"Prodigious mixtures and confusions strange": The Self-Subverting Mixed Style of *The Cenci*

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I read the Greek Dramatists and Plato forever.
Shelley, letter to John Gisborne, October 22, 1821

Abstract This study positions Percy Bysshe Shelley as an important though ultimately unwilling contributor to the development of mixed-style mimesis and thus to the evolution of Western drama from neoclassicism to realism. To capture the historical dimensions and final irony of this thesis, I frame my analysis of Shelley's dramatic style with a set of poetic and critical contrasts. Judged in the light of twentieth-century treatments of the Cenci story by Antonin Artaud, Bertrand Tavernier, and George Elliott Clarke, Shelley's style appears comparatively unmixed and unrealistic or, as Stuart Curran has argued from different evidence, essentially neoclassical. Viewed in the light of Racinian tragedy, however, or even in the more restricted context of the post-Restoration English drama, Shelley's style appears radically mixed, not an antithesis to twentieth-century approaches to mimesis but a revolutionary anticipation of them. Situating Shelley by means of this double perspective, I show how he disposes the modern mixed style in *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* to make it subserve the ideal poetics and metaphysics of antiquity. As his *Defence of Poetry* argues and his stylistic treatment of Beatrice Cenci confirms, Shelley thus intended to legislate against his own mimetic breakthrough and, it would appear, significantly failed.

This essay benefited enormously from the challenges, queries, and suggestions made by the journal's referees, to whom I am most grateful. My further thanks to its editor, Meir Sternberg, for his thoughtful commentary and judicious guidance throughout the revision process.

Poetics Today 22:4 (Winter 2001).

1. The "Spirit and System" of *The Cenci*

Given his assurance of the imaginative power of the Cenci story, of its "national and universal interest . . . among all ranks of people," Percy Bysshe Shelley (1965, 2:70) might well have predicted the germinal force of his tragedy in subsequent literary history. What he could not have foreseen, however, was the *nature* of that force, for it has turned out to be exclusively stylistic, a development of his revolutionary means divorced from the poetic and philosophical ends he designed them to serve. In *The Cenci*, as in his better known but ultimately less influential drama *Prometheus Unbound*, both written in 1819, Shelley contrived to use a mixed-style approach to dramatic representation, yet in a way that would illuminate what he termed the "true philosophy" of the European drama and its classically derived principles concerning the separation of styles.[1] By a careful calibration of competing stylistic registers with various dramatic characters and effects, Shelley hoped that his "modern" mixed style would finally expose and subvert itself in favor of those "ancient" standards that had been imperfectly revived in the neoclassical understanding of dramatic decorum. Yet if subsequent adaptations of the Cenci story are any measure, just the opposite has transpired. Taking their cue from what appears to be a creative misreading of Shelley's play, succeeding generations of poets, playwrights, filmmakers, and other storytellers (to name only those whose medium is or involves language[2]) have cultivated and by now perfected the mixed style of representation. In the process they have rendered concepts of dramatic decorum—and the metaphysics of character Shelley would attach to them—functionally obsolete. Rather than subverting itself as it was intended to do, Shelley's style by imitation and extension has contributed to the subversion of the very philosophy of drama it was meant to promote.

Though simply stated, the irony of this thesis is richly complicated and, Shelley would argue, profoundly consequential. Shelley stands as a pivot in the history of Western dramatic style, poised between the movements we know broadly as neoclassicism and realism with their two different modes of literary representation. And he stands there uneasily because, though he developed in *Prometheus Unbound* and especially in *The Cenci* a forward-looking mixed style capable of the serious representation of reality, his dramatic sensibilities and themes were essentially backward-looking or *neo*-classical, as his *Defence of Poetry* (1821) makes abundantly clear. For Shelley (7:224) the

1. The distinction of "mixed-style" mimesis from classical and neoclassical forms of mimesis involving "the separation of styles" is, of course, Erich Auerbach's (1953 [1946]: *passim*.
2. For a fairly comprehensive list of nineteenth- and twentieth-century treatments of the Beatrice Cenci story, not only literary but also cinematic, plastic, photographic, operatic, etc., see the "Conviction" in George Ellion Clarke's *Beatrice Chancy* 1999: 152–54.

correlation of poetic style and metaphysical substance, or "spirit and system" as he puts it in his unfinished essay of 1818 entitled "Discourse on the Manners of the Ancients," constitutes the supreme and unsurpassed excellence of the ancient Greek poets.[3] What they had perfectly modeled and what modernity had never fully understood or properly imitated was a literary system of great range and flexibility, designed not merely to represent various types of experience and modes of being but simultaneously to evaluate them on a scale that presumed and, according to Shelley, everywhere embodied the superior value of essence over existence, of the ideal over the real. Reviewing the literary history of modern Europe, Shelley sees a fundamental misapprehension of the classical precedent and a resulting counterdevelopment in the direction of realism, with its emphasis on the external, circumstantial, and existential and its concomitant subordination of character to scene or environment. He thus constructs his own dramas as a saving intervention in this history, as an attempt to forestall the further corruption of both the genre and the being it reflects. Yet, though Shelley calls in the *Defence* for men of genius "capable of bringing back the drama to its principles" (123), no doubt feeling that in both *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* he had himself already answered, his work has ironically engendered not a dramatic return to the first principles of classicism but rather, especially in the twentieth century, a truly radical departure from them.

2. Essential Ancients, Existential Moderns: The "True Philosophy" of Dramatic Style

"It is indisputable," Shelley (1965, 7:119) contends in the *Defence*, that dramatic art "never was understood or practised according to the true philosophy of it, as at Athens." The classical dramatists are especially admirable in Shelley's mind for their harmonious and organic coordination of "the loftiest idealisms of passion and of power" with the perfection, "in its kind," of "each division in the art" (119). In the high dramatic "kind" tragedy, for example, the Athenian poets perfectly subordinate situation and action to character and meaning, so that "the spectator beholds himself, under a thin disguise of circumstance, stript of all but that ideal perfection and energy which every one feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become" (121). For similar reasons "Homer must be acknowledged to excel Shakespeare in the truth, the harmony, the satisfying completeness

3. Though "ontological substance" may be a more technically appropriate phrasing, I'm following Shelley, who in his "Discourse on the Manners of the Ancients" defines "Metaphysics" as "the science of man's intimate nature" (Shelley 1965, 7:225).

of his images, their exact fitness to the illustration, and to that to which they belong" (224). Homer's excellence lies in the complete appropriateness ("exact fitness") of each of his images to the thing it represents ("the illustration") and to the generic kind and/or rhetorical purpose ("that to which they belong") that representation subserves. Though Shelley centers this description on the term *image*, he clearly refers more generally to Homer's practice of linguistic decorum, which requires, in M. H. Abrams's (1984 [1954]: 6) comparable but more thorough-going definition, "that in each instance the expression must be intricately adjusted to the poetic kind (high or low, tragic, epic, or lyric), to the matter signified, and to the exact pleasurably emotional effect intended, as well as to the permanent character, incidental situation, and momentary mental state of the speaker who gives it utterance." Homer "embodied the ideal perfection of his age in human character" (Shelley 1965, 7:116) with (and through) exemplary decorum and so, like the Athenian tragedians after him, helped to unveil that ideal "internal type" Shelley believes everyone "would become." The Greek poets are thus, as Shelley (10:43) enthused in a letter two years earlier, when he had completed three of the four acts of *Prometheus Unbound* and was just commencing *The Cenci*, "our masters and creators, the Gods whom we should worship,—pardon me."

With such reverence for the ancients it is no wonder that Shelley excoriates the apostasy of modernity, especially as it affected the post-Renaissance drama. Shakespeare, Shelley (7:120) allows, was a singular genius, whose achievement came "in spite of the narrow conditions to which the poet was subjected by the ignorance of the philosophy of drama which has prevailed in modern Europe." So too was the Spanish dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca, who "attempted to fulfill some of the high conditions of dramatic representation neglected by Shakespeare" yet "omits the observation of conditions still more important" pertaining to the drama's essential purpose of representing "living impersonations of the truth of human passion" (ibid.). The following age, however, commencing in England with the Restoration and extending through the eighteenth century, represents for Shelley (7:121–22) the "period in our own history of the grossest degradation of the drama," in which "tragedy becomes a cold imitation of the form of the great masterpieces of antiquity, . . . often the very form misunderstood," and "comedy loses its ideal universality." This generic "decay" both reflects and reinforces—"sympathizes with" is how Shelley puts it—a "decay" in culture, "a corruption of manners" leading potentially to "an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life" (ibid.). Shelley's meaning in this admittedly vague passage is not difficult to reconstruct. As he urges later in the *Defence*,

> the cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceeds the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature. The body has then become too unwieldy for that which animates it. (135)

Shelley refers most immediately to the eighteenth century. With its ever-expanding market economy and all-consuming ethos of economic individualism, it cultivated as no previous age had both selfishness and materialism, a preoccupation with the bodily and external at the expense of the intellectual, spiritual, or otherwise internal qualities of human nature. "At such periods," Shelley claims much earlier in the discussion, anticipating the language of this later passage, "the calculating principle pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition, and poetry ceases to be expressed upon them" (122). In the place of poetry, defined as "the image of life expressed in its eternal truth" (115), Restoration and eighteenth-century drama presumably substitutes more externalized, bodily, and otherwise materialistic representations of human life, which comes increasingly to be imaged, therefore, merely in its *temporal* truth or reality. To the extent that it becomes comparable to "a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other bond of connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect," the drama fails to be what it should be and once was in the hands of the ancient masters: "the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature" (115).

This distinction between changeable and unchangeable or existential and essential forms of human nature is foundational both to Shelley's criticism of modern European drama and to his own countervailing practice as a playwright. As a proper idealist in philosophy, he refuses any distinction of kind between the objective and subjective, though he does insist upon an important difference in degree or value. Thus in his "Speculations on Metaphysics" (ca. 1815–1819), Shelley denies "what has commonly been supposed," that there is an "essential difference" between "those distinct thoughts which affect a number of persons, at regular intervals . . . which are called *real*, or *external objects*," and more internal and purely subjective thoughts, "those which affect only a few persons, and which recur at irregular intervals, and are usually more obscure and indistinct, such as hallucinations, dreams, and the ideas of madness" (59–60; Shelley's emphases). Although all thoughts are just that, thoughts or "ideas," and so are identical in kind, they can nevertheless be distributed according to their degrees of complexity and their corresponding values. As Shelley puts it, using the language of Lockean psychology,

> A scale might be formed . . . according to which all ideas might be measured, and an uninterrupted chain of nicely shadowed distinctions would be observed, from

> the faintest impressions of the senses, to the most distinct combination of those impressions; from the simplest of those combinations, to that mass of knowledge which, including our own nature, constitutes what we call the universe. ((61))

The scale would be graduated, in other words, from the most concrete and external ("impressions of the senses") to the most abstract and internal ("combinations of those impressions," especially referring to "our own nature"), or adopting Samuel Taylor Coleridge's distinction in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), from the most existential to the most essential.[4] Such a scale would be especially useful in measuring literary or imaginative ideas and determining their relative worth. The more existential and concrete, that is, circumstantial and bodily, the representation, the lower its value. And of course, conversely, the more essential, abstract, and universal the representation, the higher its value.

Shelley (1965, 7:122) has exactly this standard in mind when he condemns "the classical and domestic dramas" of the Restoration and the eighteenth century for degrading "sentiment and passion" to "caprice and appetite" and thereby transforming "the divine beauty of life" into the "monster," "Obscenity." In more descriptive and less evaluative language, modern critics of the English drama from 1660 to Shelley's day have substantiated Shelley's claim, emphasizing one related tendency that Shelley himself does not specify but that, given all the foregoing, he surely recognized. In her exceptional *English Dramatic Form, 1660–1760* (1981), Laura Brown traces what she too terms "the decline of the genre" (147) in the movement from early Restoration heroic action drama through affective tragedy to the eighteenth-century moral action play. As her many detailed analyses of representative works from the period clearly demonstrate, this trajectory "entails a major revision of Restoration dramatic practice and reflects a concurrent breakdown of the neoclassical rules that codify the social assumptions of the earlier drama" (ibid.: 146).[5] The dramatist more and more "deliberately disregards traditional generic distinctions and levels of

4. "Essence, in its primary signification, means . . . the inmost principle of the possibility of any thing, as that particular thing. It is equivalent to the *idea* of a thing, whenever we use the word, idea, with philosophic precision. Existence, on the other hand, is distinguished from essence, by the superinduction of *reality*" (Coleridge 1958 [1817/1907], 2:47) (Coleridge's emphases). In his letters Shelley articulates his preference for essence over existence repeatedly. Writing to Thomas Love Peacock in 1818, for example, Shelley (1965, 9:340) admits, "I always seek in what I see the manifestation of something beyond the present and tangible object." Almost three years later he writes to John Gisborne, "As to real flesh and blood, you know that I do not deal in those articles; you might as well go to a ginshop for a leg of mutton, as expect any thing human or earthly from me" (10:333).

5. Of the many discussions that provide suggestive parallels to Shelley's *The Cenci*, see especially Brown's (1981: 91–93, 152–63) treatments of Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682), Nicholas Rowe's *Jane Shore* (1714), and George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731).

style" and "classical notions of decorum in characterization"; at the same time, and very much as a result, he or she emphasizes "situation at the expense of assessment" and betrays "diminished interest in characterization and a diminished ability to . . . sustain consistent characters" (69, 146). Joseph Donohue, Jr., in his *Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age* (1970), proceeds from different premises and evidence to similar conclusions. The mode of characterization exemplified in the plays of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, he argues, dominated the English understanding of dramatic character from the mid-seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century. Donohue (1970: 23) identifies "three important [and clearly interrelated] qualities of the Fletcherian dramatic character: his passionate responsiveness within the carefully prescribed limits of a scene or sequence; his perversion from some posited norm of reasoned conduct under pressure of extreme circumstances; and his apparent psychological inconsistency." Thus in plays ranging from James Shirley's *The Traitor* (1635) to Joanna Baillie's *De Monfort* (1798), dramatic character is altered and redefined, scene by scene, according to the shifting affective designs of the playwright upon his or her audience. Here again is Brown's (1981: 86) thesis that character becomes subordinate to scene and action, with "consequent inconsistencies in plot and character motivation congenital to the mature affective tragedy and later to the tragic moral action." But as Donohue shows, through the eighteenth century playwrights increasingly tried to rationalize this inherited tendency to inconsistent characterization by thematizing it. Though crude perhaps, this general theme had become by Shelley's day pervasive in the serious drama: "under the stress of extreme circumstances, human personality undergoes inexplicable change" (Donohue 1970: 33).

