels are encamped. This happens during the very early hours of the morning, and Laon sits down beside an 'armed youth' with whom he converses about freedom. As day breaks, this young man recognizes Laon and exclaims "'Thou art here!'", whereupon Laon recollects:

Then suddenly, I knew it was the youth  
 In whom its earliest hopes my spirit found;  
 But envious tongues had stained his spotless truth,  
 And thoughtless pride his love in silence bound,  
 And shame and sorrow mine in toils had wound,  
 Whilst he was innocent, and I deluded.

(v, 37-42)

The reader has a haunting sense that this character has appeared before, and locates him in canto II xviii, where he is introduced quite emphatically yet with the minimum of foregrounded explication:

Yes, oft beside the ruined labyrinth  
 Which skirts the hoary caves of the green deep,  
 Did Laon and this friend on one grey plinth,  
 Round whose worn base the wild waves hiss and leap,  
 Resting at eve, a lofty converse keep:  
 And that this friend was false, may now be said  
 Calmly - that he like other men could weep -  
 Tears which are lies ...

(xviii, 154-160)

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<sup>26</sup> Mimesis, p. 110.

In the preceding stanza, Laon has spoken of a plurality of sympathetic listeners - 'we all were sons of one great mother' - but in this stanza there is an abrupt narrowing of focus upon 'this friend'; the phrase contains a demonstrative adjective which appears to, but which in fact does not, provide the reader with a definite and previously stated identity for the 'friend'. Who is Laon's friend, exactly? Further, the authorial and editorial consciousness which presents the stanza - in contrast to the previous one, which is spoken by Laon - does little or nothing to elucidate why the 'friend was false'. All the more puzzling, therefore, is Laon's statement in canto V that the friend was not false, and that he, Laon, had been deluded in thinking so. Laon's friend enters canto II rather doubtfully, and then promptly disappears from the narrative only to reappear later in canto V where Laon's former attitude to him is inexplicably but quite definitely stated as having been woefully misguided.

Equally enigmatic is the origin and identity of the female child who appears in canto V. She first emerges in the narrative as the sole companion of the tyrant Othman (V. xxi), but the reader's attention is soon directed away from her to the Altar of the Federation episode. Her next appearance is in canto VII. xvii, within Cythna's dream of childbirth and then she vanishes completely to re-appear in canto XII. xxiv as a 'plumed Seraph' to pilot the magic boat to the Temple of the Spirit with Laon and Cythna aboard. Her birth and subsequent movements are rendered in the narrative with a degree of ubiquity and obscurity characteristic of a dream. There has been considerable critical debate concerning the child's

significance and origins,<sup>27</sup> a discussion which has undervalued the importance of the dream concept as a means both of accounting for her mobility and of focusing specifically upon the apparently confusing circumstances of her birth.

The element of mystery in Shelley's presentation of Laon's friend and the child is illustrated also by some spatial disorientation in the poem, a characteristic also of dream experiences. Certainly, Shelley does specify Argolis (in the Peleponnese) as the birth-place of Laon and Cythna, and clearly conceived the 'Golden City' as Constantinople.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, certain crucial episodes in the poem are lacking in any specific geographical setting.<sup>29</sup> In this respect, Laon and Cythna is similar to Spenser's The Faerie Queene, and stands in useful contrast to the epics of Ariosto and Tasso. In The Faerie Queene (apart from the mention of Cleopolis, which is never seen) the

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, David Perkins, The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1959, p. 155; E. B. Murray, "Elective Affinity" in The Revolt of Islam. JEGP. LXVII, No. 4 (October 1968), 577-578; Donald H. Reiman, Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 57; Harold Orel, 'Shelley's The Revolt of Islam: the last great poem of the English Enlightenment?', Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century. LXXXIX (1972), 1205-1207; Irvin B. Kroese, The Beauty and the Terror: Shelley's Visionary Women, Romantic Reassessment Series No. XXIII, Salzburg, Universität Salzburg, 1976, pp. 66-70.

<sup>28</sup> Shelley wrote to Longman on October 13, 1817 'The scene is supposed to be laid in Constantinople & Modern Greece', Letters. I, 563. His choice of Argolis in the Peleponnese was uncannily prophetic as a birthplace for his revolutionaries: in 1821 Ypsilanti's National Convention met in Argos during the Greek War of Independence before the city was sacked by Ibrahim Pasha in 1825.

<sup>29</sup> By contrast, as I argued in the previous chapter, Alastor is a poem which contains a pivotal but localized and single dream experience episode - its spatial locations are closely defined. Laon and Cythna, however, is frequently interpolated by either the occurrence of a dream or vision episode or by an allusion to this form of experience: consequently, there is little attempt to plot precise locations.

settings are quite unlocalized; in Ariosto and Tasso, however, geographical references are quite explicit. Book XV of Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered, for example, traces the journey of the knights Charles and Ubaldo to rescue Rinaldo from Armida's palace from the Levant and along the north African coast, with the frequent interpolation of place names. This journey is, in some respects, similar to the one undertaken by the narrator, woman and serpent in canto I of Laon and Cythna, with the crucial difference that in Tasso the journey is plotted with geographical accuracy, while in Shelley it is not.<sup>30</sup>

The narrative context within which even a geographical place name like 'Argolis' occurs may convey tacit as opposed to clearly explicated meaning, and so remind the reader once again of the causal inexplicitness so common in dreams. A comparison of some lines from Wordsworth's The Prelude with Laon and Cythna may serve to illustrate and perhaps dramatize this difference in presenting meaning. The Wordsworth passage which I shall use here describes the educative influence of the river Derwent upon Wordsworth in his childhood; the Laon and Cythna lines are taken from the beginning of canto II, where Laon cites Argolis as his birthplace and describes some of the formative influences from nature which were decisive in his childhood.

O Derwent! travelling over the green Plains  
Near my 'sweet Birthplace', didst thou, beauteous Stream,  
Make ceaseless music through the night and day  
Which with its steady cadence, tempering  
Our human waywardness, compos'd my thoughts  
To more than infant softness, giving me,  
Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,

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<sup>30</sup>In both cases the voyagers are conducted by a lady of divine character who accompanies them in a magic boat, Laon and Cythna, I, xxi, xxiii; Jerusalem Delivered, XV, 3-5, 9.

A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm  
That Nature breathes, among the hills and groves.<sup>31</sup>

The Shelley lines run:

The star-light smile of children, the sweet looks  
Of women, the fair breast from which I fed,  
The murmur of the unreposing brooks,  
And the green light which shifting overhead,  
Some tangled bowers of vines around me shed,  
The shells on the sea-sand, and the wild flowers,  
The lamp-light thro' the rafters cheerly spread,  
And on the turning flax - in life's young hours  
'These sights and sounds did nurse my spirit's folded  
powers.

In Argolis beside the echoing sea,  
Such impulses within my mortal frame  
Arose,

(1, I - 11, 12)

The Wordsworth passage demonstrates quite clearly the exact nature of the inter-relationship between the child and natural environment: the regular and unhurried rhythm of the river's sound succeeds in stabilizing the consciousness of the child, its gentle assonance invests the human world with peace. Wordsworth is able to convey the causal relations that hold between the child and nature partly by the use of subordinate clauses which define logical relations and partly by employing a combination of verb forms (chiefly main verbs and gerunds) and substantives which carry precise and sharply focused meanings. For example, the defining subordinate conjunctions 'which' and 'that' in 'Which ... compos'd my thoughts' and 'the calm/That Nature breathes' displays overtly the effect of the natural surroundings upon the growing boy. The explicitness of 'cadence', 'tempering', 'compos'd' and 'calm' leave

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<sup>31</sup>The Prelude. 1805, Book First, lines 275-281.

the reader in no doubt as to the form that this natural influence takes.

In the Shelley lines, on the other hand, there is tacit rather than explicit communicativeness. The controlling structure is paratactic: noun phrases, linked by punctuation or by 'and' conjunctions predominate to give an overall impression of a series of discrete pictures within the Spenserian stanza. The 'sights and sounds' which 'did nurse my spirit's folded powers' are presented only: there is no attempt, as in the Wordsworth passage, to establish in what particular way these natural influences, centred upon Argolis, actually determined the early consciousness of Laon. A succession of phrases 'The star-light smile of children', 'the sweet looks/Of women', 'the fair breast', and so on, finally locates these impulses and places them in Argolis, but the specificity of location appears to bear little relation to the significance of this series of verbal pictures which constitute the particular environment.

In March 1819, the Monthly Review dismissed The Revolt of Islam as a 'demi-maniac' composition, and commented of its author:

his dreams of the perfection of the world, in which the 'eagle of evil' will finally be conquered by the 'serpent of good,' partake too much of poetical phrenzy for our comprehension. Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley seems to be one of those obdurate dreamers, whose imaginations are hardened rather than reprov'd by the frequent exposure of their follies;<sup>32</sup>

The reviewer articulates here a familiar enough contemporary view,<sup>33</sup> that dreams and visions were spurious or delusory phenomena, to be regarded with suspicion. Shelley did not subscribe to contemporary

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<sup>32</sup>The Romantics Reviewed, Part C, II, 702.

<sup>33</sup>See Chapter 3 above, p.94.

opinion on this point, as he did not subscribe on many others; the unequivocal choice of 'dream' and 'vision' in first draft, the frequent occurrence of the words in the narrative - often to describe a specific experience or episode - together with an insistent dreamlike quality in the texture of the narrative are more than mere indications to the contrary. I have tried, in the latter part of this discussion, to suggest some ways in which the dreamlike quality of Laon and Cythna is reminiscent of Spenser in this particular respect.

The next two sections of this chapter pursue the possible epic character of Laon and Cythna through a discussion of heroism and epic unity. Hurd, in his essay on The Faerie Queene, has the epic poet declare 'I leave to the sage dramatist the merit of being always awake, and always in his senses: the divine dream, and delirious fancy, are among the noblest of my prerogatives.'<sup>34</sup>

It is also significant that Shelley wrote the following memorandum while drafting Laon and Cythna: 'Socrates says that his powers were assigned to him by dreams and prophecies',<sup>35</sup> referring specifically to The Apology, section 33c, which reads 'Now this duty of cross-examining other men has been imposed upon me by oracles, visions, and in every way which the will of divine power was ever intimated to any one.'<sup>36</sup> Shelley's conviction of the importance of dreams would naturally attract him to the 'divine dream' of Plato and of Homer.

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<sup>34</sup>H. J. Todd, ed., The Works of Edmund Spenser, II, p. clxxiii.

<sup>35</sup>MS Shelley adds e.10. fol 219, in ink at the bottom of the page.

<sup>36</sup>The Dialogues of Plato, translated by B. Jowett, 4th edn., 1953, I, p. 358.

It is certainly a characteristic of more than peripheral concern when establishing the epic pretensions of Laon and Cythna: the concepts of dream and vision are integral to the characterization of Laon and Cythna, and explain also the impression of simultaneity, disrupted time sequences and alternating perspectives which the poem presents, as I shall discuss in the following two sections of this chapter.

## SECTION II

### HERO AND HEROINE

Notionally, heroism is an integral feature of epic poetry and one may reasonably suppose that Shelley wished to invoke an epic context for Laon and Cythna from his quite deliberate description of its two major characters as a hero and a heroine. In the letter to Longman & Co. enclosing the four first proof sheets of the poem Shelley explained that the revolution which Laon and Cythna illustrated was

the beau ideal as it were of the French Revolution, but produced by the influence of individual genius, & out of general knowledge. The authors of it are supposed to be my hero & heroine whose names appear in the title.<sup>37</sup>

The opening sentence of the last paragraph in the Preface to the poem similarly refers to 'the personal conduct of my Hero and Heroine', and Laon exclaims in canto II 'all things became/Slaves to my holy and heroic verse' (xxx. 267-268). In Chapters 1 and 2 I considered some twentieth century views regarding the Romantic

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<sup>37</sup>Letters. I, 564.

epic hero and indicated briefly the type of hero exemplified most commonly in the epics of Shelley's contemporaries. Two readings of Shelley's poem have dealt in some detail with the subject of heroism: Brian Wilkie conducts an illuminating discussion in Chapter 4 of Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, and in a recent study Alicia Martinez devotes three chapters to the subject of heroism in the characterization of Laon and Cythna.<sup>38</sup>

I shall also concentrate upon Shelley's mode of characterization in casting Laon and Cythna as hero and heroine. The section will begin by placing Laon and Cythna against the background of contemporary epic practice in presenting heroic characters. I shall then examine the ways in which Shelley defines the relationship between the pair in canto II, before they are parted at the beginning of canto III. A study of the differing roles and activities of each character will then be undertaken, and finally a detailed study of their parallel imprisonment episodes made.

Shelley's characterization of Laon and Cythna as hero and heroine is necessarily linked very closely with the thematic concerns of his poem, and this latter topic provides a useful introductory context for the discussion of heroism in Laon and Cythna. In common with many epics written towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the thematic centre of Laon and Cythna lies in its delineation of freedom and liberty, themes

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<sup>38</sup> The Hero and Heroine of Shelley's 'The Revolt of Islam', Romantic Reassessment Series No. LXIII, Salzburg, Universität Salzburg, 1976, Chapters 1 to 3.

which are intimately associated with the human qualities of virtue and benevolence. Shelley's purpose in writing his poem, according to the Preface, was to kindle

within the bosoms of my readers, a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence, nor misrepresentation, nor prejudice, can ever totally extinguish among mankind.

The turn of the century was witness to many similar sentiments in poems with claims to epic status: specifically, those poems of a political character published after the beginning of the French Revolution, whose heroes were invariably well known and familiar figures. Two examples of this thematic concern may be cited here:

The sentiment of noble resistance to oppression, and that courage which disdains all perils in vindication of laws, liberties, and national existence, cannot be inculcated too forcibly;

(Joseph Cottle, Alfred. 2nd edn., 1804, xxx)

There is another requisite in Epic Poetry, ... that the narrative should every where uniformly, inculcate the love of virtue and universal Benevolence, ... The subject, ... being pregnant with instances of true Heroism, and Benevolence, opposed to Tyranny, Superstition, Cruelty, and Craft.

(James Ogden, The Revolution. 1790 , xvii)

These passages, which show heroic action in opposition to tyranny, are taken from the prefaces to poems in which the central hero is historically renowned, for example, Alfred the Great, and William, Prince of Orange. It is entirely possible that Shelley was alluding to such poems on national and political themes - Ogden's poem was probably written to vindicate the relatively peaceful development of democracy in England as opposed to the recent violent events

in France - in a letter to Godwin on December 11, 1817. Shelley had sent a copy of Laon and Cythna to his father-in-law, and had received his comments on it. In reply, he wrote to Godwin:

I never presumed indeed to consider it anything approaching faultless, but when I considered contemporary productions of the same apparent pretensions, I will own that I was filled with confidence.<sup>39</sup>

Now whether or not Shelley was consciously placing Laon and Cythna in relation to contemporary epic poems 'of the same apparent pretensions' whose themes were liberty and freedom, it is difficult to say, but his comment is certainly a suggestive one when considering the possible epic identity of Laon and Cythna. These contemporary epics provide a valuable contrast to Shelley's poem as regards their portrayal of heroism.

The political epics of Shelley's day, as Ogden's The Revolution (1790) and Cottle's Alfred (1800) amply illustrate, were generally based upon an episode from English history in which a national hero championed the cause of freedom against despotism. Recent events in the Napoleonic Wars also furnished subjects for attempts at epic, which glorified the individual heroism by which England's democratic traditions had been protected e.g. W. H. Drummond's The Battle of Trafalgar (1806) and W. Hildreth's The Niliad, an Epic Poem in Honour of the Victory off the Mouth of the Nile (1799). The idea of heroism which underpins many of these contemporary epics is largely martial in character, the hero being physically active, a personage whose status in society was assured by his success in securing the continuance and independence of British democracy.

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<sup>39</sup>Letters. I, 577.

In Shelley's Laon and Cythna, however, the thematic focus is wider than in contemporary narratives of similar length and epic intention. In Shelley's poem the ideals of liberty and freedom are not keyed specifically to a national and political situation, as contemporary narratives were. This is not to deny Shelley's idea of using the French Revolution as a paradigm of revolutionary activity, nor the demonstrable parallelism between some of the poem's episodes and the actual events in France during the period of revolution and reaction.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the notion of heroism embodied in the characters of Laon and Cythna is more complex than that exemplified by contemporary epic, since Laon and Cythna is a more comprehensive poem in its assertion of the idea of freedom and liberty.

One desirable form of freedom which Shelley emphasizes, the emancipation of women, is a good example of this comprehensiveness. As Walter Graham first pointed out,<sup>41</sup> James Lawrence's Empire of the Nairs, or the Rights of Woman (1811), which Shelley had read in the spring of 1812, complemented his reading of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft on the subject of marriage.<sup>42</sup> This important aspect of the central theme of freedom is presented in the poem through the characterization of Cythna, whose experiences in Othman's harem and subsequent vital role in the release of the women destined for slavery are important episodes in the poem. This aspect of the theme of liberty is made explicit in Cythna's speech to Laon early in the poem:

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<sup>40</sup>Gerald McNiece, Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea, pp. 192, 202.

<sup>41</sup>Shelley and the "Empire of the Nairs", PMLA, XL No. 4 (December 1925), 881-891.

<sup>42</sup>See Shelley's note to the line 'Even love is sold' from Queen Mab, canto V, 189, in Julian, I, 141-142.

'Can man be free if woman be a slave?  
Chain one who lives, and breathes the boundless air  
To the corruption of a closed grave!'

(II. xliii, 379-381)

There are, therefore, several variations upon the theme of freedom projected in the narrative. These include political freedom, a plea for mankind's release from all forms of religious tyranny, and also from society's codification of love relationships. Laon and Cythna, as hero and heroine, are not the static historical figures of contemporary epic, but individuals who develop morally during the course of the poem. Shelley identifies them with a range of refinements upon the theme of freedom, a theme whose context of reference is wider in scope than the limited historical context so representative in the epics of Shelley's contemporaries. Even Southey's Joan of Arc (1796), a poem whose heroine powerfully articulates her love of mankind, is located within a specific historical context.

The deployment of two major heroic characters instead of one in the poem marks Shelley's most obvious departure from contemporary epic practice, and distinguishes Laon and Cythna from the practice of classical epic also. It was not an entirely unusual departure, however: Adam and Eve in Milton's Paradise Lost are another famous pair of epic heroes, and the Italian romance epics of Ariosto and Tasso contain numerous pairs of lovers. It has been suggested by Gerald McNiece that Shelley's pair of heroic characters derives from the latter's reading of Louvet's Memoirs: Louvet de Couvrai was a Girondist who recounted his separation from his beloved Lodoiska during the Terror, before the fall of Robespierre.<sup>43</sup> Shelley

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<sup>43</sup>Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea, p. 191.

may be indebted to Louvet, of course, but as far as epic tradition is concerned, the adventures of Olindo and Sofronia in Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered may have attracted his attention. In Book II. xxii of the poem, Olindo and Sofronia are bound to a stake to be burned alive, but are rescued by the intervention of Clorinda. Laon and Cythna are also fastened upon a burning pyre in canto XII of Shelley's poem, where they are immolated - a possible echo from Tasso's poem, which Shelley admired and had begun reading in 1813.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to contemporary epic, then, Shelley's thematic range is more complex and he uses two epic protagonists instead of the usual one. It is also important to recognize another contrast: the poetic interest of the heroes of contemporary epic is conveyed simply by externalising their psychology into public action and event.<sup>45</sup> Shelley's hero and heroine also have a public role to play, but equally important is Shelley's portrayal of their early childhood relationship and their intellectual development.

Unlike the famous heroes of Cottle's Alfred or Ogden's The Revolution. Laon and Cythna are of obscure origin, and are profoundly influenced by dreams and visions; they are also convinced of the power of verbal eloquence as a revolutionary means of changing human behaviour and attitudes towards social, religious and political issues. Shelley devotes canto II of his poem to showing how the

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<sup>44</sup>See Chapter 2 above, p. 34.

