



# Shelley's Visions of Death

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## A NOTE ON EDITIONS

Quotations from Shelley's poems (with one exception, noted below) are from *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Geoffrey Matthews and others, 4 vols to date (London/Harlow: Longman/Routledge, 1989–):

*The Poems of Shelley: Volume 1: 1804–17*, ed. by Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London: Longman, 1989)

*The Poems of Shelley: Volume 2: 1817–19*, ed. by Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, contributing eds Jack Donovan, Ralph Pite, and Michael Rossington (Harlow: Longman, 2000)

*The Poems of Shelley: Volume 3: 1819–20*, ed. by Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington, assisted by Laura Barlow (Harlow: Longman, 2011)

*The Poems of Shelley: Volume 4: 1820–21*, ed. by Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan, and Kelvin Everest, assisted by Andrew Lacey and Laura Barlow (London: Routledge, 2014)

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- Bieri, i James Bieri, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography: Youth's Unextinguished Fire, 1792–1816* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004)
- Bieri, ii James Bieri, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography: Exile of Unfulfilled Renown* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005)
- Bion Bion, *Lament for Adonis*, in *Greek Pastoral Poetry: Theocritus, Bion, Moschus, The Pattern Poems*, trans. by Anthony Holden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974)
- BSM *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and others, 23 vols (New York: Garland, 1986–2002)
- Exc. William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. by Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007)
- JMS *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)
- LJK *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958)
- LMS *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980–88)
- LS *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964)
- Mosch. Moschus, *Lament for Bion*, in *Greek Pastoral Poetry: Theocritus, Bion, Moschus, The Pattern Poems*, trans. by Anthony Holden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974)
- NU Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, ed. by Ronald Melville, intro. and notes by Don and Peta Fowler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)

- Phaedo* Plato, *Phaedo*, ed. by G. M. A. Grube, in *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997)
- PS* *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Geoffrey Matthews and others, 4 vols to date (London/Harlow: Longman/Routledge, 1989–) (see **A Note on Editions**)
- SPP* *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edn (1st edn ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, 1977) (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002)



## CHAPTER 1

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# ‘While Yet a Boy I Sought for Ghosts’: Contexts

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,  
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.  
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed,  
I was not heard – I saw them not –

By the time Shelley wrote these lines to ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ (ll. 49–54), composed in the cold and gloomy summer of 1816, he was, as a young man of twenty-three years of age, no stranger to loss. The losses Shelley had suffered up to this point had been various, and were painful in different ways: he had been expelled, ignominiously, from Oxford, and was effectively estranged from his father; he and his first wife, Harriet Westbrook, who would soon commit suicide, were separated; and his first child with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, a daughter, born prematurely, had died just weeks into her short life. In a reflective mood, far from England on the shores of Lake Geneva, Shelley was able to recapitulate on what had been, so far, a troubled life, and found the space to write, like Wordsworth before him, his own poem on the growth of a poet’s mind. This book, being the first in-depth examination of the various visions of death Shelley conceived of over the course of his writing life as a poet, speaks strongly of loss, and frequently of loss of the most all-consuming type. But, I hope, it speaks even more strongly of possibility. For Shelley,

as this study will illustrate, death was very seldom simply a void, or a vacuum, or a state, as Sigmund Freud has it, to be characterised, paradoxically, by its ‘negative content’.<sup>1</sup> From an early age, from his very childhood, Shelley chose to gaze into ‘The dark shade of futurity’<sup>2</sup> and to envision *something* rather than nothing.

## FROM GOTHIC FANCY TO THE THRESHOLD OF MATURITY

Amid the stifling, isolated atmosphere of the family seat, Field Place, where he was, until 1806, the only boy among six children,<sup>3</sup> the young Shelley sought, and found, solace in the power of his own extraordinary imagination. One constant amidst the turbulent currents of his early years had been his capacity for cultivating a rich inner life, a life of the mind: one in which he found himself free, firstly, from the ennui of life in Sussex, then from the indignities heaped on him by his schoolmate bullies at Syon House and Eton College, and then from the vicissitudes of the various personal difficulties that he found himself mired in as he made his way, post-expulsion, in a world that seemed either coldly indifferent towards or generally dismissive of his work as a writer. Of Shelley’s boyhood pursuits, Thomas Jefferson Hogg writes:

Amongst his [...] self-sought studies, he was passionately attached to the study of what used to be called the occult sciences, conjointly with that of the new wonders, which chemistry and natural philosophy have displayed to us. His pocket-money was spent in the purchase of books relative to these darling pursuits, – of chemical apparatus and materials. The books consisted of treatises on magic and witchcraft, as well as those more modern ones detailing the miracles of electricity and galvanism. Sometimes he watched the livelong night for ghosts. At his father’s house, where his influence was, of course, great among the dependants, he even planned how he might get admission to the vault, or charnel-house, at Warnham Church, and might sit there all night, harrowed by fear, yet trembling with expectation, to see one of the spiritualised owners of the bones piled around him.<sup>4</sup>

Shelley’s sister Hellen<sup>5</sup> provides a similarly colourful recollection, neatly illustrating the ‘influence [...] among the dependants’ of which Hogg writes:

Bysshe was certainly fond of eccentric amusements, but they delighted us, as children, quite as much as if our minds had been naturally attuned to the same tastes; for we dressed ourselves in strange costumes to personate spirits, or fiends, and Bysshe would take a fire-stove and fill it with some inflammable liquid and carry it flaming into the kitchen and to the back-door; but discovery of this dangerous amusement soon put a stop to many repetitions.<sup>6</sup>

The 'seeking for ghosts' incident that Hogg describes, redolent of the dramatised account that Shelley provides in the fifth stanza of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', suggests that, even as a young boy, Shelley had an unusually active interest in enquiring into death—or, more accurately in this case, in accessing spaces 'occupied' by the dead, in the hope of engaging in some act of transmortal communion. Hellen Shelley's recollection, in which Shelley and his siblings, encouraged by him, 'personate[d] spirits', suggests that Shelley, again at an unusually early age, was already going beyond merely *seeking* the dead. In this case, he is *imitating* the dead, and encouraging others to do so—he is, in effect, using himself and others as sites for exploring the idea, in an intimate way, of being dead.

At Syon House, the first boarding school that Shelley attended, between 1802 and 1804, and where he was bullied, he again found solace by retreating into imagination. As Shelley's contemporary at the school, John Rennie, later the famous civil engineer, recalled in 1867, 'His imagination was always roving upon something romantic and extraordinary, such as spirits, fairies, fighting, volcanoes, &c.'. <sup>7</sup> Plainly, Shelley's deep interest in 'spirits'—many contemporary recollections of him, by those who knew him, mention this word—ran deeper than merely alleviating the boredom of his life at home in Sussex. At this school, where Shelley was unhappy, he, according to his cousin, and later biographer, Thomas Medwin, 'greedily devoured'<sup>8</sup> popular 'blue books'—short, sensationalised Gothic romances—such as those published by the Minerva Press, which, as Medwin has it, 'were to be bought for sixpence, and embodied stories of haunted castles, bandits, murderers, and other grim personages – a most exciting and interesting sort of food for boys' minds'. At Syon House, encounters with more canonical works of literature on death and the dead came, for example, in the form of making a Latin translation of 'The Epitaph' from Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard* (1751) as a school exercise.<sup>9</sup> Echoes of this poem, one of

the most famous English elegies, would continue to permeate Shelley's mature poetic writing.<sup>10</sup>

At Eton, where Shelley studied between 1804 and 1810, the bullying, and Shelley's unhappiness, continued; in fact, it worsened.<sup>11</sup> Shelley, according to Hogg, continued his familiar nocturnal questing, in part a means of escaping the torments he had to endure within the confines of the college walls, and in part a means of pursuing what had now become a personal preoccupation:

He consulted his books, how to raise a ghost; and once, at midnight, – he was then at Eton, – he stole from his Dame's house, and, quitting the town, crossed the fields towards a running stream. As he walked along the pathway amidst the long grass, he heard it rustle behind him; he dared not look back; he felt convinced that the devil followed him; he walked fast, and held tight the skull, the prescribed assistant of his incantations.