The parallel to Shelley's Beatrice Cenci will be obvious at once. Raped by her father, threatened with continued rape, and apparently without any other recourse, Beatrice changes from an innocent and noble maiden first to a madwoman, then to a calculating parricide. By no means "inexplicable," the change in Beatrice's personality is quite clearly motivated in terms of "the stress of extreme circumstances." Shelley's play thus apparently shares the post-Restoration drama's structural and thematic propensity to changeable and inconsistent characterization. But what this generic heritage implies in terms of Shelleyan metaphysics is perhaps less immediately clear. Shelley inherits a dramatic form in which the breakdown of dramatic decorums (decorums never properly revived in the first place according to Shelley) has left playwrights with what Brown (1981: 101) calls "generic problems beyond the capacities of the age's most talented dramatists to resolve." These problems are located in the conception and representation of char-

acter. No longer grounded by the principled interrelation of certain genres and styles with certain modes of being, the very notion of "character" becomes destabilized and therefore subject in representation to incident and situation, to "circumstances" or external and existential realities. As Donohue (1970: 50) hints, this mimetic tendency to represent human character in its changeable rather than, as the ancients had, in its unchangeable forms has its corollary in empirical psychology: "Locke's notion of the reality of the individual consciousness coupled with his admitted inability to demonstrate its nature [i.e., essence] with certainty provides a psychological basis for the treatment of subjective and erratic states of mind increasingly evident in serious post-Restoration drama." What is equal must be convertible, as Shelley knew, so the reverse would also hold: that the representation of human character as erratic because existentially determined was reciprocally reinforcing the Lockean view of the human psyche, which seemed to vitiate the idea of essence. As a poet-philosopher oppositionally devoted to the ancient practice of representing the "internal type" of "ideal perfection," Shelley therefore constructs his dramas, especially *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*, to counteract the empiricism and materialism that were overtaking aesthetics and overwhelming metaphysics, at least as Shelley understood them.

Donohue seems to appreciate something of the philosophical stakes when he characterizes *The Cenci* as a play about "radical innocence" that attempts (and in his view fails) to show "that the crime [Beatrice] commits is somehow separable from the integral real person" (ibid.: 164). Yet both his own and Brown's analyses amply demonstrate that this alone cannot distinguish Shelley's play from the offending bulk of Restoration and eighteenth-century drama. As Brown especially insists, playwrights from Thomas Otway to George Lillo to Baillie confronted the same problem Shelley does. To secure the sympathetic response of the audience while at the same time protecting their morals, the protagonist of affective and moral action tragedy had to be pure and innocent, an exemplar of virtue, yet for the plot to be *tragic* the protagonist had somehow to be implicated in a less-than-virtuous action resulting in his or her demise. Heroes and heroines thus faced the commanding task of breaking both the law (whether criminal or merely conventional) and the audience's heart, and in play after play they managed the matter rather haphazardly, disjunctively. The usual procedure, as in Nicholas Rowe's *Jane Shore* (1714), was that any "aspersions of guilt or misconduct" in the hero's character were, one way or another, simply "eliminated in time for the pathetic paroxysm of Act V" (Brown 1981: 153). The result was a "crippling formal impediment," a "functional inconsistency" that infected not just English but European drama generally and that "is

not the simple unintended consequence of an action that treats character as entirely subordinate to effect, but a fundamental, necessary defect in a form that regards the moralized paragon as the primary vehicle of comprehensibility" (ibid.: 154, 181).[6] In *The Cenci*, Shelley proposes to correct the defective form, as it were, from within by adopting it and reconstructing it according to the "true philosophy" of the drama.

The grave flaw of post-Restoration drama was its failure to formally rationalize and unify the disjunctive claims of its actions, characters, and themes, especially at the level of style, where all such claims are made manifest. Though criticism has not been perfectly clear on this point, the best of it does seem to employ this comprehensive understanding of style, which is almost surely the one held by Shelley and other theoretically disposed romantics.[7] Brown (1981: xv), for instance, defines the genre "drama" as follows:

> Plays are actions, constructed from the unfolding conflicts and relationships among characters whom we understand according to our evaluation of them in terms of their represented world. This evaluation is the basis of our comprehension of the plot and thus of our engagement of the story, since it directs our expectations about the characters' fates in relation to our immediate assessment of their merits. Actions can differ, then, in regard to the terms of evaluation they represent, the kinds of characters and conflicts they depict, and the nature and dynamism of the relationship between the characters' deserts and fates.

In Brown's view, mimetically conditioned judgment ("our evaluation . . . in terms of [the] represented world") has priority over all other features; it is "the basis of our comprehension" of plot, character, conflict, and fate or resolution. The definition begs the question of what exactly the "terms" of

6. Compare, for example, Denis Diderot's *The Natural Son* (1757) and Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller's *The Robbers* (1781).

7. The second half of *Biographia Literaria* (chapters 14–24), Coleridge's invaluable discussion of William Wordsworth's poetics and poetry, affords one extended example of Romantic stylistics in both theory and practice. Believing that "the ultimate end of criticism is . . . to establish the principles of writing," Coleridge (1958 [1817/1907], 2:63) focuses the entire disquisition on the question, "By what principles should the poet regulate his own style?" The short answer is, "By the principles of grammar, logic, psychology!" (64), and here the correlation of the three final terms should remind us of Shelley (1965, 7:223), who suggests even more clearly their Trinity-like consubstantiality: "Metaphysics, the science of man's intimate nature, and logic, or the grammar and elementary principles of that science." The longer answer spells out an essentialist decorum, which helps both poet and critic judge the appropriateness of a given style to a given genre, purpose, character, etc. Thus chapter after chapter, we hear Coleridge (1958 [1817/1907], 2:21–24, 28, 31, 49, 56) referring to "the manner of treatment" of various literary works, invoking standards of "appropriateness," "facility," "proportion," "dramatic propriety," "probability," "harmonious adjustment" to evaluate the poet's "use and selection" of (principally) images, diction, and meter.

representation are, but Brown's discussion, especially when she moves from abstraction to application, would indicate that they are essentially stylistic. For example, Brown argues that "the heroic action is shaped and governed by a system of precise epic, chivalric, or Platonic standards, which express the ideology of a self-consciously exclusive social class and which are justified aesthetically by neoclassical epic and dramatic theory" (ibid.: 3). Here ideology, which supplies the "standards" that "shape and govern" the action, intersects with aesthetic theory; surely the site of such intersection is the language of the text or, more accurately, its style. As Brown (ibid.: 5) rather muddily puts it, "The details of the drama's manner—its style, tone, and language—are not merely local consequences of its theatrical context. They are integral characteristics of its form."[8] I can find no absolute distinction between the terms *manner*, *style*, *tone*, and *language*; the first three are coextensive, and they are all a subset of the fourth. We might further specify such a list with the terms *diction*, *figuration*, *rhetoric*, *meter*, *rhyme*, *parallelism*, *hypotaxis and parataxis*, *foregrounding and backgrounding*, and so forth and in doing so get a fair sense of the artistic choices necessarily involved in Abrams's (1984 [1954]: 6) definition of *linguistic decorum*. Decorum governs the "intricate adjustment" of poetic expression to genre ("poetic kind"), to the poet's mimetic and affective objectives ("the matter signified" and "the exact pleasurably emotional effect intended"), and to dramatic character ("the speaker who gives it utterance"). These various ideological and aesthetic factors are *realized* in the "intricately adjusted" expression or style. *Style* may thus be broadly defined as the tangible and more or less principled or decorous expression of an artist's ideological and aesthetic choices.[9]

The generic and structural problems Brown identifies in post-Restoration drama are therefore isolable in and epitomized by its style. As Brown suggests, that drama increasingly disregards neoclassical decorum concerning the separation of styles and develops instead a mixed style approach to representation. This development, however, is undertheorized and therefore largely unsystematic. Even as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century the mixed style, though widely in evidence, lacks a coherent poetics, an organizing rationale that would govern and harmonize its practice. This holds especially true for dramatic character. The inconsistent charac-

8. Of course this "manner" has its own cultural-historical context, but Brown (1981: 5–6) insists that stylistic features "must first be defined formally, even though a full account . . . would ultimately return to the context of the play—and to the social, economic, and political as well as the intellectual, cultural, and theatrical history that determines its form." Brown's distinction here is problematic, to say the least, but it can serve. See Fowler 1991.

9. Shelley (1965, 2:173) has something like this in mind when he claims, echoing Aristotle and anticipating Erich Auerbach, "poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation."

terization argued by both Brown and Donohue is most readily discernible in the inconsistency of the style with which a given character is expressed. Donohue (1970: 24) implies as much in his description of the Fletcherian protagonist: he "seizes upon some one emotion and, with the suave playfulness of an accomplished rhetorician, rides upon its crest simply to see how far it will carry. When his tour is complete, he coolly abandons it with no sense of having compromised himself in any way." The parallel to Brown's analysis of the subordination of character to affective scene should be clear, and Donohue here implicitly links the resulting inconsistency to the various *rhetorical* formulations and reformulations of an otherwise "'core-less' dramatic character" (ibid.).

We thus find "the symptomatic inconsistency of the best, most popular, and most strictly bourgeois" (Brown 1981: 158) of the eighteenth-century moral action tragedies, Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731), manifested most palpably in its unrationalized and therefore incoherent use of mixed stylistic resources. Brown highlights the play's inconsistent characterization and corresponding but competing themes of inexplicable personality change and radical innocence: "Lillo's problem, then, like Rowe's and Addison's, is that of motivating a workable tragic plot with a static, flawless, and supremely pathetic central figure. His solution is ingenious inconsistency. Barnwell [the play's central figure] is a criminal, represented in the commission of robbery and murder. But the manner of Lillo's depiction of his crimes is calculated to erase the blame and leave only the pathos of his tragic fate" (ibid.: 159). Lillo's "manner" suggests, however, not calculation but, as Shelley would say, caprice, an ill-considered mimetic willfulness traceable at best to shifting dramatic exigencies, at worst to authorial inattention. The play's conflict and resolution turn on the innocence of the eighteen-year-old George Barnwell, manipulated to his demise by the older and deeply embittered but still powerfully attractive and persuasive "lady of pleasure," Millwood. Just before Barnwell's first appearance in the play, Millwood gives a characterization of him that *must* obtain if the audience is to believe in and sympathize with his downfall, which she'll effectively accomplish by the end of act 1. "What manner of person am I to receive?" she asks rhetorically and immediately answers, "He is young, innocent, and bashful" (1.4.5–6). So indeed he shows himself on arrival: hesitant, deferential, apologetic, bumbling, no one of his first five speeches exceeding ten simple and conventional words, for example, "Pardon me, madam"; "I fear I am too bold"; "*retires in confusion*" (1.5.4–6). But this is only for the moment; as Lillo's affective purposes shift, so too does his representation of Barnwell's character. Within 150 lines, now succumbing to the seductive wiles of Millwood, a different Barnwell emerges, or rather *two* different Barnwells,

judging from the enormous stylistic disparity of his two final speeches at the climax of the act:

Barnwell.

To hear you talk, though in the cause of vice, to gaze upon your beauty, press your hand, and see your snow-white bosom heave and fall, enflames my wishes. My pulse beats high. My senses are in a hurry, and I am on the rack of wild desire. Yet, for a moment's guilty pleasure, shall I lose my innocence, my peace of mind, and hopes of solid happiness?

Millwood.

Chimeras all!

Come on with me and prove
No joy's like woman kind, nor Heav'n like love.

Barnwell.

I would not—yet I must on.
Reluctant thus, the merchant quits his ease
And trusts to rocks and sands and stormy seas;
In hopes some unknown golden coast to find,
Commits himself, though doubtful, to the wind;
Longs much for joys to come, yet mourns those left behind. (1.8.14–29)

That this passage is conducted in mixed style goes without saying, but notice further that, whether from a lack of ability, interest, precedent, or more likely a combination of all three, Lillo has virtually no control over this style and its characterizing effects. In mimetic terms the innocent and bashful Barnwell has simply ceased to exist, replaced on the one hand by a character accomplished in self-anatomy and especially articulate, as the sexually innocent tend not to be, about his own desire and on the other by a character of apparently even greater experience and more various reflection, whose sententiousness is congruent with neither Barnwell's original character nor his involvement in the "guilty" action underway. Here and throughout the play the stylistic means are inconsistently suited to Lillo's dramatic and thematic ends, which themselves come to seem inconsistent. To adopt Brown's terms, Lillo's aesthetics and his ideology don't quite match up, and their disjuncture is most obvious in the haphazard mixedness of his style.[10]

As Shelley was quite aware, inattentiveness to dramatic style is dangerous not only poetically and philosophically but also critically. In his otherwise unexceptionable discussion of Shelley's *Cenci* and its relationship to the dominant mode of Fletcherian affective tragedy, Donohue fails to appreciate Shelley's stylistic difference from his precursors and consequently mis-

10. In his introduction to Lillo's play, William H. McBurney makes exactly this point: "Lillo's style is frequently faulty"; "he failed . . . to invent a style which could realistically *and* artistically convey 'a tale of private woe'" (Lillo 1965: xxiv, xxv).

evaluates Shelley's relative achievement in the play. Donohue (1970: 169) finds the closest parallel to Shelley's drama in Henry Hart Milman's *Fazio* (1815), which Shelley (1965, 10:265) saw performed at Covent Garden in early 1818 and which he apparently felt was "miserable trash." Yet on Donohue's reading Shelley's heroine is largely indistinguishable from Milman's. Donohue (1970: 174) thus presents the two following passages as fully comparable instances of the conventional "mad scene."

> [Milman's] *Bianca.*
> Oh, I am mad, wildly, intensely mad.
> 'Twas but last night the moon was at the full;
> And ye, and ye, the sovereign and the sage,
> The wisdom and the reverence of all Florence,
> E'en from the maniac's dim disjointed tale,
> Do calmly judge away the innocent life,
> The holy human life, the life God gave him [her convicted husband, Fazio]. (*Fazio* 3.2.194–200)
>
> [Shelley's] *Beatrice.*
> There creeps
> A clinging, black, contaminating mist
> About me . . . 'tis substantial, heavy, thick,
> I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
> My fingers and my limbs to one another,
> And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
> My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
> The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!
> My God! I never knew what the mad felt
> Before; for I am mad beyond all doubt! (*The Cenci* 3.1.16–25)

Donohue's (174) treatment of these extracts is brief and baffling, a one-clause analysis followed by false conclusions: "Bianca and Beatrice explicitly announce that they are mad, and their styles of expression are equally extravagant. More important, the same dramatic technique and purpose support the language in each case." Nothing could be further from the truth than the assertion that these two styles are "equally extravagant." In every respect except the one Donohue specifies, that is, that the two speakers announce their own madness, the extracts differ, whether we consider grammatical structure, rhythmic effects, the comparative concreteness or abstraction of the diction and imagery, the character's attention or inattention to contextual cues, or as a consequence of all these, the dramatic propriety and more or less convincing effect of the whole. Clearly Shelley's style is substantially more "extravagant" than Milman's and yields a much more convincing mimesis of madness. Clearly too the two poets

do *not* share "the same dramatic technique" or, despite the superficial similarity of their intent to represent madness, even the same "purpose." By failing to read Shelley's style aright, Donohue misreads not only Shelley's drama but, more importantly, its historical transformation of its inherited materials. In such misreading, as we shall see, Donohue is far from alone.