<sup>45</sup>Stuart Curran views Laon and Cythna as colourless vehicles for Shelleyan propaganda - a more appropriate description, however, not of Shelley's hero and heroine but of the heroes of many contemporary epics. He characterizes Laon and Cythna as 'caricatures, mere roles brought out of stock to be enacted before Southey's backdrop', Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, p. 30.

motives and values of Laon and Cythna are formed. He apparently wished his readers to concentrate exclusively upon the developing psychological state of his hero and heroine, providing only a very minimum degree of background information about them. A study of his drafts is helpful here in confirming this intention. For instance, when drafting the lines for stanza xxi, he initially considered giving some details concerning the parentage of Laon and Cythna, but subsequently chose to omit any such detail. The relevant line, subsequently deleted, ran: I had a father who was kind.<sup>46</sup>

Laon is introduced first in canto II: his birthplace is Argolis, and this is the only piece of background information we are given about him. He quickly realizes that Argolis is subject to the tyranny of a foreign despot, and wanders through his native land, eventually pausing to contemplate a number of ruined tombs and columns. This episode is crucial for his decision to become a revolutionary leader dedicated to the cause of freedom, since he senses that these 'monuments of less ungentle creeds' (xi, 94) had been fashioned by men who were 'wiser, greater, gentler' (xii, 101) than the forces at present occupying his country. He resolves to awaken his countrymen and throw off oppression, a decision which thereafter remains central to his actions. Significantly, the hope of future liberty is kept alive in Laon's soul by dream and vision experiences:

One summer night, in commune with the hope  
 Thus deeply fed, amid those ruins grey  
 I watched, beneath the dark sky's starry cope;  
 And ever from that hour upon me lay  
 The burthen of this hope, and night or day  
 In vision or in dream, clove to my breast.

(xv. 127-132)

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<sup>46</sup>MS Shelley adds e.19. fol 46, in ink at the bottom of the page.

In stanza xxi of the canto, Laon describes his sister Cythna. Although several readers of the poem have commented upon the sexual and incestuous aspect of this brother and sister relationship,<sup>47</sup> which becomes explicit in canto VI and which Shelley discusses in the last paragraph of the Preface, one should not ignore another dimension of importance - the receptivity of each character to visions and dreams. Cythna also frequently experiences visions, and the canto demonstrates clearly that the interdependence of hero and heroine is based upon a transference of the ideas of hope and liberty through the agency of visionary experience. Laon and Cythna are constantly together: in stanzas xxvii - xxviii Laon describes how

in my arms she slept,  
And I kept watch over her slumbers there,  
While, as the shifting visions o'er her swept,  
Amid her innocent rest by turns she smil'd and wept

And, in the murmur of her dreams, was heard  
Sometimes the name of Laon:-

(xxvii. 240 - xxviii. 245)

Cythna is sustained by the visionary idealism of Laon's character:

Her spirit o'er the ocean's floating state  
From her deep eyes far wandering, on the wing  
Of visions that were mine, beyond its utmost spring.

(xxix. 259 - 261)

Her revolutionary thoughts derive from Laon; she is invested with a strength of purpose through this sympathetic identity with Laon and she is endowed with strange power and knowledge which is

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<sup>47</sup>For example, James Lynn Ruff, Shelley's 'The Revolt of Islam'. Romantic Reassessment Series No. X, Salzburg, Universität Salzburg, 1972, pp. 58-60; Richard Holmes, Shelley, the Pursuit. pp. 394-396.

conveyed by visions:

Nor are the strong and the severe to keep  
 The empire of the world: thus Cythna taught  
 Even in the visions of her eloquent sleep,  
 Unconscious of the power thro' which she wrought  
 The woof of such intelligible thought,

(xxxiv. 298-301)

The epithet 'eloquent' in the phrase 'visions of her eloquent sleep' characterizes another aspect of the relationship between Laon and Cythna: both hero and heroine believe in the persuasive power of eloquence as an effective method of achieving reform. Laon asserts in stanza xxx 'all things become/slaves to my holy and heroic verse' (267-268), and in stanza xli Cythna recalls how a condemned slave was released after singing a moving melody to his judge.<sup>48</sup> Cythna concludes 'All shall relent/Who hear me' (366-377), vowing to pursue the cause of women's freedom through the means of rhetorical eloquence. Brian Wilkie argues that this idea of persuasive eloquence is Shelley's substitute for the traditional martial element in heroism,<sup>49</sup> a point I shall take up presently. Here, it is sufficient to indicate that in canto II the introduction of Laon and Cythna as heroic characters involves the notion of eloquence as well as the concepts of vision and dream. In both these respects, Shelley's presentation of Laon and Cythna reveals a mode of characterization which differentiates the heroic identity of the pair clearly from the political and historical heroes of contemporary epic. The relative anonymity and opaqueness of the origin of brother and sister tends to reinforce the impression created by their

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<sup>48</sup> Shelley may have derived the idea for this stanza from Plutarch's Life of Nic us, as Charles E. Robinson suggests in Shelley and Byron, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, p. 139.

receptivity to vision and dream that their values are spiritual and universal, a sustaining element of great strength to both of them.

I have argued so far that in canto II both Laon and Cythna are characterized in terms of their obscure origins, a sensitivity to dream and vision, and a shared belief in the efficacy of rhetoric, all of which features serve to distinguish them from the typical hero of contemporary epic. It has been customary to define Shelley's hero and heroine not as sharing similar character traits, but as representing opposite ends of a character spectrum. Richard Hoffpauir, for example, argues that in the poem each character assumes the socio-economic role traditionally reserved for the other because of opposite character identities: Laon is predominantly passive, and Cythna is active.<sup>50</sup> Alicia Martinez also takes this position:

Laon represents 'intellect espousing a pacifism which verges on impotence'; Cythna represents a 'love of humanity avowing an activism which approaches heroic proportions.'<sup>51</sup>

Carlos Baker judges Cythna to be 'a positive dynamic force', Laon, in comparison, is 'a mere shadow, a bearer of news, an observer and reporter, more acted upon than acting.'<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>The Theory and Practice of Epic (especially narrative and character) with special reference to Southey, Landor, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Byron', University of London, 1969, p. 221 (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation).

<sup>51</sup>The Hero and Heroine of Shelley's 'The Revolt of Islam', p. 19.

<sup>52</sup>Shelley's Major Poetry, p. 81; James A. Notopoulos contrasts Laon and Cythna as Platonic symbols: 'Laon is a philosopher, an idealist, a Platonic lover, Cythna, even though an idealization of Mary, is a Platonic soul mate', The Platonism of Shelley: a Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind. Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1949, p. 214.

These views do not consider the presentation of Laon and Cythna in canto II, but focus upon their respective activities in the subsequent cantos. It is contended that Laon is largely passive in character, but that Cythna is more assertive and active after their separation in canto III. The underlying assumption of this view seems to be that Laon and Cythna are psychologically human types; having made this assumption, it is open to attempt a differentiation between them as representatives of commonly recognizable types of humanity, those being the active and the passive. I will presently question the assumption that both Laon and Cythna are psychologically human types by suggesting that Cythna is portrayed with intimations of a divine identity, but would like now to examine more closely the view that Cythna is largely active and Laon passive in the poem. Both the assumption and the view based upon it merit discussion in the present context of the nature of heroism exemplified by Laon and Cythna.

One approach to assessing the accuracy of the active-passive polarity lies in comparing the actions and speeches of both Laon and Cythna. Are the actions and speeches of Laon generally less positive and dynamic than those of Cythna? Is Cythna a superior 'positive dynamic force' and Laon an inferior 'mere shadow' as Carlos Baker affirms?

On the level of physical action, Laon and Cythna both behave in decisive and important ways; Cythna appears a more assertive character simply because her two actions are presented dramatically. In canto VI. xix she arrives fortuitously at the height of the battle on a giant Tartarian horse to rescue Laon, scattering all before her. In canto XII. viii, she causes panic by appearing out of nowhere on the same strange horse to join Laon on the sacrificial pyre. These

actions lack the realism of Laon's behaviour, however. His actions are framed within a readily familiar context of human courage, approximating more closely to the idea of physical heroism associated with individual combat. He instinctively strikes down three of the tyrant's men to prevent Cythna's abduction in canto III. x, he is wounded attempting to protect a patriot from death in canto V. viii-ix, and resolutely gathers around his person 'a band of brothers' to oppose the onslaught of the tyrant's allies in canto VI. His actions in cantos X and XI confirm also a courageous nature. Far from being merely a 'bearer of news, an observer and reporter'<sup>53</sup> who does not expose himself to danger, Laon exhibits an intrepid audacity in venturing forth under the noses of the counter-revolutionaries to obtain food and to gather information:

Each night, that mighty steed bore me abroad,  
And I returned with food to our retreat,  
And dark intelligence;

(X. iii, 19-21)

In canto XI he fearlessly bargains with his life for Cythna, an act requiring considerable personal courage, whatever the reader's response to Laon's apparent naivete.

As concerns the speeches of each character, a belief in the causative power of language, embodied in speeches of persuasive eloquence, is common to each character, as canto II demonstrates. In the cantos which follow, it appears that Cythna's command of language is more efficacious and determinant than that of Laon. Certainly, it is impressive to learn from the hermit who rescues

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<sup>53</sup>Carlos Baker, Shelley's Major Poetry. p. 81.

Laon that the force of rhetoric alone has enabled Cythna to disarm the soldiers of the Golden City and initiate a revolution:

The tyrants send their armed slaves to quell  
Her power; - they, even like a thunder gust  
Caught by some forest, bend beneath the spell  
Of that young maiden's speech, and to their chiefs rebel.

(IV. xx, 177-180)

The speeches which each character makes during the narrative reveal a less decisive differentiation, however. Indeed, what is notable is that Shelley achieves a dual perspective with regard to Cythna's assuredness; alongside the compulsion and vigour of her rhetoric Shelley creates a slight margin of doubt, since the reader apprehends that several of Cythna's speeches are as much pure statements of Shelley's views on freedom and equality as impassioned utterances which causally affect the course of the narrative action. A comparison of Laon's speeches with those of Cythna will make this clear.

Laon makes four speeches in the poem, the first of which is modestly brief, of one stanza only. In canto II. xxxvii he tells Cythna that women's servitude to man must cease; in canto V. ix-xii he argues against the instrument of vengeance, and in stanzas xxxiii-xxxiv remonstrates further with the people, who wish to avenge themselves upon Othman. In canto XI. xv-xix, xxi-xxv he exhorts the Senate to renounce their evil ways, and offers his life in exchange for Cythna's freedom. Laon's speeches occupy only seventeen stanzas of Laon and Cythna, yet their significance lies in the palpable and demonstrable effect they exert upon his listeners. They function as statements of the poem's thematic concerns only marginally. Excepting the brief speech to Cythna in

canto II, Laon's speeches have causative effects. In canto V his words reconcile the tyrant's guards to the people and prevent the murder of Othman; in canto XI his eloquence moves certain nobles to move towards him in sympathy, and then he subdues a would-be assassin by verbal power alone:

And one more daring raised his steel anew  
 To pierce the Stranger: "What has thou to do  
 With me, poor wretch?" - Calm, solemn, and severe,  
 That voice unstrung his sinews, and he threw  
 His dagger to the ground, and pale with fear,  
 Sate silently - his voice did then the Stranger rear.

(xx. 175-180)

Cythna makes five speeches, a total of forty-three stanzas, which is over twice the number allotted to Laon. In general, her speeches are longer and more obviously propagandist in tone than those of Laon. In canto II. xxxviii-xlvi she speaks to Laon of equality between men and women in a speech of eleven stanzas, and bids him farewell in canto III. viii-ix by defining her future role as truth's 'chosen minister'. As Laone in canto V she reiterates her function as the Priestess of freedom at the Altar of the Federation and addresses the inhabitants of the Golden City on Equality and freedom from tyrannical rule (xlvii-xlix; Li: 1-6). During her flashback narrative in canto VIII she urges her rescuers on the slave-ship to proceed directly to the Golden City (stanza 1) and during the voyage discourses for twenty stanzas on the subjects of God, economic exploitation, the servitude of women, and the potential of the individual will to achieve reform (iv-xxii, xxvii).

Only at two points do Cythna's speeches dictate action, and both occur in canto VIII. In the first stanza she persuades the sailors to set course for the Golden City; her long address to them, which occupies almost the entire canto, results in the release of their prisoners, a group of young women being carried into slavery.

Otherwise, Cythna's eloquence in her set speeches constitutes an oratorical display whose subjects are chiefly religion, women's freedom, and the possibility of a future egalitarian society.

It is important to recognize the causative influence of Cythna's eloquence as reported by others, for example the hermit in canto IV. Nevertheless, Cythna and Laon are not in fact at opposite poles of characterization: Laon is not an ineffectual speaker who is largely passive in speech or action, and it is inaccurate to characterize Cythna as entirely positive and dynamic. From the point of view of speech causally effecting action, many of Cythna's speeches are rhetorical statements only. The physical actions of hero and heroine show also that the active-passive antithesis is less absolute than has been suggested. In particular, as far as Laon is concerned, Shelley has not substituted eloquence for the martial element of heroism, as Brian Wilkie has insisted, and as Gerald McNeice implies when he writes 'In The Revolt of Islam Shelley wrote the epic of the hero as a poet'.<sup>54</sup> What is intriguing about Shelley's mode of heroic characterization in Laon and Cythna is that the traditional epic features of set speech and physical bravery are common to both his characters, in different degrees, but form only part of the complexity of their characterization as hero and heroine.

As I have suggested, the active-passive polarity from which the characters of Laon and Cythna are often viewed appears to assume that Laon and Cythna are familiar human types. Shelley's letter to

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<sup>54</sup>Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea, p. 202; Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, p. 139.

Longman & Co., in which he described most of the poem as 'a mere human story'<sup>55</sup> would tend to support this assumption. Laon is certainly presented as a very human young man, idealistic and impetuous by temperament, whose name may have been construed by Shelley from Greek to signify 'of the people', an appropriate indication of his essential humanity.<sup>56</sup> Cythna however, is a more complex character: there is evidence in the poem which points to non-human aspects in her character as well as human traits, a feature which is generally ignored in studies of the poem.

In canto II, Laon and Cythna are introduced to the reader. Laon presents his sister as an innocent human child:

I had a little sister, whose fair eyes  
Were loadstars of delight, which drew me home  
When I might wander forth; nor did I prize  
Aught human thing beneath Heaven's mighty dome  
Beyond this child.

(xxi. 181-185)

After they are parted at the beginning of canto III, Cythna becomes a revolutionary leader. Shelley may have assigned this major role in the poem to a female protagonist because Southey drew on a female figure for his Joan of Arc.<sup>57</sup> It is also possible, however, that Shelley was responding to William Hayley's Essay on Epic Poetry, as I argued in Chapter 2. Hayley supported the view that the female sex should provide protagonists for epic poetry, and proposed that future epic poems should recognize this. He translated a passage from Eroilla's La Araucana in which Donna Mencia de Nidor exemplifies

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<sup>55</sup>Letters, I, 563.

<sup>56</sup>James Lynn Ruff, Shelley's 'The Revolt of Islam', p. 61.

<sup>57</sup>Brian Wilkie, Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, p. 141.

female heroism.<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to note that in a memorandum at the bottom of page three of a working notebook for Laon and Cythna Shelley cited Ercilla's epic poem:

Araucana Don Allon <?So d'Ercilla><sup>59</sup>

Cythna is portrayed as a confident human figure who asserts the equality of men and women, attracts the sexual lust of Othman, gives birth to a child, and aggressively leads a revolution. Nevertheless, the poem subtly qualifies this portrayal of Cythna's mortality by articulating a number of other aspects to her characterization. She is compared, for example, to an angel and then directly identified as a phantom when she arrives on her giant horse to rescue Laon in canto VI:

On which, like to an Angel, robed in white,  
Sate one waving a sword; the hosts recede  
And fly, as thro' their ranks, with awful might,  
Sweeps in the shadow of eve that Phantom swift and bright;

(xix. 168-171)

In canto XII, Cythna's sudden appearance on the horse to join Laon is similarly abrupt and uncanny; she is compared again to an angel, and also to a phantom:

and a steed  
Dark and gigantic, with the tempest's speed,  
Bursts through their ranks: a woman sits thereon,  
Fairer it seems than aught that earth can breed,  
Calm, radiant, like a phantom of the dawn,  
A spirit from the caves of day-light wandering gone.

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<sup>58</sup>An Essay on Epic Poetry. p. 230.

<sup>59</sup>MS Shelley adds e.19 fol 3. The symbol <? > denotes my conjectural reading.

All thought it was God's Angel come to sweep  
The lingering guilty to their fiery grave;

(viii. 68-72; ix. 73-74)

This terrifying phantom, who strikes terror into the hearts of the people, is partly characterized in terms of an epic phantom: this is a familiar form of vision appearance, as I argued in Chapter 3. The element of mystery in Cythna's dramatic entry at these two points in the narrative is sustained elsewhere in the poem, where doubts are expressed about her human identity by those who observe her closely. Although these doubts seem allayed by others, or by Cythna herself, intimations of a divine or spiritual presence are nonetheless present. When Cythna is taken aboard the slave-ship in canto VIII the captain is uneasy, and the pilot's attempt at reassurance displays a singular lack of heartfelt conviction, with its 'she can be nought beside':

'Alas, alas! I fear we are pursued  
By wicked ghosts: a Phantom of the Dead,  
The night before we sailed, came to my bed  
In dream, like that!' The Pilot then replied,  
'It cannot be - she is a human Maid -  
Her low voice makes you weep - she is some bride,  
Or daughter of high birth - she can be nought beside.'

(ii. 12-18)

Upon their arrival at the Golden City, Cythna disembarks and her eloquence moves the people to resist tyranny. Despite Cythna's own statement 'my human words found sympathy/In human hearts' (IX. ix, 73-74), the people almost unanimously agree that Cythna is a spiritual, not human, being:

"Some said I was a maniac wild and lost;  
Some, that I scarce had risen from the grave  
The Prophet's virgin bride, a heavenly ghost:-  
Some said, I was a fiend from my weird cave,  
Who had stolen human shape, and o'er the wave,  
The forest, and the mountain, came; - some said  
I was the child of God,

(IX. viii, 64-69)

The view of the people, that Cythna is the 'Prophet's virgin bride, a heavenly ghost', articulates an important facet to her character. As I suggested in Chapters 1 and 3, the identification of epic with prophecy was made by late eighteenth century and also twentieth century critics. It is largely through the characterization of Cythna that Shelley achieves this identification. Cythna is, in an important respect, a prophet figure whose visions of a profound change in man's mental attitude of servitude are reiterated constantly throughout the poem. In canto IX. xx-xxv, for example, she emphasizes - in contrast to the representative and contemporary view of prophecy as prediction<sup>60</sup> - the eternal spirit rather than the localized and particular form of change.<sup>61</sup> Cythna addresses Laon:

"We know not what will come - yet, Laon, dearest,  
Cythna shall be the prophetess of love,

(xx, 173-174)

Also, during her imprisonment in the subterranean cave, she compares her thoughts to prophetic dreams:

As in its sleep some odorous violet,  
While yet its leaves with nightly dews are wet,  
Breathes in prophetic dreams of day's uprising,

(VII. xxxvii, 328-330)

The assumption, therefore, that Cythna is an entirely human figure in the poem, is questionable. In contrast to Laon, she is imaged almost as a divinity with her spectacular intrusions into the narrative to join Laon in cantos VI and XII. She is characterized as a phantom by those around her, and has an important role as a prophetic character to play in the poem.

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<sup>60</sup>See Chapter 3 above, p. 86.

<sup>61</sup>This view is articulated by Cythna in canto IX. xxvi.

The basis of the imaginative complexity which constitutes Shelley's presentation of Laon and Cythna as hero and heroine has now emerged during the course of this discussion, and may be seen to have several distinctive features. Although both Cythna and Laon are physically heroic in the traditional epic sense - Laon more convincingly than Cythna - Shelley emphasizes their spiritual and emotional consciousness also. They are receptive to dreams and visions, convinced of the power of language to effect action, and Cythna is invested with a mysterious aura of otherworldliness to complement the presentation of her as a human being. Consequently, the idea of heroism represented by both characters is considerably more sophisticated than that embodied in the heroes of contemporary epics. A further feature of great importance, however, is that Laon and Cythna are a hero and a heroine who develop morally in the poem.

This development takes the form of an extended crisis of consciousness as each character undergoes a period of insanity which is conveyed to the reader predominantly through a series of dreams and visions. Both Laon and Cythna become morally enlightened as a result of their experiences. These parallel developments function also as a unifying device within the poem's structure, as I shall remark in the next section of this chapter. They are central to a consideration of the heroic characters of Laon and Cythna, since they underline the importance of the internalized action of the poem, a feature which twentieth century critics like Joseph Antony Wittreich, Jr., and Stuart Curran see as fundamental to the Romantic epic.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>See Chapter 1 above, p. 18.

