

Bysshe Inigo Coffey, *Shelley's Broken World: Fractured Materiality and Intermitted Song*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. Pp. xxi + 220. £90. ISBN 9781800855380.

Merrilees Roberts, *Shelley's Poetics of Reticence: Shelley's Shame*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. Pp. xi + 237. £120. ISBN 9780367256432.

These two exciting author-focused studies of Percy Bysshe Shelley have an idiom in common. That is, a language of gaps, aporias, limits, interstices, vacancy, irresolution, and indeterminacy that their authors render as an affirmative provision. Coffey and Roberts rehabilitate such typically negative terms from their association with poststructuralism in literary studies. A Promethean Shelley is being recast within a new situation: a world(view) both of 'limit-points' (Coffey, 194) and of future, altered prospects that exceed their creator's capacity to enjoy (Roberts).

This work is done with assurance by Coffey, in terms of Shelley's relation to contemporaneous, and earlier, science, philosophy, and poetic repertoires. The touchstone that 'absence is an unreliable guide to non-existence' (14) offers a responsive register for analysis, and strikes a balance between wit and incisive judgment. It not only throws off the unhelpful grasp of theory (though Coffey can be too cavalier in his dismissals (10)): the allowance of 'non-manifest materiality' (29) also guides an original overview of seventeenth-century ideas. Shelley read about *materia subtilis* (subtle matter) and *vis inertiae* (the force of rest and motion as states), precursors and alternatives to today's trendy vibrant materialisms (10, 195). Indeed, to support his main argument that '[t]he inactive is powerful' (60), Coffey allots much of the first half of his book to the reclamation of Newton's physics against the widespread notion that Newtonian space is a void (55). The book's comparative frames are scientific and philosophical instead of poetic, excepting a reduced Wordsworth in a notably careful investigation of whether and how Shelley read Kant, in Chapter 5, on *Peter Bell the Third*. There are hints that by way of a poetics of 'fruitful vacillation,' Coffey has in mind a Coleridgean sensibility freed from the debilitation from which Coleridge suffered. When this excellent study of Shelley ends on the summation that, '[i]n reading him we actuate a poetry of interruption and experience it as the very condition for living a continuing life. Shelley writes of a beautifully broken world' (195), that brokenness does not involve historical catastrophe, but something more like the plenary pause at breaking into and out of song, and even the sociable breaking of bread. Though it would be a break of catachresis to move between these two options for metaphor.

This convivial aspect holds in a professional and not just thematic sense, as Coffey works closely within the Shelley editorial circle. Belying the book's lyrical title (which generously acknowledges the visionary company of Harold Bloom and Hart Crane), the provenance of the many insights in *Shelley's Broken World* is impressively evidence-based. Coffey has an archival ace in the hole: the 'virtually unknown' and not yet published 'Marlow List' of Shelley's library from March 1817 to February 1818, during that anomalous period of domestic stability (17). With this list in hand (and shared in numerous textual figures), Coffey is able to pursue surprising investigations, and to shore up the grounds of several internal questions long held in Shelley Studies. At the same time, Coffey is a giftedly creative critic who can leap to his insights straight off. In his judgments, not simply pro or con, of historical Shelleyans and Shelleyphobes, he begins with an instance of the latter – F. R. Leavis's accusation that he possessed a 'weak grasp upon the actual' (1). For Coffey, however, that charge serves as a means to access something integral to Shelley's distinctive philosophical intelligence and aesthetic practice: his 'firm grasp upon the

weakness of the actual' (2). Hence the 'weakness of the actual' is revalued as earned description. Like the subject-object genitive in grammar, the witty reformulation pivots on Leavis's familiar criticism not just to bestow a more generous interpretive enthusiasm, but to argue in well-backed earnest that Shelley as a poetic thinker had a considered grasp of the discursively 'objective' sciences available to him. Coffey's methodology tacks amongst subfields of editorial caretaking, book history, and philosophical poetics. He cites first – or first relevant – editions, and in original languages. Sometimes, keen arguments are raised and then sidelined as tactically irrelevant. This could be due to overlapping adjudications among these several areas. For instance, Coffey takes pains to discuss the editorial history of pointing (punctuation) in Shelley's texts – and this makes sense given his *métier* is the language of pauses – but then concedes that '[t]he principal works I discuss in this book are relatively free from textual cruxes' (23). But we are shown Coffey knows all the cruxes. *Shelley's Broken World's* greatest strengths are its professional content and its style, aligning scholarly argument to a temperament that redeems belles lettres through meticulous research.