But let me first recap. Shelley takes up a seriously flawed dramatic form, intending to repair it by appeal to the ancient ideal of the separation of styles. Yet, though it refers to a classical standard, Shelley's stylistic solution to the formal problems of the English drama is not itself, in the strictest sense, an instance or embodiment of classicism. Rather, his strategy involves a fully conscious use of the increasingly mixed but desperately unsystematized linguistic resources deployed by Otway, Rowe, Lillo, Baillie, Milman, and countless others. Shelley adopts their mixed style but carefully distributes it according to the classical scale of value, where "low" corresponds to "comparatively external" or "real" and "high" to "comparatively internal" or "ideal." In thus coordinating, within a single drama, different stylistic registers and effects with his protagonist's various passions and self-presentations, Shelley has two ambitious and closely related ends: 1) to distinguish between existential and essential, changeable and unchangeable forms of *being* and thereby to repair the "necessary defect" in modern dramatic characterization and 2) to illustrate and simultaneously evaluate existential and essential forms of *representation* and in the process restore the drama's original but largely defunct capacities for the latter sort. If it achieved these ends, his drama would illustrate the true philosophy of the genre and effectively legislate the genuine revival of both the philosophy *and* the genre (which are in Shelley's view essentially one) in European literature.

3. Distinguishing Means and Ends: Ironic Developments in Mixed-Style Mimesis

The revolution Shelley authored is not the one he intended; indeed quite the opposite. *The Cenci*'s ironic impact upon literary history may be observed in its relationship to three of its twentieth-century progeny, whose authors had all of the resources of realism and modernism at their disposal (and those of postmodernism in the final instance). They therefore have seemed to critics simply to contrast with Shelley, particularly in style. Yet I hope to show these works are better understood not as a series of increasingly radical departures from the Shelleyan mimetic but rather as a significant development or, as Shelley might urge, a *recrudescence* of it.

In "Artaud's Revision of Shelley's *The Cenci*: The Text and Its Double,"

Jane Goodall (1987: 118), despite her title, treats Antonin Artaud's *The Cenci* (1935) as a thoroughgoing "transcodification" of Shelley's play. She (ibid.: 118) locates the difference in Shelley's purely "logocentric" approach to representation as opposed to Artaud's "multiple coded arrangement involving complex interplay between different modes of expression." By downplaying linguistic representational means and emphasizing "gestic and kinesic terms," Artaud replaces "the even rhythms of Shelley's blank verse" with a much more "volatile surface texture" designed to "heighten sensory awareness and intensify the isolated moment, the here and now of the performance" and "of the objective world" (ibid.: 119). For Goodall then, Artaud's "radical and pervasive" difference from Shelley lies in his more mixed representational means, which give his drama a much more immediate, sensory, and existential focus, a "predominance of action over reflection" (ibid.: 119). Even more emphatically nonlinguistic and brutally existential is the later work of Artaud's countryman, the filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier. In his 1988 *La Passion de Beatrice*, Tavernier transposes the Cenci story from late-sixteenth-century Italy to medieval France. Because of this new setting and especially because of the *visual* medium, the film focuses on the graphic, earthy, and otherwise immediate and unseemly realities of the story in a way no merely *textual* version could. Tavernier's purpose, announced in the film's foreword, is to depict "*des enfants sauvages*" (savage children) or "*des êtres nus*" (naked creatures) in a universe that is "*vaste et féroce*" (vast and ferocious). As viewers of *La Passion* readily perceive, Tavernier neglects no detail that might contribute to the film's austere and unrelenting realism, nor does he allow, in the symbolic action of its imagery, any "logocentric" or metaphysical assertion of Beatrice's innocence or justification of her crime or even, really, the need for one. At first glance the externalized, cruelly existential focus again seems to mark, as Goodall suggests for Artaud, more of a departure from Shelley's practice than an extension of it.

A similar sense of radical difference from Shelley informs the first critical notices of the most recent treatment of the Cenci story, *Beatrice Chancy* by the Canadian poet George Elliott Clarke, issued in both dramatic (1999) and operatic (1998) versions. Reviewing the opera, Lauren Henry (2000: 101), while admitting certain general affinities between Clarke's and Shelley's texts, sees "two very different works of art." Henry writes, "There is no question in Clarke's text, as there is in Shelley's, where Beatrice's act of revenge has come from and what it indicates about human nature. With Shelley, we are left to ponder whether this tragic character might have found another course of action that would have allowed her to remain the pure soul, the 'gentle and amiable being,' that Shelley believed she was meant to be. . . . With Clarke, such questions become unimportant: Beatrice's murder of her

father is, in fact, the *natural* and justified outcome of an *unnatural* and utterly indefensible system of oppression" (102). Clarke's opera, in other words, maintains a rigorous focus on what Shelley (1965, 7:115) terms "time, place, circumstance, cause and effect," rendering "unimportant" those questions having to do with Beatrice's "pure soul" or, again in Shelley's terms, "the unchangeable form" of her being. Kevin McNeilly (2000: 176, 177, 178), in a review focused on the mixed style of Clarke's verse drama, seconds Henry's analysis. *Beatrice Chancy* "is not simply a cooked-up version of *The Cenci* transplanted to Nova Scotia"; "the intertext is pulled, convoluted, reshaped" by Clarke's "vernacular formalism," which turns the "traditional form against itself" and likewise "stirs its listeners to visceral, sensual transformation." I'm not certain what "transformation" exactly McNeilly has in mind, but Clarke's style is rightly characterized as both extremely mixed (as the oxymoronic "vernacular formalism" nicely suggests) and emphatically physical ("visceral, sensual") in both reference and effect.

Where I would want to take issue with McNeilly, as I would with Henry and Goodall, is in the identification of increasingly mixed representational means with fundamental difference from Shelley. Shelley was, as I've already suggested and will demonstrate presently, a great innovator in mixed style mimesis. The apparent stylistic contrast between him and Artaud or Clarke is therefore relative, a difference of degree rather than kind, and better characterized as a development than a "radical reshaping." The *radical* distinction is not in what Artaud's or Clarke's style *presents* but in what it *fails to present*. Shelley's play too uses a mixed style to represent existential realities, but it does not limit its attention to such realities. We might state the distinction between Shelley and his imitators in much the same terms Shelley uses to characterize the difference between Homer and Sophocles on the one hand and the bucolic and erotic poets of Rome on the other. The superiority of the Greeks "over these succeeding writers consists in the presence of those thoughts which belong to the inner faculties of our nature, not in the absence of those which are connected with the external" (Shelley 1965, 7:123). Like the Romans, Artaud and Clarke imitate the "external" portions of their great forebear's thought and style but largely fail to represent those characteristic "thoughts" of his pertaining to our "inner . . . nature." In Henry's blunt but I think insightful words, "such questions" of metaphysical essence now simply "become unimportant."

But let me for the moment grant the premise of radical stylistic difference between Shelley and his successors to outline its critical implications for our reception of Shelley. Indeed the sense of difference is not far to seek. Compare, for example, Shelley's and Clarke's treatments of Beatrice's mad

scene, which in both plays transpires within hours of her father's first incestuous assault upon her. Here is Shelley:

> *Beatrice. (She enters staggering, and speaks wildly.)*
> Reach me that handkerchief!—My brain is hurt;
> My eyes are full of blood; just wipe them for me . . .
> I see but indistinctly . . .
> *Lucretia.*
> My sweet child,
> You have no wound; 'tis only a cold dew
> That starts from your dear brow . . . Alas! Alas!
> What has befallen?
> *Beatrice.*
> How comes this hair undone?
> Its wandering strings must be what blind me so,
> And yet I tied it fast.—O horrible!
> The pavement sinks under my feet! The walls
> Spin round! I see a woman weeping there,
> And standing calm and motionless, whilst I
> Slide giddily as the world reels. . . . My God!
> The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!
> The sunshine on the floor is black! The air
> Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe
> In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked! (*The Cenci* 3.1.1–15)

And now the equivalent lines in Clarke, from the libretto for the opera:[11]

> *Beatrice.* (*Wildly*)
> I was black, but comely. Don't look
> Upon me: this flesh is dying.
> I'm perfumed, bleeding carrion.
> My eyes weep pus, my womb's sopping
> With tears; I can hardly walk: the floors
> Are tizzy, the sick walls tumbling,
> Crumbling like proved lies.
> His scythe went shick shick shick and cut
> My flowers; they lay in heaps, murdered.
> *(As if awakening, tearing her hair)*
> His sweat infests my hair!
> Get a knife! I'll hack it off!
> He dug his lips upon my breasts:

11. I quote from the libretto because it conveniently condenses the action of the play without losing any of the mixedness of Clarke's style. As Clarke (1998: 63) puts it, "The libretto reflects my diction, poetics, and obsessions" with a "hard purity" of expression.

> Hand me a knife, I'll slice 'em off.
> His breath panted upon my thighs—
> Draw me a bath of boiling pitch. (*Beatrice Chancy* 3.1.1–15)

Though at first Clarke's verses may appear to be little more than a paraphrase of Shelley's, very rapidly the elevated register and metaphorical displacements adapted from Shelley devolve into a much lower, more literal style that is, like nothing in Shelley, perfectly explicit in its reference to the rape and almost wholly unadorned and dialectal in utterance. Even where we hear the clearest echoes, Clarke's style is comparatively vulgar and grotesque. Shelley's "My eyes are full of blood" becomes "My eyes weep pus." Clarke's Beatrice refers directly to her womb, which is not even figuratively signified in Shelley, and her diction degrades almost at once from the learned and allusive ("I was black, but comely," "perfumed, bleeding carrion") to the idiomatic ("my womb's sopping," "the floors are tizzy," "proved lies"). True she affects the conceit of men as mowers of feminine flora, but its potential elevation is seriously compromised by the low register in which she voices it. Notice the rudimentary diction, the simple syntax, and, especially, the onomatopoeic concreteness of the adverbial phrase: "His scythe went shick shick shick and cut / My flowers." Contributing to these unsettling effects is the embedded allusion to Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," which cuts in yet another direction across the controlling vehicle of mower/flowers, amplifying from within its all-too-real tenor. Beatrice proceeds to tear her hair and, at the touch of her father's sweat, descends even further to her most brutal—that is, most bodily, literal, realistic—register. Here metaphor virtually disappears, the diction is unabatedly low, the syntax becomes ruthlessly paratactic, and the true matters at hand, both the act of rape and the self-loathing it engenders, are starkly imaged: "He dug his lips upon my breasts! / Hand me a knife I'll slice 'em off." This may be, as McNeilly (2000: 178) suggests, "poetry of the highest order," but its bluntness, crudity, and violence make it seem substantially different from Shelley's.

Though of degree rather than kind, these differences in Clarke's treatment of the scene tend nonetheless to heighten our sense of the austerity and restraint of Shelley's version. Comparing the two, we are likely to feel with Stuart Curran (1970: 90, 257), surely the most influential critic on Shelleyan drama, that Shelley's "constant iteration of the unmentionable deed" is dramatically "jejune and tiresome," that ultimately "the play is Janus-faced, looking backward for its structural means and forward to a time when the theatre could treat such themes as Shelley broached with a candor his age lacked." Yet Curran's (ibid.: 257) sense of a maladjustment between Shelley's structural means and his thematic ends—or between the

"antiquated techniques" at Shelley's disposal and the "advanced ideas" he intended them to embody—is, I submit, retrospectively overdetermined, as is our initial reading of Clarke's stylistic difference from Shelley.[12] To get a full and fair description of Shelley's style, we need to read his drama from the other side, as it were, comparing it not only to its successors but also to its precursors. In other words, we should temper our retrospective sense of Shelley's style with a prospective view of the horizon of expectations (outlined in the previous section) that Shelley confronted and stunningly surpassed. Here Curran has led and partly misled the way. A central conclusion of *Shelley's* Cenci*: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (1970) is the well-argued notion that Shelley's dramatic art is less romantic or even Elizabethan than it is classical.[13] In his later essay "Shelleyan Drama" (1986) on the subject in general, Curran concludes that, particularly with its "structure of non-action" and its corresponding emphasis on passions and psychology, Shelley's drama is essentially neoclassical, more comparable to Jean Racine's than to Sophocles' or Shakespeare's. Like Racine's, Shelley's "is a dramaturgy not of action but of psychology, not of doing but of being"; it "reflects not actions, as in Aristotle's formula for mimesis, but passions" (Curran 1986: 68, 73). Though both illuminating and broadly accurate, Curran's observations about Shelley's neoclassicism apply unproblematically to Shelley's poetic ends alone and not to his poetic means.

Particularly in its development of a mixed-style form of tragic mimesis, Shelley's dramaturgy represents a significant departure from conventional neoclassical dramatic decorums, which, as Erich Auerbach argues in *Mimesis* (1953 [1946]), found their most sustained and perfect expression in Racine. Through an overrigorous interpretation of classical rhetorical theory, which dictated a sublime or elevated style (*sermo gravis* or *sublimis*) for noble subjects and a low style (*sermo remissus* or *humilis*) for common or vulgar subjects (Auerbach 1953 [1946]: 151), neoclassicism formulated schematic rules governing the matters and manners of literary

12. Though Curran is entirely forgiving, his implied charge here would surely strike Shelley as serious, especially if Curran rightly judges Shelley as essentially a classicist in dramatic style. To whatever extent Shelley failed to adapt his structural means to the matter to be signified—and here we are speaking of the very mainspring of the Cenci plot—he would be guilty of violating the first principle of dramatic composition, at least in classical and neoclassical theory, that of linguistic decorum. And to the extent that he violated decorum, his drama would be an aesthetic failure. I intend to explore and finally dismiss this charge, but only to expose what Shelley would surely take as an even more radical failure of his drama, stemming precisely from his structural, or more accurately, stylistic *innovations*.