When he had crossed the field he felt less fearful, for the grass no longer rustled, so the devil no longer followed him. He came to some of the many beautiful clear streams near Eton, and sought for one which he could bestride Colossus-like; then, standing thus, he repeated his charm, and drank thrice from the skull. No ghost appeared, but for the credit of glamour-books, he did not doubt that the incantation failed from some mistake of his own.<sup>12</sup>

An Eton contemporary of Shelley's, Walter Halliday, describes, in an 1857 recollection of the country walks he took with Shelley, being 'a delighted and willing listener to his marvellous stories of fairy-land, and apparitions, and spirits, and haunted ground'.<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, Halliday adds: '[Shelley's] speculations were then (for his mind was far more developed than mine) of the world beyond the grave'. Shelley's former schoolfriend continues:

Another of his favourite rambles was Stoke Park, and the picturesque churchyard, where Gray is said to have written his Elegy, of which he was very fond. I was myself far too young to form any estimate of character, but I loved Shelley for his kindness and affectionate ways: he was not made to endure the rough and boisterous pastime at Eton, and his shy and gentle nature was glad to escape far away to muse over strange fancies, for his mind was reflective and teeming with deep thought.<sup>14</sup>

There is, of course, a degree of mythologising (intentional or otherwise) going on in these contemporary portraits of the young Shelley:

by the time Hogg et al. came to publish their recollections of Shelley, he had already begun to acquire the venerated status, among those who were sympathetic towards him, of the impassioned yet ultimately doomed young genius, one who, like his own Adonais, was a 'bloom, whose petals nipp'd before they blew' (*Adonais*, l. 52), one who 'was not made to endure' the base brutality of the uncaring world he had left behind. In short, soon after his death, Shelley's transformation into the 'beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain'<sup>15</sup> of Matthew Arnold's famous later reckoning was already underway. A more authentic, and, indeed, more reliable, account of the young Shelley's unusually deep interest in death and the dead, free from the potentially misleading baggage of posthumous mythmaking, may be found in his juvenile poetry, of which I will briefly consider three examples, all illuminating in different ways.

'February 28th 1805: To St Irvyne', the final poem of Shelley's Esdaile Notebook, was composed in February 1810. By this time, Shelley was approaching the end of his studies at Eton. The poem, referring in its title to St Irvyne, the family home of Harriet Grove, Shelley's first serious love interest, is an introspective meditation on former 'happiness' and 'pleasure' that is no more. Images of rapid 'passing away' and fading permeate the poem: 'How swiftly the moment of pleasure fled by / How swift is a fleeting smile chased by a sigh...' (ll. 8–9); 'How oft have we roamed, through the stillness of eve, / Through St Irvyne's old rooms that so fast fade away...' (ll. 13–14); 'My Harriet is fled like a fast-fading dream / Which fades ere the vision is fixed on the mind...' (ll. 17–18). Harriet Grove's and Shelley's budding relationship, which had led to an informal engagement, was to fail in the summer of 1810, and a profound sense of loss permeates this elegy-like poem from start to end. 'To St Irvyne' closes with a startling vision of the speaker's own death:

When my mouldering bones lie in the cold chilling grave,  
 When my last groans are borne o'er Strood's wide lea  
 And over my tomb the chill night tempests rave,  
 Then, loved Harriet, bestow one poor thought on me.

(ll. 21–24)

This marks an important moment of intellectual progression for Shelley. The seventeen-year-old Shelley had, by this time, moved beyond the naïve 'seeking for ghosts' of the 'other' dead: now, the imagined grave and the

tomb in this poem are *his own*. Death and being dead, rather than being a mere Gothic fancy, or a somehow ‘outward’ mental abstraction, had, for the first time, become a real, personal possibility for the young Shelley.

The sense of inner turmoil merely hinted at by Shelley in ‘To St Irvyne’ is intensified in ‘How swiftly through Heaven’s wide expanse’, which Shelley sent in a letter to Edward Fergus Graham of 22 April [1810], adding ‘Of course I communica[te these lines to] you as a friend [who, I can con]fide will not shew [them to any member] of my family or o[ther person] [...] [They were written, I can] assure you with [sincerity and] impulse on the [feelings which] they describe’.<sup>16</sup> The poem begins by reprising the images of rapid passing away and fading of ‘To St Irvyne’: ‘How swiftly through Heaven’s wide expanse / Bright day’s resplendent colours fade...’ (ll. 1–2). The focus shifts, in the fifth stanza, from a description, again of St Irvyne, the place, to a lone figure amid the scene, who begins to speak:

For there a youth with darkened brow  
 His long lost love is heard to mourn.  
 He vents his swelling bosom’s woe –  
 ‘Ah! when will hours like those return?’

