

## Review

MICHAEL O'NEILL and ANTHONY HOWE (eds) with the assistance of Madeleine Callaghan, *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Pp. xxii + 711. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. £95.00 (ISBN 978 0 19 955836 0).

LOGICIAN or mystic? Navelgazer or revolutionary? Liberationist or womanizer? Since 1811, when Oxford expelled him for refusing to deny authorship of *The Necessity of Atheism*, Shelley has been a Rorschach test, reflecting back his readers' prejudices and affinities—and those of their age—in concentrated form. The penumbral inquisition into our own values that Shelley's best work occasions, predicted in the author's own claim that poets are 'mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present' (*Defence*, qtd 292), is well parsed in this monumental compendium published by the university that kicked him out. As Arthur Bradley explains here, the story of Shelley's reception, exegesis, and evaluation is 'the story of contemporary literary criticism itself' (673). What could be more urgent than to revisit this story now?

The format followed here resembles that of other *Oxford Handbooks*, with twists. Chapters on 'Biography and Relationships' lay sturdily empirical foundations for sections surveying the works separated by mode ('Prose', 'Poetry'); these readings are succeeded by contextualizing essays ('Shelley and Music', 'Shelley and Milton') that lead to a section of superb entries, including Bradley's, on the history of the poet in criticism. But where the Coleridge and Wordsworth *Handbooks* examine 'reception', this one frames 'afterlives': an emphasis on Shelley's almost unworldly capacity for being reanimated, even weaponized, in contexts foreign to his own situation. The *Handbook's* squarely Aristotelian format (life, work, reception) spares us entries on particular schools of interpretation in favour of more durable overviews and extractable analyses. Rather than 'Shelley and Ecocriticism', for instance, we have Marilyn Gaul's fine entry on 'Shelley's Sciences'; instead of 'Shelley and Feminist Criticism' we get 'Shelley and Women', in

which Nora Crook surveys the poetry's treatment of female characters with glances toward the notorious biographical episodes, such as Shelley's abandonment of his pregnant wife, Harriet Westbrook, in 1814, under a thin alibi of progressive sexuality. This conservatism of structure invites charges of fustiness, but turns out to offer maximal latitude to individual authors, and where it sacrifices uniformity and *au courant* topicality—and generates recursivities, with many essays returning to the same key texts—it allows these essays by leading scholars to take their own organic shapes.

A sensitivity to the internal complexity of Shelley's achievement is common across the best entries in this informative and sometimes even gripping volume. Susan Wolfson, Michael O'Neill, Ian Balfour, Jerrold Hogle, and Stuart Curran, among others, all take angles on Shelley's conviction that epistemological problems are really political ones, and vice versa, and that the most supple language for taking on both at once is poetry itself. The melodramatic prose often required to dress up straightforwardly biographical accounts pops up only intermittently, and even Ann Wroe's sometimes maudlin essay on 1822 scales down from cliché to describe Shelley's recurring dream, in the months before his death, of a strange, snake-like plant, 'creeping, growing, mutating' into a metaphor for an art 'nourished by starlight and tears' (61).

Of course, Shelley's positive dispensation toward the mutating is legible in biographical facts like Shelley's meliorist politics and vegetarian utopianism. It is also obvious in the *engagé* occasional poetry that earned his reputation as a radical. The recently discovered 'Poetical Essay on The Existing State of Things', for example, imagines a time when 'Peace, love, and concord, once shall rule again, / And heal the anguish of a suffering world' (London: B. Crosby & Co., 1811, <<http://poeticalessay.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>>). But the best essays here show how what Curran refers to as Shelley's compulsion 'to project history as a possibility' (292) registers in the formal effects and meta-generic experimentation of his most ambitious work. Successive essays by Curran and Michael Rossington show how *Prometheus* and *The Cenci*, respectively, deploy their formal machinery in self-conscious ways: they coordinate

private and public modes, the lyric and the dramatic, in service of the idea that political change must be driven by a never-ending revolution in mental life. Readers know that *The Triumph of Life* cuts off mid-line, but biographical explanations of this startling caesura—Shelley was working on it when he died—mask how the poem concretizes as poetic effect its thesis that no historical process of liberation can ever really be final. Such interplay between the literary, the epistemological, and the political give shape to what Anthony Howe calls Shelley's 'undulating, dynamic sense of what knowledge—and thus what philosophy—might be' (102–3). The sensitivity to the intellectual consequences of form common among these entries enables the volume to be concretely historical and conceptually astute at once, and therefore to offer a full picture of Shelley's still-challenging accomplishment.

Challenging us, of course, is exactly what the writing itself seeks to do. In works like *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus* no less than in *A Defence*, Shelley positions literary thought as the medium that might unite the conceptual antagonisms of modernity and renovate the social and political structures of his damaged world. Such grandiose rhetoric spurred Matthew Arnold's famous slur that Shelley was an ineffectual angel, 'not entirely sane' (qtd 667). But if we take seriously poetry's roots in *ποιέω*—to make, cause, or do—then Shelley might, as the Yale School realized, usefully stand for the world-making capacity of literature as such. Given that literary studies today finds itself pressed to justify its existence

to a growing set of audiences who presume, with Shelley's own antagonists, that knowledge means 'the accumulation of facts and calculating processes' (*Defence*, qtd. 589), there may be no better time to reassess the force of this consummate poetic thinker. It is Shelley himself, after all, who reminds us that the 'cultivation of sciences', taken to an extreme, ensures that 'man remains himself a slave' (*ibid.*).

STEM-era readers in the market for crib-guides have other and less expensive options than this 710-page tome (list price: \$170.00). They might turn to Timothy Morton's *Cambridge Companion to Shelley* (2006), or any of the proliferating guides to Romanticism now marketed to libraries and undergraduates. But the *Cambridge Companion's* slender elegance should be seen as a complement rather than alternative to the substantive gravitas of this volume. Like its sibling *Handbooks*, this one is literally substantive: three pounds on the bathroom scale. But it is exhilarating to read this luminously intelligent guidebook from cover to cover amid the 'melancholy ruins' of our own moment (*Prometheus*, qtd. 590). For though literary studies might now lie 'huddled in grey annihilation' (*ibid.*), these essays show, among other things, how Shelley might help us find a way forward.

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doi:10.1093/notesj/gjw124

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