13. See, for example, Curran's (1970: 75) distinction of Cenci-as-artist from Shelley, "who's rather classical than romantic in his art," and his discussion of *The Cenci* as essentially classical rather than Elizabethan drama (260ff.).

production, or more concisely, linguistic decorum.[14] In dramaturgy the principle of linguistic decorum was especially forceful and exclusive. As Auerbach puts it, speaking primarily of Racine, "The separation of the tragic from the occurrences of everyday and human-creatural life was carried out in such a radical way as never before" (370): the tragic personae are exclusively aristocratic, their actions and passions transpire "in the strictest seclusion . . . from everything below them" (382), and they discourse invariably in the elevated register. The representation of reality, of the "everyday and human-creatural," is thus severely limited: "references to sleeping, eating and drinking, the weather, landscape, and time of day are almost completely absent"; "there is hardly a trace of the physical and sexual"; "it becomes impossible to do more than to allude in the most general way to the historical, social, economic, and regional determinants of the occurrence" (382, 386). Such human-creatural realities and the modes of expression appropriate or "natural" to them were, as neoclassical theory held, the proper domain only of low-style drama, the popular farce or learned burlesque, or much sanitized and considerably elevated, of the intermediate style of social comedy and satire. What rarely appears in French neoclassicism and not at all in Racine is what Auerbach terms "the mixed style" of mimesis, the peculiarly Christian approach to representation, which from the first saw fit to combine the low and human-creatural with the elevated and tragic and which ultimately, more than the classical approach in Auerbach's

14. *Vulgar* is an admittedly slippery term. I use it in this essay as does Auerbach (1953 [1946]: 158–59, 194, 278–79, 315, 411, 480–81, etc.) to describe a stylistic range extending from the "common" to the "low." Vulgar style emphasizes "creatural-realistic" referents (matters of representation) using diction and imagery drawn from the most colloquial, dialectal, idiomatic, or otherwise "colorful" registers. Shelley's use of *vulgar* varies. Most commonly, in works from the early essay "On Life" (1815 or earlier) to the mature *Defence*, Shelley uses it to mean unlearned, uneducated. But he also uses it, especially when regarding poetic style, to mean conventional or hackneyed as well as low and unseemly or inappropriate. Thus in a letter to Leigh Hunt in late summer 1819, when he had just finished writing *The Cenci*, Shelley (1965, 10:68) comments on the style of another recent composition, the dramatic dialogue "Julian and Maddalo": "I have employed a certain familiar style of language to express the actual way in which people talk with each other whom education and a certain refinement of sentiment have placed above the use of vulgar idioms. I use the word *vulgar* in its most extensive sense; the vulgarity of rank and fashion is as gross in its way as that of Poverty, and its cant terms equally expressive of bare conceptions, and therefore equally unfit for Poetry." Shelley's almost Wordsworthian formulation here should not be misconstrued as a species of antic lassicism. As he continues in the letter to Hunt, "Not that the familiar style is to be admitted in the treatment of a subject wholly ideal, or in that part of any subject which relates to common life, where the passion exceeding a certain limit touches the boundaries of that which is ideal" (68–69). In the treatment of *ideal* as opposed to *familiar* matters, Shelley would adjust his style to suit his subject, setting aside the "*sermo pedestris*" of "Julian and Maddalo," as he calls it in a letter in 1820 (168), and adopting the *sermo sublimis* he deploys in, for example, act 4 of *Prometheus Unbound*.

amply demonstrated view, determined the course of Western realism, of the literary representation of *reality*. The passage from Clarke above—with its mulatto speaker, half slave, half aristocrat; its swift transitions between literary and colloquial registers; its metaphors of displacement jostling with unflinching metonymies; its arresting fusion of passionate or psychological *and* bodily or creatural emphases—represents an extreme of the mixed style. In the neoclassical view such "style" would be falsely so-called, would be in fact an abomination.

But what of Shelley's play and its style? To what extent does it conform to this neoclassical separation of styles with its strict delimitations of the decorous or, what is the same thing, the "natural"? Like Racine, Shelley does set his tragic action squarely in the noble class but not exclusively (witness the key role of Marzio, to which we shall return). Even among the aristocrats, furthermore, especially the gold-obsessed Cenci and his son Giacomo, whom Cenci has ruined financially, economic considerations and the sociopolitical world they imply weigh heavily and decisively. Again like Racine, Shelley prefers to foreground tragic passions and to displace action into the background, offstage. Yet the actions in themselves are here emphatically domestic and grotesque, as they are not in Racine, and the expression of the passions frequently descends from the elevated register, as it does not in Racine.[15] Then too, where Racine omits reference to momentary or circumstantial setting (e.g., details of time, place, landscape, sleeping, eating, and drinking), to the creatural (especially the morbid and sexual), and to actual sociopolitical practices and problematics, eschewing the representation of realities that "naturally" dictate the low or at best intermediate level of style, Shelley admits virtually all of these into his tragedy, not copiously, to be sure, but carefully, indeed programmatically. Given such departures from neoclassical standards of tragic decorum, we should not wonder that the favored objection of Shelley's outraged early reviewers concerned the play's "unnatural" matter and manners, by which commentators meant either not occurring in nature or indecorous or both at once, as in the following from the *British Review*:

> Incestuous rape, murder, the rack, and the scaffold are not the proper materials of the tragic Muse. . . . Such blasphemous ravings cannot be poetry for they are neither sense nor nature. No such being as Cenci existed: none such could exist. The historical fact was in itself disgustingly shocking; and, in Mr Shelley's hands, the fable becomes even more loathsome and less dramatic than the fact.

15. Beatrice, for example, says of her father, "he has given us all / Ditch water" (*The Cenci* 2.1.66–67). Here the metonymic phrase "ditch water" (i.e., sewage running in open gutters) is particularly gross in reference and, despite its slightly euphemistic quality, undignified as diction.

> It is true that there are tragedies of the highest order (the *Oedipus Tyrannus* for instance) where the catastrophe turns upon an event from which nature recoils; but the deed is done unwittingly; it is a misfortune, not a crime; it is kept back as much as possible from our view; the hopes, fears, and sufferings of the parties occupy our thoughts, and all that is revolting to purity of mind is only slightly hinted at. Here the deed is done with premeditation; it is done from a wanton love of producing misery; it is constantly obtruded on us in its most disgusting aspect; the most hateful forms of vice and suffering, preceded by involuntary pollution and followed by voluntary parricide, are the materials of this mis-called tragedy. (Quoted in White 1966 [1938]: 211, 213)

As the overstated but nonetheless astute contrast with Sophocles makes clear, Shelley's unforgivable difference resides precisely in his mimetic and stylistic choices, his decision, for example, to foreground ("obtrude on us"), presumably in his diction, imagery, and use of other linguistic resources, the "most disgusting aspects" and "loathsome" facticity of his play's incest and murder, the very things Sophocles, as an exemplary tragedian, scrupulously backgrounds ("keeps back as much as possible from our view").[16] The implicit standard of evaluation here derives from the neoclassical understanding of decorum. Tragedy has its "proper materials" and manners, and those of *The Cenci* are not among them. The "historical fact" alone, the critic implies, would be unsuitable for high tragic treatment, and Shelley has rendered it even more "disgustingly shocking" and thereby even "less dramatic than the fact." Disgusting facts and shocking expressions are not the domain of tragedy, and *The Cenci* appears therefore as an utterly indecorous failure, which Shelley may *call* tragedy but which is, in this critic's purist view, far from it.

Though the charge against Shelley is again violation of decorum, it in fact asserts just the opposite of Curran's implied charge. Both critics find that Shelley failed to adjust his structural and stylistic means to the thematic burdens of the Cenci story, but where the *British Review* locates Shelley's violation in the vulgarity of the matter and the overexplicitness of the representation, Curran on the contrary locates it in the restraint, chastity, and sublimation of Shelley's mimetic style, in his almost overdecorous and Racinian avoidance of the story's sad realities. Here the prospective and retrospective views of Shelley's performance (that is, the evaluation of it in the light of an early-nineteenth-century horizon of expectations on the one hand and of a late-twentieth-century horizon of expectations on the other) appear radically conflicted, but each contains a measure of the truth. Both views must

16. Shelley (1963, 10:81–82) himself makes the contrast in a letter to Peacock but apparently with exactly the opposite sense: "You know 'Oedipus' is performed on the fastidious French stage, a play much more broad than this [i.e., *The Cenci*]."

be merged to understand aright Shelley's achievement and his failure in *The Cenci*.

Shelley appears fully aware of the special problem in decorum that the story of the Cenci, treated as tragedy, presents. He proposes to write "A Tragedy, in Five Acts," as the title page indicates; but, as his dedication and preface insist, he intends nevertheless to represent not "what ought to be, or may be" but "that which has been," a story of "sad reality" (Shelley 1965, 2:65, 67). Writing to Thomas Love Peacock about his just-completed "tragedy of reality," which he yet hoped would premiere at Covent Garden, Shelley (10:61) acknowledges that its potential success "hangs entirely on the question as to whether any such thing as incest in this shape, however treated would be admitted on the stage." "Incest in this shape, however treated"—here Shelley grasps both horns of the decorum dilemma. Incestuous rape and consequent parricide are matters not only of fact, of reality, but are in themselves domestic, grotesque, violent. Shelley worries that, "however treated," the matter of the Cenci may be inadmissible, unrepresentable on the stage, for the lower style, appropriate to the human-creatural and the everyday but debarred from the resources of *sermo gravis*, would seem unnaturally crass. Conversely, the elevated style, fitting for tragedy but debarred from the direct representation of low or sad reality, would appear unnaturally false. Shelley (10:61) assures himself and Peacock, however, that the subject matter will finally "form no objection" to the performance of the play because of the "peculiar delicacy with which I have treated it" and made it "fit for representation." Though Shelley's resolution of the dilemma appears at first to be elevation, the "peculiar *delicacy*" and refinement of the tragic style, at whatever cost to realism, we should underscore the adjective and understand him a bit differently. For his is a "*peculiar* delicacy," motivated at once by his philosophical idealism and by his extraordinary and indeed revolutionary poetic judgment. Shelley's peculiar delicacy contrives to violate and vindicate dramatic decorum simultaneously, to mix styles in order to portray with gravity "that which has been," yet at the same time to expose the limitations and insufficiency of reality and thus of the mixed style itself, reality's ultimate means of expression. Hoping thus to restore the drama to its original orientation toward the essential and ideal, Shelley authors a style that, in its exemplary mixedness, ironically figures in the history of Western literature as a contribution to the total abandonment of the classical principle of the separation of styles. Though Shelley differs radically from Artaud, Tavernier, and Clarke in dramatic purpose, his stylistic performance in *The Cenci* serves rather as a precedent, an influential anticipation of their much more existentially compelling imitations.

4. Existence versus Essence: The Mixed Style in *Prometheus Unbound*

That Shelley "loved to idealise reality" and like Plato "took more delight in the abstract and the ideal than in the special and the tangible," as Mary Shelley (quoted in Shelley 1965, 1:xiii) put it, and that he was therefore the poet "least likely in the popular mind to have constrained his temper to the hard realities of either this form [tragedy] or this legend [of the Cenci]," as Stuart Curran (1970: xiv) added, are commonplaces of Shelley criticism. Though generally true, such ideas, because of their acceptance, have calcified into simplifications. Shelley certainly favors the abstract and ideal both poetically and philosophically, but, particularly in dramatic modes, he is capable of the clearest attention to the concrete, the creatural, the real. To be sure, for Shelley "the deep truth is imageless" (*Prometheus Unbound* 2.4.116), and embodied reality is but an illusion, "a two-edged lie, / Which seems, but is not" (*The Cenci*, 4.4.115–16). Yet this philosophical position does not lead Shelley stylistically to the *suppression* of reality so much as to a remarkably sophisticated and pervasively consistent *contextualization* of it. Shelley mimetically *delimits* tangible realities, that is, limits and prevaluates them both structurally and semantically; they must therefore be understood as limited, as formed, embodied, *imaged*, not the platonic "deep truth" but, at best, a mere shadow of it or, at worst, an imprisoning distortion of it.[17] Shelley's style attains its ideal character much more from this strategic contextualization of reality than from his supposed constitutional avoidance of reality altogether. In fact Shelley is often, in his most characteristic work, a poet of the mixed style.[18]

Take, for instance, Shelley's "universal" comedy, *Prometheus Unbound*. Here, generations of critics and anthologists have agreed, is quintessential Shelley, that is, Shelley at his loftiest, most abstract and idealized. Yet this already is a sign of the mixed style, for comedy, in the classical and neoclassical views, is a dramatic mode of the intermediate range, suited to neither the *sermo sublimis* nor the mythic seriousness (even, perhaps especially, when the personae were themselves drawn from mythology) Shelley imposes upon it. The work is further mixed, however, in that it does not maintain the elevated style unremittingly but rather deploys the creatural and low stra-

17. Stephen Behrendt (1990: 225) puts this point concisely, "Shelley believes with Blake that error must be given form and recognized before it can be repudiated."

18. Here I absolutely agree with Curran (1986) that Shelley matured from a lyric poet to a dramatic one and that his finest poetry, from "Julian and Maddalo" to *The Triumph of Life* (1824), is best understood in the latter character. Though Shelley never distinguishes the terms *lyric* and *dramatic* systematically, he does seem to imply their distinction, especially in the preface to *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama* (1821), in which he explains the play's subtitle (Shelley 1965, 3:7). See also Ronald Tetreault 1987: 121ff.

tegically and, in this matter, decisively. The forces of Jupiter, themselves projected from the "One Mind" (Shelley 1965, 6:196) who is Prometheus, represent something of this range of stylistic values, with Mercury perhaps approaching the top of the scale and the Furies certainly representing the bottom.[19] Shelley does not mimetically embody any of the characters, not even the Furies, to the reader's imagination, but this is only natural or decorous.[20] Given that the entire ground of action is a single imageless psyche (again a thoroughly *indecorous* motive and setting for comedy), it follows that the drama's characters are but metaphorical projections or shadows, tentative and temporary forms of consciousness. To embody them, to concretize them in any way, to make them imaginatively conceivable and credible by imitating them from reality as bodies in society would unnaturally distort the play's focus on the ideality it means to represent. Instead, Shelley methodically associates his antagonists with bodies and embodiment, with the limitations of reality, and he accordingly adjusts the stylistic register in which he gives their various passions utterance. Thus Jupiter, the tyrannical king of the "everliving Gods," in his moment of supposed triumph over all creation, proclaims the *body* to be the *soul* of joy in language decorously adapted to the sentiment but indecorous to the cosmic occasion and to his presumably noncreatural character: "be the nectar circling through your veins / The soul of joy, ye everliving Gods" (3.1.30–31). In his nervous excitement over the purported birth of a throne-securing heir, he recollects and relishingly rehearses the obscene details of his rape of Thetis, going so far as to parrot her anguished expression at the moment of her impregnation: "'Insufferable might! / God! spare me! I sustain not the quick flames, / The penetrating presence'" (37–39). Here the noun phrase "penetrating presence" epitomizes the creatural emphasis and unseemly existential effect of the whole passage. Jupiter finally concludes this

19. The phrase "one mind" is Shelley's (1965, 6:196) from "On Life": "The words *I*, *you*, *they*, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind." Earl Wasserman (1971: 257ff.), I believe, was the first to point out the application of this philosophy to the dramatic action of *Prometheus Unbound* and rightly so, for Shelley signals it throughout the play. See especially Shelley's use of the "Phantasm of Jupiter" to embody Prometheus and reiterate his fateful curse (act 1, 240ff.); his essential equation of Asia, Panthea, and Prometheus through images of legible eyes, spiritual shadows, and communicable dreams (2.1.27–31, 56–57, 70, 109–13); and his reiteration of the "one mind" theme throughout the choral songs of act 4, for example "Man, who was a many-sided mirror"; "Man, oh, not men! a chain of linked thought, / Of love and might to be divided not"; and "Man, one harmonious soul of many a soul" (4.382, 394–95, 400).