Laon and Cythna are separated from each other at the beginning of canto III. The story of Laon's imprisonment and insanity occupies the narrative from canto III. xiii to canto IV. vii and that of Cythna runs from canto VII. iii to xxxviii. I shall discuss Laon's story first.

Canto III commences with Laon's dream in which he has a prevision of his separation from Cythna; the dream is a typical example of the prophetic dream in epic, in which the epic protagonist sees into the future, as I noted in Chapter 3. Laon dreams of a terrifying event:

Legions of foul and ghastly shapes, which hung  
Upon my flight; and ever as we fled,  
They plucked at Cythna - soon to me then clung  
A sense of actual things those monstrous dreams among.

(v, 42-45)

He awakes to find that his cottage is surrounded by Othman's soldiers, and is struck insensible after having killed three of these men in an attempt to prevent Cythna's abduction. He regains consciousness to find himself being carried into a cavern beneath a rock upon which a tall column stands. He is obliged to ascend into the interior of this column, and is finally chained upon a platform at its top.<sup>63</sup> From here he observes the slave-ship carrying Cythna away into slavery,<sup>64</sup> and on the fourth day begins to lose the use of his reason:

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<sup>63</sup>Charles E. Robinson, Shelley and Byron, p. 259 note 16 suggests some useful comparisons between Shelley and Byron's The Prisoner of Chillon for this particular episode.

<sup>64</sup>An abduction episode is found also in the fourth book of William Wilkie's epic poem The Epigoniad, where Clytophon the Theban relates how he was captured by pirates and sold into slavery (2nd edn., 1769, pp. 65-66).

My brain began to fail when the fourth morn  
 Burst o'er the golden isles - a fearful sleep,  
 Which through the caverns dreary and forlorn  
 Of the riven soul, sent its foul dreams to sweep  
 With whirlwind swiftness - a fall far and deep -

(xxii, 190-194)

Shelley may have derived his interest in derangement from his possible reading of Tasso's madness in contemporary accounts, or perhaps from a reading of Ariosto's epic Orlando Furioso, in which the title figure loses his senses when forsaken by Angelica.<sup>65</sup> Laon's madness, however, is a necessary regenerative experience rather than simply an allegory of youth's folly, as it is in Ariosto. Through it, he is confronted with the evils of selfishness and revenge. These aspects of his experience are decisive for his moral redemption.<sup>66</sup> In canto VI he no longer meets violence with violence, but persuades the people to value fraternal love and to reject vengeance. The madness episode is punctuated by two visions:

Yet two visions burst  
 That darkness - one, as since that hour I knew,  
 Was not a phantom of the realms accurst,  
 Where then my spirit dwelt - but of the first  
 I know not yet, was it a dream or no.

(xxiv. 209-213)

Laon is uncertain whether the first vision is a vision or an actual event. He imagines that the gate to his prison is opened by the soldiers who have confined him there. They bring four corpses with them, hanging these by the hair from the edge of the column.

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<sup>65</sup>For Shelley's posited reading of Tasso biography see Chapter 2, above, p. 37 ; Orlando Furioso, XXIII, 103-107.

<sup>66</sup>See also E. B. Murray, "Elective Affinity" in The Revolt of Islam, 572-573 and James Lynn Ruff, Shelley's 'The Revolt of Islam', pp. 72-74 for a discussion of Laon's derangement.

Three of the corpses are dark in complexion; the fourth is 'very fair'. When the soldiers depart, Laon stretches out towards them:

And eagerly, out in the giddy air,  
Leaning that I might eat, I stretched and clung  
Over the shapeless depths in which those corpses hung.

(xxv. 223-225)

The implication here seems to be that the three swarthy corpses represent the soldiers that Laon has killed; he has committed an evil act in returning violence for violence, this part of his nightmare vision is designed to haunt him and to signify his moral depravity.<sup>67</sup> The vision becomes even more terrifying, as Laon feeds from the flesh of the fourth corpse:

A woman's shape, now lank and cold and blue,  
The dwelling of the many-coloured worm,  
Hung there, the white and hollow cheek I drew  
To my dry lips - what radiance did inform  
Thos horny eyes? whose was that withered form?  
Alas, alas! it seemed that Cythna's ghost  
Laughed in those looks, and that the flesh was warm  
Within my teeth!

(xxvi. 226-233)

This aspect of Laon's vision has been read as an act of cannibalism and also as an indication that Laon has murdered Cythna ('it seemed that Cythna's ghost') by murdering the soldiers.<sup>68</sup> However, it appears to represent rather more a parody of the loving kiss, the

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<sup>67</sup> Shelley was to write later in his Preface to *The Cenci*: 'Undoubtedly, no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes', *Julian*, II, 71.

<sup>68</sup> Ruff, p. 73; E. B. Murray, p. 573.

sign not necessarily of sexual love only but of human warmth and affection. The kiss is now imaged as a perverted and revolting embrace in Laon's guilty consciousness, which horrifies him because he is tainted with the depravity of murder. A similar embrace occurs later in the poem in canto VI. xlvii, when the figure of Pestilence clasps Laon to her breast:

Soon as she heard my steps she leaped on me,  
And glued her burning lips to mine, and laughed

(428-429)

Laon observes here that he 'might have raved in sympathy', 'but that she/Who loved me, did with absent looks defeat/Despair' (lil, 465-467). At this later point in the narrative Laon is unaffected by the evil of Pestilence because he has suffered and atoned for his former evil act of murder. In canto III, however, his 'sickening spirit' (xxvi. 234) still projects an inner despair.

The second vision that Laon experiences is of an old man:

The shape of an old man did then appear,  
Stately and beautiful, that dreadful sleep  
His heavenly smile dispersed, and I could wake and weep.

(xxvii. 241-243)

The vision of the old man either prefigures Laon's rescue by the hermit or describes the actual rescue; in retrospect, Laon can say only that this second vision 'Was not a phantom of the realms accurst' (III. xxiv, 211), but a positive vision within a nightmare experience. Under the hermit's care Laon gradually recovers his sanity and vows to search for Cythna (IV. xxxiii). His insanity has passed, but it has been an enlightening experience. Thereafter, he rejects the revenge ethic himself and persuades his fellow human beings against it in canto VI.

Cythna recounts her rape and imprisonment by Othman to Laon in canto VII. Her experience is one from which she emerges with a different but equally enlightened moral understanding as Laon. Like him, she is imprisoned and undergoes a period of insanity in which visions and dreams figure prominently.

Cythna's account is linked explicitly to Laon's story by lines 46-51 in stanza vi:

She told me what a loathsome agony  
Is that when selfishness mocks love's delight,  
Foul as in dreams most fearful imagery  
To dally with the mowing dead - that night  
All torture, fear, or horror made seem light  
Which the soul dreams or knows.

Here Cythna tells Laon of her rape by Othman, a ghastly parody of love which has been motivated by selfishness; the lines 'Foul as in dreams most fearful imagery/To dally with the mowing dead' should remind Laon of the corpses in his first vision. The reason for the onset of Cythna's madness is not entirely clear, but it appears that Cythna is being punished for her brief refusal to accept that part of her mission as truth's 'chosen minister' might entail personal suffering. She has placed a concern for self above the ideals of reform and revolution, momentarily, by resisting the tyrant's will. The spirit of resignation and necessity which underlined her parting words to Laon in canto III has been temporarily forgotten:

"Look not so, Laon - say farewell in hope,  
These bloody men are but the slaves who bear  
Their mistress to her task - it was my scope  
The slavery where they drag me now, to share,  
And among captives willing chains to wear  
Awhile -

(ix. 73-78)

After the rape, Cythna is imprisoned in a cave beneath the sea, carried there by an Ethiopian diver who clasps her in his arms and plunges underwater. He touches a golden chain and an opening is revealed: Cythna is left in an underwater cavern, open to the sky. The description of this cavern, with its fountain and natural wealth of sand and shells, strongly suggests the creative potential of Cythna's mind for good.<sup>69</sup> She survives with food brought by a sea-eagle, but in her madness and despair experiences a strange vision of childbirth:

a long  
And wondrous vision wrought from my despair,  
Then grew, like sweet reality among  
Dim visionary woes, an unreposing throng.

Methought I was about to be a mother -  
Month after month went by, and still I dreamed  
That we should be all for one another,

(xvi. 141 - xvii. 147)

As I observed earlier in this chapter, the ambiguity and equivocation which characterizes the origin and appearances of the child in Laon and Cythna contributes partly to the dreamlike quality of the poem. Here, Cythna insists that her experience is a dream experience, "'twas a dream divine", "'Though 'twas a dream" (xviii, 158, 161). This insistence is given greater credibility by a draft for stanza xvii.

In his draft Shelley wrote, in ink: I bore a female child.<sup>70</sup> The sentence is omitted in the first printed edition of Laon and Cythna. This suggests that Shelley wished the vision or dream of childbirth in the printed edition to function primarily as an

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<sup>69</sup>Ruff, p. 78; E. B. Murray, p. 575.

<sup>70</sup>MS Shelley adds e.10 fol 67.

indication to Cythna herself that the power of hope may be born from despair; this is not to deny that the experience could also have been a literal event, but Shelley appears to have wanted the dream to convey a spiritual birth. It is not necessary to adjudicate between these two interpretations, since for Shelley the birth of hope was as ontologically convincing as a physical and literal birth. In her dream Cythna imagines that the child is eventually taken away. She recovers her senses but continues in a state of sad despair, looking back upon her dream as a possible source of hope whose significance, like the Poet's vision in Alastor, remains equivocal:

"So now my reason was restored to me,  
I struggled with that dream, which, like a beast  
Most fierce and beauteous, in my memory  
Had made its lair, and on my heart did feast;

(xxv. 217-220)

Nevertheless, Cythna's capacity for selfless love has been partly restored by the dream; this is more firmly demonstrated by the incident which follows. A nautilus swims into Cythna's fountain and she offers it food, protecting it from the eagle which hovers threateningly above. The eagle's predatory instincts are neutralized by Cythna's action. The bird throws a shadow of peace over the nautilus, which is then imaged as an infant. Cythna's own sense of purpose is activated once again, her love of humanity strengthened:

"The Eagle, hovering o'er his prey, did float;  
But when he saw that I with fear did note  
His purpose, proffering my own food to him,  
The eager plumes subsided on his throat -  
He came where that bright child of sea did swim,  
And o'er it cast in peace his shadow broad and dim.

This wakened me, it gave me human strength  
And hope, I know not whence or wherefore, rose,

(xxvii. 238 - xxviii. 245)

She is able now to reassume her 'ancient powers', to transform the pernicious concern with self into a sympathetic empathy with all human beings. Accordingly, the imprisoned cavern of her own mind disappears and an earthquake literally destroys the cavern. She is released, and embarks upon the slave-ship.

The imprisonment and insanity experiences which Shelley's hero and heroine undergo are relevant to a wider context of discussion which concerns myth and which is invoked in twentieth century writing on Romantic poetry in general and also on the Romantic epic in particular. I remarked in Chapter 2 that Northrop Frye sees the fall-redemption myth as particular to Romantic literature, and that Joseph Antony Wittreich, Jr., places a particular emphasis upon the myth of redemption in his discussion of the Romantic epic. This latter view is shared by Alicia Martinez, who defines Laon and Cythna as heroic Christ figures in her study of the poem.<sup>71</sup> On the basis of the foregoing discussion in this chapter, however, a wider pattern of both fall and redemption appears to underpin the parallel experiences of Laon and Cythna. As Laon says of his own insanity in canto III, his 'fearful sleep'

sent its foul dreams to sweep  
With whirlwind swiftness - a fall far and deep -

Both hero and heroine fall by failing to completely embody their ideals when placed within a public context of action. This fall takes the form of a loss of sanity which is linked to a period of suffering, experiences which enable each character to assess the extent of their respective tasks and to measure out the difficulties. The continuance of the attempt to lead a moral and physical revolution is all the more heroic, therefore, and the inspirational element of derangement - a classical commonplace - results in direct action.

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<sup>71</sup>The Hero and Heroine of Shelley's 'The Revolt of Islam'. p. 42.

The nature of heroism in Laon and Cythna is, then, profitably explored from the perspective of characterization, which nonetheless recognizes the range of thematic variations upon the central subjects of freedom and liberty: these variations introduce considerable complexity into the mode of heroic characterization. This section of the chapter has sought to establish the following points with regard to the hero and heroine of the poem.

Freedom and liberty, typical themes in the epics of Shelley's contemporaries, are presented in Shelley's poem through the public and private experiences of Laon and Cythna. In contrast to the heroes of contemporary epics, Laon and Cythna are not historically famous personages, but characters of obscure and inferior origin whose own moral development is as important a consideration in their mode of characterization as their influence in the public and revolutionary sphere of action. One particular aspect of freedom quite crucial in the narrative is women's freedom, a theme embodied in the character of Cythna. The major role assigned to this female protagonist may owe something to William Hayley's Essay on Epic Poetry. Laon and Cythna are generally viewed as distinct opposites, i.e. Laon is 'passive' and Cythna is 'active'. This polarization is simplistic and inaccurate as a placing judgement of their respective characters, more especially since the poem strongly suggests that Cythna has non-human qualities, and is in part a divine character. Finally, the concepts of vision and dream are essential to a balanced assessment of Shelley's presentation of both Laon and Cythna as heroic characters: although the epic protagonists of classical epic, for example, are confronted with vision figures and experience dreams of significance, these episodes are more centrally placed and more frequently interpolated into the narrative in Laon and Cythna. They are fundamental, not marginal, concerns.

## SECTION III

## 'THE CONNEXION OF ITS PARTS'

When John Gibson Lockhart reviewed The Revolt of Islam in the January 1819 number of Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine he touched briefly on the subject of structural coherence in the poem, passing a swift but confident judgement on Shelley's failure, as he saw it: 'the author has composed his poem in much haste, and he has inadvertently left many detached parts, both of his story and his allusion'; further, 'It will easily be seen, indeed, that neither the main interest nor the main merit of the poet at all consists in the conception of his plot or the arrangement of his incidents.'<sup>72</sup> Shelley's two letters to Byron and Longman & Co., however, written shortly after the composition of the poem, show that he had aimed specifically at achieving structural coherence in Laon and Cythna. In the letter to Byron, Shelley compared Laon and Cythna to Queen Mab; the former, he remarked, had been composed 'with more attention to the refinement and accuracy of language, and the connexion of its parts.'<sup>73</sup> In the letter to Longman & Co. he wrote: 'unity is one of the qualifications aimed at by the author', and 'The first Canto is indeed, in some measure, a distinct poem, tho' very necessary to the wholeness of the work.'<sup>74</sup>

What is revealing about the comments of Lockhart and Shelley is that their remarks are similarly couched in the language used by their contemporaries to discuss the problem of epic unity. It is

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<sup>72</sup>Donald H. Reiman, ed., The Romantics Reviewed, Part C, I, 97, 103.

<sup>73</sup>Letters, I, 557.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., I, 563.

from the perspective of epic unity that I wish to approach Laon and Cythna in this last section of the chapter, since the topic of unity in epic poetry seems to have exercised Shelley's imagination during the composition of Laon and Cythna as a specific focus of concern.

Shelley's own word 'unity' and his phraseology 'connexion of its parts', 'wholeness of the work', would have been quite familiar to contemporary writers of epic and their critics.<sup>75</sup> Shelley himself referred quite directly to the importance of unity in epic while in Italy in 1821 when he urged Byron to write an epic poem:

I still feel impressed with the persuasion that you ought - and if there is prophecy in hope, that you will write a great and connected poem, which shall bear the same relation to this age as the 'Iliad', the 'Divina Commedia', and 'Paradise Lost' did to theirs;<sup>76</sup>

As I observed in Chapter 2, the word 'connexion' was part of the traditional terminology used in contemporary discussions of epic unity which Shelley could easily have read; he had access to the essays on epic unity by Hurd and Thomas Warton reprinted in Todd's 1805 edition of Spenser's Works, and also to Le Bossu's treatise on epic, which had become a standard text in epic criticism since its translation into English in 1695. The reviews were another source: Scott's Marmion was characterized as an epic narrative but criticized for its lack of coherence by a contemporary reviewer in 1808: 'No long poem, however, can maintain its interest without a connected narrative.'<sup>77</sup> Charles Hoyle's epic Exodus (1807) was

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<sup>75</sup>The Romantic discussion concerning the organic nature of poetry is also suggested by these words and phrases: nevertheless, they are more specific to the critical vocabulary used by contemporary reviewers and writers of epic, particularly in discussions of epic structure.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., II, 309.

<sup>77</sup>Edinburgh Review. XII (April 1808), 8.

praised because in it the poet had avoided the fault of shifting 'from one unconnected adventure to another.'<sup>78</sup> These comments reflect the neoclassical position on epic unity which had been formulated most importantly by Le Bossu: 'Aristotle finds fault with Incidents that are without any Consequence or Connexion.'<sup>79</sup>

It is not unreasonable to suppose that Shelley's preoccupation with the problem of unity before his final departure for Italy in 1818 was directed specifically towards the topic of epic unity. The particular terminology used in statements pertaining to Laon and Cythna, the 1821 letter to Byron, and the availability of a considerable body of criticism on the subject of unity in epic all point to Shelley's interest in epic structure.<sup>80</sup> This interest is best demonstrated from a study of the poem itself; it will then be seen that this external evidence is a substantial confirmation of Shelley's involvement with the problem of epic unity in Laon and Cythna.

When Shelley wrote 'unity is one of the qualifications aimed at by the author' he quite explicitly recognised the need for narrative coherence in his long poem, a coherence which I shall presently argue embraced the unity of action and also the integration of the individual parts of the poem into a unified whole. In so doing, Shelley assented to critical orthodoxy by accepting the Aristotelian and neoclassical requirement that the epic poem should

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., XI (January 1808), 367.

<sup>79</sup>Le Bossu and Voltaire on the Epic, p. 71.

<sup>80</sup>Richard H. Haswell, in his essay 'Shelley's The Revolt of Islam: "The Connexion of Its Parts"', K-SJ, XXV (1976), 81-102, has also invoked the question of structure in Laon and Cythna. However, he does not see Shelley as preoccupied with anything other than general problems of structure in poetry, and relates his comments to Coleridge's Biographia Literaria.

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possess unity in these two last mentioned respects. Despite his statement in A Defence of Poetry, 'Poetry is a sword of lightning ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it',<sup>81</sup> and his praise of Byron's 'freedom from common rules' in The Prisoner of Chillon, Manfred, and Canto III of Childe Harold,<sup>82</sup> he respected this particular 'rule' of epic poetry and attempted to satisfy an important requirement of epic.

In Chapter 2 I outlined the two main and interrelated aspects of unity which had been discussed by Aristotle and prescribed as necessary to unity in epic: firstly, the unity of action and secondly, the unity of the whole work which was to be achieved by means of the integration of its various parts. Laon and Cythna. I shall now suggest, is unified in both these respects.

Dr. Hurd, as I noted in Chapter 2, had proposed the idea that unity of action could be accomplished either by presenting a single subject in the epic poem or by keeping the epic protagonist constantly before the reader. The latter suggestion is not found in Aristotle, but was often used as an argument for unity by later commentators, including Shelley's contemporaries.<sup>83</sup> Laon and Cythna exhibits unity of action in each regard. It presents the single subject of revolution, which is a dramatic synthesis of revolution within the public sphere of action contingent upon the individual revolutionary genius of its hero and heroine. As Carlos Baker has rightly observed, 'One unifying agent in the poem, however, is Shelley's revolutionary point of view.'<sup>84</sup> The two epic

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<sup>81</sup>Julian. VII, 122.

<sup>82</sup>Letters. I, 547.

<sup>83</sup>See J. Ogden's introductory essay to his epic poem The Revolution, 1790, p. xvii.

<sup>84</sup>Shelley's Major Poetry. p. 80.

protagonists, either separately or together, appear in each canto of the poem. In this sense also the action is unified.<sup>85</sup>

Nevertheless, even if Laon and Cythna is understood as unified in its action, the question of overall structural unity, of 'the connexion of its parts' is a more decisive issue related to the unity of action in a fundamentally important way. It is the detailed working out and arrangement of the poem's individual structural characteristics which determines whether or not a single and unified action is presented successfully to the reader. This issue appears to have been the subject of Shelley's prose comments in his letters to Byron and to Longman & Co.: it merits close attention since several twentieth century readers of the poem have also concerned themselves with the problem of structural coherence. Commentators have suggested that Laon and Cythna lacks overall coherence and that canto I is structurally unrelated to the rest of the poem.<sup>86</sup> Yet none of these readers has related the problem particularly to epic.