‘O’er this torn soul, o’er this frail form  
 Let feast the fiends of tortured love,  
 Let lower dire fate’s terrific storm  
 I would, the pangs of death to prove.

‘Ah! why do prating priests suppose  
 That God can give the wretch relief,  
 Can still the bursting bosom’s woes  
 Or calm the tide of frantic grief?’

‘Within me burns a raging Hell.  
 Fate, I defy thy farther power,  
 Fate, I defy thy fiercer spell  
 And long for stern death’s welcome hour.

‘No power of Earth, of Hell or Heaven,  
 Can still the tumults of my brain;  
 The power to none save [Harriet’s] given  
 To calm my bosom’s frantic pain.



'Ah, why do darkening shades conceal  
 The hour when Man must cease to be?  
 Why may not human minds unveil  
 The dark shade of futurity?' –

(ll. 17–40)

On the evidence of the letter to Graham, which, Shelley entreating his correspondent to secrecy, speaks of the lines being written with 'sincerity', and considering the mention of Harriet in l. 35, it is not unreasonable to identify the tormented youth of 'How swiftly through Heaven's wide expanse' with Shelley himself. Line 32—'[I] long for stern death's welcome hour'—also marks another important moment of intellectual progression for Shelley. Not only is Shelley's speaker now, as he did in 'To St Irvyne', associating his meditations on death and being dead with the self by imagining his own death and his own future state of being dead, he is, going further than he did in the previous poem, also expressing, distinctly and unequivocally, an individual death-wish. The 'youth with darkened brow' unapologetically longs to be dead in order to 'still the tumults of [his] brain'. This is the first substantial acknowledgement in Shelley's poetry that one's own death can be, as Keats would later call it, 'easeful'.<sup>17</sup> a source of permanent relief from the myriad pains and troubles of life. The closing stanza of 'How swiftly through Heaven's wide expanse' speaks, clearly and for the first time in Shelley's poetic oeuvre, of the larger project that Shelley's youthful 'seeking for ghosts' had led him to by 1810, and which is the primary focus of this book: the human mind's attempted unveiling of (understanding the mysteries of) that which is in all of our futures, the reality of our personal, individual death.

By late 1810, Shelley's thinking on death, in this year of emotional turmoil occasioned by the breakdown of his relationship with Harriet Grove, had continued to mature. Having firstly admitted death and being dead as being a real, personal possibility in 'To St Irvyne', then secondly expressed an awareness of the fact that one's own death can, in the face of worldly 'tumult', be easeful in 'How swiftly through Heaven's wide expanse', in 'To Death', composed in December 1810, Shelley begins to speak of certain key ideas that will, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters, come to be seen as hallmarks in his most searching

mature poetic writing on death. In the opening lines of the poem, Shelley's speaker invokes scripture, specifically 1 Corinthians 15. 55 ('O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?'):

Death! where is thy victory?  
 To triumph whilst I die,  
 To triumph whilst thine ebon wing  
 Enfolds my shuddering soul –  
 O Death, where is thy sting?

(ll. 1–5)

Intertextuality, the interweaving of other insights from the writing of others into one's own writing, is a hallmark of Shelley's mature poetic writing on death, and his sources are numerous, ranging from the Biblical, to the classical, to the contemporary. So too is his recourse to the idea of 'soul', repeated later in 'To Death'—'And on some rock whose dark form glooms the sky / To stretch these pale limbs when the soul is fled...' (ll. 31–32)—often in a Platonic or Neoplatonic sense rather than in an orthodox Christian sense. The traditionally Platonic notion that not every part of us perishes when the body dies—a notion that at some times in Shelley's poetic career he writes of enthusiastically, and at others seemingly grows unsure of—is present in 'To Death'. Speaking of the relative immaturity of Shelley's poetic vision of death in 1810, what it is that survives the process of earthly death is presented variously in this poem, however: it is the 'soul' that is left to 'flee' the body in l. 32, yet earlier in the poem it is, cryptically, the 'sense' that is 'Love':

To know, in dissolution's void,  
 That earthly hopes and fears decay,  
 That every sense but Love, destroyed,  
 Must perish with its kindred clay –  
 [...]  
 Yes! this were victory!