20. This holds even for the incestuous dance of the Earth and the Moon in act 4, which is comparatively abstract and unerotic when judged against, say, the rapturous conclusion of Shelley's *Epipsychidion* (1821).

naturally unnatural speech (he is, after all, the *villain*) in ironic and logical self-contradiction, "Waiting the incarnation, which ascends" (46). Though adapted from the noblest rank of character, the mythological Jupiter is here something of the conventional comic buffoon, damned by his own indecorous mouth, by the sentimental and stylistic impurities of his very character and expression. As an embodiment of the mixed style, Jupiter confounds matters and manners and thereby exposes his own villainous error.

No one, in other words, would be tempted by a reading or viewing of *Prometheus Unbound* to embrace the mixed style of Jupiter and his cohorts because Shelley has carefully contextualized his mixed style to reveal its philosophical and ethical consequences, its tendency to prioritize the existential and bodily, and thus to compromise, diminish, and otherwise obscure the internal and essential self, or as Shelley (1965, 7:113) calls it, "the invisible nature of man." Shelley's strategy is especially evident in the one genuinely dramatic movement of the play, Prometheus's temptation by the Furies. Proceeding to the stage from "the all-miscreative brain of Jove," the Furies appear to Prometheus as "Horrible forms" and "execrable shapes" (1.445, 448–49), as hideous embodiments; but again, other than in such elevated, general, and abstract terms, Shelley does not embody them to *our* imaginations.[21] Their threatening danger, however, and the rationale for not representing directly what Prometheus physically beholds and experiences Shelley announces at the moment of their first appearance. Perceiving such miscreations sensorily, as if in the flesh, Prometheus exclaims, "Whilst I behold such execrable shapes, / Methinks I grow like what I contemplate / And laugh and stare in loathsome sympathy" (449–51). Beholding the low, the grotesque, the evil, Prometheus threatens to become it, to mirror it in "loathsome sympathy," laughing and staring in perverse fascination. He is in danger of indecorously abandoning his noble and permanent character and fixating on the most degrading of external, embodied, and therefore quite illusory appearances, on a world which seems but in truth is not. Shelley therefore treats us now to no mixed style or otherwise sensational, graphically mimetic effects. The passage remains elevated and abstracted, for he will not be the one to tempt us into Prometheus's loathsome position.

In the dialogue that ensues, however, Shelley makes perfectly clear the creatural, historical, and realistic significances of the Furies, their iden-

21. One exception exists: Prometheus's exclamation "these lakes and echoes know / The darkness and the clangour of your wings" (1.459–60), in which both the deictic "these" and the onomatopoeic dorso-velar consonance (/k/, /ŋ/) momentarily conduce to a concrete imagination of the play's space and personae. But even here the Furies are imaged more in auditory than in visual terms. Though we *hear* them clearly enough, they appear to the *eye* only in the amorphous shadows of their otherwise undescribed wings.

tification with the pains and sufferings of bodily, experienced life, with the actualities and problematics of sociopolitical existence, with the very weight of *this world*. They subsist in the "bone" and "nerve" (475–76), in the "lidless eyes" (479), and in the "animal life" (484) of humans; they are manifest in war-torn cities, shipwrecks, and famines; they incarnate as the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror and most emblematically as the crucified Christ. They are, in a telling simile, all things low and vulgar, "like a vain loud multitude / Vexing the self-content of wisest men" (486–87). Wasserman (1971: 305) writes of the verses just summarized, "However much the reader may be tempted to specify Shelley's references, the fact is that Shelley has consistently abstracted and syncretized archetypal patterns of religious and political history in the same manner that he assimilated the forms or potential forms of various conventional myths by releasing them from their special particularities." Even the references to the French Revolution and to Christ he construes as intentionally generalized and unspecific, for "*Prometheus Unbound* is cast in universal, not special terms" (304). Jean Hall (1984: 345) echoes this view, asserting, "Shelley takes care not to identify these as the visions of Christ and the French Revolution." Stylistically speaking, Wasserman's and Hall's insistence on Shelley's generalizing strategy is only half right and therefore largely misses the dramatic point. Shelley does begin this scene and carry it to its crisis in an elevated and abstracted style for the aesthetic and philosophical reasons outlined above and in direct imitation of his protagonist's characteristic responses. Thus following the initial tremor of loathsome sympathy at the first appearance of the Furies (a tremor which, after all, is not even slightly registered in the speech that identifies it), Prometheus regains his composure and answers each of the Furies' generalized embodiments of reality with cool confidence and equanimity, inviting them again and again to do their worst and assuring them of his invincible indifference to their tortures. But all of this is merely preparatory to the scene's climactic action, which is all the more shockingly effective because of the mimetic elevation and restraint that immediately contextualize it. Confronted with an unshakable Prometheus, who "yet defies the deepest power of Hell," a frustrated and provoked Fury imperiously cries, "Tear the veil!" and another instantly responds, "It is torn!" (538–39). Clearly this is the crisis, the unveiling of Jupiter's most terrible and miscreative powers, and Shelley renders the moment with stunning creatural-realistic clarity, embodied in the passionate outcry of its victim:

> Remit the anguish of that lighted stare—
> Close those wan lips—let that thorn-wounded brow
> Stream not with blood—it mingles with thy tears!

> Fix, fix those tortured orbs in peace and death
> So thy sick throes shake not that crucifix,
> So thy pale fingers play not with thy gore.—
> O horrible! Thy name I will not speak,
> It hath become a curse. I see, I see
> The wise, the mild, the lofty and the just . . . (597–604)

I cannot locate a more concrete, imagistically specific, powerfully realistic, and consequently unmistakable passage anywhere else in Shelley's work. With a sudden eruption of deictic, metonymic, and sensory language ("those wan lips," "that thorn-wounded brow," "those tortured orbs," "thy pale fingers"), Shelley graphically embodies the creatural processes of Christ's passion. Tears and blood stream and mingle on his cheeks, his body jerks in "sick throes" upon the cross, his fingers convulsively twitch in the blood that oozes from the nail holes in his palms (an image Shelley makes even more grotesque by his brutally ironic use of "play"). Furthermore, Shelley provides a realistic mimesis of palpable horror in the very syntactic and rhetorical structures in which Prometheus is compelled to express himself. In the face of this exemplary and exemplarily realistic horror, his former confidence and composure abandon him and with them his clear-headed hold upon rational, abstract, hypotactically organized thought, upon elevated style. He bursts out with a quick succession of brief, paratactically juxtaposed imperatives, each of which is recoilingly reactive to some particularized feature of the emblem. He repeats himself, emphatically but without rhetorical artifice, crying "Fix, fix those tortured orbs . . . So thy sick throes shake not . . . So thy pale fingers play not." He breaks off suddenly with the exclamation "O horrible!" and his thought veers to the conventional name of this embodied horror, which he will not utter. It leaps again to "I see, I see," which at first, because of the enjambment, seems to reiterate the essential point and the aesthetic effect of the foregoing verses but which in fact represents a turning away from sight, a retreat into his characteristic and nonsensory abstraction, as the final quoted line so eloquently indicates. Excepting this and the elevated opening line, his diction throughout the passage is uncharacteristically common. The Furies have contrived and revealed their worst, and Prometheus's disordered and thoroughly creatural response suggests that finally their torments are registering upon him. Shelley likewise has deferred and then strategically displayed in full articulation the mixed style, intending a similarly arresting effect upon his audience.[22]

22. Shelley moreover seems here to anticipate Auerbach's (1953 [1946]: 41) general thesis, for Shelley devotes his most mixed and realistic style to the emblem of Christ. Auerbach of

Nowhere else does Prometheus's conflict register as credibly and powerfully as here, nowhere else do we so clearly see and feel the real pressures of his otherwise disembodied and idealized endurance or grasp how narrowly he escaped the tragic potential of his plot. In this tense confrontation with the embodiment of his own worst fears, Prometheus does indeed stare in loathsome sympathy, but he does not laugh. Horribly for him and his audience alike he becomes, metaphysically and hence stylistically, the mirror of the grotesque reality he beholds. But he does so only momentarily, for from the passionate ruins of his firmness and self-confidence, pity, a force of imaginative sympathy unforeseen by either the Furies or Prometheus, suddenly springs. The Furies vanish at once, Prometheus instantly resumes his natural self and style, his abstraction and elevation, and the plot is henceforth liberated from the claims and demands of reality, dramatically freed to pursue its larger but no less peculiarly mixed end, the creation and stylistic elaboration of the comic sublime.

Readers and critics often fault *Prometheus Unbound* and particularly this moment of sudden release for lacking true *drama*, but I suspect the disappointment stems from a failure to appreciate the *stylistic* action and conflict, which could not be more dramatic. The very presence of tragic pity—for it is tragic pity that Prometheus here experiences and that liberates him into comedy and sublimity—is stylistically daring and arresting, all the more so because of its crucial structural role.[23] And Shelley, in an even bolder move, renders the provoking tragedy in a mixed style, in stunning creatural-realistic detail, so we too stare but do not laugh, we too are suddenly moved by the passionate spectacle of suffering through which the flesh and the world must be redeemed. Shelley's delicacy in all of this cannot be overemphasized and must not be misunderstood. He has carefully selected the one embodiment of terror best calculated *not* to tempt his audiences' worst sympathies and then purposefully timed its delivery and its stylistic deviance to give it maximum impact on their imaginations. He is not sensationalizing but sensitively and dramatically *realizing*, yet in a way that argues against the imagination of reality. We are not invited into the illusion of reality but, on the contrary, are screened and shielded from it in an elevated and secure abstraction until suddenly it is exposed in arche-

course contends that it is precisely the Judeo-Christian tradition that first formulated the mixed style. The paradoxically humble incarnation yet grave passion of Christ is thus for him (and apparently for Shelley) the natural figure of the mixed or nonclassical style.

23. Stuart M. Sperry (1988: 88) is particularly good on the thematic dimensions of the action: "Deprived of all ground for confidence, Prometheus is reduced to compassion. It is just Shelley's point, however, that pity, the last residuum of desire and hope, affirmation in its most primitive form, is sufficient, like the Promethean spark, to rekindle the rehabilitating energies that now enter the drama."

type, but in archetype arrestingly specified and embodied, concretized in every aspect of the style. Shelley wants one to flinch, to desire to turn away, and in that desire to recognize the directions of one's vital sympathies, of one's essential self, *away from* violence, *away from* the creatural-realistic, *away from* the mixed, the unelevated.[24] He wants one not to fixate in "loathsome sympathy" upon embodied reality but instead to feel and judge as Prometheus does:

> The sights with which thou torturest gird my soul
> With new endurance, till the hour arrives
> When they shall be no types of things which are. (643–45)

Shelley is earnest both in his conviction of the nonsensory, nonmaterial, and nonhistorical character of authentic being or essence and in his desire for the hour when his own mixed style, with all its existential illusions, especially that of the incarnated and suffering Christ, will be no type "of things which are."

5. The Actor behind the Mask: The Calibration of Character and Style in *The Cenci*

If the danger of realism is, to adapt Count Cenci's words, that it lends to what is most abhorrent "a fascination to entrap the loathing will" (*The Cenci* 4.1.86–87), then in proposing to represent "sad reality" in *The Cenci*, Shelley places himself in peculiar straits indeed. To begin with he intends to violate decorum by treating reality in the high dramatic kind of tragedy, and in *Prometheus Unbound* he had already perfected a carefully rationalized mixed style capable of serving this end. Moreover his matter here—historical rather than mythological, domestic rather than cosmic, grotesque and creatural rather than grave and sublime—naturally demands even greater proportions of this mixed style, demands, that is, even further and more extensive violences to the decorum of tragic elevation. Philosophically, however, Shelley is disposed against his own revolutionary stylistic innovations. Just as circumstantial and bodily reality can dominate human consciousness with foul and fatal effect, so unmitigated realism may harmfully overmaster the literary and transcendent imagination. He would therefore have to deploy the mixed and realistic style in such a way that it would nevertheless invoke and model the classical ideal of stylistic separation and so expose its own mimetic and metaphysical insufficiency, its *essential* indeco-

24. Shelley (1965, 2:174) states this intention positively in the preface to the play, "My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence."

rousness. The "immortal" imagination must here "assume flesh" but only, as Shelley (1965, 2:72) puts it in his preface to *The Cenci*, "for the *redemption* of mortal passion" (my emphasis), never, in other words, for the mere representation of the mortal, as an end in itself or for its own sake. Shelley therefore proposes, in a phrase that perfectly captures the peculiar delicacy of his project, to "raise what is low, and level to the apprehension that which is lofty." He will raise and level, mixing the traditionally separated modes and manners of representation, but at the same time, as the evaluatively tinged "low" and "lofty" still securely imply, preserve the legitimacy and indeed reinforce the value of the ancient stylistic hierarchy.