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<sup>85</sup> Timothy Webb, Shelley: A Voice not Understood, implicitly recognizes this when he writes 'What gives this long, and at times rather awkward, narrative its focus and direction is the conception of the two central characters', p. 113.

<sup>86</sup> These comments are fairly typical of the orthodox critical attitude towards the structure of the poem: N. I. White, Shelley, I, 530, 'Even with Shelley's clear outline in the Preface it the poem is hard to follow and understand'; N. Frye, A Study of English Romanticism, p. 110, 'In The Revolt of Islam there is a plot of sorts, and a great nuisance it is: we notice that whenever the imagery goes fuzzy the reason usually is that the plot has given another spasmodic lurch'; E. B. Murray, '"Elective Affinity" in The Revolt of Islam', p. 572, 'the tenuous structure of his narrative as a whole'; James Rieger, The Mutiny Within, p. 102, 'The heavenly war of Canto One adequately accounts for the presence of evil in the world, but it does little more ... Shelley's myth merely decorates the revolutionary chronicle'; Ross Greig Woodman, The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley, p. 102, 'He fails to bring together in a sustained way the myth and the narrative'.

The general and synoptic coherence of Laon and Cythna is more rigorous than often appears on a first reading; it is masked completely by the dreamlike impression that the poem as a whole conveys to the reader as a primary imaginative response. The poem is divided into twelve cantos, an epic number readily associated with Virgil's Aeneid, the second edition of Milton's Paradise Lost and the projected length of Spenser's The Faerie Queene, whose six books are themselves divided into twelve cantos. Shelley's cantos, however - unlike the twelve books of Virgil's Aeneid, for instance - are not easily accessible to symmetrical analysis, as some commentators have proposed. Richard Haswell, for example, treating Laon and Cythna as a Virgilian epic in this respect, it seems, has argued for 'a symmetry of twelve cantos' in the poem. Cantos I and II represent the youth of Laon and Cythna, cantos III-IV the adventures of Laon, canto VI the revolution, cantos VII-IX Cythna's adventures, canto X the aftermath of the revolution, and cantos XI-XII the deaths of Laon and Cythna.<sup>87</sup>

Shelley's formal division of his poem into twelve cantos is nevertheless deceptive, and does not constitute the method by which he unifies it. The scheme worked out by Haswell is less than convincing, for a number of reasons. The early upbringing of Laon and Cythna is described in canto II, not I, their deaths are treated in canto XII. v-xvii, not canto XI at all. The adventures of the two heroic characters run across the canto divisions, it is true, but are not as neatly controlled by them as the argument for canto symmetry suggests. Laon is separated from Cythna in canto III. xi, and his adventures occupy the rest of this canto, cantos IV-VI and including canto VII. ii; Cythna's adventures are recounted from

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<sup>87</sup> Shelley's The Revolt of Islam: "The Connexion of Its Parts", p. 83.

canto VII. iii to canto IX. xix, the remainder of canto IX consisting of her set speech prophesying universal regeneration. This twelve canto aspect of Laon and Cythna is no mere gesture by Shelley to imitate a traditional form of epic structure. Shelley retained the traditional form in order to demonstrate the considerable degree to which he could transform its limitations and hitherto accepted use. Indeed, his own ideas of epic time, parallelism and antithesis in the deployment of balancing episodes and mythological pattern in image and character underpin the poem to give it overall coherence and unity.

The complexity of the time dimensions in the poem has been generally overlooked as a unifying device. Lack of attention to this feature of the poem's construction lies behind E. B. Murray's censure of 'Shelley's jumbled narrative'<sup>88</sup> and Northrop Frye's observation 'whenever the imagery goes fuzzy the reason usually is that the plot has given another spasmodic lurch'.<sup>89</sup> The consistent sequential progression of the narrative action from canto to canto sometimes obscures the fact that the poem is organized upon a finite and an infinite time dimension, for example. Both interact to produce a comprehensive, unified and circular structure rather than a linear one. The effect of this is to convey a powerful sense of simultaneity and contemporaneity in the narrative, characteristic of a dream or vision experience which, as I argued earlier in the chapter, is one of the dominant features of the poem. Thus any reading of Laon and Cythna as a classical or Renaissance epic whose narrative develops consistently along, or is keyed exclusively to,

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<sup>88</sup> "Elective Affinity" in The Revolt of Islam, p. 578.

<sup>89</sup> Frye, loc. cit.

one finite time dimension, is naturally disturbed by two apparently spasmodic shifts in the action. These are the sudden change from the Temple of the Spirit in canto I to Argolis at the beginning of canto II, and the shift in canto XII from the burning pyre in the Golden City (xvii) to the unearthly paradise (xix).

In fact these two transitions are the result of a careful exercise in structural organization on Shelley's part. In both cases a transition is made between a human and a supernatural scene of action, between a finite and an infinite frame of reference in time. In the Temple of the Spirit at the end of canto I, Laon as a spirit begins to recount the story of his former earthly existence; at the end of canto XII Laon and Cythna die on the burning pyre to awaken as spirits in paradise. The poem as a whole has moved in a circle, its end is its beginning, and its beginning is its end: as the poet-narrator is travelling towards the Temple of the Spirit in canto I, the spirits of Laon and Cythna are arriving at the Temple of the Spirit in canto XII. The balancing symmetry is made clear both by the parallelism of the boat journeys to the same destination, and by a similarity in the imagery used to describe the boats; these elements of structural coherence, rather than entire cantos, are used to organize the interaction of the time dimensions. In canto I the poet sees

A boat of rare device, which had no sail  
But its own curved prow of thin moonstone,

(xxiii. 199-200)

In canto XII Laon and Cythna embark on their journey in a similar craft:

The boat was one curved shell of hollow pearl,  
Almost translucent with the light divine.

(xxi. 181-182)

Textual evidence may also be adduced to show that this circular structure was basic to Shelley's conception of total unity in the poem. As Donald H. Reiman has convincingly argued from his study of Shelley's working Notebooks for the poem, it appears that the last half of canto I was composed at roughly the same time as the completion of canto XII.<sup>90</sup> This means that the voyages to the Temple of the Spirit and the description of the Temple in cantos I and XII were composed concurrently. It strongly suggests therefore, that Shelley intended from the very beginning to unify the poem by means of a juxtaposition of the finite and the infinite time dimensions. The latter parts of cantos I and XII are balanced with each other and linked to the other cantos in an unconventional yet effective manner.

The symmetrical unity of Laon and Cythna is achieved also through a parallelism and antithesis in its balancing of individual episodes, rather than in any organization of whole cantos. The most important parallels are the episodes in which Laon and Cythna are imprisoned and go insane, together with the boat journeys. The most significant antithesis is the contrast between the Altar of the Federation episode in canto V and the raising of the sacrificial pyre in canto X.

The parallels between Laon and Cythna as they undergo periods of insanity and imprisonment have been discussed at length in the previous section of this chapter. These episodes also have a structural function, serving to balance the moral development of each epic protagonist against the other. In terms of epic practice, Shelley's method here is similar to that of Spenser, as Richard Haswell has noted: 'Structurally, as far as the separation of the two protagonists and their moral struggles are concerned, a more complete

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<sup>90</sup>Shelley and his Circle. V, 148-151.

analogue is Book I of The Faerie Queene,<sup>91</sup> - a view which complements the suggestion in Section I of this chapter that Laon and Cythna is in many respects to be placed in the context of epic represented by Spenser. Cythna recounts her own adventures to Laon in a long flashback, an epic convention as old as Homer; yet the episode is interpolated into the action at a crucial point in the narrative, and is of considerable length. Here, the reader is reminded of a typical Virgilian structure, the suspended narrative device.<sup>92</sup>

At the nadir of the public revolution in canto VI, the narrative action is suspended by Shelley in order to focus mainly upon the personal history of Cythna. The public action of the poem is not taken up again until canto X.

The boat journey episodes are structural episodes whose parallelism contributes importantly to the symmetry of Laon and Cythna: in canto I. xxiii-li. the poet-narrator travels with the Woman and the serpent to the Temple of the Spirit; in cantos III. xxx - IV. i. Laon and the hermit journey to the latter's tower refuge; in cantos VII. i - IX. v Cythna sails on the slave-ship to the Golden City; in canto XII the spirits of Laon, Cythna and the child embark together and speed to the Temple of the Spirit. In each case the voyage is one away from the slavery of despair towards the freedom of hope. In canto I the Woman invites the poet to accompany her and the serpent:

To grieve is wise, but the despair  
Was weak and vain which led thee here from sleep:  
This shalt thou know, and more, if thou dost dare  
With me and with this Serpent, o'er the deep,  
A voyage divine and strange, companionship to keep.

(xxi. 185-189)

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<sup>91</sup>Shelley's The Revolt of Islam: "The Connexion of Its Parts", p. 84 note 5.

<sup>92</sup>See Richard Heinze, Virgils Epische Technik, p. 20.

Laon is released by the hermit from captivity and sails with him to the peaceful tower; Cythna's passage on the slave-ship takes her away from the undersea prison to the scene of her revolutionary activities; the spirits of Laon, Cythna and the child leave the oppression of Othman behind them in their journey to the Temple of the Spirit. These structural episodes are essential to the harmony and elegance of the poem's overall unity: they balance the first and last sections of the poem and reinforce importantly the symmetrical patterning of the adventures which Laon and Cythna experience when separated in canto III.

Two episodes in cantos V and X, placed in a balanced but antithetical relationship, focus firmly upon the polarity of despair and hope which is characteristic of Laon and Cythna. In canto V, flushed with the success of their revolutionary actions, the people prepare a feast and build a marble pyramid upon which Cythna, as Laone, delivers her speech of freedom. The physical and moral health of the joyful people is patterned in the imagery of earth's natural bounty:

for gore  
Or poison none this festal did pollute,  
But piled on high, an overflowing store  
Of pomegranates, and citrons, fairest fruit,  
Melons, and dates, and figs, and many a root  
Sweet and sustaining, and bright grapes ...

(lvi. 589-594)

In contrast to this festival of hope, the despairing and starving people of the restored despot build a pyramidal funeral pyre in appeasement of what they are led into believing is divine vengeance, which has taken the form of famine and plague. They

prepare this pyre for Laon and Cythna, motivated by pure fear and terror:

for Fear is never slow  
To build the thrones of Hate, her mate and foe,  
So, she scourged forth the maniac multitude  
To rear this pyramid - tottering and slow,  
Plague-stricken, foodless, like lean herds pursued  
By gad-flies, they piled the heath, and gums, and wood.

(xlii. 375-378)

I have attempted so far in this discussion of epic unity to indicate the various ways in which Shelley sought to unify his poem into an organic whole: the unity of his subject, the continual presence of the hero and heroine, the circular structure based upon two time dimensions and the balancing of individual episodes all play their part in unifying the twelve cantos of Laon and Cythna. Considerable debate, however, has arisen concerning the problematical relationship between one particular canto, canto I, and the rest of the poem. Shelley himself was aware that canto I might be regarded as discrete and separate from the other cantos, but endeavoured to justify its coherence in the letter to Longman & Co.: 'The first Canto is indeed, in some measure a distinct poem, tho' very necessary to the wholeness of the work.'<sup>93</sup> Shelley might have felt obliged to point this matter up in his letter to a prospective publisher in order to forestall any adverse criticism which may have charged him with failing to respect Aristotelian precepts.

It is interesting to observe that Joseph Cottle had focused precisely upon the issue raised by Shelley in the preface to the second edition of his epic poem Alfred in 1804. There is no direct

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<sup>93</sup>Letters, I, 563.

evidence to suggest that Shelley was acquainted with Cottle's poem, but both Cottle and Shelley voiced similar views regarding this particular question of unity; Cottle wrote in the preface to his second edition of Alfred:

My first book, by some, has been deemed inconsistent with the rest, and an excrescence which should be sacrificed ... I admit that it is different from, but I do not think that it is inconsistent with the remainder of the poem.

(ix-x)

Shelley's statement, that canto I 'is indeed, in some measure a distinct poem' echoes Cottle, and was clearly an articulation of a concern about structure. The statement should not be taken as meaning that canto I is completely distinct from the rest of the poem, however. Several commentators have interpreted it in this sense: Carlos Baker, for example, argues 'The Revolt of Islam is therefore intentionally designed as two poems, one within the other', a view shared also by Brian Wilkie and Frederick L. Jones.<sup>94</sup> The underlying assumption here seems to be that canto I is a separate poem because it provides a non-human 'allegorical framework'<sup>95</sup> for the human story of cantos II - XII. This framework was irritatingly obscure to contemporary reviewers. In Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine John Lockhart disregarded canto I entirely in his review: 'We shall pass over, then, without comment, the opening part of this work, and the confused unsatisfactory allegories with which it is chiefly filled.'<sup>96</sup> Leigh Hunt, however, grappled resolutely with the difficulties presented by canto I, remarking in

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<sup>94</sup>Shelley's Major Poetry, p. 64; Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition, p. 129; Frederick L. Jones, 'Canto I of The Revolt of Islam', K-SJ, IX, Part I (1960), 27.

<sup>95</sup>Wilkie, loc.cit.

<sup>96</sup>The Romantics Reviewed, Part C, I, 97-98.

the Examiner: 'healthy-minded ... will find themselves amply repaid by breaking through the outer shell of this production'.<sup>97</sup>

Leigh Hunt's phrase 'outer shell', couched in the traditional Renaissance diction of allegorical exegesis, suggests also a clear division between canto I and the remainder of the poem. Yet Shelley carefully qualified his description of the first canto as a distinct poem with the phrase 'in some measure'. This qualification seems to me essential to an understanding of the relationship in which the first canto stands to the other cantos of the poem. I shall conclude this discussion of epic unity in Laon and Cythna by suggesting that the 'supernatural interference', as Shelley expressed it, of the first canto, furnishes important structural connectives for the rest of the poem. Far from being filled with 'confused unsatisfactory allegories', canto I presents a mythological pattern of imagery and character portrayal which is entirely coherent, and which is projected into the rest of the poem.

It is appropriate to explore the mythical dimensions of canto I from the perspective of 'sublime allegory', a mode of allegory which William Blake and Henry Fuseli, for instance, had begun to associate with epic in their observations upon epic poetry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As I pointed out in Chapter 3, Fuseli had characterized the epics of Homer and Milton as works of 'sublime allegory'. Their human and divine planes of action intermingled to the extent that straightforward equivalence or translation allegory was felt to be an inappropriate and inadequate critical approach to the metaphorical independence and complexity of their epic mythology. The aim of epic, according to Fuseli, was 'to astonish whilst it instructs', epic 'breaks the fetters of time, it unites with

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<sup>97</sup>Ibid., Part C, I, 433.

boundless sway the mythologic, feudal, local incongruities'. Consequently, an emotional response is evoked in the consciousness of the reader, who is capable of perceiving in the 'sublime allegory' of epic mythology a complexity of imaginative reality and metaphorical resonance in the images which sustain it not keyed entirely to moral abstractions or systems of thought. Schlegel called the imaginative reality of myth a 'reality independent of the idea'.

Canto I of *Laon and Cythna* presents a mythological grammar which, although complex, is nevertheless coherent. It extends to the other cantos of the poem and is sublimely allegorical, astonishing the reader by presenting him with different levels of awareness in its use of image and character. The manifold repetitiveness of these allegorical elements contributes importantly towards the effect of simultaneity and consequently towards the visionary quality of the poem as a whole. I shall discuss what appear to me to be the most significant structural allegories of canto I: the 'Woman, beautiful as morning', the Temple of the Spirit, and the related imagery of the pyramid and the Senate.

The 'Woman, beautiful as morning' in canto I is an allegorical figure of considerable imaginative complexity. Although she appears to be simply an allegorical representation of Hope, a figure who urges the poet to abandon despair,<sup>98</sup> she is certainly not a bloodless abstraction of the type so common in eighteenth century allegory. It is important to view her, like Cythna, as a character who embodies both divine and human qualities: there are many affinities between

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<sup>98</sup>Carl Grabo, The Magic Plant: the Growth of Shelley's Thought, Chapel Hill, N.C., University of North Carolina Press, 1965 (Reprint), p. 209, 'I have tentatively identified the lady as Hope'.

the Woman and Cythna which confirm her function in the poem as a device of structural unity, linking canto I with the rest of the poem. Indeed, the Woman in canto I is identified with Cythna in a number of ways, many of which were first pointed out by Wilfred Dowden in his illuminating essay on the poem.<sup>99</sup>

As Dowden recognizes, both the Woman and Cythna are orphans, both walk bravely through the city confronting possible death, and both have strange, melodious voices.<sup>100</sup> There are other points of identification, however. The receptivity of both to visionary experience is stressed, as I shall presently show. The home of each is a cottage (compare I. xxxix. 346 'I saw, and started from my cottage hearth', to III. vi 51-52, 'Our dwelling - breathless, pale, and unaware/I rose, and all the cottage found') and in the thirty-eighth stanza of cantos I and VII respectively the hopes of each are presented through earthquake imagery; in canto I the Woman declares:

So that when Hope's deep source in fullest flow  
Like earthquake did uplift the stagnant ocean  
Of human thoughts - mine shock beneath the wide emotion

(xxxviii. 340-342)

In canto VII Cythna is released from her subterranean prison by an earthquake; the episode has both literal and metaphorical significance, connecting Cythna to the Woman in canto I:

"So years had passed, when sudden earthquake rent  
The depth of ocean, and the cavern crackt  
With sound,

(xxxviii. 334-335)

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<sup>99</sup>Shelley's Use of Metempsychosis in "The Revolt of Islam", Rice Institute Pamphlet, XXVIII, No 1 (April 1951), 55-72.

<sup>100</sup>Dowden, pp. 66, 68, 69.

These identifications between the Woman and Cythna in different cantos of the poem are further reinforced by the fact that each character has both human and divine qualities. The Woman in canto 1 is presented as human and divine. At two points in canto I she is portrayed with human attributes. She addresses the poet with the words

List, stranger, list! mine is an human form  
 Like that thou wearest - touch me - shrink not now!  
 My hand thou feel'st is not a ghost's, but warm  
 With human blood.

(xxv. 307-310)

In stanza xliii she is described by the 'winged youth' in her dream as a 'mortal maiden'. Nevertheless, these overt and heavily didactic affirmations of her mortality are coupled with frequent suggestions of her divinity and superhuman power. She appears as a 'fair Shape' (xvii. 145) to the poet, a being whose unintelligible language 'might not belong to earth' (xix. 163); she invites the poet to accompany her on 'A voyage divine and strange' (xxi. 189), and her eyes 'a kindling beam/Of love divine into my spirit sent' (xxiv. 214-215). She tells the poet a 'strange and awful tale' (xxiv. 208) which explains the origin of good and evil and the significance of the serpent-eagle fight which the poet has just witnessed. The possessor of visionary and prophetic power, 'nurtured in divinest lore' (xxvii. 327), the Woman has access to supra-rational knowledge, 'To few can she that warning vision show' (xxviii. 338). Whether or not Shelley drew directly on Peacock's female Genius in the latter's abandoned epic Ahrimanes for his portrait of the Woman,<sup>101</sup> her disclosure of these secrets casts her in the role of a divine hierophant, somewhat similar to the Fairy Queen in Shelley's earlier poem Queen Mab.

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<sup>101</sup> See K. N. Cameron, 'Shelley and Ahrimanes', NQ, III, No. 2 (June 1942), 291-292.

The visionary and superhuman dimensions of the Woman's character are also suggested by the two appearances of the Morning Star in canto I. The Woman recounts the story of her life to the poet and describes how, one day, the Morning Star shined through her casement window to inspire her with the strength of love: 'But from its beams deep love my spirit drank' (xli. 364). The following night she has a dream:

A winged youth, his radiant brow did wear  
 The Morning Star: a wild dissolving bliss  
 Over my frame he breathed, approaching near,  
 And bent his eyes of kindling tenderness  
 Near mine, and on my lips impressed a lingering kiss,

(xlii. 374-378)

The Woman's lover is immortal, 'then I loved; but not a human lover!' (xl. 358). The visionary intimacy which sustains her during the despair following the failure of the French Revolution is derived from this spiritual lover, and the episode implies strongly an important supernatural aspect to her character. The Woman is a sublimely allegorical figure introduced into the first canto to show, in Fuseli's words, how 'heaven and earth mingle their boundaries':<sup>102</sup> the eternal presence of hope inspires the human endeavours towards freedom and liberty in the poem.