(ll. 18–30)

By late 1810, Shelley's understanding of death as being easeful (that which gives comfort and/or relief) has also developed. Not only does death have the capacity to alleviate woe in the personal, singular sense (as is imagined in 'How swiftly through Heaven's wide expanse'), it also has the capacity to remove the 'bad' in a political, more plural sense. In the

face of death, 'ambition', 'pride', and 'envy'—malignant currents in 'life's unquiet stream'—are powerless to resist:

Perish ambition's crown,  
 Perish its sceptred sway,  
 From Death's pale front fade Pride's fastidious frown,  
 In death's damp vault the lurid fires decay  
 Which Envy lights at heaven-born Virtue's beam,  
 That all the cares subside  
 Which lurk beneath the tide  
 Of life's unquiet stream...  
 Yes! this were victory!

(ll. 22–30)

This is the first instance in Shelley's poetry, repeated later in works of obvious political as well as philosophical bent such as *Queen Mab*, of death as being a *renovating* phenomenon, of one that checks and resets, by default, all that is foul, odious, or corrupt in the world. Similarly, the idea that death, as Claudian has it, is 'the leveller of all',<sup>18</sup> that which reduces all, from the mightiest to the lowliest, to the same state, is also present in 'To Death':

Death! in thy vault when Kings and peasants lie  
 Not power's stern rod or fame's most thrilling blasts  
 Can liberate thy captives from decay –  
 My triumph, their defeat; my joy, their shame.

(ll. 63–66)

As Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest note, the 'triumph' here, in Shelley's maturing (though not yet mature) vision of death, is over those who command 'power's [...] rod' and 'fame's [...] blasts'.<sup>19</sup> Shelley's point is overtly political, and his acceptance of death at the close of the poem—'Welcome then, peaceful Death, I'll sleep with thee: / Mine be thy quiet home, and thine my Victory' (ll. 67–68)—speaks of a rather different type of 'victory' to that described in Corinthians, that is to say, the attainment of eternal life in Christ through adherence to the Christian faith.<sup>20</sup> Shelley's 'victory' is over the corruption of the world of 'power' and 'fame' that he has left behind, and from which he has, at least in mind, escaped.

In summary, while 'To Death' lacks the maturity even of *Queen Mab*, by the close of 1810 Shelley's poetic voice had grown more confident,

and this early poem bears many of the hallmarks of his mature writing on death: his use of (and the free adaptation of) canonical writing on death (in this case, Corinthians); his conviction (usually expressed, albeit inconsistently over the course of his poetic career, in Platonic terms) that part of us is capable of surviving death; and his apprehension of death as a phenomenon with the potential to be ‘good’ in what he increasingly recognised to be, as he suffered early personal crises and as his political awareness grew, an imperfect, and at times deeply troubling, world. Having plainly broadened his perspective on death over the course of an important year, Shelley would soon be in a position to write something far more speculative, and more searching, on what was, by now, one of his most active areas of enquiry.

### THE CLASSICS, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE DE-CHRISTIANISING CONTEXT

Writing on death has existed for as long as writing on *anything* has existed. The overwhelmingly large body of writing, in all of its forms, on death speaks of three of its particular characteristics. Firstly, death is universal: all of us will die, and most of us will experience the deaths of others. Secondly, death is, in the vernacular, a very big deal: it brings the human life we have to an end, and changes forever the lives of those the deceased has left behind. Thirdly, death, operating at the very limits of human experience, is ultimately unknowable: as Ludwig Wittgenstein pithily observes, ‘Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death’.<sup>21</sup> We do not, and cannot, experience or ‘live through’ our own death in the way that we experience or live through the other, again in the vernacular, big events of life. Yet it is ‘there’, a thing in the world, ‘*something that stands before us – something impending*’,<sup>22</sup> always blankly, and sometimes terrifyingly, silent. Thus, as Geoffrey Scarre writes, death has been, and will always be, one humanity’s ‘perennial foci of attention’.<sup>23</sup> To the enquiring mind, death represents an invitingly blank canvas, and responses to it are as varied as the human lives, all rich, all strange, no two ever truly alike, that it ultimately brings to an end. I will briefly consider some of the most important canonical writing on death, before locating Shelley—an important writer on death in his own right—within that tradition.

The vision of death presented in some of the earliest literature that we have is bleakly pessimistic. In Book XI of the *Odyssey*, Homer describes