Shelley thus conducts a fascinating drama of decorum in *The Cenci*, expressing in its stylistic action both the problems he confronted as a post-Restoration playwright and the argument he developed as to their proper solutions. A number of critics have discussed Shelley's play in terms of its "self-reflexivity" upon his dramaturgical practice, which is, the argument typically runs, mirrored in reverse by Count Cenci, Beatrice's father, whose demonic, "miscreative" brain engenders within the fiction (as Shelley's does without) the key elements of its plot, not only the incest but also, quite literally, the parricide (cf. 2.1.130ff). Curran (1970: 73), for example, understands Cenci to be, like Shelley, "an artist, conscious of his every effect." His art, however, unlike Shelley's, "is not carefully restrained; not formal, intent on grace of line and fluidity of motion; not traditional either in conception or effect: in a word, not classical" (ibid.: 75). Suzanne Ferriss (1991: 162, 164), pursuing the same point in terms closer to my own, argues that "Shelley pictures the tyrant as a poet, specifically a dramatic poet," but he is again distinguishable from Shelley in that he readily "imagine[s] what the decorous poet finds 'unspeakable'"; in Ferriss's view, Cenci's "unnatural creation of the dual acts of incest and parricide undermines [Shelley's] idealized image of poetry as Elysian visions." Anne McWhir (1989: 150) echoes this view: "Cenci is a villain who equates deeds and words, a demonic perversion of the Word made flesh, an evil counterpart of the poet who embodies imagination in language." What none of these readings convincingly demonstrates, however, is Shelley's artistic and stylistic difference from Cenci, and the reason is not far to seek. Representationally at least, Cenci has no art, no style that is not simultaneously and in fact Shelley's. If Cenci's lack of restraint and classicism, his informality and disrespect for tradition, his unnatural indecorousness, his demonic perversion of imaginative incarnation, if any of these are dramatically embodied in *The Cenci*—and all of them most assuredly are—the credit or blame belongs to his creator. This is surely the sense of the otherwise inexplicable declaration of the *British Review*: "No such being as Cenci existed: none such could exist." By this

decorous critic's standards Shelley's mixture of styles in portraying Cenci at all creates an unnatural fiction, a kind of being that could not exist in reality. What is corrective in this otherwise programmatically neoclassical criticism is that it keeps the focus where it belongs, on Shelley, who authors every one of the stylistic violations Curran, Ferriss, and McWhir have otherwise accurately enumerated.[25] Ferriss suggests that the Cenci's nonclassical, indecorous, and fleshly art "undermines" Shelley's classical, decorous, and ideal one, but in fact something more complicated even than the reverse appears to be true. Shelley not only creates and articulates the Cencian mimetic but also, as the evaluations of all three critics imply, simultaneously undermines *it*, exposing it as "unnatural," "perverse," and "evil," as a corrupting distortion of the immortal imagination's native style. This other and original style, which also belongs to Shelley but not to his demonic fictional reflection, is the *supplement*, as it were, in which we can locate the source and nature of the value-laden difference these critics articulate but do not adequately specify.

Shelley delimits Count Cenci with and likewise limits him to a self-exposing mixed style, calculated by its contrast to the play's other, more classically decorous stylistic registers to horrify rather than entrap the imaginations of its auditors. Titled and elevated in estate, Count Cenci is incongruously base in thought and speech, much like Jupiter when he appears in propria persona in act 3 of *Prometheus Unbound* but worse even, for this is tragedy. Thus, in the opening scene of *The Cenci*, Cardinal Camillo has come to Cenci's villa to announce the Vatican's (ostensibly) reluctant willingness, given remuneration, to overlook a murder that Cenci at least commissioned if not perpetrated himself. Though common enough in the domestic and moral action tragedies of the preceding century, this conspiratorially private and viciously economic focus is, by classical and especially neoclassical standards, thoroughly inappropriate for tragedy. But Shelley carefully conducts the scene to locate and consolidate its violations of decorum largely in the unnatural character of Count Cenci. Notice, for example, the remarkable stylistic difference between the play's two opening speeches:

25. Curran (1970: 238) has said as much, though somewhat incongruously, given his insistence elsewhere on Shelley's classicism and neoclassicism: "Shelley's play is an amalgam of past and present conventions of the stage, and because of that, a violation of the rules of playwriting that accompany each of those conventions." Shelley's dramatic style *is* amalgamating and convention violating and therefore, I argue, mixed, much more romantic or at least Elizabethan than classical or neoclassical. Suitable to Shelley's style are Auerbach's (1953 [1946]: 312–33) comments not on Racine but on Shakespeare or, more fitting still, on the mixed styles of German and French romanticism (434–92).

Camillo.
That matter of the murder is hushed up
If you consent to yield his Holiness
Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate.—
It needed all my interest in the conclave
To bend him to this point: he said that you
Bought perilous impunity with your gold;
That crimes like yours if once or twice compounded
Enriched the Church, and respited from hell
An erring soul which might repent and live:—
But that the glory and the interest
Of the high throne he fills, little consist
With making it a daily mart of guilt
As manifold and hideous as the deeds
Which you scarce hide from men's revolted eyes.
Cenci.
The third of my possessions—let it go!
Aye, I once heard the nephew of the Pope
Had sent his architect to view the ground,
Meaning to build a villa on my vines
The next time I compounded with his uncle:
I little thought he should outwit me so!
Henceforth no witness—not the lamp—shall see
That which the vassal threatened to divulge
Whose throat is choked with dust for his reward.
The deed he saw could not have rated higher
Than his most worthless life:—it angers me!
Respited me from Hell!—So may the Devil
Respite their souls from Heaven. (1.1.1–27)

Rhetorically these speeches are nearly polar opposites of one another, the first moving swiftly to an elevated, abstract, and refined style, the other plunging at once into a low, concrete, and tonally (as well as mimetically) violent style. Camillo begins bluntly enough, but already by his second and third lines he is softening and refining the low matter under discussion, courteously phrasing a hard and sordid bargain in terms of Cenci's free "consent to yield," dignifying its author with the lofty epithet "his Holiness," and describing the property in question in ornamental and general terms as "the *fief* that lies beyond the *Pincian gate*." By contrast, Cenci's opening lines are marked by impatient exclamations ("let it go! / Aye"). He refers to Clement as "the Pope" and, even less decorously, as the euphemistic "uncle" of the "nephew" who stands to gain by this transaction. He embodies the property to his imagination specifically and concretely, visu-

alizing the nephew's architect upon "the ground," plotting a "villa" where Cenci's "vines" presently grow. Where Cenci focuses on the ignoble and circumstantial realities informing the offer, Camillo instead highlights the moral tolerance and outrage that attend it. Camillo's second period, running to eleven lines and indirectly quoting Clement, is accordingly elevated in every respect. Note the syntax, for example: following the short introductory clause, to which it is hypotactically related, we have the emphatically minimal but complexly modified main clause, paralleling and contrasting three object clauses of increasing grammatical complexity ("he said that . . . , that . . . , but that . . . ."). Note too the diction, the profusion of romance-latinate terms, such as *perilous impunity*, *compounded*, *respited*, *consists*, *hideous*, and *revolted*; the reverential deployment of biblical phraseology ("An erring soul which might repent and live," "the glory and the interest") and class-conserving figures ("high throne he fills" versus "daily mart of guilt"); and the staunch avoidance of the grotesque and creatural, as in the generalized references to "crimes like yours" and "deeds / Which you scarce hide."

Turn again now to Cenci's speech; it is clearly of a different order. The diction is comparatively specific and creatural ("villa" and "vines" versus "fief"; "the vassal . . . / Whose throat is choked with dust" versus "crimes" and "deeds"), and its register is much lower. Of the few terms that stand out as potentially elevating—*architect*, *compounded*, *divulge*, and *respited*—two he has stolen from Camillo's mouth and mockingly intends to debase (*compounded*, *respited*), and another, *architect*, he uses too specifically and belittlingly to realize its potential elevation (as, for example, in the figure "God, architect of the universe"). Though Cenci too invokes the semantic field of class relations, he does so brutally, indecorously, without ennobling ornament, heatedly referring to the "vassal" whose "worthless life" he's taken. He is moreover, unlike his interlocutor, in a state of low and angry passion, vividly embodied in the increasingly paratactic and abbreviated syntax of his speech, which builds to a furious and blasphemous crescendo: "—it angers me! Respited me from Hell!—So may the Devil / Respite their souls from Heaven." In all of this Count Cenci is patently oblivious to the dignified person of his guest and the decorums of politeness that normally govern social intercourse. Indeed he is ranting not so much to Camillo as to himself, venting his uncensored thoughts and feelings in total indifference to the presence and sensibilities of the Cardinal.

Throughout the play Cenci remains true to the character he establishes here. Whenever he appears his style is equally unnatural and indecorous, his performance no-less-shockingly outrageous. He is a self-confessed sensualist turned sadist, obsessed with bodies and embodiment, with "the *sight*

of agony, and the *sense* of joy" (1.1.82; my emphases). Like Jupiter, he delights in concretely imagining and imaging creatural-realistic forms of suffering and torment, such as "the dry fixed eye ball; the pale quivering lip, / Which tell me that the spirit weeps within / Tears bitterer than the bloody sweat of Christ" (1.1.111–13). This passion obviously dominates his expression, which has therefore a hyperrealistic, indeed visceral concreteness. For example, in an aside in act 2, scene 1, Cenci, despite the presence of his wife on the stage, momentarily savors in imagination the rape he will presently accomplish:

> 'Tis an awful thing
> To touch such mischief as I now conceive:
> So men sit shivering on the dewy bank,
> And try the chill stream with their feet; once in . . .
> How the delighted spirit pants for joy! (124–28)

The simile, evoking a common nervous memory, is stunningly creatural and shudderingly apt. Cenci's low and indecorous tendencies of thought and style are still more strongly marked in his last speech of the play. Having cursed Beatrice in an inspired fit of profanity, replete with "encrusted . . . leprous stains," "blistering drops," speckled toads, parched lips, warped limbs, and (most grotesque of all because most probable, most realistic) his and Beatrice's child "Smiling upon her from her nursing breast," Cenci vividly anatomizes his pulsing delight:[26]

> My blood is running up and down my veins;
> A fearful pleasure makes it prick and tingle:
> I feel a giddy sickness of strange awe;
> My heart is beating with an expectation
> Of horrid joy. (4.1.130–34, 149, 163–67)[27]

On rare occasions Cenci adopts the fully elevated style conventionally appropriate to tragedy and to his social rank. But even then, as in the beautifully conducted banquet scene of act 1, Cenci's deference to his auditors, his fine and ornamental diction, his carefully generalized, formal-

26. Thomas Medwin, a friend and correspondent of Shelley, evidently found Cenci's curse objectionable. Responding to him, Shelley (1965, 10:192) admits: "As to Cenci's curse—I know not whether I can defend it or no. I wish I may be able, since, as it often happens respecting the worst part of an author's work, it is a particular favourite with me." As the paradoxical combination of "worst part" and "favourite" should suggest, Shelley considers his stylistic performance in the curse to be dramatically appropriate though perhaps ultimately indefensible.

27. Notice in particular the assonance on /I/ here—"is," "it," "prick," "tingle," "giddy sickness," "is," "horrid"—which concretizes Cenci's panting joy, as the reader will sense by repeating the short /I/ sound eight times aloud.

ized, and sanctified expressions are nevertheless all calculated to outrage, to render even more violently dramatic the sensational violations of decorum he always and everywhere intends.[28] Here as always he is an embodiment of the mixed style, a creature such as "never existed" because, in the neoclassical view, "none such could exist," an outrage to nature, especially the nature of tragic representation.

This at least is how Shelley means for us to evaluate Cenci; again and again Shelley dramatizes this reaction to Cenci, underscoring and reinforcing what he hopes will be his audience's natural revulsion. Components of Lucretia's charge—"unnatural, strange and monstrous, / Exceed[ing] all measure of belief" (3.1.188–89)—echo across the text, like a refrain or a disembodied chorus. "Will none among this noble company / Check the abandoned villain?" (1.3.91–92) cries an outraged guest of Cenci's funeral banquet, measuring in his finely balanced phrasing both the unexpectedly low and villainous abandonment of decorum he has been affronted with and the hierarchical standards of nobility and elevation with which, Shelley believes, it must be countered, checked, and ultimately, as another guest cries, silenced.[29] More subtle and effective than such imposed judgments, however, is Shelley's stylistic treatment of Beatrice, for in her the audience is shown, not told, the argument against Cenci's mixed style, the style of "sad reality," that is, the style Shelley himself has convincingly developed and most delicately deployed. In a thoroughly apposite dramatic metaphor, Shelley (1965, 2:73) prefatorily concludes of Beatrice that the "crimes and miseries in which she was an actor and a sufferer are as the mask and the mantle in which circumstances clothed her for her impersonation on the scene of the world." Shelley clearly and characteristically conceives his heroine as having both an essential self, the transcendent actor who exists permanently beyond and apart from "the scene of the world," and an assumed self, the temporary, existential, and as it were accidental role she impersonates in this tragedy of sad reality.[30] These two selves he embodies

28. McWhir (1989: 150–51) provides a full and fully relevant discussion of Cenci's flouting of decorum in this scene, "telling no lies, but obviously laughing at the bewilderment of his guests used to judging by manner and appearance," by "the conventionally expected."

29. Shelley's "hierarchical standards of nobility and elevation" should not be mistaken for the more conventional and specifically socioeconomic ones normally attaching to the terms *nobility*, *refinement*, *elevation*, and *aristocratic*. Leigh Hunt, in his 1832 preface to Shelley's "Masque of Anarchy," puts the distinction precisely: Shelley "never for one moment confounded the claims of real and essential, with those of conventional refinement" (Shelley 1965, 3:229). See also Shelley's (10:113) fine distinction in a letter to Hunt of November 3, 1819: "Nor is the word aristocracy susceptible of an ill signification. Oligarchy is the term for the tyrannical monopoly of the few."

30. See Wasserman 1971: 126.

respectively in his most sublimely elevated and painfully mixed styles, a combination with which he means to teach his audience "through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself" (71).