The Temple of the Spirit is also an important allegorical image which has a connective function in Laon and Cythna. The Temple is dedicated to the Spirit of Good and is located within the realm of the divine and the eternal. It is first introduced in canto I and described partially through the iconographical images of the pyramid and the Senate. In cantos II-XI, however, the Temple

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<sup>102</sup> Lectures on Painting in J. Knowles, ed., The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, II, 196-197.

and its related images of pyramid and Senate are presented as human manifestations, with predominantly evil connotations. The Temple image pattern, therefore, is a pattern of 'sublime allegory' which combines the human with the divine, as the character of the Woman also does: its structural function is to connect different parts of the poem together by demonstrating that there is a recurrence of an image pattern which is capable of synthesizing both good and evil resonances. As such, it is sublimely allegorical in a manner which is more complex than the allegorical figure of the Woman: the latter unites the qualities of human and divine, but the former refines this complexity even further by uniting good with evil.

The Temple of the Spirit is the destination of the poet, Woman and serpent in canto I, and also of the spirits of Laon, Cythna and the child in canto XII.<sup>103</sup> It is interesting to note that in Spenser's epic The Faerie Queene the temple is a dominant and recurring image of pleasure and love;<sup>104</sup> one of these occurrences may have suggested to Shelley certain details for his own description of the Temple of the Spirit. In canto I the Temple of the Spirit is presented as a vast dome supported upon columns; the poet, Woman and serpent enter a hall in which a 'mighty Senate' of spirits are seated around a central, but vacant, throne. This throne stands upon a pyramidal base, and belongs to the Spirit of Good, to whom the Temple is dedicated. Shelley may be indebted in his description to Spenser's delineation of the innermost temple of Venus in Book IV. x, 37-39 of The Faerie Queene:

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<sup>103</sup>The temple is, as Northrop Frye has argued, an archetypal image in literature, 'Theory of Archetypal Imagery' in Anatomy of Criticism, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 142, 144.

<sup>104</sup>For example, the Temple of Venus in Book IV and the Temple of Isis in Book V.

"Into the inmost temple thus I came,  
Which fuming all with frankensence I found  
And odours rising from the altars flame.  
Upon an hundred marble pillars round  
The roof up high was reared from the ground,

"Right in the midst the goddesse selfe did stand  
Upon an altar of some costly masse,  
Whose substance was uneach to understand:  
For neither pretious stone, nor durefull brasse,  
Nor shining gold, nor mouldring clay it was;  
But much more rare and pretious to esteeme,<sup>105</sup>  
Pure in aspect, and like to christall glasse;

Spenser's 'roof up high' supported upon 'an hundred marble pillars', together with the central altar 'like to christall glasse' may have been echoed by Shelley in canto I of Laon and Cythna:

We came to a vast hall, whose glorious roof  
Was diamond ...

... On night-black columns poised - one hollow hemisphere!

Ten thousand columns in that quivering light  
distinct -

A cloud of deepest shadow, which was thrown  
Athwart the glowing steps and the crystalline throne.

(lil. 460-461, 468; liii.469-470; lvi. 503-504)

Further, the statue of the goddess in Spenser represents Venus, who is also Shelley's eternal form of the Spirit of Good<sup>106</sup> which sits beneath the planet in stanze lvii, 'Fairer than tongue can speak or thought may frame'.

This allegorical image of the Temple of the Spirit, shrine of goodness and love, is demonically parodied in canto X, where the temple appears again but with the reverse connotation of evil. In

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<sup>105</sup>H. J. Todd, ed., The Works of Edmund Spenser, V, 413, 414-415.

<sup>106</sup>See Richard Haswell, 'Shelley's The Revolt of Islam: "The Connexion of Its Parts"', 90-93, for a cogent discussion of the association between the Temple of the Spirit and the planet Venus.

this later canto, Shelley portrays the slaughter and famine which accompanies the reactionary wars in which the tyrants reassert their military power after the collapse of the revolution.<sup>107</sup> The rulers themselves, terror-struck at the famine and plague caused by their depredations, pray to God for a release from these self-generated horrors in their temple:

So, thro' desolate streets to the high fane,  
Of their almighty God the armies wind  
In sad procession ...

Thus they with trembling limbs and pallid lips  
Worshipped their own hearts' image, dim and vast,  
Scared by the shade wherewith they would eclipse  
The light of other minds; - troubled they past  
From the great Temple;

(xxvi. 231-233; xxx. 262-266)

This earthly temple is purposively counterpoised against the divine Temple of the Spirit: the 'high fane' built by man is a travesty, a construction dedicated to self-interest. It is imagined by Shelley as in direct and pitiless contrast to the selfless shrine of love, the 'vast Fane's aërial heap' introduced in canto I.

There are two pictorial details established in the course of the description of the Temple of the Spirit in canto I which also have a structural and unifying purpose in Laon and Cythna, connecting the first canto with the others. These are the images

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<sup>107</sup>It seems certain that Shelley drew on his own observations as an eye-witness to the havoc caused by the Napoleonic Wars. He wrote in the Preface 'I have seen the theatre of the more visible ravages of tyranny and war, cities and villages reduced to scattered groups of black and roofless houses, and the naked inhabitants sitting famished upon their desolated thresholds', Julian, I, 243.

of the pyramid and the Senate. The throne at the centre of the  
'vast hall' in the Temple is

Reared on a pyramid like sculptured flame,  
Distinct with circling steps which rested on  
Their own deep fire -

(lv. 488-490)

This architectural image of the pyramid had particular mythological associations which Shelley may have known, since it is a precise iconographical detail relevant to the divinity of the Temple.<sup>108</sup> As I suggested in Chapter 5, Shelley had access to a body of contemporary literature on Indian mythology. In two of these possible sources, William Robertson's Historical Disquisitions ... which the Ancients had of India (1791), and Francis Wilford's 'Essay on Egypt and the Nile, from the Sacred Books of the Hindus' in the third volume of the Asiatic Researches (1792), the pyramid is cited as a sacred artefact erected for worship. It was in fact a form of templum, enclosing a sacred space to exclude the profanity and chaos of secular life. Robertson described the pyramid as an early architectural form adopted in India:

Instead of caverns, the original places of worship, which could be formed only in particular situations, the devotion of the people soon began to raise temples in honour of their deities in other parts of India. The structure of these was at first extremely simple. They were pyramids of large dimension, and had no light within but what came from a small door.

(4th edn., 1804, p. 224)

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<sup>108</sup> Earl R. Wasserman, The Subtler Language, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959, pp. 348-350, has pointed out that Shelley's contemporaries understood the word 'pyramid' to be derived from the Greek *πῦρ* or 'fire' and that pyramids were symbols for immortality. The argument which I am developing, however, seeks to establish a context in Indian mythology for the significance of the pyramid in Leon and Cythna.

Francis Wilford also mentions the pyramid as a sacred building erected by the Hindus on the banks of the Nile:

On their arrival in Egypt, they found the country peopled by evil beings and by a few impure tribes of men, who had no fixed habitation: their leader, therefore, in order to propitiate the tutelary divinity of that region, sat on the banks of the Nile, performing acts of austere devotion, and praising PADMA-dévi or the Goddess residing on the Lotus. PADMA at last appeared to him, and commanded him to erect a pyramid, in honour of her, on the very spot, where he then stood: the associates began to work, and raised a pyramid of earth two crós long, one broad, and one high.

(Asiatic Researches, 1792, III, 313)

Shelley's association of the pyramid with the Temple may well have been derived from one of these sources. Certainly, the image of the pyramid is an accurate one to use in depicting the shape of the base of the central throne in the Temple of the Spirit. The image occurs again in canto V, also with associations of goodness and worship. The particular architectural form of the Altar of the Federation which the revolutionaries erect for their devotion to the ideals of equality, wisdom and love is a pyramid: Cythna sits enthroned upon the top:

a work, which the devotion  
Of millions in one night created there,  
Sudden, as when the moonrise makes appear  
Strong clouds in the east; a marble pyramid  
Distinct with steps:

(xl. 354-358)

The phrase 'distinct with steps' is a verbal echo of a similar phrase in the lines which describe the pyramid in canto I, 'Distinct with circling steps' (lv. 489).

The positive values of the pyramid, like those of the Temple, are inverted elsewhere in the poem, however. In canto X the famine which attends the military campaigns of the reactionary forces affects thousands of people, and Shelley invokes the pyramid image to illustrate the inevitable consequences of pursuing war instead of fraternal love:

Sometimes the living by the dead were hid.  
Near the great fountain in the public square  
Where corpses made a crumbling pyramid  
Under the sun, was heard one stifled prayer

(xxiii. 199-202)

Later in this canto, the funeral pyre of Laon and Cythna is swiftly thrown together in the form of a pyramid (xlii. 376); this is a ghastly parody of the base of the throne of Good in canto I.

The Temple of the Spirit contains also a 'mighty Senate' composed of 'The Great, who had departed from mankind' (I. liv, 479). Cythna refers to these figures in her speech to Laon after the pair have been reunited:

"The good and mighty of departed ages  
Are in their graves, the innocent and free,  
Heroes, and Poets, and prevailing Sages,

(xxviii. 245-247)

Again, the Senate of enlightened spirits portrayed first in canto I as devout worshippers of the Spirit of Good in the Temple appear later in the poem transformed into a Senate with diametrically opposite values. In canto XI, Laon is disguised as a hermit; he tries to instil the power of love into the hearts of the tyrant's men. His immediate audience are Othman's council of elderly

ministers an unsympathetic group of subservient, unenlightened men:

Before the Tyrant's throne  
All night his aged Senate sate, their eyes  
In stony expectation fixed; when one  
Sudden before them stood, a Stranger and alone.

(xiii. 114-116)

The allegorical image pattern based upon the Temple of the Spirit, with its associated images of the pyramid and the Senate is, I have argued, a structural device for unifying canto I with the remainder of the poem. It complements the character of the 'Woman, beautiful as morning', whose affinities to Cythna are discernible chiefly through a similar mode of characterization in that both figures embody human and divine characteristics. Shelley's allegorical method here would certainly appear puzzling, incoherent and confused if viewed as one-dimensional equivalence allegory. If viewed as 'sublime allegory', however, Shelley's artistry in connecting canto I with the rest of the poem becomes more apparent.

Shelley, unlike many of his contemporaries who wrote long narrative poems on political, historical and religious themes, did not choose to call Laon and Cythna an epic poem, although he may have been making an oblique reference to epic when he wrote to Godwin in 1817 comparing the poem to 'contemporary productions of the same apparent pretensions.'<sup>109</sup> In this chapter I have suggested that Laon and Cythna is lodged in the tradition of epic primarily through its presentation of a hero and heroine, a concern with the problem of epic unity and the use of mythological machinery. Shelley's poem, however, is a

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<sup>109</sup>Letters, I, 577.

highly individual work which transcends the accepted conventions of epic found in classical, renaissance and contemporary epic poems.

Laon and Cythna has at its thematic centre the ideals of freedom and liberty, familiar subjects in contemporary epic; Shelley's perspective on them, however, is considerably wider in scope than the specific historical and political orientation so typical of contemporary narratives. His hero and heroine are as physically active as the epic protagonists of e.g. classical epic, but Shelley extends his mode of characterization into areas of spiritual and emotional consciousness: both Laon and Cythna are profoundly influenced by, and receptive to, dream and vision experiences, they develop morally in the poem and cannot be defined simply as representing the opposite ends of an active-passive polarity as modern critics have suggested. The idea of heroism which both characters embody is more refined and sophisticated than that represented by the heroes of contemporary epic.

The poem reveals Shelley's strong awareness of the problems of unity and narrative coherence in epic poetry, Aristotelian precepts which were frequently invoked in contemporary epic criticism. The Aristotelian and neoclassical requirement that an epic poem should be unified is adhered to by Shelley in Laon and Cythna: his concern that canto I should be understood as part of the whole structure was perhaps articulated in direct response to the arguments which had been provoked by the publication in 1800 of Joseph Cottle's epic Alfred, a poem whose first book had been considered as inconsistent with the rest. The vocabulary and phraseology of Shelley's letters concerning Laon and Cythna includes expressions which were used frequently in contemporary epic criticism regarding unity in epic poetry. The structure of Laon and Cythna is based upon a formal twelve canto division but the method of unifying the poem is largely original: Shelley's use of different time dimensions and a sublimely allegorical presentation of mythical character and imagery e.g. the

'Woman, beautiful as morning' and the Temple of the Spirit to connect different parts of the poem is evidence of an individual approach.

The poem as a whole presents a dreamlike experience which is created by a carefully controlled and organized plan. Shelley's careful craftsmanship constructs a narrative strategy of spatial and temporal dislocation and an allusiveness and inexplicitness which is paratactic in tone and presentation. In this respect Laon and Cythna may be usefully compared to Spenser's The Faerie Queene.

The concepts of dream and vision, realized in the characterization of Laon and Cythna and in the dreamlike texture of the narrative, are fundamentally important to appreciating Shelley's individuality in his attempt at epic but also relevant to a consideration of the poem as an 'epic of consciousness'. A study of the manuscript drafts, details of which are given in Appendix 1, corroborates the significance of the words 'dream' and 'vision' in the poem.

It has been suggested that after Laon and Cythna Shelley 'abandoned the epic form on which he had invested his greatest labors'.<sup>110</sup> If he did, this last effort at epic before the final departure for Italy revealed not only a conscious and sustained attempt to confront and solve problems of poetic structure in a number of unusual ways but also an acute awareness of contemporary epic practice and criticism.

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<sup>110</sup>Shelley's Annus Mirabilis, p. 32.

## CONCLUSIONS

I began this study by pointing out that the rehabilitation of certain Romantic narratives as poems of epic dimension had received considerable impetus from a small group of twentieth century commentators writing about the Romantic epic. Shelley's idea of epic, as exemplified in Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna has, hitherto, been delineated solely in terms of classical and renaissance epic or defined cursorily in short, laudatory phrases. These poems have not figured significantly in discussions of the Romantic epic. This is unfortunate, since the idea of epic which inheres in these poems has exciting and interesting dimensions. Close examination of Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna reveals that Shelley's idea of epic may be profitably discussed only by invoking a number of critical contexts.

Three general conclusions should be stated at once. First, the idea of epic represented by the three narratives has to be located within a milieu of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century epic poetry and criticism of epic, a background with which Shelley was probably well acquainted. Second, the concepts of dream, vision and allegory are central to the idea of epic embodied in Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna: in the case of this last poem, textual research corroborates the view that dream and vision were important ideas for Shelley throughout all the stages of composition of the poem. Third, the insights provided by the commentators on the Romantic epic are illuminating when directed towards an interpretative reading of the three narratives. These general conclusions require more detailed amplification.

As concerns the first point, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries furnish ample evidence of numerous attempts at epic and the frequent publication of essays, reviews and treatises concerning it. Shelley had access to this body of writing, chiefly through his connection with the bookselling and circulating library enterprise of Thomas Hookham and sons. Their circulating library contained many of the texts cited in my presentation of contemporary sources, for example, Le Bossu, Treatise of the Epick Poem, William Hayley, An Essay on Epic Poetry, Joel Barlow, The Columbiad, John Black, The Life of Torquato Tasso, and H.J. Todd, ed., The Works of Edmund Spenser. Shelley possibly referred directly to contemporary epics when he used the phrase 'contemporary productions of the same apparent pretensions' in a letter to Godwin which mentioned Laon and Cythna.<sup>1</sup> Both the existence and significance of this contemporary source material has been overlooked in discussions concerning Shelley and epic. The notable exception to this is Stuart Curran's book Shelley's Annus Mirabilis (1975) which, however, confines itself largely to Prometheus Unbound and takes contemporary writings on myth rather than on epic as its major focus of attention. I have tried to provide as much circumstantial evidence as possible from previously unpublished or unnoticed sources - detailed in Appendix 2 - for Shelley's access to this body of contemporary source material.

The three narratives which Shelley wrote before 1818 have to be read, in part, as highly equivocal responses to the Aristotelian and neoclassical idea of epic as represented in contemporary sources. Hence, while certain of the traditional requirements of epic, - for example, epic unity and heroic characterization, - are respected by

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<sup>1</sup>December 11, 1817; Letters, I, 577.

Shelley, he nevertheless transcends the typical and accepted modes of achieving them. In Queen Mab he used a vision-frame to secure an appearance of unity in the poem, a strategy which had been adopted previously by Joel Barlow in his epic The Columbiad (1807) and which had been severely challenged by the Aristotelian reviewers of Barlow's poem. Shelley's later work, Laon and Cythna, approaches the problem of epic unity by providing an appearance of classical regularity through its twelve canto divisions; underpinning the poem, however, are a number of connectives whose identity and deployment are novel and distinctive. Similarly, the classical idea of the hero as a physically active character is reflected in the presentation of Laon and Cythna, but there are other, more complex dimensions to their portrayal as epic hero and heroine.

It is also important to recognize that the epic criticism of Shelley's day articulated various innovatory attitudes to epic. I have suggested that Shelley's narratives exhibit a conscious awareness of some of them. For instance, innovatory attitudes to epic included a critical interest in the life of the epic poet Torquato Tasso. Also, William Hayley had recommended in his Essay on Epic Poetry (1782) that the epic poet should look to non-Christian and non-classical cultures for his mythological base and that female heroism was appropriate to epic characterization. Shelley's study of the solipsistic imagination in Alastor, I have argued, and the characterization of Cythna in Laon and Cythna, are examples of different ways in which these innovatory attitudes were realized by Shelley in his verse.

In relation to the second point, one important aspect of the idea of epic in Shelley's pre-1818 narratives is the centrality of dream and vision to that idea. The dream and vision usages typical of classical, renaissance and contemporary epic invariably take the form of isolated

episodes occurring infrequently during the course of the narrative and playing only a localized role in the poem. In Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna, however, the concepts of dream and vision are at the centre of imaginative concern. In Queen Mab a vision-frame serves as the structural basis for the whole poem and in Alastor the Poet's vision of the 'veiled maid' is pivotal to the crisis of consciousness which the poem as an entity expresses. Laon and Cythna is a poem whose pervasive dreamlike resonances are the result of careful craftsmanship; dream and vision are fundamental to both heroic characterization and epic unity in the poem. Textual scrutiny of the working manuscripts for Laon and Cythna supports this view.

The allegorical dimensions of the three poems are similarly relevant to establishing the idea of epic represented in them. In Queen Mab Shelley deploys a typical eighteenth century allegorical mode but there are, nevertheless, suggestions of an increasing individuality and sophistication in the use of language. In Alastor and Laon and Cythna Shelley moves towards a type of allegory discussed in early nineteenth century criticism: 'sublime allegory'. I have indicated that, while Shelley was unlikely to have known of this phrase or of the discussion which invoked it, nevertheless it may be deployed as an illuminating critical perspective which contributes to an understanding of the ambivalence which is patterned in Alastor and Laon and Cythna.

This brings me on to my final point. Some of the critical approaches to the Romantic epic presented by recent twentieth century commentators are applicable to a discussion of the idea of epic in Shelley's pre-1818 narratives. For instance, all three poems exhibit, to some degree, the characteristic of internalization; Queen Mab is based upon a vision experienced by the soul of Ianthe, the thematic focus of

Alastor is predominantly internal, and the dreamlike texture of Laon and Cythna is a dominant feature of that poem. Each poem makes use, although not at all exclusively, of the Christian myths of redemption and reintegration. There is a figuring of apocalyptic renewal in canto VIII of Queen Mab, the hope of redemption is posited as illusory for a person in the Poet's situation in Alastor, and a wider pattern of fall-redemption informs Laon and Cythna.

Karl Kroeber's view that the hero of the Romantic epic is a spiritually heroic personage is true both of the Poet in Alastor and of Laon and Cythna, although Shelley does indeed present his heroes also as physically active characters. Further, the journey motif, which Kroeber discusses in his examination of Romantic epics, is prominent in Alastor and in Laon and Cythna. Finally, the link which J. A. Wittreich, Jr., sees between epic and prophecy in Blake is discernable also in Shelley's Laon and Cythna: Cythna, the 'Prophet's virgin bride', is a heroine whose visions of a profound change in man's mental attitudes towards authority and servitude are constantly reiterated throughout the poem.

