

Mathelinda Nabugodi, *Shelley with Benjamin: A Critical Mosaic*. London: UCL Press, 2023. Pp. 152. £25 (pb). ISBN 9781800083240.

Shelley with Benjamin is the fruit of University College London's inaugural Creative Critical Writing PhD. Its subtitle 'a critical mosaic' encapsulates the creative ambition behind the book, which seeks to place Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin in an analytical montage. *Shelley with Benjamin* is 'a critical experiment, an attempt to develop a method for reading out of the materials being read' (xii). The bold structure of this 'experiment' aims not to read Shelley's poetry in the light of Benjamin's philosophy, but to redress what Mathelinda Nabugodi perceives as 'the totalitarian universalism of critical objectivity' (xvi). So, Nabugodi seeks to 'make my subjective self visible as part of my critical interpretation' (xv), interpolating personal and political details into the book. Shelley and Benjamin are brought into one another's orbit, but within the 'critical mosaic' it is sometimes hard to discern the stakes of the critical conversation and distinguish these from the author's creative ambition.

The book is in three sections. The first, 'Truth in a name', considers the legacy of naming for Shelley and Benjamin both in themselves and in their works. Nabugodi intersperses this section with autobiographical asides to 'occupy the margin as a site of resistance' against 'the strictures of the White academy' (xvi). These marginalia (15, 19, 26, 30, 35 and 43) seem tangential to the discussion but draw attention to the author's own name and legacy during her consideration of the writings of Shelley and Benjamin. The discussion of Shelley's 'Hymn to Mercury' is well-executed, though its connection to the overall conversation remains elusive. The subchapter 'Violets' provides an excellent introduction to Benjamin's philosophy of translation, and his diagnosis of the crisis of the fractionalization of language. 'Benjamin makes it the translator's task to arrange fragments across languages' (34), and one feels that criticism should fulfil the same function; namely, reintegrating the disparate into a restorative dialogue. Since translations are integral to *Shelley with Benjamin*, it is a shame that Nabugodi places these writers in close proximity to one another, rather than developing resonances into a wider argument.

'Loving knowledge', section two, considers Shelley and Benjamin's engagement with Plato's *Symposium* and their thoughts on the mores of Ancient Greece. A discussion on truth, metaphor and poetic language (57-59) stands out, as does the subchapter 'Love', which brings these thoughts into relation with the role of criticism itself. Benjamin writes that 'The task of art criticism is not to lift the veil but rather [...] to raise itself for the first time to the true view of the beautiful' (qtd on 63). Nabugodi develops from this the idea that 'criticism too aims towards [a] kind of generation' (89). At this point, *Shelley with Benjamin* labours under its own formal conceit, as Nabugodi draws the reader's attention to this critical ideal and signals her own creativity. She envisions her work as 'each paragraph a fragment carefully taking its place in a greater whole, this whole being nothing less than truth itself' (67). Since *Shelley with Benjamin* has no clearly defined argumentative telos, drawing the reader's attention to its creative structure does not always serve to strengthen its interpretative claims.

Similarly, the erudite consideration of guilt, atonement and forgiveness in *The Cenci*, which forms the bulk of the final section, 'Legacies of violence', does not bring these arguments to a clear conclusion. Rather, this section is 'punctuated by interlinear interruptions that forcefully insert the transatlantic slave trade' (xvii), which Nabugodi acknowledges is only tangentially relevant. These 'interruptions', framed as an 'ethical task' (98), occupy the spaces in the chapters where one might expect the threads of the analysis to be woven together. This is to the detriment of Nabugodi's textual analysis of Shelley and Benjamin, and risks characterizing these comments on the slave trade as tokenistic afterthoughts (for example, 125), as neither is given the critical space they warrant. Nabugodi uses *The Cenci* to provide stimulating commentary on Shelley's political and religious framework, although some of the

links made appear more tenuous than others. Maximising the merits of comparing Shelley and Benjamin would have enabled a greater critical stake to be claimed on these authors.

Shelley with Benjamin is perhaps too conceptual to realise the virtues of its textual analyses. Nabugodi's creative passion is evident, but her avowedly subjective authorial insertions such as 'Who am I to veil myself in moral righteousness and talk of slavery?' (131) and suggesting 'supernatural sanction [for] the reading I was engaged in' (30) are distracting for the reader. The book's creative and critical forces are more in tension than they are in unison. Nabugodi's critical mosaic sets out the tiles of an intriguing comparison but does not fully clarify the overarching picture to which these fragments might belong.

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