So Shelley expresses and identifies the essential Beatrice—and subtly wins our affections for her—with a dignified, articulate, rationally organized, generalized, but nonetheless sensitively passionate style, a style wholly appropriate to tragedy and to her heroic persona and thus wholly different from her father's. Nowhere is this style or Beatrice's original and ultimate character more powerfully expressed than in her impassioned appeal to the company of the banquet scene, which, especially given the immediate and violent contrast of her father's outrageous indecorousness (he's just announced the purpose of the banquet to *celebrate* news of two of his sons' deaths), fairly brims with sublimity:

> I do entreat you, go not, noble guests;
> What although tyranny, and impious hate
> Stand sheltered by a father's hoary hair?
> What, if 'tis he who clothed us in these limbs
> Who tortures them, and triumphs? What, if we,
> The desolate and the dead, were his own flesh,
> His children and his wife, whom he is bound
> To love and shelter? Shall we therefore find
> No refuge in this merciless wide world?
> Oh, think what deep wrongs must have blotted out
> First love, then reverence in a child's prone mind
> Till it thus vanquish shame and fear! O, think!
> I have borne much, and kissed the sacred hand
> Which crushed us to the earth, and thought its stroke
> Was perhaps some paternal chastisement!
> Have excused much, doubted; and when no doubt
> Remained, have sought by patience, love and tears
> To soften him, and when this could not be
> I have knelt down through the long sleepless nights
> And lifted up to God, the father of all,
> Passionate prayers: and when these were not heard
> I have still borne,—until I meet you here,
> Princes and kinsmen, at this hideous feast
> Given at my brothers' deaths. (1.3.99–122)

This is a rhetorical tour de force of greater stylistic sophistication and elevation than the speeches of any other character in the play. The syntactical arrangement, of considerable hypotactic complexity and aesthetic integrity, is most immediately impressive: it subdivides naturally into three macro-

structures that nonetheless are balanced and unified by their fundamental rhetorical and grammatical identity. The first, an interrogative, develops its subordinate element in three progressively elaborated but anaphorically paralleled conditional clauses ("What although . . . ? What, if . . . ? What, if . . . ? Shall we therefore . . . ."). The second involves the two anaphorically paralleled imperatives, the first grammatically complex, the second emphatically simple ("Oh, think what deep wrongs must have blotted out / First . . . , then . . . . / Till . . . . O, think!"). The third, most sophisticated of all, conjoins three real sentences using a double pattern of anaphoric and grammatical parallelism ("I have borne . . . and kissed . . . and thought . . . , have excused . . . ; and when . . . , have sought . . . , / and when . . . I have knelt down . . . and lifted up . . . : / and when . . . I have still borne,—until . . . ."). Corresponding to the exquisitely refined syntax is the polite, decorously generalized diction, for example, the respectful direct addresses that elegantly frame her appeal ("noble guests," "Princes and kinsmen"); the preponderance of abstract terms ("tyranny," "impious hate," "the desolate and the dead," "love and shelter," "refuge," "merciless wide world," "love," "reverence," "shame and fear"); the genteel, discreet, and sensitive indirection of all references to Cenci's grotesque crimes or her own creatural sufferings ("deep wrongs," "I have borne *much*," "stroke," "paternal chastisement"); even the biblical allusions with which she sublimates and distances her own body ("he who clothed us in these limbs," "his own flesh"). One could go on to considerable length unpacking the beautifully articulated and tragically decorous elevation of this speech, but this much will suffice to indicate Beatrice's natural style and permanent character. Surely our sympathies are commanded by this "passionate prayer," particularly since, as foreshadowed in a grotesquely ironic homonymic pun of which Beatrice cannot be aware, the prayer, for all its sublimity, is fatally "still borne" in its dramatic moment.

Beatrice's alienation from this permanent character or essential self and her unwilling transformation into her father's daughter, into her assumed and accidental, circumstantial self, is concretized in her subsequent and increasingly indecorous deviations from this naturally sublime style. In her famous mad scene immediately following the rape (3.1., quoted in sections 2 and 3 above), Beatrice's thought and expression are realistically deranged in syntax and logic. Her diction is uncharacteristically low and relentlessly specific, sensory, *creatural* in reference ("brain," "eyes," "hair," "strings," "pavement," "feet," "walls," "blue," "flecked with blood," "floor," "black," "charnel pits," "heavy," "thick," "my fingers," "my limbs," "my flesh," "my sinews," etc; note also the verbs describing sensation, "sinks," "spin round," "slide giddily," "reels," "glues"). She is palpably infected with

her father's stylistic "pollution," which is even now "poisoning / The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life" with "prodigious mixtures and confusions strange" (22–23, 52). Yet this is but an intermediate step to Beatrice's full stylistic degradation during act 4, when her attention and expression are steadily and therefore terribly vulgar and when it seems that her father's passionate curse—that "what she most abhors / Shall have a fascination to entrap her loathing will"—has been most horribly fulfilled.

During the actual commission of the parricide plot in act 4, Beatrice and Lucretia share the stage for two scenes (2 and 3) with Olimpio, the "degraded" former castellan of Petrella, and Marzio, a "desperate wretch" and former mercenary for Cenci (3.2.62, 64–65). The presence of these low and unseemly characters and, even more outrageous, their circumstantially central role in the main action are already violations of tragic decorum, and Shelley makes matters still worse by conducting both scenes in his lowest and most unvaried style, which must verge in performance on the farcical. Combined the two scenes run a mere 108 lines yet contain fifty-five changes of speaker, meaning that each independent speech averages slightly less than two lines. The whole is therefore characterized by an unyielding paratactic bluntness and rhythmic monotony, a pervasive dulling and contraction of stylistic range and reach. What keeps it from sheer buffoonery, however, but surely makes it even more grotesque, is the effect we see in the elevated characters, who become stylistically indistinguishable from Marzio and Olimpio:

Beatrice.
Are ye resolved?
Olimpio.
Is he asleep?
Marzio.
Is all Quiet? (4.2.29–30)

Or again at the opening of scene 3:

Lucretia.
They are about it now.
Beatrice.
Nay, it is done.
Lucretia.
I have not heard him groan.
Beatrice.
He will not groan.
Lucretia.
What sound is that?

Beatrice.

List! 'tis the tread of feet
About his bed.
Lucretia.
My God!
If he be now a cold stiff corpse . . . (1–5)

The conspiratorial and breathless inarticulateness, the nervous fixation on the minute facts and circumstances, indeed the very sounds of immediate reality, of creatural life and death, the complete absence of rhetorical method and ornament in their speech plans and performances—all of this we must register as woefully unnatural in the mouths of Lucretia and especially Beatrice.[31] Several times in the course of the two scenes, it is true, Beatrice's speech does strike a higher note, but in each instance the elevation is stimulated by violent, unrestrained feeling and betrayed as inauthentic by the infectious presence of the mixed style of her father, who though not physically present is manifestly the presiding genius of the scene: "Ye conscience-stricken cravens, rock to rest / Your baby hearts" (2.39–40); "Base palterers! / Cowards and traitors! Why, the very conscience / Which ye would sell for gold and for revenge / Is an equivocation" (3.25–28); "My breath / Comes, methinks, lighter, and the jellied blood / Runs freely through my veins" (3.43–44). That Shelley intends just these debasing effects is evidenced by his uncharacteristically specific and emblematic stage directions for the first of these two scenes, whereby he physically underlines the indecorous deviance embodied in the style. Thus Beatrice and Lucretia are to appear "*above on the ramparts*"; then presently "*Enter Olimpio and Marzio, below*"; seeing them Beatrice says, significantly, "All mortal things must hasten thus / To their dark end. *Let us go down*" (16–17; my emphasis). Here "*Exeunt Lucretia and Beatrice from above*," and then momentarily "*Enter Beatrice and Lucretia, below.*"[32]

In this shocking spectacle of the Shelleyan mixed style, Beatrice descends literally and stylistically into the grotesque, imagining and accomplishing parricide and confessing her unnaturally assumed character in her every vicious word. She becomes, as no critic of the play has failed in one way or another to notice, the spitting image (more properly "sound-image") of

31. "*Their* speech plans and performances" should not be confused with Shelley's, in which, as I argue, the lack of rhetorical ornament is, on the contrary, a signal of rhetorical method.
32. Likewise notable in act 4, scene 3 is the stage direction wherewith Beatrice "*Snatches a dagger from one of them and rushes at it.*" In the preceding lines Cenci's sleeping body has been imaginatively and creaturally-realistically evoked, with his "thin grey hair," "his veined hands crossed on his heaving breast," his "loose wrinkled throat" (4.3.10–11, 17). Here as Beatrice raises the knife as though to stab, the physical action overlaps with the mimetic focus of the style, more or less forcing us to imagine Beatrice in the act of parricide.

her father, whose loathsome mode and manner of being she most abhors. If Shelley skillfully assured our sympathy for the sublime Beatrice of act 1, he no less masterfully provokes our fear and pity for the disordered Beatrice of act 3, and our antipathy for the low and calculating Beatrice of act 4. Through our stylistically cultivated responses we are meant to distinguish the original and penultimate versions of Beatrice and thereby to understand intuitively what Shelley (1965, 2: 73) discursively prefigured in his preface, that such "crimes and miseries in which she was an actor and a sufferer are as the mask and the mantle in which circumstances clothed her for her impersonation on the scene of the world." The costume or "habit" of being compelled by existential "circumstances" may temporarily obscure, but it cannot finally obliterate or even fundamentally alter Beatrice's essential self, the original and transcendent "actor" within. To make the point inescapable, Shelley adapts this figure insistently in act 5. Orsino, for example, says, "And these must be the masks of that within / Which must remain unaltered" (5.1.92–93), and Beatrice, in her "inmost soul," weeps "To see, in this ill world where none are true, / My kindred false to their deserted selves (5.3.66–69). Yet such thematic cues are intended not so much to convince as to confirm what the style has already affectively registered and taught.[33]

Beatrice's self-assessment in act 5 then, far from being an equivocation, is in fact the intended final meaning of the play's stylistic and mimetic action:

> O white innocence,
> That thou shouldst wear the mask of guilt to hide
> Thine awful and serenest countenance
> From those who know thee not! (5.3.24–27)

Our final evaluation of Beatrice has been the topic of considerable critical disagreement, but it should be clear from the foregoing that I think Wasserman (1971: 124) gets it exactly right: "We are to see Beatrice not only as sincerely convinced of her innocence but as indeed innocent in some fundamental sense."[34] Stylistically, at least, we *do* see Beatrice as fundamentally

33. Tetreault (1987: 139) has observed that, by the time he was writing *The Cenci*, "Shelley's desire to improve his audience changes its mode from the inculcation of dogmas and rhetorical aggression to inviting the engagement of their sympathy, encouraging the exercise of their imagination, and striving to enlarge their understanding." I can agree only to half of this, for Shelley appears at his most rhetorically aggressive in *The Cenci*, and it is through precisely this aggression that he engages, exercises, and enlarges us, moves us to the sympathetic elevation of ourselves, which is, as Tetreault rightly argues, Shelley's invariable aesthetic/ideological purpose.

34. One reads again and again in the criticism that the play is designed to generate in its audience the "restless and anatomizing casuistry" of which Shelley (1965, 2:71) speaks in the preface. Thus we are asked to try moral questions but doomed to find no easy answers. Some critics (e.g., Tetreault and Sperry) find that we are left in uneasy ambivalence; others (e.g.,

innocent, for in act 5, during her incarceration and trial for the murder of her father and up until her execution, which ends the play, she appears once again in her essential, original character, speaking her native and elevated tongue, as the passage just quoted may already imply. Of the many speeches one might advance to demonstrate this point, and indeed almost any one from act 5 will do, let us take at once the exemplary one, unmistakable both in its true character and in its intended effect. I am referring to Beatrice's rhetorically commanding and much more than forensic appeal to Marzio in the trial scene, wherein "the whole truth" (2.4) is to be made plain or rather, adjusting the idiom to the occasion, is to be sublimely revealed. At the height of her impassioned examination of Marzio, as she implores him to search his conscience as never before, to *think*, Beatrice seems, and sounds, like her original self:

> If thou hopest
> Mercy in heaven, shew justice on earth:
> Worse than a bloody hand is a hard heart.
> If thou hast done murders, made thy life's path
> Over the trampled laws of God and man,
> Rush not before thy Judge, and say: "My maker,
> I have done this and more; for there was one
> Who was most pure and innocent on earth;
> And because she endured what never any
> Guilty or innocent endured before:
> Because her wrongs could not be told, not thought;
> Because thy hand at length did rescue her;
> I with my words killed her and all her kin."
> Think, I adjure you, what it is to slay
> The reverence living in the minds of men
> Towards our antient house, and stainless fame!
> Think what it is to strangle infant pity,
> Cradled in the belief of guileless looks,
> Till it become a crime to suffer. Think
> What 'tis to blot with infamy and blood
> All that which shows like innocence, and is,
> Hear me, great God! I swear, most innocent,
> So that the world lose all discrimination

Donohue and Hall accuse Beatrice herself of casuistry in act 5 and find that her claim to transcendental innocence therefore rings false. Still others, such as Mary Finn (1996: 178), argue from different evidence (in Finn's case ekphrasis) to conclusions similar to mine: "Shelley wants ultimately to invent and establish a composite verbal portrait of Beatrice Cenci that will prevail as authoritative and serve as a scathing indictment of the community that kills her for killing her father." Finn's point is echoed in different ways by Behrendt (1990) in terms of Shelley's mythopoesis and Young-Ok An (1996) in terms of Shelley's feminism.

> Between the sly, fierce, wild regard of guilt,
> And that which now compels thee to reply
> To what I ask: Am I, or am I not
> A parricide? (131–57)

As the *now tri*partite imperative structure insists ("Think, ... Think . . . . Think . . . ."), Shelley has explicitly designed this speech to resonate with Beatrice's character-establishing plea during the banquet scene (quoted above; cf. "O, think, ... O, think!"). If the courtroom setting makes this passage feel slightly less elevated than its original, still every word of analysis and description I applied there reapplies here. Here again is the hypotactic complexity and aesthetic integrity of syntactic design, the compounding and counterpointing of anaphorically paralleled clauses. Here is the generalized diction, the abstraction, the discrete indirection, the sublimation of the creatural-realistic. Here is in short the *sermo gravis*, and here therefore is *Beatrice*. Her final question "Am I, or am I not / A parricide?" we should understand like the question at the end of a riddle, "What am I?" which points one back to the text above and the subtleties of its expression for the solution. "Am *I*," this passage seems to be saying about itself, "the parricide?" Insofar as the elevated style expresses the essential self, the permanent actor who exists before and beyond its existentially determined "impersonations"—and in Shelley's dramatic mimesis this is just what the sustained elevated style invariably signifies—then the correct, indeed forcefully compelled answer is *no*.[35] This is decidedly *not* the Beatrice of acts 2 through 4, but, as if untouched by her intervening corruption and vulgarity, the Beatrice of act 1. This is, as it were, stylistic evidence of things not otherwise seen, bearing witness, as Beatrice puts it at the last, "to the faith that I, / Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame, / Lived ever holy and unstained" (5.4.147–49).[36] Through his careful calibration of the mixed and elevated styles in the representation of his heroine's various states of being, Shelley thus attempts to harness the modern drama's inconsistent

35. This point touches on a complex of general and specific evaluative issues. See the appendix, "Evaluating Beatrice: Responding to the Call for Character Stylistics," for further discussion.