This study, then, has explored the idea of epic in Shelley's Queen Mab, Alastor and Laon and Cythna from a number of different points of view. It reveals Shelley's skill in transcending accepted modes of writing epic at the same time as respecting their basis in historical practice. Distinctive yet nonetheless familiar, the idea of epic embodied in Shelley's three pre-1818 narratives should serve to attract and retain the interest of all those who enjoy reading epic poetry.

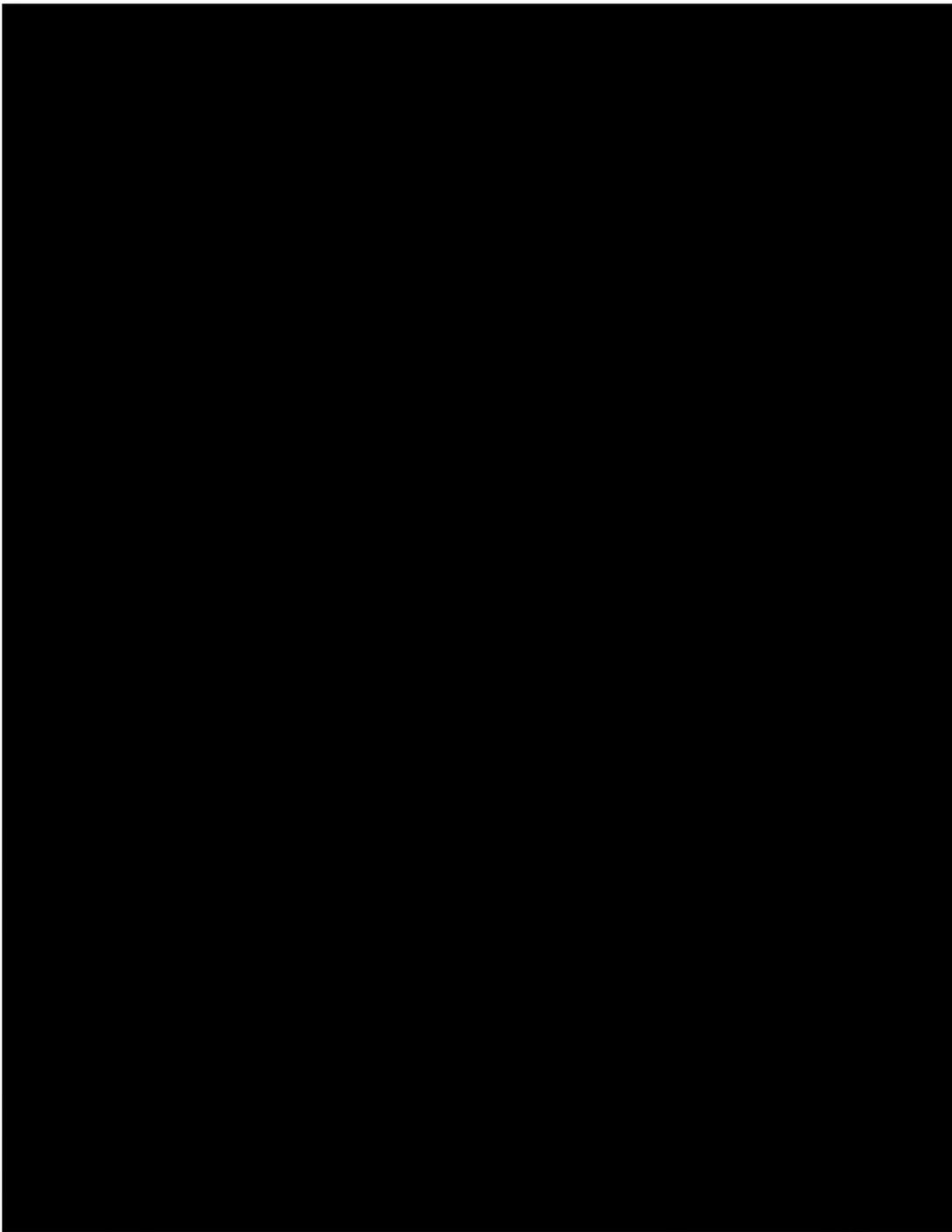


Plate ii

## APPENDIX 1

### A COMPARISON OF THE WORDS 'DREAM' AND 'VISION' AND THEIR COGNATES IN THE PRINTED TEXT OF LAON AND CYTHNA WITH THEIR HOLOGRAPH SOURCES IN THE DRAFT AND FAIR COPY MANUSCRIPTS FOR THE POEM.

The primary aim of this appendix is to present a table of the words 'dream' and 'vision', with their cognates, taken from the first printed text of Laon and Cythna and to place against them the corresponding versions taken from the draft and fair copy manuscripts of the poem. A comparison of the printed copy instances with the manuscript transcriptions shows that during the period of composition and copying out of Laon and Cythna Shelley allowed the words 'dream' and 'vision' to stand unaltered from first draft through to printed copy in a very high number of cases. This is significant when one considers how substantially Shelley would cancel, delete and revise when drafting the lines for Laon and Cythna, as Plate ii opposite illustrates. It suggests that the concepts of dream and vision were unequivocally central to the poem at each stage of its composition and preparation for the press and constitutes textual source evidence to corroborate my discussion of the importance of dream and vision in the first section of Chapter 6.

As a context for the presentation of this table some information regarding the manuscript materials for Laon and Cythna is necessary. I shall give first a checklist of the manuscripts relevant to Laon and Cythna before describing the particular manuscripts used in preparing the table.

<u>Laon and Cythna</u>	<u>Provenance and Manuscript designation</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Preface.	Bodleian MS Shelley d.3.	intermediate fair copy.
Dedication.		
1-xiv.	Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.14.	first draft.
1-iii, xi-xiv.	Bodleian MS Shelley d.3.	intermediate fair copy.
<u>Canto I</u>		
1-iii.	Bodleian MS Shelley adds c.4.	first draft.
1-xxv, lix-lx.	Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.19.	first draft.
vi, viii-x, xxiii-xli, xliv-l.	Bodleian MS Shelley d.3.	intermediate fair copy.
iii-v.	Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, SC391.	fair copy.
vii.	The British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Ashley A4048. National Library of Scotland, Department of Manuscripts, MS 3291 (recto).	fair copy. <i>intermediate</i> fair copy.
vi.	MS 3291 (verso).	
vii-viii.		
<u>Canto II</u>		
1-xxxvii.	Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.19.	first draft.
<u>Canto III</u>		
<u>Canto IV</u>		
<u>Canto V</u>		
xix-xxxiii, xxviii-lviii.	Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.10.	first draft.

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Miss D. Yeo, Assistant Keeper of the Department of Manuscripts, National Library of Scotland, for informing me that MS 3291 is a fragment, apparently cut from Bodleian MS Shelley d.3.

Canto VI

i-xxvi, xix-xxxvi, Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.10. first draft.  
xliv-lv.

Canto VII

i-vi, x-xxvi, Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.10. first draft.  
xxx-xlvi.

Canto VIII

i-xxix Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.10. first draft.

Canto IX

i-xxii, Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.10. first draft.  
xxvi-xxxvi.

iii-vi. Bodleian MS Shelley adds c.4. fair copy.

ix-xii. University of Texas, AMS Laon fair copy.  
and Cythna.

xv-xviii. Trinity College Library, fair copy.  
Cambridge, MS Cullum, p. 175.

xviii-xx. Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, fair copy.  
SC392.

xxi-xxiii. Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, fair copy.  
SC392.

xxiii-xxix. Texas Christian University, fair copy.  
W. Luther Lewis Collection.

Canto X

i-xxii, Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.10. first draft.  
xxiv-xxvii,

xxxiii-xlvi.

xlvi. Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.14. first draft.

Canto XI

i-xxv. Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.10. first draft.

Canto XII

i-xxx. Bodleian MS Shelley adds e.10. first draft.

My transcriptions are based upon a study of five MSS:<sup>2</sup> three of these, which I have examined, are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The other two are located in libraries in the United States, and I have worked from photostat reproductions of them.

The Bodleian MSS are as follows:

MS Shelley adds e.10 is a notebook measuring 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches x 4 inches, bound in brown calf, containing 219 pages of first drafts written in pencil and in ink on wove paper with no watermark.

MS Shelley adds e.19 is a notebook measuring 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches x 5 inches, bound in brown boards containing 76 pages of first drafts written in pencil and in ink on laid paper with the watermark 'JFA' and a crown and bell.

MS Shelley d.3 contains sixty leaves bound in a modern binding of green morocco.<sup>3</sup> Leaves 1-20 measure 8 inches x 6 inches and are on laid paper with the watermark 'ALL' enclosed in a circle with an anchor. Leaves 21-40 measure 9 inches x 6 inches and are on laid paper with the watermarks 'MASSO' and 'J.L. GRAN'. Leaves 41-60

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<sup>2</sup>To date, four Shelley scholars have undertaken studies of the Laon and Cythna manuscripts in the Bodleian Library: Benjamin W. Griffith, Jr., 'The Writing of The Revolt of Islam: A Study of Percy Bysshe Shelley's Methods of Composition', Northwestern University, 1952 (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation); Claude C. Brew, 'Shelley and Mary in 1817'; Donald J. Ryan, 'Percy Bysshe Shelley's Laon and Cythna: A Critical Edition of the Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library', New York University, 1972 (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation); Neville Rogers, The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, (Oxford, 1975), II, 97-270.

<sup>3</sup>When C. D. Locket examined MS Shelley d.3 at the turn of the century he described it as 'an unbound quarto with some sheets missing' (An Examination of the Shelley Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, 1903, p. 26).

measure 9 inches x 6 inches and are on laid paper with the watermark of a shield. While concurring with Neville Rogers that it is not always possible to distinguish first draft from fair copy in Shelley's manuscripts,<sup>4</sup> it is reasonable to suppose that MS Shelley d.3 is an intermediate fair copy. The manuscript does not have the character of a first draft but neither is it a fair copy - as both Locock and Claude Brew assume - from which a printer could easily work.<sup>5</sup>

SC392 is a holograph manuscript in the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, New York. It is a single leaf measuring approximately 7 inches x 6 inches on wove paper with the watermark '1808' and is a fair copy manuscript.<sup>6</sup> This is the holograph which William Rossetti used as a frontispiece in his 1870 edition of Shelley's poems.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, II, 362.

<sup>5</sup>An Examination of the Shelley Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, p. 26; 'Shelley and Mary in 1817', p. 7. The manuscript contains the Preface together with parts of the Dedication and canto I. It is neatly copied out in Shelley's hand, in ink, but is not a printer's copy. For instance, the first pages of canto I are missing, the first page of the canto beginning with '7', which is in fact the sixth stanza: presumably, the pages missing from the manuscript contain either a cancelled stanza or a stanza whose number was later changed to '7'. Donald H. Reiman, ed., Shelley and his Circle, 1773-1822, V, 180 comments in detail on these points.

<sup>6</sup>See the facsimile reproduced in Donald H. Reiman, ed., Shelley and his Circle, 1773-1822, V, 176-177, and also p. 182 for a description of the manuscript.

<sup>7</sup>Donald H. Reiman has confirmed my supposition that SC392 is the holograph reproduced by William Rossetti in his 1870 edition of The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley and has drawn my attention to the fact that in the Pforzheimer Library copies the holograph is used for the frontispiece to volume II, not I. The frontispiece to volume I is a portrait of Shelley engraved by J. H. (or I. H.) Baker after the Curran portrait. It appears that the two frontispieces may have been reversed in some copies at two stages of binding up the sheets of the edition.

MS Laon and Cythna is a holograph manuscript located in the Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas. It is a single leaf measuring 7<sup>1/2</sup> inches x 6<sup>1/2</sup> inches on wove paper with the watermark 'J.B.' and is a fair copy manuscript.<sup>8</sup>

The table below records all the printed 'dream' and 'vision' instances, together with their cognates, in Laon and Cythna. A transcription of the corresponding line or lines from the manuscript source accompanies each example. A comparison of the printed text occurrences with the manuscript transcriptions is illuminating: of the 57 instances where the printed text has a corresponding draft, the draft or fair copy concurs, without alteration, with the printed text in 51 cases.

I have used as my printed text the first published edition of the poem, postdated '1818' and later withdrawn from circulation by Shelley's publisher Charles Ollier: 'Laon and Cythna; or, the Revolution of the Golden City: a vision of the nineteenth century. In the stanza of Spenser.'/Sherwood, Neely & Jones and C. and J. Ollier, London, 1818 [1817]. Page references are to this edition, but stanza and line references are to the standard Julian edition, edited by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck,<sup>9</sup> to enable the reader to locate the relevant lines easily.

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<sup>8</sup>This description of the MS has been provided by Ellen S. Dunlap, Research Librarian, Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas.

<sup>9</sup>Julian, I, 235-408.

Symbols

~~word~~ : cancelled word.

< > : probable reading of a word.

<? > : conjectural reading of a word.

<—> : word undecipherable.

1 Laon and Cythna, page 1.

Like a brief dream of unremaining glory,  
(canto I.i. 2)

Manuscript

~~Best~~ like a dream of unremaining glory  
(MS Shelley adds e.19 folio 38, in pencil)

2 Laon and Cythna, page 1.

From visions of despair I rose, and scaled  
(canto I.i. 3)

Manuscript

From visions of despair I rose, & scaled  
(MS Shelley adds e.19 folio 38, in pencil)

3 Laon and Cythna, page 13.

That Woman told, like such mysterious dream  
(canto I.xxiv. 209)

Manuscript

(i) That woman told, like a majestic dream  
(MS Shelley adds e.19 folio 33, in pencil)

(ii) That Woman told, like such a mysterious dream  
(MS Shelley d.3 folio 22, in ink)

4 Laon and Cythna, page 17.

In dream, the golden pinioned Genii came,  
(canto I.xxxii. 281)

Manuscript

In dream, the golden-winged genii came.  
(MS Shelley d.3 folio 24, in ink)

5 Laon and Cythna, page 18.

In dream, unnatural watch beside an infant's sleep.

(canto I.xxxv. 315)

Manuscript

In dream, unnatural watch beside an infant sleep.

(MS Shelley d.3 folio 26, in ink)

6 Laon and Cythna, page 20.

To few can she that warning vision shew,

(canto I.xxxviii. 338)

Manuscript

To few can she that warning vision show

(MS Shelley d.3 folio 27, in ink)

7 Laon and Cythna, page 21.

Deep slumber fell on me:- my dreams were fire,

(canto I.xl. 352)

Manuscript

Deep slumber fell on me - my dreams were fire -

(MS Shelley d.3 folio 27, in ink)

8 Laon and Cythna, page 25.

Has never built, nor ecstasy nor dream,

(canto I.xlix. 434)

Manuscript

Has never built, nor Extacy nor Dream

(MS Shelley d.3 folio 29, in ink)

9 Laon and Cythna, page 39. [vision]

In vision or in dream, clove to my breast:

(canto II.xv. 132)

Manuscript

In vision or in dream, ~~might~~  
~~for-ever-kept~~  
 clove to my ~~heart~~ breast;  
 Among mankind, or when fled away  
 (MS Shelley adds e.19 folio 60, in ink)

- 10 Laon and Cythna, page 39. [dream]  
 In vision or in dream, clove to my breast:  
 (canto II.xv. 132)

Manuscript

In vision or in dream, ~~might~~  
~~for-ever-kept~~  
 clove to my ~~heart~~ breast  
 Among mankind, or when fled away  
 (MS Shelley adds e.19 folio 60, in ink)

- 11 Laon and Cythna, page 40.  
 As to awake in grief from some delightful dream.  
 (canto II.xvii. 153)

Manuscript

~~When~~ we awake in grief from ~~ee-e~~ delightful dream.  
 (MS Shelley adds e.19 folio 61, in ink)

- 12 Laon and Cythna, page 41.  
 In dreamless rest, in sleep that sees no morrow -  
 (canto II.xix. 165)

Manuscript

dreamless sleep  
 In ~~silent~~ rest, in ~~might~~ that sees no morrow -  
 (MS Shelley adds e.19 folio 62, in ink)

- 13 Laon and Cythna, page 43.  
 Like the bright shade of some immortal dream  
 (canto II.xxiii. 206)



18 Laon and Cythna, page 106.

With imagery as beautiful as dream  
(canto V.xxvi. 228)

Manuscript

With imagery as beautiful as dream  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 5, in pencil)

19 Laon and Cythna, page 113.

To feel the dreamlike music, which did swim  
(canto V.xli. 366)

Manuscript

To feel the dream like music w<sup>ch</sup> did swim  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 10, in ink: 'swim' is badly smudged)

20 Laon and Cythna, page 115.

From the sleep of bondage; nor the vision fair  
(canto V.xlv. 401)

Manuscript

                  sleep  
From the ~~sleep~~ of bondage; nor the vision fair ~~dark~~

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 13, in ink)

21 Laon and Cythna, page 117

In dream, scepters and crowns; and one did keep  
(canto V.xlix. 440)

Manuscript

~~In dream, scepters & crowns;~~ & one did keep  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 15, in ink)

22 Laon and Cythna, page 120

In dreams of Poets old grown pale by seeing  
(canto V.li: 2, line 483)





Manuscript

(i) and still I dreamed

(ii) To beat beside my heart, ~~which-and~~ still I dreamed

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 67, in ink)

32 Laon and Cythna, page 165.

Thine own beloved: - 'twas a dream divine;

(canto VII.xviii. 158)

Manuscript

~~Thy-hand~~ beloved - twas a dream divine

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 68, in pencil)

33 Laon and Cythna, page 165.

Tho' 'twas a dream." - Then Cythna did uplift

(canto VII.xviii. 161)

Manuscript

Cythna

Tho twas a dream; and then ~~she~~ did uplift

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 68, in ink)

34 Laon and Cythna, page 168.

Have waked the dream for which my spirit yearned

(canto VII.xxiv. 215)

Manuscript

Have waked the dream from which my spirit yearned

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 71, in ink)

35 Laon and Cythna, page 168.

I struggled with that dream, which, like a beast

(canto VII.xxv. 218)

Manuscript

dream

a beast

I struggled with the ~~visions~~ which like ~~beasts~~

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 72, in ink)

Manuscript

(i) and still I dreamed

(ii) To beat beside my heart, ~~which-amé~~ still I dreamed

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 67, in ink)

32 Laon and Cythna, page 165.

Thine own beloved: - 'twas a dream divine;

(canto VII.xviii. 158)

Manuscript

~~Thy-hand~~ beloved - twas a dream divine

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Tho' 'twas a dream." - Then Cythna did uplift

(canto VII.xviii. 161)

Manuscript

Tho twas a dream; and then <sup>Cythna</sup> ~~she~~ did uplift

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 68, in ink)

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(canto VII.xxv. 218)

Manuscript

I struggled with the <sup>dream</sup> ~~visions~~ which like <sup>a beast</sup> ~~beasts~~

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 72, in ink)

36 Laon and Cythna, page 173.

Where I saw - even as misery dreams of morn  
(canto VII.xxxv. 308)

Manuscript

Where I saw, - even as <sup>misery</sup> ~~watehes~~ <sup>day</sup> dreams of ~~morn~~  
~~morn~~

(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 75, in ink)

37 Laon and Cythna, page 174.

Breathes in prophetic dreams of day's uprise,  
(canto VII.xxxvii. 330)

Manuscript

Breathes in prophetic dreams of days uprise  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 76, in ink)

38 Laon and Cythna, page 178.

In dream, like that!' - The Pilot then replied,  
(canto VIII.ii. 15)

Manuscript

In dream like that - the pilot then replied  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 79 in ink)

39 Laon and Cythna, page 179.

"What dream ye? Your own hands have built an home,  
(canto VIII.iv. 28)

Manuscript know

Why ~~What~~ ~~dream~~ ye? - that your hands have built a ~~home~~  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 81, in ink)

40 Laon and Cythna, page 179.

Dream ye that God thus builds for man in solitude?  
(canto VIII.iv. 36)



Manuscript

The change was like a dream to them  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 97, in pencil)

45 Laon and Cythna, page 198.

In the white furnace; and a visioned swound,  
(canto IX.xi. 94)

Manuscript white

- (i) In the ~~bright~~ furnace; & a visioned swound  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 105, in ink)
- (ii) In the white furnace, & a visioned swound,  
(AMS Laon and Cythna, University of Texas)

46 Laon and Cythna, page 203.

And violence and wrong are as a dream  
(canto IX.xx. 180)

Manuscript

- (i) And violence & wrong are as a dream  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 117, in ink)
- (ii) And violence & wrong are as a dream  
(Carl H. Pforzheimer Library: SC392)

47 Laon and Cythna, page 209.

Peopling with golden dreams the stagnant air,  
(canto IX.xxxii. 287)

Manuscript

Whose ~~vis~~ visions ~~may~~ be very fair  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 131, in pencil)

48 Laon and Cythna, page 224.

In dreams of frenzy lapped his eyes; he fell  
(canto X.xxv. 222)

Manuscript

In dreams of madness lapped his eyes - he fell  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 153, in ink)

Manuscript

The change was like a dream to them  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 97, in pencil)

45 Laon and Cythna, page 198.

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(canto IX.xi. 94)

Manuscript white

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47 Laon and Cythna, page 209.