Roberts historicises Shelley's constructions of the Romantic subject per se, concerned with the predicaments of history and ideology as inescapable recursive structures. Here the key and often-repeated terms – textual strategies of reticence, Sartrean 'bad faith,' and the affect and subject position of shame – display their speculative character. *Shelley's Poetics of Reticence: Shelley's Shame* is rewarding but challenging to engage with. The book required further proofreading; and in a few moments this concern reaches to content (such as one error in a scholar's name, one on a poem's title, and the dating of 'On Life'). Roberts hammers key concepts of bad faith, reticence, and shame, and rivets home the argument that 'textual strategies of reticence' in Shelley 'perform a phenomenology of shame' (225). Bad faith and strategies of reticence aside – why ground the study exclusively in the feeling of shame? Roberts deploys from Giorgio Agamben the concept of the 'subject-in-shame.' Agamben's dynamics of subjectification and de-subjectification meet with Shelley's own practice, based on his relay of surrogate poet figures (32), of a future hermeneutics inveigling the reader to participate in their continual *resubjectification* (107, 213). Thus shame, as Roberts says frequently, can or should be of 'productive' utility. In view of Jerome McGann's and Paul de Man's charges that Romanticism pursues the illusory possibility of future hermeneutics – but flipping these valuations – Roberts argues that the acceptance of 'bad faith' in future-oriented hermeneutics is Shelley's proper creative legacy and authentic position (18): 'This is why his texts are so strategically reticent: asking their reader to carry on, to humanise, their affective work' (19).

Most recent theoretical engagements with Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'intersubjective' imagination view his future-oriented, open-ended, non-sovereign, affectively distributed, even atmospheric poetics as diverse mediums of radical thought that resist co-optation by increasingly dominant liberal thinking. But Roberts sets Shelley squarely amidst the problems of the utilitarian 'liberal subject' (228). This is a utility-ethic to which she commits him. Roberts also gauges the possibilities of Shelley's writing much more narrowly than do the radical readers of Shelley's indirect or otherwise 'reticent' lines of flight, through application of Wolfgang Iser's reader-response hermeneutics. At the end of the book's most rangy chapter, Roberts describes how this encircling hermeneutic strategy develops across texts, as 'the dialectic of reticence and impersonation which characterises all the works I have discussed' (170). In the chapter at hand, this choice of texts means *A Defence of Poetry*, 'Ode to the West Wind', 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' (not 'Ode,' as is multiple times wrongly said (150, 159)), and *Adonais*. Across the full study, chapters develop analytical close readings of *Alastor*, *The Cenci*, *Julian and Maddalo*, the

‘Jane poems’, and *The Triumph of Life*. Each chapter’s interpretive argument is impactful and distinctive, and the chapters’ movements are well digested and substantially linked.

Clear ties between chapters in part emerge because each is a moment in an unfinished dialectic that must not be won. The study’s philosophical bases – half post-Romantic philosophy from Kant to Hegel, half Sartre’s existentialism (provided with no context; and there is a bridge – Alexandre Kojève’s Hegel lectures – that Roberts does not mention) – are set in place through familiar schema. More grappling with the philosophical texts that ground this book would have taken away from the territory of Shelleyan criticism, but would have surmounted the problem of Roberts’s nearly interchangeable, fleet references to the famous names of ‘literary’ moments in philosophy. These include the passages on bad faith and metastability in Sartre, and Hegel’s ‘unhappy consciousness’ and ‘master-slave’ relation (mentioned late). Nevertheless, stepping back, Roberts’s study displays ambitions for a kind of thick phenomenological rendering of Romantic authorship and, further off, for a psychically ‘productive’ Romantic literary history of ideas: worthy aims once manifest in the works of Geoffrey Hartman and M.H. Abrams, and (I add) in Lionel Trilling’s uncited *Sincerity and Authenticity*. *Shelley’s Poetics of Reticence* forces through its terms as an undertaking of major critical argument. I admire the way Roberts’s book struggles for a poetics of ‘life’ at the risk of merely successful conceptualisations in ‘theory’.

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