36. Hunt seems to have read the play this way: "It is thought by some, that she ought not to deny her guilt as she does;—that she ought not, at any rate, to deny the deed, whatever she may think of guilt. But this, in our opinion, is one of the author's happiest subtleties. She is naturally so abhorrent from guilt,—she feels it to have been so impossible a thing to have killed a FATHER, truly so called . . . that it was a notion, a horrid dream, a thing to be gratuitously cancelled from people's minds, a necessity which they were all agreed had existed but was not to be spoken of, a crime which to punish was to proclaim and make real,—any thing, in short, but that a daughter killed her father. It is a lie told, as it were, for the sake of nature, to save it from the shame of a greater contradiction" (White 1966 [1938]: 200).

characterization and train it to the service of an *essential* rather than *existential* conception of the human character.

All of this is dramatized in the tragedy's climactic recognition and reversal, which follow instantly upon Beatrice's commanding speech. To her final question, "Am I, or am I not / A parricide?" Marzio emphatically cries, "Thou art not!" (5.2.157). In this stunning reversal of his own previous testimony, Marzio penetrates with Shelleyan insight to the metaphysical crux of the matter, and his style attains now and in Shelley's view naturally to an elevation it nowhere else even attempts:

> Torture me as ye will:
> A keener pang has wrung a higher truth
> From my last breath. She is most innocent!
> Bloodhounds, not men, glut yourselves well with me;
> I will not give you that fine piece of nature
> To rend and ruin. (5.2.163–68)

Notice the balanced and grammatically paralleled hemistiches of "A keener pang has wrung a higher truth," the abstract diction ("Torture," "pang," "truth," "that fine piece of nature"), the extended "bloodhound" metaphor, the tidy alliterations of the concluding hemistich, and the resulting Promethean firmness of the whole. Just as Shelley debased Beatrice to Marzio's brutally existential level and style in act 4 to dramatize her temporary dereliction from her permanent character, so he elevates Marzio here to something of her essentially dignified character and style to dramatize the transformative power of his crucial recognition.[37] We should pause to reflect on how *radical* is Shelley's procedure, how mixed and anticlassical—Marzio, the "desperate wretch," the villainous murderer-for-hire, impersonating the tragic hero, enduring the tragedy's ultimate crisis, and expressing with uncharacteristic dignity its final meaning. But at the same time how *conservative* is Shelley's theme, how abstracting and idealizing, how elevated and elevating, how peculiarly and decorously delicate. To represent sad reality, to make "that which has been" fit for the tragic stage, Shelley develops a mixed style that is intended to be self-subverting, an approach to mimesis that is concerned at once with the imitation of external reality and with the proper subordination of it, that even as it embodies what "is" and "has been" begs the question of how such things "shall not be again" (3.1.146–47). Through

37. Marzio thus enacts within the fiction what Shelley hopes his audience will experience without it: to adapt the words with which Shelley (1965, 7:116) characterizes Homer's affective achievement, "the sentiments of [her] auditors" are to be "refined and enlarged by a sympathy with [her] great and lovely impersonations, until from admiring they imitate, and from imitation they identify themselves with the object of their admiration."

his stylistic embodiments of Beatrice especially, Shelley commands us in *The Cenci* to *think*, but only so that, through the sympathies and antipathies we thereby recognize, we learn to "*Forbear to think*" (146) of the existential, the "unreal real."[38] As Shelley's style everywhere insists and Marzio so heroically recognizes, in our dramatic art as in our philosophy of the human character, the merely circumstantial or realistic should be not slavishly imitated and unduly emphasized but rather appropriately contextualized and ultimately surpassed.

6. The Substance of Style: Reflections

We may now comprehend the perfect rightness of Curran's (1970: 272) claim that "throughout the play, Shelley's philosophical idealism is structurally implicit in his stubborn resistance to the independent reality of the plot." This idealism is *stylistically explicit*, and it does not, as Curran seems here and elsewhere to imply, refuse to admit existential realities. Rather, it attempts to subordinate and finally subvert the realities it selectively but nonetheless frankly and forcefully admits, to grant them no independence or self-sufficiency. It attempts not to *reveal* reality but to *expose* it, to show it up for the partial and inessential imitation Shelley so firmly believes it is. As he puts it in the *Defence of Poetry*, speaking of the Athenian tragedies but no doubt with his own *Cenci* squarely in mind,

> The imagination is enlarged by a sympathy with pains and passions so mighty, that they distend in their conception to the capacity of that by which they are conceived; the good affections are strengthened by pity, indignation, terror and sorrow; and an exalted calm is prolonged from the satiety of this high exercise of them into the tumult of familiar life; even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature; error is thus divested of its willfulness; men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice. (Shelley 1965, 7:121)

In this evaluatively charged definition of tragic mimesis and its effects, terms such as *enlarged*, *mighty*, *good*, *exalted*, and *high* line up in antithesis to *tumult of familiar life*, *crime*, *contagion*, and *agencies of nature*. Tragedy embodies these latter categories of creatural-realistic "error" only so "men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice." This is classicism to be sure, but it describes only the *principle* of mimesis in *The Cenci* and not its thoroughly mixed but fully rationalized *method* of mimesis. In style *The Cenci* is definitively part of and as tragedy perhaps the exemplary instance of what

38. Wasserman (1971: 109ff., especially 110–13) is particularly good on this point, which he explains in terms of the difference between self-anatomy and self-knowledge.

Auerbach (1953 [1946]: 481) has described as "the great romantic agitation for the mixture of styles—the movement whose slogan was Shakespeare vs. Racine."

This is what makes *The Cenci* so peculiar in the history of dramatic literature. Shelley intended to be the unacknowledged legislator of a philosophically reconstructed but still definitively neoclassical separation of styles, to speed the day when humanity, cultivated through the highest poetry, would no longer require the representational means he helped to develop. Shelley (1965, 7:117) considered the mixed style, the characteristic "vice" of his age, a "temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover[s] without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty."[39] Yet the mixed style has turned out to be not a "temporary" error in the evolution of literary representation but rather, as Shelley feared and Auerbach so powerfully demonstrated, "the creation of our choice," by now our sole and extremely articulate means of expression. I expect that Shelley would be deeply dismayed by twentieth-century developments in mimesis, particularly in the representation of his beloved and essentially idealized Beatrice. To adapt, albeit indecorously, the words of Cenci's final curse upon Beatrice (4.1.146–49), wouldn't Shelley see in the works of Artaud, Tavernier, and Clarke "a hideous likeness of himself . . . smiling upon him from his nursing breast"? Wouldn't he find reflected there, "as from a distorting mirror," his own inspiring image, not only further "mixed with what he most abhors" but, still worse, now *un*mixed with what he most adored, that classical and "ideal perfection and energy which everyone feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become"? Would he not be forced to recognize himself as, most unnaturally, both the father and the victim of

39. My adaptation of Shelley's metaphor follows that in Wasserman 1971: 126. Though Shelley immediately refers to the moral character of each age's particular heroes, as the passage develops he extends the dress metaphor from this original thematic sense to what appears to be a more exclusively stylistic sense by the paragraph's end: "Few poets of the highest class have chosen to exhibit the beauty of their conceptions in its naked truth and splendour; and it is doubtful whether the alloy of costume, habit, etc., be not necessary to temper this planetary music for mortal ears." Shelley almost certainly has in mind Alexander Pope's *An Essay in Criticism* (1711).

> Expression is the dress of thought, and still
> Appears more decent as more suitable.
> A vile conceit in pompous words expressed
> Is like a clown in regal purple dressed:
> For different styles with different subjects sort,
> As several garbs with country, town, and court. 1.2.318–23]

See also Shelley's (1965, 10:265) description of John Keats's style: "The energy and beauty of his powers seem to disperse the narrow and wretched taste in which (most unfortunately for the real beauty which they hide) he has *clothed* his writings."

ces enfants sauvages? And shall we content ourselves in this matter with the simple assurance that, in his permanent character as poet, Shelley too was of the devil's party but didn't know it?

Appendix

Evaluating Beatrice: Responding to the Call for Character Stylistics

My analysis of Beatrice's courtroom speech, in which I conclude that her elevated style bespeaks her recovery of her essential self, begs an important question deserving of another study in itself: How does style certify or authenticate its characterizing claims and effects? As Goodall (1987: 125) says, "In literary drama, character is sculpted in language, in the rhetoric of self-representation." But how are we to judge the appropriateness and validity of a character's self-representation? For surely high style can be manipulated for low ends. This vexing problem (not only in drama but in what it imitates, human life and language) will not be settled here, but allow me to make two brief points. First, if the dilemma is the evaluation of stylistic representations of character, then the classical solution is decorum. As Abrams's definition insists and my analyses imply, the practice of linguistic decorum is not blind to artistic, contextual, and conventional cues but intimately responsive to them. We measure appropriateness, the "intricate adjustment" of word to action and meaning, only by such cues. To be sure, such measurement requires a finely attuned sensitivity or what Coleridge (1958 [1817/1907], 2:64), in the *Biographia*, calls "taste" (see also Shelley 1965, 7:111). But this brings me to my second brief point: the consequent need for stylistics.

To evaluate dramatic speech, its motivation and sincerity, we need to be close and careful readers, and Shelley, like other playwrights from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Stoppard, therefore dramatizes acts of stylistic interpretation and misinterpretation throughout *The Cenci*. For example, in the opening scene, after Cenci details his sadistic, Jupiteresque appetites, Camillo exclaims, "Hell's most abandoned fiend / Did never, in the drunkenness of guilt, / Speak [even] to his heart as now you speak to me; / I thank my God that I believe you not" (1.1.117–20). Camillo is effectively saying, "Such speech is totally inappropriate in you, given not merely our social stations and the conventions of politeness that would typically govern our discourse but also your very humanity; you must, therefore, be lying." Camillo is only half wrong here; Cenci is not lying. Not yet an accomplished reader of style or character (he will become one by the play's conclusion), Camillo fails to see that Cenci's outrageously indecorous style verifies the sincerity of his blasphemous thoughts and his genuine intention of *realizing*

them. Shelley opens the next scene with another dramatization of stylistic analysis, this time with Beatrice reading the speech of Orsino and rightly sensing that its style belies its substance. Orsino assures her both of his enduring love and "My zeal for all you wish," but Beatrice hears a false note in the cold formality of his diction and syntax: "Your zeal for all I wish; — Ah me, you are cold!" (1.2.40, 43). Likewise in act 5 Shelley repeatedly dramatizes Camillo's correct and sympathetic reading of Beatrice's final self-characterization. Hearing her impassioned and eloquent self-defense, for example, Camillo exclaims, "I would pledge my soul that she is guiltless" (5.2.61–62), a line that recalls the great recognition scenes of *Othello* (5.2) and *Much Ado about Nothing* (4.1), both of which turn on a minor character's (Emilia's and Friar Francis's) right reading of a heroine's (Desdemona's and Hero's) innocence despite circumstantial evidence to the contrary. Through these and other representations of stylistic assessment, Shelley hopes to lead us to discriminate between innocence and guilt, that is, between authentic (truly essential) and inauthentic (merely existential) self-representations.

Critics who resist Beatrice's claim to metaphysical innocence do so using exactly the same evidence I use to substantiate it, but none, so far as I've seen, provides an adequate stylistic account of Beatrice's courtroom speech, and some disregard it altogether. Ferriss (1991: 164, 165), for example, characterizes Beatrice's sublime speech in the banquet scene as "'revolutionary' in the Kristevan sense," a "subversive assault against her father's oppression." Referring to Beatrice's corresponding speech in the trial scene, however, Ferriss suggests that, "Like her father, Beatrice employs language as a defensive and repressive structure to defend herself against the charge of parricide"; thus "Beatrice's parricide, combined with her use of the same 'rhetoric of tyranny' that had been her father's tool of oppression," "subverts the revolutionary potential of her banquet speech" (ibid.: 166, 167). Unfortunately, Ferriss offers but little argumentation to clarify her analysis and resolve the apparent contradiction. What I demonstrate beyond doubt, I hope, is that Beatrice's speech in the trial scene is rhetorically *nothing like* her father's speeches and *exactly like* her banquet speech. Ferriss can't have it both ways: if the banquet speech represents "an ideal revolutionary subversion of [Cenci's] linguistic tyranny" (ibid.: 164), then so too does the courtroom speech, for both have exactly the same self-conserving strategy and style.

Donohue (1970: 180) fails altogether to examine the style or content of Beatrice's speech and so seems to misevaluate the action that ensues: "When, in the trial scene, we hear Beatrice emphatically deny her implication in the murder, we are aware that she feels justified in this outright lie because she has already abjured the responsibility to be bound by con-

ventional human justice and morality. But our sympathies, already unbalanced, are permanently alienated when Beatrice appears willing to allow the hired murderers to bear full responsibility for the crime. Her contempt for human law now extends to human lives." Donohue responds, I think, to the fact that Marzio's recantation of his earlier testimony implicating Beatrice leads the judge to order his renewed torture. Donohue rightly implies that Beatrice is morally culpable insofar as her eloquence impacts Marzio's "human life," but he apparently mistakes the nature of that effect. In fact, Marzio never experiences the torture to which he's resentenced. What Beatrice intends in her self-defense is (a) to face her accuser as the law entitles her to do and (b) to make him admit that she is not "*by my nature*" (5.2.93) a murderous criminal (which, by the way, Marzio is). We could quibble I suppose about whether or not she should foresee that Marzio's reversal will infuriate the sadistic judge and result in his being condemned to further torture, but Shelley renders the point moot by having the truth set Marzio free. Marzio is dragged offstage to renewed torture at act 5, scene 2, line 168. Eleven lines later an officer returns to announce Marzio's calm, contented, *heroic* death:

> *Officer.* Marzio's dead.
> *Judge.* What did he say?
> *Officer.* Nothing. As soon as we
> Had bound him on the wheel, he smiled on us,
> As one who baffles a deep adversary;
> And holding his breath, died. (5.2.179–83)

The judge then condemns Beatrice, her brother Giacomo, and their stepmother Lucretia to the torture, but Camillo intercedes. Unfortunately, later that day the Pope overrules Camillo, and Beatrice and the others are indeed tortured, as is clear in act 5, scene 3. Thus *because of Beatrice's eloquence*, Marzio actually escapes any further torture and a comparatively ignoble public execution, which Beatrice along with those she dearly loves suffers instead. I have difficulty seeing what exactly is supposed to be so "permanently alienating" to our moral sensibilities and sympathies. Beatrice's whole argument in the courtroom scene is that people must not "lose all discrimination" between innocence and guilt, yet too often criticism, inattentive to Shelley's stylistic design, has done just that.

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