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(canto IX.xxxii. 287)

Manuscript

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48 Laon and Cythna, page 224.

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(canto X.xxv. 222)

Manuscript

In dreams of madness lapped his eyes - he fell  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 153, in ink)

49 Laon and Cythna, page 241.

All natural dreams: to wake was not to weep,  
(canto XI.ix. 76)

Manuscript

Other dreams

All visions: and to wake was not to weep.  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 176, in pencil)

50 Laon and Cythna, page 242.

The victims, and hour by hour, a vision drear,  
(canto XI.xi. 95)

Manuscript

~~Thus~~ hour by hour a vision  
The victims: and ~~each-hour~~ in ~~torment-dream~~  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 179, in pencil)

51 Laon and Cythna, page 245.

Ye seek for peace, and when ye die, to dream  
(canto XI.xvii. 150)

Manuscript

Ye seek for peace & when ye die to dream  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 183, in pencil)

52 Laon and Cythna, page 245.

No evil dreams: all mortal things are cold  
(canto XI.xvii. 151)

Manuscript

No evil dreams - mortal  $\langle \text{-----} \rangle$  cold  
all ~~evil~~ things are cold.  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 183, in pencil)

53 Laon and Cythna, page 253.

As in a quiet dream - the slaves obey -  
(canto XII.vii. 59)

Manuscript

As in a quiet dream; the slaves obey  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 196, in pencil)

54 Laon and Cythna, page 255.

One checked, who, never in his mildest dreams  
(canto XII.x. 85)

Manuscript

One checked, who never in his mildest dreams  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 198, in pencil)

55 Laon and Cythna, page 261.

And not a dream, and we are all united!  
(canto XII.xxii. 195)

Manuscript

And not a dream, & we are all united -  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 208, in pencil)

56 Laon and Cythna, page 262.

Kindled a clinging dream within my brain,  
(canto XII.xxiv. 213)

Manuscript

Kindled a clinging dream within my brain  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 209, in pencil)

57 Laon and Cythna, page 263.

Who might have made this life's envenomed dream  
(canto XII.xxvii. 242)

Manuscript

<? ~~He~~ > Who might have <sup>made</sup> this lifes envenomed dream  
(MS Shelley adds e.10 folio 212, in pencil)

## APPENDIX 2

### SHELLEY AND THE HOOKHAMS

The purpose of this appendix is to demonstrate that Shelley had clear access to many of the essays, reviews and works quoted in Chapters 2 to 6. In these preceding chapters I have referred frequently to a number of texts and reviews relevant to the theory and practice of epic, the life of the Italian epic poet Torquato Tasso and Indian mythology; in addition, works dealing with vision and dream experiences, epic and prophecy and epic and allegory have been cited. My discussion of the possible epic identity of Queen Mab, Alastor and Leon and Cythna has consistently invoked this body of contemporary literature to illuminate the contexts of epic appropriate to a reading of Shelley's pre-1818 narratives e.g. Queen Mab may be profitably compared to Joel Barlow's epic poem The Columbiad and Leon and Cythna explored with particular reference to the topic of unity in epic as pursued in contemporary periodical review discussion and in the essays on epic unity contained in a contemporary edition of Spenser's Works, the 1805 Todd edition.

The contact which Shelley maintained with Thomas Hookham and sons, a firm of London publishers, booksellers and proprietors of a famous circulating library is the focus of attention here, since it was through this family firm that Shelley may well have become acquainted with much of the contemporary literature which I have referred to in my discussion of Shelley and the idea of epic. The firm of Thomas Hookham and sons was a well established family business

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whose activities dated back to the middle of the eighteenth century. By the time Shelley first approached one of the sons, Thomas Hookham, Junior, as a prospective publisher for his Letter to Lord Ellenborough in July, 1812<sup>1</sup> their scale of operations had become complex and diverse. Some reference to the development of this history is necessary to appreciate the significance for Shelley's reading of the access which he enjoyed from the summer of 1812 to a book stock of considerable variety and range.

The father of the firm, Thomas Hookham of Huntingdonshire, founded the bookselling business and a circulating library in London. He was born in 1739 and died in 1819; his obituary notice in the Monthly Magazine reads, in part,

At Lower Tooting, 80, Mr. Thomas Hookham, sen. known for above half a century as the spirited conductor of a bookselling and library establishment in New and Old Bond-Street, where it still flourishes as one of the first of its kind in the metropolis, under the liberal management of a son, whose filial piety constituted the chief solace of the afflicted age of his parent.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Hookham senior established his library initially in New Street, Hanover Square in 1764<sup>3</sup> on which premises he also conducted a bookselling and stationery business.<sup>4</sup> He moved to New Bond Street in 1780,<sup>5</sup> and began also to undertake bookbinding

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<sup>1</sup>Letters, I, 319.

<sup>2</sup>XLVII (May 1819), 371.

<sup>3</sup>W. Tinsley, Random Recollections of an Old Publisher, 1900, I, 69.

<sup>4</sup>THOMAS HOOKHAM, and CO. Booksellers and Stationers, in New-Street, opposite Maddox-Street, Hanover-Square;' (Title-page of Library Catalogue, c.1766: John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford).

<sup>5</sup>Ian Moxted, The London Book Trades 1775-1800: A Preliminary Checklist of Members, 1977, p. 114.

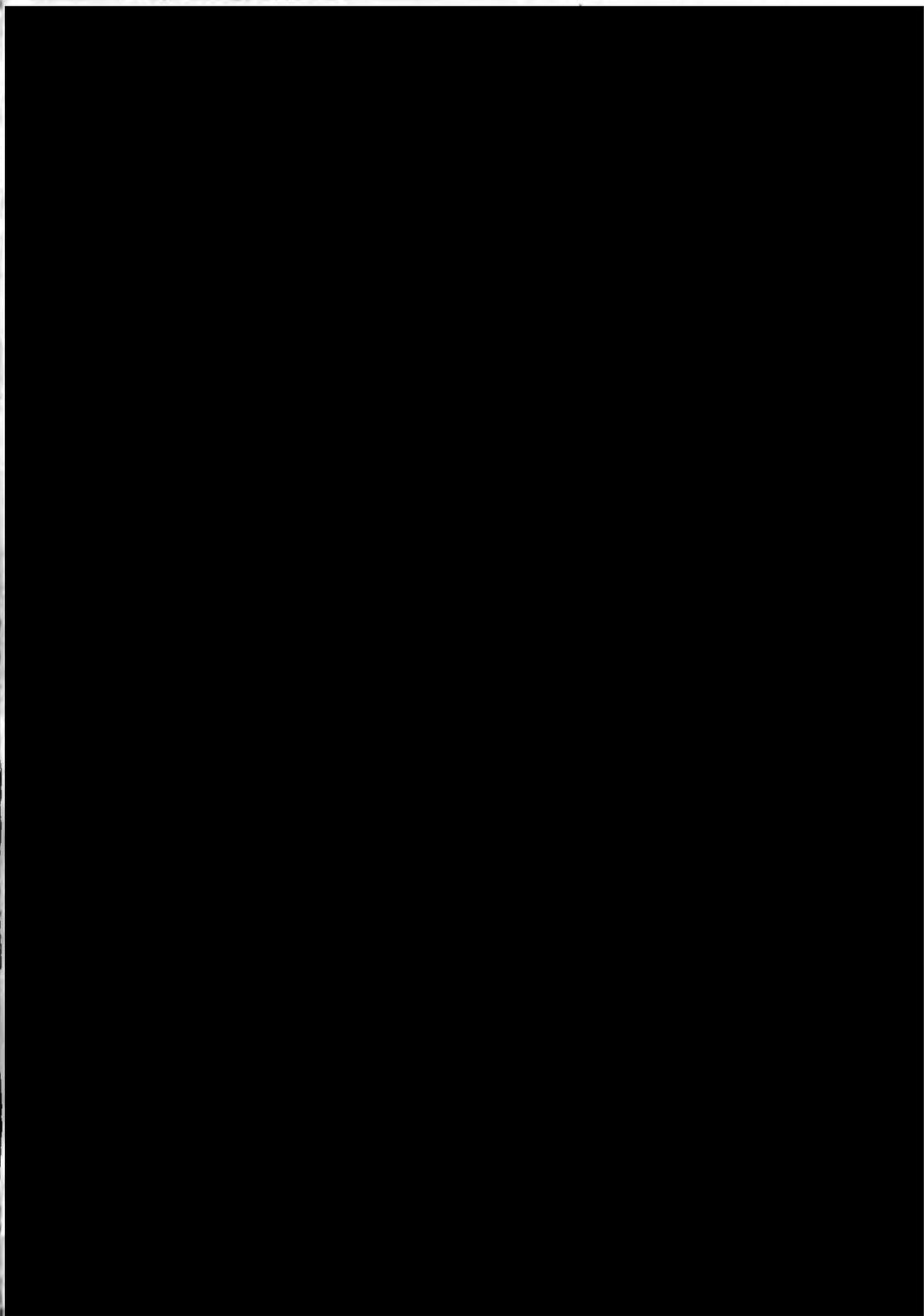


Plate iv

PLATE III

work.<sup>6</sup> In 1792 the circulating library was settled at 15, Old Bond Street; in 1794 the bookselling and stationary was run by Hookham and his son-in-law James Carpenter at New Bond Street while the circulating library remained at Old Bond Street also under Hookham's guidance but with the assistance of Thomas Jordan Hookham, his nephew.<sup>7</sup> Another line to the business was the selling of opera tickets, as Byron observed rather sardonically to Hobhouse in 1810.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hookham, Junior, (1787-1867) and his brother Edward T. Hookham helped their father with the circulating library in Old Bond Street at the beginning of the nineteenth century and also published and sold books themselves at this address: the earliest reference which I have found to their publishing ventures is an advertisement for Thomas Love Peacock's The Genius of the Thames (1810) which described the volume as printed on wove hotpressed paper by Bensley for a purchase price of seven shillings.<sup>9</sup>

The Hookhams' circulating library in Old Bond Street, to which Shelley was a subscriber even after his final departure from England to Italy in 1818,<sup>10</sup> was a library well provided with a comprehensive range of works on almost every branch of civilised

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<sup>6</sup>See Plate iii opposite.

<sup>7</sup>Marted, *ibid*; Hilda M. Hamlyn, 'Eighteenth-century Circulating Libraries in England', The Library, 5th series, I, Nos. 3-4 (December 1946 - March 1947), 204-205.

<sup>8</sup>Leslie A. Marchand, ed., Byron's Letters and Journals II, 16; see Plate iii opposite.

<sup>9</sup>See Plate iv opposite.

<sup>10</sup>'I wish you wd. contrive to enclose the 2 last parts of Clarkes travels relating to Greece & belonging to Hookham. You know I subscribe there still' (Shelley to Peacock, Livorno, June 5, 1818) Letters, II, 18.

literature: a list of the works available to subscribers which have been cited in my discussion during Chapters 2 to 6 is given at the end of this appendix.<sup>11</sup> I have located five copies of catalogues for the Hookhams' circulating library, c.1766, 1791, 1794, c.1795 and 1829.<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hookham's earliest surviving catalogue of the circulating library situated in New-Street at about 1766 gives the number of volumes as 'Several Thousand Volumes in ENGLISH and FRENCH'; by 1794 the library, now settled in Old Bond Street, had expanded to 'near one hundred thousand volumes in English, French and Italian' and in the 1829 catalogue it was advertised as the 'most extensive in the metropolis'.<sup>13</sup> Other accounts substantiate these claims. Tinsley described the library as a 'splendid old library, with its fine old gallery and underground rooms full of books.'<sup>14</sup> Shelley wrote to Thomas Hookham, Junior, from Tanyrallt in November, 1812 'If you have got anything new or Paine's works send it [a parcel] with them',<sup>15</sup> remarking a few weeks later in another letter to Hookham 'There is more philosophy in one square inch of your counter than in the whole of Cambria'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See below, pp. 329-332.

<sup>12</sup> c.1766 (John Johnson Collection); 1791 and 1794 (Bodleian Library); c.1795 (The British Library); 1829 (Bodleian Library, dated '1829' in the Bodleian Library catalogue). Internal evidence dates the substantive part of this last mentioned catalogue at 1818-1820 since back numbers of certain periodicals e.g. the Quarterly Review are listed up to 1818 and there are separate addenda in the catalogue for 1821, 1824, 1826 and 1829.

<sup>13</sup> Title-pages of catalogues c.1766, 1794, 1829.

<sup>14</sup> Random Recollections, I, 69.

<sup>15</sup> Letters, I, 332.

<sup>16</sup> December 3, 1812; Letters, I, 333.

Shelley may have been drawn to the Hookhams' library partly because of its extensive provision of continental and American books. The English book trade had begun to expand significantly in the direction of foreign markets by the close of the eighteenth century;<sup>17</sup> by the 1820's the Hookhams had become well-known specialists in the importation of books from the continent and America.<sup>18</sup> The fact that Joel Barlow's republican epic The Columbiad (Philadelphia, 1807) for instance, appears in the Hookhams' catalogue for 1820 is a strong indication of the firm's receptivity to liberal sympathies and the extent of their overseas connections.

Shelley's request to Hookham quoted above 'If you have anything new or Paine's works' implies that the firm acquired newly published books as swiftly as possible for their circulating library. In their 1794 catalogue they stated that 'ALL NEW BOOKS, on every useful and entertaining Subject, both in English, French, and Italian, are purchased, as soon as published, for the Use of Subscribers'.<sup>19</sup> Subscribers could obtain their catalogues at a reasonable price: the 1794 catalogue cost one shilling, but by 1820 the Hookhams issued two catalogues, one for works in English at two shillings and one for foreign works at two shillings and sixpence. They offered generous borrowing facilities to their readers. The library was open six days a week, excepting Sundays, from eight o'clock in the morning until eight at night. According to their

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<sup>17</sup>Leslie F. Chard, 'Bookseller to Publisher: Joseph Johnson and the English Book Trade, 1760 to 1810,' The Library, 5th series, XXXII, No. 2 (June 1977), 155.

<sup>18</sup>Giles Barber, 'Treuttel and Würtz: Some Aspects of the Importation of Books from France c.1825,' The Library, 5th series, XXIII, No. 2 (June 1968), 125.

<sup>19</sup>Title-page.

subscription rate, borrowers were entitled to a maximum of twelve books at a time in London and eight in the country and a minimum of four in London and eight in the country. Subscribers ordering books from outside London, like Shelley on occasion, were obliged to pay carriage charges and the cost of the boxes, cordage, locks and keys used in transportation.<sup>20</sup>

If a reader wished to retain a book, it would have to be paid for at the price given in the catalogue. Hookham sent Shelley T. L. Peacock's Palmyra (1806) and The Genius of the Thames (1810) in the one volume edition of 1812 and The Philosophy of Melancholy (1812) in August, 1812. Shelley kept these volumes, which had been sent to him at Lynnmouth: 'I shall take the liberty of retaining the two poems<sup>21</sup> - Mr. Peacocks - & only regret that my powers are so circumscribed as to prevent me from becoming extensively useful to your friend'.<sup>22</sup> Shelley must have been impressed by Peacock's poems: The Philosophy of Melancholy, for example, was a relatively expensive volume to purchase at eighteen shillings.<sup>23</sup>

From 1792 the Hookhams' circulating library had attached to it a suite of reading rooms on the first floor of the premises,<sup>24</sup> furnished with newspapers, literary periodicals and books of reference published in Britain and abroad. The existence of this reading facility at 15, Old Bond Street is significant in asserting

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<sup>20</sup>1794 catalogue: Conditions for Borrowers I, II, III, V and VII.

<sup>21</sup>Shelley means 'volumes' here.

<sup>22</sup>Letters, I, 324-325.

<sup>23</sup>1820 catalogue, item 631.

<sup>24</sup>Tinsley, I, 69.

Shelley's possible knowledge of the sources cited in Chapters 2 to 6: visiting subscribers to the library were afforded the opportunity of perusing recently published works and periodicals as well as the volumes from the library stock. I shall discuss presently the frequency of Shelley's visits to Old Bond Street from June 1814 to January 1815: it is quite possible that he browsed through books in the reading rooms, particularly new publications like H. J. von Klaproth's Travels in the Caucasus and Georgia, 1807 and 1808 (London, 1814), a work to which I have referred in my discussion of Alastor.

As I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> many bookshops at the turn of the century were used as 'lounging rooms' where the latest publications could be read by members of the public. In 1808 William Carey stated 'The booksellers' shops which are frequented as lounging rooms, and which are provided with all new publications, newspapers, &c, are Ridgeways, Stockdale's, and Hatchard's, all in Picadilly'.<sup>26</sup> The extent of Thomas Hookham's influence and the magnitude of his enterprise may be judged from his correspondence, from a contemporary advertisement for the reading rooms and from some printed information in Shelley's copy of the Literary Pocket-Book, dated 1821.

Thomas Hookham deployed his immense range of personal contacts, both at home and abroad, to further his plan of establishing the reading rooms in Old Bond Street. He was particularly anxious to

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<sup>25</sup>'Blake and the Booksellers', Blake Studies VI, No. 2 (1975), 172.

<sup>26</sup>The Stranger's Guide Through London: or, a View of the British Metropolis in 1808. 1808, p. 266.

secure current European journals and gazettes for foreigners visiting London. The range of his continental acquaintances is shown by two letters written in 1791 and 1792.<sup>27</sup> Late in 1791 he wrote to a Professor Thorkelin in Copenhagen

Sir

I have several times by means of our good friend Mr Wood heard of your welfare give me leave to wish you a happy New Year & many returns with good health & every Blessing of this world. As I have not recd any Gazettees News Papers or Literary Journals from those places I took the liberty to trouble you with & as I have by cards delivered to the Nobility and Gentry announced the opening of the Rooms on Monday the 2 d of Jan 1792. let me request my Dear Sir if they are not yet ordered that you'll have the goodness to do it directly & to commence from the 1st of Jany next. least you should have mislaid the mem. I think it was as follows.  
a Gazettee & Literary Journal from Stockholm. Copenhagen & Altno. The Direction to Stepn Rolleston Esq Secretary of State Office Whitehall London with T.H. on the cover they'll safe & be forwarded directly to me.

You have so many friends in this Country that it would be almost useless to make a tender of my servises but such commands as you may please to favor me with shall be executed with great pleasure by Sir

Your obliged  
 & very Hble Servant

THookham

N 15 Old Bond St  
 Dec 30th 1791

By the favor of an ansr would be an obligation. Mrs Wood & family are all well I heard by her youngest son today.

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<sup>27</sup>I give here my transcripts of these two letters, which form part of the David Laing Collection, University of Edinburgh Library.

In addition, Hookham sent a circular letter to the representatives of the British government in each major European city after the official opening of the reading rooms to request their assistance in publicising his rooms:

London February 19th 1792

Sir

I have taken the Liberty to trouble you with the Plan of an institution, it is on the broad Basis that promises much General Information and may if properly Conducted be of Public Utility in a Political, Literary and Moral sense.

As an Individual I have made every exertion in my power, but much remains to be done, Gentlemen in a Public but much more in the Diplomatique Line may assist it greatly.

Should You Sir so far Honour me as to Notice it, any favors you may please to confer on me will by that means render it a more Public Institution.

You will have the Goodness to Address under Cover to George Aust Esq UnderSecretary of State London, to the care of Stephen Rolleston Esq

I have the Honor to be

with great Respect

Sir Your most Obedt & very Humble Servant

Thomas Hookham

To Daniel Hailes Esq  
Copenhagen.<sup>28</sup>

The advertisement for the reading rooms - a copy of which Hookham had sent before January, 1792 to all the British ambassadors, envoys and charge d'affaires in Europe - makes impressive reading.

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<sup>28</sup> David Laing Collection.

*Journal of the American Chemical Society*

Plate v

The reading rooms were open 'at TEN in the morning, and close at TEN in the evening, Sundays excepted'; there was an annual subscription of two guineas and Hookham asserted that the

CIRCULATING LIBRARY is generally thought to stand unrivalled by any Thing of the same Nature in Europe. This Plan is

A MOST EXTENSIVE IMPROVEMENT OF THE FORMER.<sup>29</sup>

The 'ELEGANT SUITE OF ROOMS' was illustrious enough to be recorded in an annual diary, the Literary Pocket Book or Companion for the Lover of Nature and Art (1821). Shelley's own copy of this diary, which contains a number of entries in Mary Shelley's hand, is deposited in the Bodleian Library: at the back of the diary, a number of pages are devoted to printed information concerning London booksellers and publishers. Under the heading 'Circulating Libraries' the names of Hookham and Ollier are given, and under 'Reading Rooms' Hookham is cited as one of only ten proprietors of reading rooms in the capital, clear evidence of his importance in this type of enterprise in early nineteenth-century London.<sup>30</sup>

Shelley's acquaintance with Thomas Hookham and sons began at some time between January and July 1812. Although both Roger Ingpen and Walter Peck have suggested that Shelley was introduced to Thomas Hookham, Junior, by Peacock,<sup>31</sup> this seems unlikely: Shelley's letter

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<sup>29</sup>See Plate v opposite.

<sup>30</sup>MS Shelley adds f.4. page 191.

<sup>31</sup>Roger Ingpen in Julian, VIII, p. xxxiii; Walter Peck, Shelley: His Life and Work, I, 289.

of August 18, 1812 to Thomas Hookham comments upon Peacock's poems in a tone which indicates that Shelley did not know Peacock personally at that time.<sup>32</sup> It is more probable that Thomas Hookham introduced his friend and client T. L. Peacock to Shelley on the premises at Old Bond Street in October or November 1812 when Shelley came up to London with Harriet after leaving Lynnmouth in August.<sup>33</sup>

Shelley was probably put in touch with the Hookhams by William Godwin, some months before he met Peacock. Shelley had first written to Godwin on January 3, 1812 from Keswick.<sup>34</sup> Settled at Lynnmouth in July, Shelley began a period of rigorous philosophical reading in order to conduct an intellectual debate with Godwin on materialist philosophy. He needed a London bookseller and circulating library to provide him with the required texts. It is quite possible that Godwin recommended Thomas Hookham, Junior, a young man with sympathetic attitudes towards liberalism and republican thought.<sup>35</sup> Godwin had a fairly intimate knowledge of the London book trade, not only through his own dealings with publishers but also from the experience of running a small business publishing children's books, called the Juvenile Library. His advice on publishing and bookselling was sought, and given, quite freely. In a letter dated February 20, 1806 to a Mr. Booth of Newburgh, Fife, Godwin wrote:

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<sup>32</sup>Letters, I, 319.

<sup>33</sup>R. Garnett, ed., The Letters of T. L. Peacock, Boston, 1910, p. 12; C. Van Doren, The Life of Thomas Love Peacock, 1911, p. 56; K. N. Cameron, Shelley and his Circle, 1773-1822, III, 236.

<sup>34</sup>Letters, I, 219.

<sup>35</sup>Julian, VIII, p. xxxiii.

The bookseller's profit from a book is usually 25 per cent: so that a book, the sale price of which is 5s produces to its owner 3/9 per copy. The bookseller who undertakes the sale, that is, who styles himself the publisher, has no part of this 25 per cent, except from the copies which he chooses to dispose of by retail in his own shop, which is ordinarily a very small portion of the copies actually sold. He therefore charges a percentage for his commission as publisher, or broker, to the author; this at the outside is 5 per cent: so that Messrs Longmans, the richest shop in London, seems to have proposed to make you pay 5 per cent more, or a price for your ignorance of the bookselling trade.<sup>36</sup>

No letter from Godwin to Shelley yet located contains any reference to Hookham as a prospective bookseller, publisher or library proprietor: from the above letter to Mr. Booth, however, it may be conjectured that Godwin also advised Shelley about the London book trade, putting him in touch with the firm of Thomas Hookham and sons.

Shelley wrote two letters to Thomas Hookham, Junior, from Lynmouth in the July and August of 1812. He thanked the bookseller for sending parcels of books to him, and dispatched seventy-five copies of his Letter to Lord Ellenborough, twenty-five on July 29, and fifty more on August 18. He had other literary plans, hoping that Hookham would agree to act as his publisher. One project was the issue, in book form, of several moral and religious essays written in Dublin. A further scheme involved the publication of his 'Pieces of Irish History' by subscription.<sup>37</sup> It was during this period also that Shelley was working on the manuscript of Queen Mab.

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<sup>36</sup>My transcript of a holograph letter in the Bodleian Library, MS Shelley adds d.5 fols 8-9.

<sup>37</sup>On July 29, and August 18: Letters. I, 319, 324-325.

the completed portion of which he sent off to Hookham in August with a view to interesting the publisher in its circulation.<sup>38</sup> None of these ideas was to bear fruit: Thomas Hookham is said to have destroyed all but one of the printed copies of the Letter to Lord Ellenborough<sup>39</sup> and would not risk the publication of Queen Mab, although he agreed to undertake its printing in March, 1813.

Nevertheless, Shelley continued to correspond and to order books from Old Bond Street between September 1812 and February 1813. Substantial book orders are contained in letters written from Tanyrallt in December, 1812 for instance,<sup>40</sup> and the Shelleys visited London from October 4 to November 13.<sup>41</sup> It was this London visit which provided Shelley with his first opportunity to meet Hookham personally and to explore the shelves of the circulating library and the reading rooms in Old Bond Street. It is possible, for example, that Shelley may have seen Joel Barlow's The Columbiad on this occasion, or have read the review of the poem in the Edinburgh Review for 1809.<sup>42</sup> After his return to Wales, Shelley wrote to Hookham 'There is more philosophy in one square inch of your counter than in the whole of Cambria',<sup>43</sup> an indication of the degree to which he had been impressed by the book provision at Old Bond Street.

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<sup>38</sup>Letters, I, 324.

<sup>39</sup>Julian, VIII, xxxiii.

<sup>40</sup>Letters, I, 342, 343.

<sup>41</sup>Letters, I, 326n.8.

<sup>42</sup>See Chapter 3, pp. 90-92.

<sup>43</sup>See above, p. 315.

The two men were evidently on friendly terms: in February Thomas Hookham was invited down to Tanyrallt<sup>44</sup> and it was to Hookham that Shelley wrote immediately after the supposed assassination attempt during the night of February 26.<sup>45</sup> Hookham sent Shelley £20 as a loan, which the latter gratefully collected at Bangor before embarking for Ireland. He wrote to Hookham:

How shall I express to you what I felt of gratitude surprise & pleasure - not so much that the remittance rescued us from a situation of peculiar perplexity but that one there was who by disinterested & unhesitating confidence made amends to our feelings wounded by the suspicion coldness & villainy of the world.<sup>46</sup>

He followed this letter with another in March which reaffirmed his appreciation of Hookham's assistance, 'Do not however conceive that for one moment I lose the grateful recollection of your kindness & attention'.<sup>47</sup>

The Shelleys left Ireland on April 2, arriving in London three days later. Little is known of Shelley's movements in April and May, 1813, but he appears to have kept in touch with Thomas Hookham. William Godwin recorded in his diary that he, Hogg and Peacock dined with Harriet and Shelley on Sunday, June 13.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Shelley to Hookham, February 15, 1813: Letters. I, 354.

<sup>45</sup>Letters. I, 355.

<sup>46</sup>Letters. I, 358-359.

<sup>47</sup>Letters. I, 360.

<sup>48</sup>Letters. I, 372n.1.

Harriet gave birth to Eliza Ianthe late in June: for the next six months there is no evidence of Shelley corresponding with or visiting Thomas Hookham, except for a brief letter written and posted in Warwick in October 1813 as the Shelleys were en route for Ambleside.<sup>49</sup> In December, 1813 however, Shelley was back in London on one of his many journeys between Mrs. Boinville's in Bracknell, and London. Hookham was owed money for the printing of Queen Mab and Shelley's solicitor Amory convened a meeting on the eleventh of December at Tooke's Court with Shelley, Dr. Newton, Hookham and Sorrel in order to discuss Shelley's finances.<sup>50</sup>

It was at this time that Shelley made arrangements to stay with Thomas Hookham while in London.<sup>51</sup> This enabled him to peruse books and read at 15, Old Bond Street, an arrangement which appears to have continued from March until early June 1814 as Shelley moved constantly between Bracknell and the city. He wrote two letters from Old Bond Street in May, for instance.<sup>52</sup> In June Shelley met Mary Godwin for the first time. Although he lodged in Fleet Street,<sup>53</sup> he

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<sup>49</sup>Letters, I, 377.

<sup>50</sup>Letters, I, 382n.2.

<sup>51</sup>Walter Peck, Shelley: His Life and Work, II, 410, was the first biographer to print John Mitford's recollections of conversations with Thomas Hookham, Junior; Mitford remembered that Shelley was '... an intimate during this time with Mr. Hookham of Bond St. used to live at his House when in London, take long country walks with him, borrow money, etc'; see also N. I. White, Shelley, I, 323-324, note 129 and Claire Clairmont's statement in September 1814 in her journal 'Shelley gets the clothes from Hookham': Marion Kingston Stocking, ed., The Journals of Claire Clairmont 1814-1827, p. 43.

<sup>52</sup>To Mr. Teasdale on May 6, and to John Williams on May 14, 1814: Letters, I, 386-387.

<sup>53</sup>Letters, I, 391n.3.

dined frequently with William Godwin, whose diary entries for June and July show clearly that Shelley was still in close touch with Thomas Hookham. Shelley and Godwin visited the premises in Old Bond Street on several occasions during these weeks, visits which provided Shelley with further opportunities for reading and browsing in the circulating library.<sup>54</sup>

The elopement with Mary and the departure to France in July 1814 distanced Thomas Hookham's brother Edward from Shelley.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, Thomas Hookham tried to act as an intermediary between Harriet and Shelley during the difficult weeks which followed the return of Shelley, Mary Godwin and Claire Clairmont to London in

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<sup>54</sup>Godwin made five entries in his diary which demonstrate this contact in June and July, 1814. His unpublished diaries, which consist of thirty-one small notebooks used from 1788 to 1836, were deposited by Lord Abinger in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, on 22nd April 1975 (Abinger II Dep e. 196-227). I have transcribed the following entries from notebook XVIII (Dep e. 213; unpaginated) and am indebted to Professor L. Patton of Duke University, North Carolina for supporting my conjecture that the entry for July 7, 1814, records a visit to the Hookhams:

[June, 1814]

- 18.Sa. Temple, p. 155. Call on Ballachey, Waugh + Saunders: Dadley calls: Shelley, at Hookham's, w.CC.
- 29.W. Call on Hookham + Place, w.Shelley; + on Macmillan + Lamb; adv.G. T: Shelley dines; adv.Hookham. meet Curran.

[July, 1814]

- 1.F. London Assurance, w.Shelley: call on Hume, Macmillan, Place, + S on Hookham.
- 6.W. Transaction of Mar 4 completed. Curran calls: E. T. Patrickson, Shelley + Mary dine; adv.E. T. walk with Shelley, Spa Fields + Hookham's. H. Robinson au soir. Hagan calls.
- 7.Th. M + Shelley from Nash: walk, w.Shelley, to Bond Street.

<sup>55</sup>See Mary Shelley's comment on their reception by Edward upon returning to England: 'We go by boat to London; take a coach; call on Hookham. T.H. not at home. E[ward] Hookham treats us very ill'. MSJ. p. 15.

September 1814. The diaries which both Mary and Claire kept in the autumn and winter of 1814 reveal that Shelley visited Thomas Hookham at Old Bond Street very frequently from mid-September to December 1814, as well as receiving him as a dinner guest at his lodgings.<sup>56</sup> Shelley's reasons for calling on Hookham were not solely personal and financial, however. He was studying intensively during this period, reading aloud to Mary and Claire in the evening and teaching them Greek. He brought a copy of Wordsworth's The Excursion back from Hookham's on Wednesday, September 14, for example,<sup>57</sup> and on his visits to Hookham's shop noted down interesting titles which were subsequently delivered in parcels to the lodgings in Somers Town and Nelson Square.<sup>58</sup> Early in January, 1815 Hookham sent Shelley another parcel: this one contained the December number of the Critical Review with Shelley's essay on Hogg's 'Prince Alexander Haimatoff'.<sup>59</sup>

It is at this point, early in 1815, that Shelley's close relationship with Thomas Hookham ended. The trip to Geneva, residence at Bishopsgate, Bath and Marlow during the next eighteen months signified a retreat from the capital and a discontinuance of protracted residence in London, apart from a month's stay with the Hunts in 1817. Hookham's place as Shelley's publisher was taken by Charles Ollier. Despite the fact that Shelley continued to subscribe

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<sup>56</sup>September 13, 14, 15, 23; October 27; November 11, 16; December 7, 8 (MSJ, pp. 15, 16, 23, 25, 26, 28). September 15, 16, 21, 23, 29 (The Journals of Claire Clairmont, pp. 43, 45, 46).

<sup>57</sup>MSJ, p. 15; The Journals of Claire Clairmont, p. 43.

<sup>58</sup>October 6, and December 2: MSJ, pp. 17-18, 27.

<sup>59</sup>January 3: MSJ, p. 34.

to the circulating library and saw Thomas Hookham in Marlow in August 1817,<sup>60</sup> the bonds between the two men had loosened and thereafter they were not to see each other again.

However, as the list below demonstrates clearly, the Hookhams' circulating library and reading rooms permitted Shelley access to a comprehensive range of contemporary writing on epic, mythology, Tasso, dream and vision. It is probable that Shelley became acquainted with some of this literature while visiting Old Bond Street, particularly in the autumn of 1812 and in the summer and autumn of 1814.

## CHECKLIST

BOOKS CITED IN CHAPTERS 2 TO 6 WHICH WERE AVAILABLE TO  
SHELLEY IN THE CIRCULATING LIBRARY AT 15, OLD BOND STREET.<sup>61</sup>

| <u>Title</u>   | <u>Hookham<br/>Catalogue</u> | <u>Number</u> | <u>Price</u>  |
|--|------------------------------|---------------|---|
| J. Arnold, <u>Observations on the Nature,<br/>Kinds, Causes and Prevention<br/>of Insanity</u><br>2 vols, [London, 1806] | addendum<br>1821             | 11038         | £1 1s   |
| <u>Asiatic Researches</u> , vols I-XII<br>[Calcutta, 1788-1816]  | 1829                         | 2171-<br>2182 | i-v = 10s 6d<br>vi-viii = 12s<br>ix-xi = 14s<br>xii = 16s |

<sup>60</sup>MSJ, p. 84.

<sup>61</sup>The Hookham catalogues rarely give particulars of the edition actually available to subscribers, although the purchase price of both periodicals and books is entered and occasionally the number of volumes. I have shown the most likely edition, giving the publication details in square brackets: the date of the catalogue in which a work is listed and the number of volumes, if given, enable reasonable suppositions to be made with respect to the probable edition available to borrowers.

| <u>Title</u>   | <u>Hookham<br/>Catalogue</u> | <u>Number</u> | <u>Price</u>     |
|--|------------------------------|---------------|------------------|
| Joel Barlow, <u>The Columbiad, a Poem</u><br>[Philadelphia, 1807]  | 1829                         | 7218          | 18s              |
| Anselm Bayly, <u>The Alliance of Music,<br/>Poetry, &amp; Oratory</u><br>[London, 1789]                          | 1794                         | 6620          | 5s               |
| John Black, <u>Life of Torquato Tasso</u><br>2 vols [Edinburgh and<br>London, 1810]                              | 1829                         | 60            | £3 3s            |
| Hugh Blair, <u>Lectures on Rhetoric and<br/>Belles Lettres</u><br>2 vols [London, 1783]<br>3 vols [London, 1796] | 1794<br>1829                 | 504<br>9160   | £2 12s 6d<br>18s |
| Le Bossu, <u>Treatise of the Epick Poem</u><br>2 vols [London, 1719]   | 1794<br>1829                 | 6640<br>7119  | 6s<br>6s         |
| Ralph Church, ed., <u>The Faerie Queene,</u><br>4 vols [London, 1758-1759]                                       | 1829                         | 8509          | £1 1s            |
| <u>Critical Review (1783-1815)</u>   | 1829                         | 9324-<br>9356 | 16s-<br>£2 2s    |
| A Dowe, <u>History of Hindostan</u><br>3 vols [London, 1768]<br>3 vols [London, 1768]                            | 1794<br>1829                 | 79<br>217     | £3 3s<br>£3 3s   |
| <u>Edinburgh Review (1803-1818)</u>  | 1829                         | 9424-<br>9439 | £1 4s            |
| W. Hayley, <u>An Essay on Epic Poetry</u><br>[London, 1782]  | 1794<br>1829                 | 105<br>337    | 13s<br>13s       |
| R. Heron, <u>Letters of Literature</u><br>[London, 1785]   | 1829                         | 9748          | 8s               |
| John Hughes, ed., <u>The Works of Mr.<br/>Edmund Spenser</u> 6 vols<br>[London, 1715]                            | 1794                         | 4425-<br>4431 | 18s              |

| <u>Title</u>  | <u>Hookham<br/>Catalogue</u> | <u>Number</u>   | <u>Price</u>   |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Sir William Jones, <u>Works</u> , 8 vols<br>[London, 1799-1801]   | 1829                         | 424-<br>431     | £16 16s        |
| Lord Kames, <u>Elements of Criticism</u><br>2 vols [Edinburgh, 1807]  | 1829                         | 9814            | 14s            |
| H. J. von Klaproth, <u>Travels in the<br/>Caucasus and Georgia, 1807<br/>and 1808</u><br>[London, 1814]   | 1829                         | 448             | £2 2s          |
| Thomas Maurice, <u>The History of Hindostan</u><br>6 vols [containing the <u>Indian<br/>Antiquities</u> , London, 1793-<br>1800]                            | 1829                         | 3274            | £2 8s          |
| Edward Moor, <u>The Hindu Pantheon</u><br>[London, 1810]  | 1829                         | 569             | £5 5s          |
| Robert Orme, <u>Historical Fragments of<br/>the Mogul Empire ... and of the<br/>English concerns in Indostan<br/>from the year MDCLIX</u><br>[London, 1782] | 1829                         | 610             | £1 10s         |
| <u>Quarterly Review (1809-1818)</u>   | 1820                         | 10277-<br>10286 | £1 6s          |
| William Robertson, <u>Historical<br/>Disquisitions concerning the<br/>Knowledge which the Ancients<br/>had of India</u><br>[London, 1791]                   | 1794<br>1820                 | 923<br>804      | £1 6s<br>£1 6s |
| William Smellie, <u>The Philosophy of<br/>Natural History</u> 2 vols<br>[Edinburgh, 1790]   | 1820                         | 842             | £2 2s          |

| <u>Title</u>   | <u>Hookham<br/>Catalogue</u> | <u>Number</u> | <u>Price</u>   |
|--|------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| H. J. Todd, ed., <u>The Works of<br/>Edmund Spenser</u><br>8 vols [London, 1805] | 1820                         | 8509-<br>8517 | £4 4s          |
| William Wilkie, <u>The Epigoniad</u><br>[Edinburgh, 1757]                        | 1794<br>1820                 | 3750<br>7303  | 3s 6d<br>3s 6d |
| C. Wilkins, trans. <u>Bhagvat-Geeta</u><br>(1785)                                | 1794<br>1820                 | 810<br>52     | £1 1s<br>£1 1s |

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The bibliography is divided into two sections, unpublished and published sources. It lists both those sources which I have consulted directly during the preparation of this study and those to which reference has been made in it. There are comprehensive bibliographies of Shelley studies in N. I. White, The Unextinguished Hearth: Shelley and his Contemporary Critics (Durham, North Carolina, 1938), Clement Dunbar, A Bibliography of Shelley Studies: 1823-1950 (New York and Folkestone, 1976), and the Keats-Shelley Journal.

Entries are arranged alphabetically and the dates given are of the editions or reprints used. Where more than one work by the same writer is listed, the items are listed in the order in which they were written or first published.

All contemporary periodical articles (whether authorship is attributable or not) cited in this study are entered against the title of the periodical in which they first appeared in print. This includes contemporary reviews of Shelley's works. These reviews have been collected together however, and reprinted: they are easily located in N. I. White, The Unextinguished Hearth, and Donald H. Reiman, ed., The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers (9 vols, New York, 1972).

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